

DEMANDING EQUALITY

One Hundred Years of Canadian Feminism

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UBC Press · Vancouver · Toronto

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Introduction

Nineteenth-century anti-slavery campaigner Mary Ann Shadd Cary, arguably the first woman newspaper editor in Canada, was a passionate abolitionist who believed African-Canadian women must join with their menfolk in the struggle against racism and white supremacy in all its ugly manifestations. Shadd Cary was one of the first African-Canadian women who publicly advocated for enhanced dignity for her racial community as well as equal education and rights for Black women.

Beginning in the 1930s, prairie activist Nellie Peterson devoted her political life to convincing others that cooperation should triumph over capitalism, peace over war. An Albertan farmer, teacher, and leader in the provincial Co-operative Commonwealth Federation (CCF), she saw socialism as the means to achieve a cooperative society, though she also identified women's legal and social inequality as an inexcusable blight on Canadian society.

Quebec trade union leader Madeleine Parent risked social ostracism, imprisonment, and denunciation as a supposed communist in the 1940s and 1950s to organize low-paid textile workers. As a socialist and trade unionist, Parent was committed to workers' self-organization and improvement of their working and living conditions. Through class struggle, she believed, women would also secure new dignity, rights, and equality, and, as her career evolved, she became more centrally involved in the women's movement.

An abolitionist, a cooperator, and a trade unionist: these women did not necessarily self-identify primarily as feminists. Yet I would argue that they

were. Most women in this book would not have applied the term “feminist” to themselves: some employed vocabulary specific to their time, such as “equal rights” or “liberationists,” but others avoided “feminist” because their concerns about women’s oppression were expressed through and alongside other struggles, such as abolitionism, socialism, anti-militarism, or free thought. In fact, some argued that they were *for* women’s equality but *against* feminism, as it was associated with a narrow group of women – more affluent or privileged – whose ideas were an impediment to the emancipation of all women.

What, then, is “feminism”? It has been categorized variously as theory, ideas, organizations, movements, sensibilities, feelings, even a way of living. It can be some and all of those. However, if we define it too expansively, it can dissolve into an amorphous description of all women’s empowering political activity. Feminism is more specific: it questions, challenges, and hopes to alter women’s subordination; it encompasses women’s efforts to secure equality, autonomy, and dignity. Can we apply a “feminist” label to women in the past despite their seeming refusal of the term? If we redefine feminism, I think we can. Feminists understood women to be disadvantaged by their gender, but the origins and experience of disadvantage might be attributed to sexual oppression, patriarchy, class exploitation, racism, colonialism, heterosexism – or combinations of those. Some liberal definitions of feminism stress women’s individual desire to throw off restrictive “encumbrances” as they seek “the self-determination of a freely choosing, autonomous person.”¹ What this definition misses, however, is that autonomy and dignity may be expressed as collective ideals: women from subordinated groups saw women’s emancipation as inseparable from the just treatment of their communities.

This book argues that Canadian feminism was polyphonic; it was a chorus of diverse political voices (not necessarily singing in harmony) rather than solos sung by a few women leaders. It is difficult to distinguish a singular feminist consciousness or movement: rather, groups of feminists fashioned different dreams of equality, freedom, and social transformation. Women pursued separate pathways to equality in parallel movements, sometimes mutually supportive, sometimes oppositional. If I had written a book concerning women who consciously endorsed the word “feminist” and were dedicated only to redressing women’s inequality, it would have been a slim volume. Make no mistake: this is not just because terminology is historically specific; it is also because feminism was often a hybrid politics, in which women saw independence, equality, and dignity intertwined with struggles

against related injustices, whether racism, war, colonialism, economic inequality, or homophobia. The political awakening of some feminists began in other movements as women “questioned the radical questioners,”² whether they were enlightenment philosophers, socialists, or liberal reformers. Other feminists began with gender equality but moved to a hybrid feminism.

