



Book Reviews

A Not Unreasonable Claim: Women and Reform in Canada, 1880s-1920s, edited by Linda Kealey, The Women's Press, 1979, pp. 233, paperback \$7.95.

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This long awaited collection of essays brings together the work of an impressive array of the top talent in Canadian women's history. According to editor Linda Kealey it attempts 'in varying degrees and from various political and historical perspectives . . . to deal with the choices made by the women's rights movement in Canada. Several of the articles discuss the paths that were not followed and why; they underline how little attention has been paid to those involved in radical movements and to the working class in general' (p. 11). Unfortunately, the volume contains little detailed analysis of the working class or of the radical movement, and there is little variation in the political/historical perspective.

There are three interrelated arguments about the first women's rights movement which are advanced. The first is that the movement may be divided into two phases—a brief, more radical phase in which feminist demands were based on 'natural rights' or 'equal rights,' and a much longer conservative 'maternal' or 'social' feminist phase during which women's claims to greater participation in the public sphere were based on their rights as the nation's mothers. The second theme is that the involvement of women in professional occupations was a major contributing factor to the triumph of maternal feminism, and the third, that maternal feminism was an overwhelmingly conservative force which did not serve well the needs of future generations of Canadian women.

These themes are woven together in Wayne Roberts' provocative and wide-ranging essay on the 'new woman' and maternal feminism in Toronto. He argues that the increasing participation of middle-class women in professional life was 'a decisive precondition for the triumph of conservative maternal feminism' (p. 40). As a result, the 'earlier reform concep-

tions of women's place in politics and society . . . [were] severely undercut and negated' (p. 20). The ascendancy of the conservative feminists was reinforced by the low level of participation of 'working women' in the suffrage movement, and by the failure of the labour movement and socialist groups to challenge their leadership.

The indictment of maternal feminism is repeated in nearly all the remaining articles. The analysis of the *Fédération Nationale St. Jean Baptiste* provided by Marie Lavigne, Yolande Pinard and Jennifer Stoddart postulates the victory of conservative ('Catholic') feminism in Quebec over an earlier reform feminism, and attributes this evolution in part to the failure of the bourgeois leaders to overcome their narrow class interests. Similarly, Carol Bacchi's article is dedicated to showing the domination of the suffrage movement by middle-class urban women, and their failure to attract women from the labour and farm movements. To the long list of offences committed by English-Canadian women reformers of the period, Barbara Roberts adds imperialism. She argues that they 'were not staunch feminists. Their feminism, if it existed, was subordinated to their imperialist and bourgeois interests' (p. 187). Even Deborah Gorham's study of Flora MacDonald Denison, designed to show there were more radical visions of women's role in Canadian society, concludes that 'women of her sort were in a minority' (p. 70).

The connection between professionalization and maternal feminism is further explored in the contributions by Veronica Strong-Boag and Suzann Buckley. Strong-Boag claims that the 'earlier outward-looking feminism' of female physicians was replaced by 'an essentially conservative approach to social change' which they shared with their male colleagues (pp. 128-29). Buckley's article reiterates the theme of the victory of professional self-interest over reform efforts by documenting the consistent opposition on the part of female doctors and nurses to the use of midwives to reduce infant and maternal mortality.

The hypothesis that the increased conservatism of the women's movement was

due in large part to the effects of professionalization upon its leaders is extremely interesting and persuasive. However, there are questions which remain unanswered in this volume. Wayne Roberts, for example, suggests that there was a change in the leadership of the suffrage forces from the professionals to the 'social service women who stamped maternal feminism on the suffrage movement' (p. 26). If this is so, how then can professionalization as a process be held responsible for the perceived change in the nature of the movement? More specifically, with regard to the medical profession, his assertion that the creation of facilities such as the Ontario Medical College for Women 'marked an essential and strategic defeat for women medical students' (p. 34) is in direct opposition to Strong-Boag's assessment that the same institution was a definite underpinning of the early feminism of women doctors (p. 128).

The second part of the increased professionalization/increased conservatism equation is also open to question, for the delineation of two distinct phases to the women's movement is arbitrary and misleading. From the 1880s on the 'maternal rights' and 'equal rights' arguments were to be found side by side in the arsenals of individual Canadian feminists. To argue that one supplanted the other is to ignore the fact that suffrage leaders like Nellie McClung, that maternal feminist 'par excellence,' continued to use equal rights arguments throughout the entire period. In fact, it is more than a little ironic, given the general orientation of most of the articles, that the title of this book is borrowed from an 'equal rights' statement issued by McClung in 1915.

Ultimately, it is the assessment of maternal feminism as a profoundly conservative and limiting philosophy that is the most important theme. To some extent, the essays by Wendy Mitchinson and Joy Parr provide material for developing a more balanced evaluation. According to Mitchinson, the social feminists' 'interpretation of the domestic ideal of womanhood was a dynamic one, one that could and did encompass the women's rights movement. . . . Canadian women were able to use what some historians have seen as