The Business of Women

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Marriage, Family, and Entrepreneurship in British Columbia, 1901-51

MELANIE BUDDLE

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Contents

Illustrations

Tables

Figures

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The Business of Women

1

Businesswomen in British Columbia

When I began to research self-employed women in British Columbia, I supposed that most would be single, just as other working women across Canada often were, particularly in the first half of the twentieth century. Since marriage usually ended gainful employment for women, I hypothesized that some, willingly or unwillingly, remained single and turned to self-employment to support themselves. For much of the century, marriage was an occupation for women. It provided financial security in the form of a wage-earning spouse, but it was also an occupation in terms of the amount of unpaid work that married women did in the home. If marriage was a form of economic security, then self-employment was an alternative form of security and possibly, as historian Joy Parr has said in the context of wage-earning work, a way to "escape" conjugality.[1]

What I discovered about women who worked for themselves contradicted my initial assumptions. Being single (never-married) was not a particularly likely condition for self-employed women, and the latter cannot be understood in the same light as wage-earning single women in British Columbia or in the rest of Canada. Self-employed women were older than wage-earning women and were more likely to be married, widowed, or divorced. My initial position needed to be re-evaluated, and this book is the result of that re-evaluation. My focus is entrepreneurial women in a frontier zone, British Columbia in the first half of the twentieth century. This was a place and a time period in which rates of self-employment were relatively high for women, as were rates of marriage. Businesswomen's

identities as mothers, wives, and widows affected their entrepreneurial decisions in meaningful ways.

The term "businesswoman" was increasingly used in the early 1900s to refer to women who worked as wage earners in professional occupations. The word implied a certain kind of working woman: well-dressed, white, middle-class professional working women were called business girls or businesswomen. In the second half of this book, I write about business and professional women's (BPW) clubs, and I interrogate the use of the word "businesswoman" and its numerous meanings. However, in general and unless specifically stated in references to BPW clubwomen, I use the terms "businesswoman," "entrepreneur" and "self-employed" interchangeably throughout this book to refer to women who worked for themselves rather than working as wage earners for someone else.

This story centres primarily on white women in the province. Indigenous women and non-white immigrant women ran businesses, but these women are hard to find in the historical sources I used. I have highlighted non-white businesswomen whenever possible, and it seems that their ages, marital status, and familial demands paralleled those of white entrepreneurs. However, their businesses were usually even more marginal than those run by white women, and imperfect census taking and differing understandings of whether marginal laundry businesses, farming, hunting, and fishing were entrepreneurial have distorted the ways in which these women's stories were recorded. Investigating their experiences and using a diverse set of qualitative records (including oral history) would be a worthwhile process. In general, there is great potential for other scholars to analyze the individual experiences of non-white female entrepreneurs. I hope such scholars might use my study as a starting point from which to compare the experiences of non-white women to those of the white businesswomen that I analyze in the pages that follow. If my work helps to explain the roles of marriage, family, age, and region for a great many white businesswomen in the province, then further work might explain how these factors also mattered for non-white women. More detailed qualitative examinations might yield interesting portraits that would enrich this story, but it should be assumed that the women I discuss are white unless otherwise noted, in part because of the research methods employed here and my reliance on club records, published sources, and census data.

Simply being in the labour force in the early twentieth century was unconventional for women, and business ownership was constructed as a masculine endeavour. Businesswomen chose unconventional paths in life, and self-employed women formed a small proportion of all women workers

and of all business owners in every decade under study. This should not, however, deter us from examining them more closely. That entrepreneurs were a distinct minority of the female labour force does not mean that they did not resemble other women, but women's labour force experiences were and are diverse and deserve to be examined from different perspectives. Businesswomen struggled to survive and often operated small, home-based businesses in occupations that had been sex-typed for centuries as feminine work. They frequently ran businesses because they could not find other avenues of work and needed to support family members, not because they were rebelling against traditional roles as wage earners or as wives and mothers. As I demonstrate in the first half of this book, the need to support family – described in Chapter 2 as the "family claim" – was the primary reason women opened businesses. Self-employed women and contemporary observers invoked the language of family responsibility to justify entrepreneurship, whether it was in particularly feminized industries such as sewing, cooking, or cleaning or in more male-dominated occupations such as farming. The ways in which family – the presence of dependent children and the presence, or sometimes absence, of a spouse – influenced women's business decisions is a theme that threads throughout this study.