Certainly, we should not underestimate women’s oppression and their desire for freedom from a system of masculine dominance as incubators of feminism. It is undeniable that women’s lives from the 1880s to the 1980s not only differed dramatically from men’s but were valued less; women were more constrained than men and regulated and denigrated in ways men were not. For much of this time span, women were judged to be intellectually, physically, and/or psychologically inferior to men; therefore, their appropriate role was helpmate, follower, or subordinate. Women faced inordinate fear of sexual assault and violence, whether in familial or social surroundings. They had little control over their own reproduction – male doctors and politicians made the rules women had to live by. As a group, women earned less, had fewer opportunities for education and training, and faced a greater threat of poverty or economic dependence.

Women were also considered second-class citizens. For decades, they could not vote, sit on juries, run for office, have control over their wages, own their own property as married women, secure a divorce on the same terms as men, have custody of their children – the list goes on. Countless laws – such as those delineating self-defence, Indian status, sexual assault – were written in accordance with dominant ideals of patriarchy and masculinity. Social welfare policies similarly encoded gender and racial hierarchies.

Even when women secured citizenship rights, such as the ability to run for public office, gender norms, including women’s responsibility for family care, worked against women making full use of those rights. What appeared to be victories for women’s rights might also prove double-edged or ambiguous. Political recognition as voters did not produce economic equality, and reforms that benefited some women disadvantaged others. The ascendancy of some feminist leaders silenced their counterparts, and, even after women secured formal legal equality, the archetypal “citizen” was still imagined as a white male. Formal citizenship is not necessarily “substantive citizenship” with equal rights, opportunities, treatment, and life conditions.³

All of these political, legal, and social inequalities were qualified and differentiated for women based on their social location: their class, race, ethnicity, sexual orientation, religion, place of origin. Because women’s experiences diverged so dramatically, their understanding of feminism and (in)equality

differed too. Women of Asian descent could not vote in British Columbia until long after white women secured the franchise; working-class women had fewer economic options and faced more acute economic deprivation than middle-class women; Quebec women struggled with intense clerical opposition to equal rights; Indigenous women were subject to the colonial violence of racism and sexism. As I argue in [Chapter 3](#), the very meaning of democracy diverged between Indigenous and Eurocentric cultures, and the latter have dominated the history of feminism.

Nonetheless, there is a misperception that feminism involved only more affluent, white women anxious to overcome their social alienation and claim equal opportunity with men. That was one element of feminism, but so too were the human rights struggles of African-Canadian women determined that their daughters have equal access to education, and the organizing of labour feminists who believed the trade union movement was the best vehicle to secure gender equality. Since class, gender, and race are constituted together, not experienced as separate categories, women's politics might incorporate multiple, even contradictory, aspirations and feelings. Coalitions of politically diverse women determined to fix short-term crises, such as concerted attacks on women's right to work in the Great Depression, constituted another component of feminism.

Feminists were made as they witnessed what they or other women could not do, become, or enjoy, including the right to live without violence, poverty, and fear. While we are more cognizant of feminist struggles to change laws, politics, and institutions, women were also radicalized as they confronted the mundane injustices of daily life, from the employer who sexually harassed them to the fear of walking alone at night to anguish over their hungry children. Feminists questioned the recommended, assigned, or dictated place for women, rejecting admonitions that this was their fate and that the existing social order was reasonable, necessary, and inevitable, ordained by religion, reason, and science. Anti-feminism and outright misogyny were powerful constants in the history of feminism, even if their character shifted over time.

If some women concentrated on their individual freedom, in this volume I focus more on feminism as a collective project of resistance, since that is, ultimately, what galvanized social change. Not that the individual and the collective were mutually exclusive: they were reciprocal. Individual experience created pathways to feminism, and participation in the women's movement induced individual transformation, described by women as eye

opening, life changing, spiritual, joyful, surprising, but also painful and difficult. Episodically, feminism elicited flashes of utopian desire and hope. Utopianism, a form of “social dreaming,” signalled the transformation not just of societies, but also of consciousness, ideology, imagination, bodies, and the very definition of what is human and humanly possible. Feminists periodically imagined an almost unimaginable world of freedom, equality, and pleasure, the emancipation of those “designated ‘other’ by hegemonic cultures,” the inversion of all dominant norms and ideas, including their own complicity in them.⁴

