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Books from Canada

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Mother Was Not a Person is an anthology containing critical prose and some poetry written by Montreal women. Most were enrolled in a course called Women in Modern Society coordinated by Margret Andersen at Loyola College in 1971/72, but contributors also include well-known Quebeckers such as gynecologist Lise Fortier and expatriate American sociology professor Marlene Dixon. Arranged in seven sections, the anthology begins with “Woman’s Place: How It Was” which contains excerpts from the writings of turn-of-the-century Canadian feminists such as suffragette Nellie McClung. The remaining sections probe various aspects of contemporary women’s issues and include articles on such topics as sex stereotyping in school texts, sexual politics in the novels of Margaret Atwood and a brief resume of The Royal Commission on the Status of Women Report.


Women in Canada focuses scholarly attention, predominantly from the social sciences, on women’s role in contemporary Canadian society. The emphasis is on Canadian realities, since, as Stephenson notes in her introduction, “Canada and its people, like women, have traditionally been defined by others.” Although some of the studies merely apply certain feminist perspectives established by U. S. scholars (for example, Meredith M. Kimball, “Women and Success: A Basic Conflict?”), most of the articles present original examinations of subjects that cross class, age, language and racial differences among Canadian women. Among the 16 articles are “Indian Women,” “The Woman Suffrage Bill in Quebec,” “The French-Canadian Family” and “The Status of Women at McMaster University.” The collection includes two highly useful bibliographies: “Cousin Cinderella: A Guide to Historical Literature Pertaining to Canadian Women,” by Veronica Strong-Boag, and “A Bibliography of Materials on Canadian Women, Pertinent to the Social Sciences and Published between 1950 and 1972,” by Margrit Eichler and Lynne Primrose.


Privilege of Sex: A Century of Canadian Women is a collection of writings, largely unknown, by Canadian women published between 1837 and 1925. The selections are from letters, journals, diaries, travellers’ accounts, autobiographies and post-World War I discussions of the woman question. Zaremba divides her writers into three chronological sections: Part I, “Brothers, Husbands and Fathers,” includes excerpts from three women whose writings in the first third of the nineteenth century mirror the complexities of remaining acceptably feminine and simultaneously surviving in the uncivilized rural communities of upper Canada. Part II, “A Woman’s Place,” reprints in entirety two narratives of women pioneers, from 1871 and 1884, who successfully met the crises of the Canadian wilderness without, as Zaremba notes, bearing any resemblance to the stereotype of the masculine wilderness hero. Part III, “Changes,” includes excerpts from the autobiography of Nellie McClung; selections from a book about Canadian women written for British audiences in 1908; and part of a 1925 debate on divorce by Agnes MacPhail, the first woman member of Canadian Parliament. In addition to a general introduction, Zaremba prefaxes each section with biographical and critical information, and includes a brief bibliography at the end.


Based on original research by members of the Canadian Women’s Educational Press, Women at Work. Ontario, 1850-1930 is a history of working-class women which examines the nature and significance of wage work by single women during the period of Canada’s industrialization. Eight articles discuss traditionally female occupations such as prostitution, nursing, teaching, dressmaking and domestic service, and document with charts, drawings and photographs the exploitation of the female worker. One article focuses on the trade union movement and the failure of Canadian women, unlike their American counterparts, to substantially improve their status through organization. The material uncovered challenges the conclusions of existing history and political economy texts and begins to “establish women’s rightful importance in Canada’s past.” It includes an extensive bibliography. (Wendy Keitner and Lois Gottlieb)