Finding indications that marginal businesses – which most women's businesses were – provided something more than basic survival is difficult. Evidence of personal fulfillment is lacking, particularly for lower-class entrepreneurial women. It may not have been an important factor for the owners of small businesses in the province. But even when their operations were marginal, and personal satisfaction may not have been the primary goal, some degree of choice is evident in women's decisions. Businesswomen chose to open their own enterprises in a time period when most women did not, and "however miniscule or ephemeral" their businesses,[2] they gained the advantage of becoming their own (and sometimes someone else's) boss.

My initial research prompted me to ask whether female entrepreneurs went against the grain of what British Columbians felt was appropriate feminine behaviour. How important was gender to women's entry into self-employment? Were self-employed women perceived as less feminine in behaviour or appearance than wage-earning women because they operated in a distinctly masculine sphere? As David Burley has argued, notions of masculinity were closely linked to the idea of the businessman.[3] In some ways, female entrepreneurs in British Columbia resembled male entrepreneurs more than they resembled other women in the labour force.

Some ran businesses in male-dominated arenas, such as shopkeeping or farming. Even women who ran businesses in female-dominated trades, such as sewing or operating boarding houses, were relatively rare in the very fact of their entrepreneurship. They ran businesses in towns that were not exactly teeming with other businesswomen. However, while women in British Columbia were like men in choosing entrepreneurship, they could be feminine and also businesslike. Sara McLagan founded the Vancouver daily *The World* with her husband in 1888 and, as a widow, became sole owner in 1901 and the first woman in Canada to run a daily newspaper.[4] A colleague described her as a "most womanly woman and yet one ... who can talk politics with men."[5] Businesswomen and the commentators who described them reassured the public that even women who worked in male-dominated business worlds could be feminine in action and appearance.

I also considered region. British Columbia provides an interesting window on the actions of female entrepreneurs. There were proportionately more adult married women in the population (and in the gainfully employed population) of British Columbia than in the rest of Canada in the first half of the twentieth century. And women were more likely to be self-employed in the province than in the rest of the country between 1901 and 1951. I propose that the higher incidence of female self-employment in British Columbia was connected to the frontier characteristics of the province. The low numbers of women, the correspondingly high rates of marriage, and the market demand for the types of services women typically provided (such as food preparation and boarding and lodging establishments) led married or once-married women to open their own businesses in relatively high numbers in British Columbia. The effects of these early patterns continued to be felt in the province. Women's prominence in entrepreneurship continued until the mid-twentieth century, long after the gender imbalance had righted itself.

The year 1901, the dawn of a new century, is an apt place to begin this study. The records for the female labour force in pre-1900 British Columbia are scant, and the white female population in the province was particularly small.[6] Moreover, in the pre-1901 period, "white women's experience was defined by limited opportunities for labour and financial dependence."[7] While such limitations still existed after 1901, some women in the province responded to the limited opportunities for waged labour by turning to self-employment. If depending financially on men was untenable, they actively sought out other options for financial survival. The economic and social possibilities available to white women in the

province, beyond simply arriving on "bride ships" to be married off to miners, were just beginning to be realized as the new century began.[8] And the 1901 census records, which provide detailed data on occupations, help illuminate women's work options in this important time period.[9]

At the beginning of the twentieth century, it was also a relatively recent phenomenon for married women to be able to legally own businesses and property. As Chris Clarkson has shown, a wave of reforms in British Columbia between the 1860s and the early 1900s extended property ownership and inheritance rights to married women. Clarkson argues that British Columbia's legislators extended property, inheritance, and political rights to white women in the name of capitalism, to "encourage the individualistic pursuit of material gain," thereby boosting the province's economy, supporting family growth, and increasing immigration.[10] He states that legal reforms geared toward the rights of white settlers, including expanding married women's rights to own property, had the effect of reducing Aboriginal power and land ownership.[11] In other words, white women gained some legal headway while indigenous populations lost out as British Columbia developed legally and politically.

