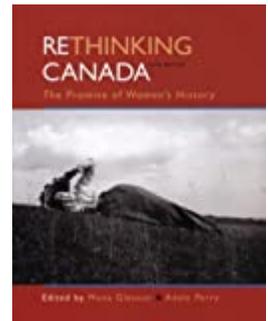




Mona Gleason, Adele Perry. *Rethinking Canada: The Promise of Women's History.* Don Mills: Oxford University Press, 2006. vii + 400 pp. \$55.00 (paper), ISBN 978-0-19-542350-1.



Reviewed by Jane Nicholas (Department of History, Lakehead University)

Published on H-Canada (October, 2007)

Rethinking Women's History

Twenty-one years ago the first edition of *Rethinking Canada: The Promise of Women's History* edited by Veronica Strong-Boag and Anita Clair Fellman was published. The groundbreaking collection reflected feminist historians' efforts to address the general absence of women's experiences in Canadian history. The fifth edition of *Rethinking Canada* under the editorship of Mona Gleason and Adele Perry highlights the continued necessity of feminist scholarship. As the editors note, the dynamics of women's history have changed significantly since the publication of the first volume. Wider shifts in the historiography continue to influence the writing of women's history. The essays selected here also show the importance of feminist analysis to other areas of historical inquiry. While this volume celebrates the achievements of women's history and related feminist movements, it also critically addresses the contemporary context of feminist scholarship. In the introduction Gleason and Perry outline the gains Canadian women have made in the areas of education, work, and politics. Despite significant achievements—the result of long-fought battles—the editors identify the substantial challenges Canadian women and Canadian women's history still face. This volume

makes it clear that feminism (in whatever shape that may take) and women's history remain a necessity. As a whole it is an excellent volume that represents an impressive diversity of Canadian women and their histories.

This edition, like the others, reflects the more recent work in women's history and the current state of the field. All but four of the twenty-four articles in the edition have been published within the last decade. Ten essays by Nancy Shoemaker, Rusty Bitterman, Janice Fiamengo, Margaret Hillyard Little, Sedef Arat-Koş, JoAnne Fiske, Franca Iacovetta, Marlene Epp, and Patricia Jasen remain from the fourth edition. Gleason and Perry make it clear that this edition continues to reflect the broader historiographical shift away from analytical topics like class and materialist explanations. The theoretical and methodological challenges of poststructuralism as well as the recognition of diversity among women, especially in terms of race and ethnicity, are more or less reflected in the most recent edition. Given the space limitations of such a collection, it comes as no surprise that articles from previous editions that engaged with different types of analysis have become less central although

not wholly replaced. The fifth edition includes much more work on topics related to race, ethnicity, and religion as central categories of analysis. However, the “traditional” topics in women’s history—politics, class, work, and family—are not abandoned. In fact, many of the articles reveal the complexity of balancing multiple analytical categories in well-nuanced arguments. Margaret Little’s article on mothers’ pensions in early twentieth-century British Columbia, for example, explores how notions of gender, race, class, and citizenship framed the debates and legislation in ways that privileged Anglo-Celtic single mothers. Newer methodological trends are also well represented in the volume. In separate essays Denise Baillargeon, Pamela Sugiman, and Jo-Anne Fiske use textual documents in conjunction with oral history.

The gendered nature of citizenship in different historical periods and the sometimes exclusive category of “citizen” are themes investigated in a number of articles. Bettina Bradbury’s fascinating investigation into women voting in Montreal in 1832 reveals that women’s participation at the hustings occurred despite the masculine bias in the construction of citizenship. Her article also challenges the notion of progressive history. Denise Baillargeon explores the contradiction poor and working-class women in Montreal faced during the Great Depression as they were deemed second-class citizens and yet were essential to the survival of the family. Denied the provincial vote, restricted from the job market, and legally subjected to their husbands’ authority, as well as having control over their own reproduction circumscribed by legal and religious authorities, women were excluded from full citizenship. Yet, poor and working-class women’s work and resourcefulness sustained their families and shored up masculine identity during a period of national and personal crisis. Their efforts and income made the difference between absolute poverty and hovering above the poverty line. Sedef Arat-Koşar exposes the complex relationship domestic workers have had with the Canadian state. Exploring the various political schemes that targeted specific groups of women, Arat-Koşar shows how racism, immigration, and citizenship rights shaped the status and experiences of domestic workers. Franca Iacovetta uses food features in *Chate-laine* magazine to explore how race, ethnic, gender, class, and sexuality informed ideas about “good citizens.” Immigrant women’s food choices and methods of preparation were deemed backwards, even suspicious, and experts promoted a “modern,” “Canadian” diet.