Broadening our definition of feminism, and recognizing that its political, cultural, and social dimensions are entangled, allows us to capture the heterogeneity of feminism and also destabilize the unfortunately tenacious model of feminist waves: the first encompassing suffrage campaigns circa 1900; the second emerging in the 1960s, with more emphasis on sexual liberation; the third taking shape in the 1990s. Despite many historical critiques, the “waves” concept has proven stubbornly popular. Although I occasionally fall back on this terminology, I believe the wave metaphor is a misleading template for women’s history. Slotting feminism into waves is problematic not only because it falsely assumes these waves were followed by troughs of inactivity, but also because it obscures the feminist activism of left-wing, labour, ethnic, and racialized women. It reifies some struggles, such as those for suffrage or sexual autonomy, while ignoring other mobilizations as well as the continuities in women’s activism. It also assumes waves are defined and driven by a peer group with a shared political agenda, and fails to acknowledge the ideological differences within feminism in all time periods.

Implicit in many wave accounts is the generational “matraphor” of mothers and daughters; feminism becomes a “family drama” (with noticeably absent fathers) in which each new generational wave measures its insights against the limitations of the previous one.⁵ The result is a linear history of progress in which feminism is mapped as a chronological evolution of increasing sophistication and insight. This story of “maternal order and generational succession” has appealed to more than one cohort of feminist activists, especially in their coming-of-age years, to identify or disidentify themselves with feminists who came before.⁶ However, the generational/wave metaphor camouflages as much as it illuminates: it suggests inevitable cross-generational tensions and obscures the continuities and heterogeneity in feminist history.

Feminism might be better characterized as political streams ebbing and flowing or as ever-present “radio waves” – multiple, overlapping, with different frequencies and channels.⁷ In specific historical moments, certain streams of feminist thought and action find succor or, conversely, are suppressed. “Radical ruptures” may also occur, as feminism takes on new meanings, issues, or intensity, in the process shifting the very definition of concepts like equality, oppression, liberation.⁸ Feminists inevitably carry the historical legacies of previous generations with them, but they may also perceive seemingly “spontaneous” shifts, eruptions, and inventions unique to their times.⁹

Remaining wary of a simple onward-and-upward progress narrative while still recognizing the significance of historical context is a delicate balancing act. Whatever the continuities in animating ideas, issues, and methods of organizing, feminist thought and action both shifted over time in relation to theoretical conversations about inequality, social and economic conditions, colonial and state institutions, political movements, diverse cultures, and unexpected events. What feminists reacted against and what they were determined to alter were products of changing global, national, and local environments. If talking about age-specific generations simplifies, we might still think about “political generations”:¹⁰ women of all ages struggling against worlds, large and small, that shaped their lives. The trauma of the First World War, for instance, produced new feminist theories about masculinist militarism; the Great Depression fostered critiques of gendered welfare policies and novel forms of socialist-feminist organizing; global anti-imperialist and liberation movements in the sixties inspired women’s feminist consciousness and activism.

Feminism also had local and cultural specificity. Feminism in early twentieth-century Quebec was shaped by the dominant francophone, Catholic culture: some feminists aligned themselves with free thought advocates critical of the Catholic Church, while others worked with female religious orders to create a Catholic feminism. Early agrarian feminists on the Prairies argued that farm women’s inequality was situated at the crossroads of eastern business domination, patriarchal laws, and a fundamental devaluation of women’s labour on the family farm. Six Nations Indigenous women cast their demands for democracy and self-governance in the tradition of the longhouse, while left-wing Ukrainian women in the 1920s pursued an emancipatory project that wove together their ethnic identification, commitment to international communism, and critique of patriarchal norms.