In 1873, the Married Women's Property Act was passed in British Columbia. Some of its aims can be interpreted charitably: it gave married women property rights that would help them survive abuse or desertion, legalized their participation in business, and generally seemed emancipatory. But its other important purpose was to allow married men "to protect property from creditors by transferring it to their wives."[12] Thus, while both Clarkson and Peter Baskerville suggest that in cities such as Victoria married women owned property in high numbers in the late 1800s, it seems women's ownership was tied more to the desire of their husbands to protect property from creditors than to their support for women's emancipation.[13] Despite this, my work shows that there was a link between marriage (at least on paper, even if husbands were absent) and entrepreneurship. Married women were finally able to own both property and businesses legally. The wave of acts and amendments that Clarkson highlights led to what he has called "a changing mentality among women. From the 1870s onward, British Columbian women were independently invoking their rights."[14] The beginning of the twentieth century was a good time for married women to own businesses even if, in practice, the property laws were not always applied equitably.

This study ends with the 1951 census. By mid-century, the gender imbalance in the province had virtually disappeared. Although British Columbia still retained frontier characteristics and high rates of female

self-employment, wage-earning opportunities had increased as a result of the Second World War, and self-employment rates for both women and men were declining. British Columbia was modernizing, the workforce was changing, and women's work and life options were arguably much different after the war. A study of the second half of the twentieth century would reveal equally interesting but different facets of female self-employment.[15]

The first half of this book gives a sense of the many experiences of self-employed women in British Columbia during the period 1901 to 1951. Surveying the options for women, the frontier nature of British Columbia in the early twentieth century, and the kinds of work that women did in the province is critical to understanding the context within which women entered self-employment. Most worked in small-scale, survival-oriented enterprises in order to support families. They are rarely discussed in business history, and the women's voices are soft and difficult to hear because they did not join clubs or leave substantial records of their businesses. They were in many ways members of the working class. Entrepreneurship may in some cases elevate the status of workers, but by and large these were working-class women running very small, home-based businesses that often involved teaching, sewing, cooking, and cleaning.

In British Columbia, frontier conditions opened some doors for female business ownership. In Chapter 2, I use census data to develop a fuller picture of these women and to explore the links between marriage, family, and entrepreneurship. The family claim in the context of self-employment is examined. I also explain the lack of women on the frontier in the first half of the twentieth century and connect demographic information to women's employment options. This is also related to marriage and family: the comparatively small number of women in the province meant high rates of marriage, but these marriages did not necessarily last. Women with children were sometimes left to support their families alone.

In Chapter 3, I look at the conditions of work for self-employed women in British Columbia and the types of work open to them. Self-employed women were, like wage-earning women, clustered into a narrow range of occupations. However, while businesswomen participated in womanly trades and frequently capitalized on what were deemed feminine skills, they worked in a predominantly male work world and were more likely than wage earners to work in male-dominated occupations. Self-employment connoted independence and manliness; businesswomen thus challenged women's place in the working world. In the latter half of the

chapter, I look carefully at entrepreneurial women's options in the province, given the sex segregation of the labour force more generally.

In the second half of the book, I examine the business and professional women's clubs in British Columbia, highlighting a particular group of white, middle-class businesswomen. Certainly, for some entrepreneurs, such clubs would have seemed irrelevant. Working-class women (self-employed or not) and non-white women, even when not specifically banned, were either not welcome or not interested in these groups. Moreover, the women who joined the BPW clubs were not all self-employed, as I discuss in Chapter 4. However, the clubs provide a glimpse into the organizational, work, and family lives of a particular demographic: ambitious but respectably conservative middle-class white women, some of whom were self-employed and some of whom needed to work, just as working-class women did.

