

# A Personal Appreciation of

BY JALNA HANMER AND SHEILA SAUNDERS

It's Sunday in Leeds and we, having just arrived home after a long leisurely breakfast with friends, remember a breakfast many years ago with Mary O'Brien. Tom and Laurence, now grown men, will always remember and be grateful to Mary for taking us out to breakfast at the Queens Hotel. They thought then and still do that it is the most decadent and best treat that anyone can have. We left our friends explaining that we have to go home and write about a woman who introduced us to new ways of understanding old ideas including how to turn breakfast into a social occasion. She stayed with us and our sons then aged 11 and 12, in the early 1980s and told us of her journey to becoming a philosopher. We were mesmerized. It was a tale of how women have such an uneven start in life compared to most men. In a decade she had moved from delivering babies to delivering lectures on the theoretical and philosophical nature of reproduction. Mary O'Brien had presence and style. We remember most vividly an event with an audience of scholars and activists from Leeds and Bradford who were not necessarily sympathetic to her views but who were totally captivated by her in 1982. Later on, a friend in need, Mary and other feminists at OISE responded to our call for help. They wrote to the Chief Constable of West Yorkshire objecting to our treatment after the police, in their infinite wisdom, raided our house in 1983 looking for anything that might incriminate us in the attacking of local sex shops or threats to Margaret Thatcher on her visit to Leeds.

Where do you start in writing an appreciation of Mary



from across the Atlantic. We had not seen her for several years but sent affection through third parties to Mary and her friend Cath McNaughton. Mary O'Brien's sense of fun in the absurdity of the human condition surpassed itself in her paper on the "commatation" of women (1984).<sup>1</sup> She patiently explained that we had to move beyond theories that talked of "women comma etc., women comma etc., women comma etc." and stated that there was no comma between women and the world either in theory or in praxis. The centrality of being, present and future, according to Mary O'Brien is women.

O'Brien's magnum opus, *The Politics of Reproduction*, published in

1981 did not really impact on the academic scene in the United Kingdom until perhaps some twelve months or more later when she presented papers at a British Sociological Association conference. This work, a theoretical exposition of nature and the natural using Hegelian and Marxist philosophical methods, introduced a completely new way of understanding human reproduction, childbirth for women as a process and alienation for men as a product. This engendered huge debate from those who saw this as biological determinism and those of us who did not. What many of us were amazed at was that Mary O'Brien had used the methodology of two of the most sexist old pigs that history has yet produced to castrate the male class in their relationship to the means of human reproduction. This provided us endless amusement as we contemplated the "phallicentrality" of the male class and their baby-making routines.

# the Life and Works of Mary O'Brien

We have few women philosophers, and even fewer prepared to grapple philosophically with feminist questions. There was no theory or theoretician too big to scare Mary O'Brien who took on postmodernism, structuralism, marxism, and socialism all with the same dynamism, verve and clarity of thought. In a discussion of Heidegger and Beckett she asks; "Suppose Godot's a woman, what then?" (1989, 83). She then proceeds to say; "... to ask speculative questions in our time is to antagonize a substantial part of the scholarly establishment" (1989, 83). This sums up O'Brien's lifetime's work. She believed that women are the future.

There is some urgency about the task of structuring the world anew on the material basis of life as value, of reintegration of the natural and historical worlds. If this is biological determinism so be it. (1989, 57)

Mary helped us to "find the energy to resist the powerful "thrust" to bury birth in technology controlled by powerful men" (1989, 81). Her analysis of men's reproductive alienation facilitated the argument that reproductive science and medical technology are ways in which men attempt to overcome their alienation as they work on the "natural nature" of women's bodies, transforming the natural into a male-controlled process where alienation



shifts from men to women. While Mary was never able to participate directly in international meetings of the Feminist International Network of Resistance to Reproductive and Genetic Engineering (FINRRAGE), her ideas were part of that intense period of theorizing and activism in the 1980s. We greatly miss her never-to-be-realized second major theoretical work.

She knew what she wanted to do, but given her encroaching illness, could no longer achieve. Mary was an intellectual giant, a gift to the world, humane, compassionate, incisive, practical with a wicked sense of humour. Dismissive of the "pricks and their prattle" (1984b, 11), with their inferior theory and practice, she helped us find a richer more encompassing way of understanding the world and the "task of creating the world anew" only begun and far from completed.

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<sup>1</sup>This was a critique of how the new left was dealing with "the new social movements." In one of the essays in *Reproducing the World*, "Hegemony, Theory, and the Reproduction of Patriarchy," Mary writes: "This provokes the strategy which I have called elsewhere 'commatization' in which social activities related to race comma gays comma gender comma are simply added to class, with no attempt to analyze the actual relations and differentiation of progressive cross-class movement" (1989, 223).

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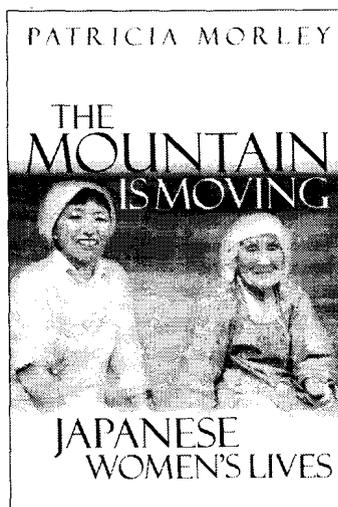
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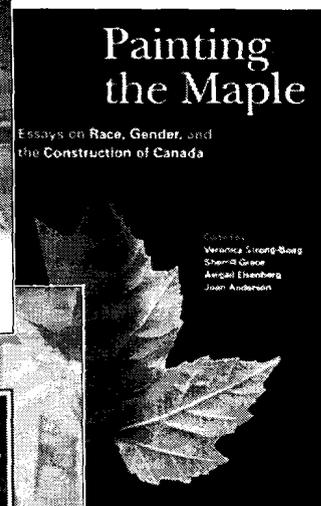
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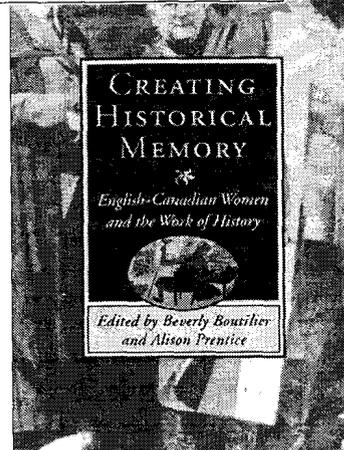
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