Since the 1960s, feminist historians have criticized mainstream history for discounting or ignoring these women’s struggles. The tendency of popular

national histories is to focus on a progress narrative of gradual reform, often inspired by great leaders, as the best feminism has contributed to a very partial feminist history. So too has the view that organized feminism is a quaint relic, needed way back when women lacked rights, now relevant only in countries portrayed as backward compared to the West. Yet, if we misrepresent the present as a haven of equality, we may have a murky sense of the past. And feminist historians are not immune from our own misunderstandings and omissions. Sadly, feminists reminiscing about their past often claim historians, too, perpetuate “historical amnesia.”¹¹ Even in a short space of time, some feminist ideas and movements are forgotten, misrepresented, distorted, airbrushed out of history.

If extending historical knowledge is an antidote for amnesia, we also have to be candid about the limitations of research. As feminist historians, we want to uncover voices hidden from history and question taken-for-granted definitions of what is historically significant. However, we may still inevitably privilege some voices, some perspectives, over others. We are always struggling to overcome the very history writing we critique – that is, a history of “winners and losers,” a project that reinforces master narratives shaped by existing power relations.¹² Openness, reflection on our own intellectual standpoint, and willingness to rethink our assumptions are all vital as we balance analysis and sensibilities, frameworks and evidence, with an appropriate measure of humility.

Precisely because feminist historians began by questioning if prevailing theories and narratives were value-free, they have been forthright in acknowledging that how we tell our past is shaped by our own evolving perspectives, social location, and historical context. Writing women’s history, suggests Susan Friedman, is a tug-of-war between two seemingly opposing impulses. On the one hand, we are trying to reclaim a forgotten, erased, trivialized, or ignored history. This compensatory project is inherently political, and it assumes that a more truthful rendition of history *is* possible. On the other hand, we worry our new histories will themselves be exclusionary or incomplete – we may ignore or misinterpret some women’s lives, privileging those with class and race advantages.

We can be paralysed by these countervailing impulses or engage them in a productive dialogue. In a sense, this is an inevitable conundrum of *all* historians: we are always walking a tightrope between “objectivity and subjectivity.”¹³ We can acknowledge our own strong points of view while still “striving for dispassionate judgment.”¹⁴ We can engage in honest projects of historical retrieval while being self-critical of how we produce those very

histories. While remaining wary of false notions of complete objectivity, we should not resign ourselves to relativism or pluralism, the former lacking a clear intellectual and moral compass, the latter masking inequalities by uncritically validating all points of view.

This book reads very much like a straightforward truth-telling narrative of historical recovery, but I acknowledge that it was shaped by available sources, feminist debates, and my own choices about which themes to highlight. After combing through archives, documentary, media, and cultural sources, as well as the interpretive works of other historians, I selected examples that typify or illustrate streams of feminist activism, including some individuals and stories already known, as well as others in need of more visibility. I only scratch the surface of a complex, rich history: recognizing that our historical work, like domestic labour, is “never done,”¹⁵ is an acknowledgement that future historians will identify individuals, sources, and interpretations others have overlooked.

Navigating fragmentary and frustratingly incomplete sources detailing women’s political activities is a perennial concern of feminist historians; every source has its own partialities and challenges, but, pieced together, counterposed to each other, they enable us to reconstruct a more fulsome account of multiple streams of feminist activity. Redefining what is “political” has been essential: rather than tallying up numbers of women successfully running for legislative office, historians have probed local and fleeting mobilizations, unpaid as well as paid work, and efforts to alter the “private” sphere of bodies, families, and relationships. We know that textual and visual records tend to favour the more literate, affluent, English and French speakers, and those with a leadership or public presence. Feminists were not always cognizant of the historical impact of their activities, they seldom left caches of personal papers, and they were less likely to be sought out by the government, media, or experts for their views. Some were just plain busy, doing the double or triple labour of family care, paid work, and politics, without the time or proclivity to document their political actions and reflections. This was especially so for working-class and racialized women, who often pursued their own pathways to equality, so it is particularly important to locate their equality-seeking efforts. Indigenous women also drew on different cultural practices of historical remembering that were not recorded in our colonial archive. After the 1970s, as a new women’s history emerged, feminists have become far more committed to preserving an archive of their own movement, though much of that current history has yet to be written.

