

## Book Reviews

### AGAINST THE CURRENT: CANADIAN WOMEN TALK ABOUT FIFTY YEARS OF LIFE ON THE JOB

Judith Finlayson, ed. Toronto:  
Doubleday, 1995.

*by Jennifer LoveGrove*

*Against the Current* is an extensive anthology of short personal accounts by Canadian women describing their experiences in the workforce during the past 50 years. From St. John's, Newfoundland, to Galiano Island, British Columbia, the collection includes women from a diverse range of age, race, ability, and occupation, documenting a compelling personal history of women working in this country. Often uplifting and exhilarating, these women forged new paths and overcame obstacles and discrimination with strength and bravery. At the same time, I read their accounts with anger at the injustices they suffered simply because they were women; from subtle disapproval to vicious sexual harassment, many of these women had their potential thwarted and careers dismantled.

One recurring statement from many of these women was their desire for an occupation other than the traditional nurse, teacher, or secretary. They refused to accept merely what was offered to them and went on to study law, learn to weld, or start their own businesses. These positive role models made innovative developments as pioneers in such diverse areas as abortion advocacy, bush-plane piloting, union organization, anti-poverty activism, filmmaking, architecture, and so on. However, their journeys "against the current" were rarely smooth ones; obstacles were constantly thrust their

way, especially in male-dominated fields. For example, a woman with a degree in engineering was constantly denied access to jobs for which she was more than qualified, and stated that discrimination against women in engineering was rampant enough to render her chosen field as "twenty years behind the times." Similarly during the 1960s, a male professor told his female student that "women had no place in business and he'd do everything possible to make life miserable" for her. Ironically, by 1994 she had become the first woman to be chair of the Board of Governors of the Canadian Institute of Chartered Accountants.

The sexualization of women's bodies in a wide range of jobs was another issue prominent in these stories. A woman applying for a job as a medical receptionist was asked by the doctor "to walk across the room because, he said, he wanted to look at her legs." Another woman was refused a job as a secretary to a male politician because it would be unacceptable for a man to travel abroad with a young woman who was not his wife. A professional and successful volleyball coach was fired after two-and-a-half years "with no cause, because of rumours or beliefs that she was a lesbian." Reading accounts such as these, I was infuriated with the unjust treatment and thwarted potential of these ambitious women, who were denied access to jobs, or were forced to endure discrimination and/or harassment based on their sex. Some women were discriminated against based on race as well. In Quebec, a health care worker writes, "I applied for lots of jobs.... But I never got them. Sometimes I wondered if I wasn't hired because I'm black."

In addition to discrimination in the public sectors, many married women encountered a distinct lack of support from husbands, from out-

right antagonism, to financing their husbands' educations while sacrificing their own goals. These women often had to exist within constant states of conflict and compromise, juggling roles of wife and wage-earner to less than supportive husbands. One woman writes, "my husband says he believes I should work, but he often prevents me from doing things I need to do for my career." Many of these women were also mothers: the image of the juggler recurs throughout the book, as they constantly tried to achieve a balance between being wife, mother, and professional. Women were usually dismissed when visibly pregnant, without the employment insurance that we know now. Formal child care benefits were rare as well, and many women were forced to leave their work to be with their children. Some preferred this, while some resented their suddenly-absent career, but none seemed to have choice.

Common also to the stories of these women is the issue of pay and education inequity. Priority was given to educating young men rather than women, and women who entered the workforce were usually paid substantially less than their male counterparts. That is, when they were hired at all—one young aspiring journalist was flatly told "We don't hire girls." Furthermore, women who contested their lower wages were often told that men had families to support, ridiculously implying that women did not, even in the case of single mothers.

For women who did achieve positions of power in their chosen fields, they often expressed a lack of mentoring. There simply had not been women in these positions prior to them, and men were often too threatened to undertake the important role of mentor. A woman from Calgary working in an insurance company writes "Until very recently I never worked anywhere with a woman di-

rectly above me in the chain of command. That meant I've never had anyone who could be a mentor and it's been quite lonely." Particularly in the legal professions, women cited the lack of professional and political mentoring as detrimental, as manifested in the lower number of career options subsequently made available to them.