The works chosen for the edition reflect the fact that interest in women’s history cuts across disciplinary di-

vides. Janice Fiamengo’s article on race and first-wave feminists makes use of postcolonial literary analysis to show the multiple and varied ways these women negotiated discourses of “race.” Moving past the historiographical poles Fiamengo labels as “apology (everyone thought like that, so we can’t judge them for it)” and “disavowal (they were all racist, so their work isn’t worth reading carefully),” she reveals how ideas of race (including whiteness) were contested and far from absolute (p. 147).

The last four essays in the volume by Glynis George, Jane Jenson, Brenda O’Neill, and Mary-Jo Nadeau, dealing with contemporary issues, draw from anthropology, sociology, women’s studies, and political science. These last four articles also address the current state of feminism and antifeminism in different Canadian venues. George’s article explores the grassroots feminist organizations fighting poverty and violence in Newfoundland in the 1990s. Jenson uses gender analysis to explore the recent history of Quebec family policy. O’Neill addresses the important issue of generational differences and feminist principles among Canadian women. Exploring the third wave and the “but I’m not a feminist” trend, O’Neill complicates our understanding about feminist beliefs among young women. Nadeau explores the debate over Sunera Thobani’s controversial speech on American foreign policy, colonialism, and violence against women given at a feminist conference in 2001. Exploring the reaction to Thobani’s speech, Nadeau shows how the intimately connected ideas of race, nation, and gender had important repercussions for women of color and immigrant women in Canada in the context of oncoming war.

In terms of structure, the fifth edition continues in the style of the other editions. Twenty-four essays in loose chronological order cover a period from the seventeenth century to 2001. Each article is introduced by the editors. The editors’ introductions serve four purposes in that they provide a concise overview of the article, introduce readers to the historiography, link the article to other relevant pieces in the book, and offer questions for “critical reading” and discussion. The articles are well edited and an appropriate length for undergraduate teaching. The book now includes an excellent index.

Throughout the volume the original topics of interest for women’s historians—work, family, and politics—remain prevalent and new topics are introduced. As always there are gaps and absences. With the exception of Elise Chenier’s article on lesbian bars, there is little focus on issues related to pleasure, amusement, or com-

memoration. Age as a central category of analysis is also neglected and as a result the issues of girlhood, adolescence, and old age remain largely unexplored. Because the edition reflects the current field of Canadian women's history, the absences reveal wider gaps in the historiography of Canadian women including the history of (dis)ability (something the editors of the fourth addition noted). These gaps, however, can be seen as a way to highlight other avenues for future inquiry.

This is the first edition published without Veronica Strong-Boag's involvement. Mona Gleason and Adele Perry have produced another fine edition of *Rethinking Canada*. In the introduction to the second edition, then

series editor Jack Granatstein wrote, "[Women's historians'] questions about gender, the meaning of labour, and the place of the family are critical ones that have to be answered as we struggle with the difficult task of rethinking Canada." [1] Although the types of questions asked by women's historians have shifted in recent years, the challenge of rethinking Canada from a feminist perspective remains pertinent. This volume is an excellent resource for the continuation of that project.

Note

[1]. Veronica Strong-Boag and Anita Claire Fellman, *Rethinking Canada: The Promise of Women's History*, 2nd ed. (Toronto: Copp Clark Pitman, 1991), 1.

If there is additional discussion of this review, you may access it through the network, at:

<https://networks.h-net.org/h-canada>

Citation: Jane Nicholas. Review of Gleason, Mona; Perry, Adele, *Rethinking Canada: The Promise of Women's History*. H-Canada, H-Net Reviews. October, 2007.

URL: <http://www.h-net.org/reviews/showrev.php?id=13662>

Copyright © 2007 by H-Net, all rights reserved. H-Net permits the redistribution and reprinting of this work for nonprofit, educational purposes, with full and accurate attribution to the author, web location, date of publication, originating list, and H-Net: Humanities & Social Sciences Online. For any other proposed use, contact the Reviews editorial staff at hbooks@mail.h-net.org.