In this narrative, I have not hidden my own socialist feminist proclivities or concern with colonialism, already evident in my other writing, but an overview of multiple feminisms necessitated that I tell multiple stories. Feminists, after all, ranged from women with revolutionary hopes to those tinkering with the status quo, from women defying all gender norms to those who wanted women's "female" distinctness valued and given equal consideration. My intent is to show all these feminists "making their own history, but not always in conditions of their own choosing."¹⁶ That well-worn Marxist axiom is not meant facetiously. It assumes that social context shapes but never determines the complexion of political movements: material conditions and social relations are a starting point to understand women's experiences, but culture and ideology are critical too. So too is human agency: after all, feminists "made" their own history through acts of courage, political stamina, innovative thinking, and leaps of the imagination, often defying entrenched ideas. We need to "always historicize,"¹⁷ describing the environments women equality seekers lived in, the prevailing ideologies they encountered, and what they understood to be ideal, possible, and necessary, while also exposing their actions and ideas to critique nurtured by contemporary insights. Acknowledging the limits of their dreams of equality is but one step toward refashioning new ones.

Seventies feminists, who initiated the remarkable explosion of women's history upon which we have built, understood how "perilous and uncertain" efforts are to recover the history of women's lives and consciousness. Contemplating the historians' ongoing internal dialogue between analysis, reflection, and understanding, Sheila Rowbotham suggested we are always acting as intermediaries between the present and the past, using evidence and empathy to reconstruct feminist histories: "The act of analysis ... demands that in the very process of thinking, we transform the relation between thinker and thought about, theory and experience. Analysis is not alone enough for we enter the beings and worlds of other people through imagination and it is through imagination that we glimpse how things might change."¹⁸

Reclaiming feminist histories, then, is both a project of recovery and a political undertaking in which we are juggling our roles as feminist activists and creators of history, our commitment to uncover truths while recognizing those truths as circumscribed.¹⁹ It is an undertaking in and of the present, predicated on the hope we may be acting on behalf of a better future. Since the eighteenth century, feminists have claimed we can never

tackle the injustice of the present or create a more humane, egalitarian future without understanding the origins of inequality. We also need to appreciate how women's movements tried – successfully, partially, or not – to alter social and gender roles they were told were unalterable. That is the challenge of this feminist history.

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Library and Archives Canada Cataloguing in Publication

Title: Demanding equality : one hundred years of Canadian feminism / Joan Sangster.

Names: Sangster, Joan, 1952- author.

Description: Includes bibliographical references and index.

Identifiers: Canadiana (print) 20210105682 | Canadiana (ebook) 20210105712 |

ISBN 9780774866064 (hardcover) | ISBN 9780774866088 (PDF) |

ISBN 9780774866095 (EPUB)

Subjects: LCSH: Feminism—Canada—History—19th century. | LCSH: Feminism—Canada—History—20th century. | LCSH: Feminists—Canada—History—19th century. | LCSH: Feminists—Canada—History—20th century. | LCSH: Women—Canada—Social conditions—19th century. | LCSH: Women—Canada—Social conditions—20th century. | LCSH: Women—Canada—History—19th century. | LCSH: Women—Canada—History—20th century.

Classification: LCC HQ1453 .S26 2021 | DDC 305.420971—dc23

Canada

UBC Press gratefully acknowledges the financial support for our publishing program of the Government of Canada (through the Canada Book Fund), the Canada Council for the Arts, and the British Columbia Arts Council.

This book has been published with the help of a grant from the Canadian Federation for the Humanities and Social Sciences, through the Awards to Scholarly Publications Program, using funds provided by the Social Sciences and Humanities Research Council of Canada.

Set in Futura Condensed and Warnock by Artegraphica Design Co.

Copy editor: Barbara Tessman

Proofreader: Judith Earnshaw

Indexer: Noeline Bridge

Cover designer: Martyn Schmoll

UBC Press

The University of British Columbia

2029 West Mall

Vancouver, BC V6T 1Z2

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