Another insightful element of this anthology is the examination of praise. Many women found that the aspects of their work praised by others in the form of references and assessments, often involved subtly veiled statements. For example, an Ontario surgeon's letter of reference, while seeming positive, emphasized a doctor's rapport with the nurses and how well she cared for the patients, while choosing not to comment upon her skills as a surgeon. Similarly, a touring conductor was thought to be paid the highest of professional compliments when she was referred to as a "Woman Conductor Equal to Any Man." It is through such omissions that many women were diminished professionally by men in positions of power.

Although this anthology celebrates the strengths of working women and their dedication, ambition, innovation, and perseverance, I cannot help but feel frustrated and angered by how much more they could have done if male-dominated infrastructures had not placed so many obstacles in their way. Many were forced out of their jobs, whether blatantly or indirectly. Still more had their identities as women negated: a pilot was referred to "as George so the passengers wouldn't know the pilot was actually Elizabeth."

These women, each distinct from one another, sacrificed and contributed to our collective experience as working women in Canada. At times I craved more detailed explanations of triumphs or injustices hinted at, and wished that Finlayson had employed an interview structure in the book rather than the less-directed narratives. However, this collection is overall a diverse and important contribution to the documentation

of women's lives in Canada, and will elicit both joy and anger in its readers.

## IN SUBORDINATION: PROFESSIONAL WOMEN, 1870-1970

Mary Kinnear. Montreal and Kingston: McGill-Queen's University Press, 1995.

by *Veronica Abbass*

There are few surprises in *In Subordination: Professional Women, 1870-1970*. Mary Kinnear's study of women in the five professions she has isolated for examination—university teaching, medicine, law, nursing, and schoolteaching—confirms what many of us already know: despite the efforts of eighteenth, nineteenth, and twentieth-century feminists, the position of professional women remains a subordinate one.

In order to "help to explain why the hopes of early feminists are still unrealized," Kinnear, professor of history at the University of Manitoba, has "tapped the memories of professional women who worked in Manitoba before 1970." Kinnear is confident that the experience of Manitoba's professional women "can be seen as a manifestation in miniature of women's participation in professional work throughout modern western society." *In Subordination* contains an excellent introduction and an equally excellent conclusion. In between are five chapters or case studies, one for each of the five professions examined. The women's memories of their work experience make up a substantial portion of the evidence used in these chapters. Although Kinnear warns of the dangers inherent in using this kind of evidence, I applauded her decision to include anecdotal evidence and looked forward to reading it. I hoped to find, despite the forewarning in the book's title, some evidence of full-scale insubordination, a resistance to the attitude that marriage is a woman's

primary goal and motherhood her primary role. I was disappointed. "My family came first" is a familiar and repeated refrain.

Remarkably, there is little analysis of how the women's acceptance and reinforcement of this attitude contributed to the continued discrimination against professional women. Only one profession, law, is condemned for creating such an hostile climate for women before 1970 that "[f]ull time motherhood could offer a woman a more satisfactory working life—albeit unpaid and not altogether litigious—than the dismal rewards offered by the legal profession." Furthermore, the women's attitude and reaction to the "blithe assumption that the professional worker is male" became increasingly more familiar and predictable with each successive case history. As much of this evidence is incorporated in the book's introduction and conclusion, its repetition in each chapter becomes tedious. While omitting repetitive material would make the book more attractive to the general reader, I suspect that the general reader is not the target market for *In Subordination*.

Although most of the information in *In Subordination* is familiar and repetitive, it is extremely well organized. By giving each of the five professions a separate chapter, Kinnear has made it possible for the general reader to choose one or two of the professions that interest her. There are two appendices. The first appendix contains statistical tables that support and add to the information in the body of the book and, for the curious, the second appendix provides a list of the survey respondents, by profession. There are notes to every chapter at the end of the book and an extensive bibliography. The introduction and the conclusion are the most interesting chapters in the book. The introduction provides valuable background material and the conclusion is a comprehensive synopsis of women's work experience in all the five professions examined. The structure of *In Subordination* makes it an excellent reference text.