Despite their relatively privileged status, not all middle-class white women were married to a breadwinner. While many more of the BPW club members, compared to the workers described in Chapters 2 and 3, chose entrepreneurship for personal reasons that may not have been entirely financial, this was still a hard road to walk, particularly before the Second World War. Were these women radical? Were they working just for fun? Were their businesses important to them because they provided a job? As Chapter 4 indicates, their social lives and organizational lives as club members provide insight into what it meant to be an entrepreneurial woman in the early decades of the twentieth century. While this group was small and did not always represent the larger group of self-employed women discussed in the first half of the book, it is still the case that the actions of the BPW clubwomen tell us something about all women who engaged in entrepreneurial occupations in the province.

Clubwomen's social activities and their efforts in the arena of women's employment conditions suggest how they understood their own roles in the business world. While members maintained a respectable "outside" image, some elements of "inside" club life were devoted to criticizing and overturning the more obvious signs of inequity that they dealt with in their daily lives. Parodies of male-dominated business traditions, described in Chapter 4, illustrate that club members were acutely aware of the gendered world that shaped and limited their working lives. While such actions, if they were noticed at all, may have seemed frivolous to non-members in the rest of the province, club activities provide a deeper and more nuanced response to the questions of gender and business than census data can provide.

Chapter 5 demonstrates that business ownership was perceived as a masculine realm of work; despite this, businesswomen found ways to present themselves as both feminine and businesslike, characteristics that would seem antithetical. The way for women to assert their place in an entrepreneurial context was to stress that they could be businesslike in an appropriately feminine manner. Entrepreneurial BPW clubwomen in British Columbia, as well as outside observers, relied on conventional understandings of appropriate gendered behaviour as a way to legitimize their place in the business world.

I conclude that women's work experiences in the first fifty years of the twentieth century were affected by the frontier characteristics of the province. The regional component to this study is important: businesswomen exercised options in British Columbia that were not exercised in quite the same way in the rest of the country, partly because of the province's demography. Furthermore, recent increases in female self-employment rates, and the increasing media interest in female entrepreneurs and "mompreneurs" in Canada, indicate the relevance and timeliness of this study.

There are undeniable differences between the marginal, frequently home-based penny capitalists documented in the first half of this book and the more privileged female entrepreneurs and BPW club members described in the latter half. However, working-class, survival-based businesses and upscale salons and clothing stores all reflect a set of similar themes in the lives of self-employed women in British Columbia. First, while some women worked primarily to support themselves, most used the income from their businesses to support family members, often children. Second, women who were entrepreneurs, whether they took in boarders, operated private schools, or ran tastefully appointed retail shops, were older and more likely to be married or once-married than were wage-earning women. Third, entrepreneurial women, by running their own businesses, were in a distinct minority not only among all workers but also among all working women, an important and interesting point. Given the marital status and ages of most self-employed women, they would have had fewer options for wage-earning work. And in British Columbia in particular, wage-earning jobs for women were not plentiful in the early half of the twentieth century. This helps to explain the elevated rates of self-employment in the province compared to the rest of the country, regardless of size or status of business. Finally, all self-employed women had to consider operating businesses that fit societal ideas about what women were supposed to do. Whether they ran women's clothing stores or businesses tied to women's supposed domestic strengths, they tended

to move into businesses that were appropriately feminine, again regardless of the size of business.

Historiography

Canadian researchers have rarely singled out businesswomen as a subject of study, and there are presently no competing works in the fields of business/labour/gender history. This material does not duplicate other works like it because other scholars are not researching the history of self-employed women in British Columbia or even in Canada generally. The history of women and work in British Columbia, especially that which deals with the twentieth century, is also sparse. Two useful collections, *In Her Own Right: Selected Essays on Women's History in BC* and *Not Just Pin Money: Selected Essays on the History of Women's Work in British Columbia,* were published in 1980 and 1984, while Gillian Creese and Veronica Strong-Boag's collection *British Columbia Reconsidered: Essays on Women* was published in 1992.[16] As useful as these collections have remained, their continued prominence indicates that more recent research on women and work in the province is scant. Research on women and self-employment is more so. One recent addition to the field is Lindsey McMaster's *Working Girls in the West: Representations of Wage-Earning Women.*[17] Her work goes beyond earlier studies that primarily documented women's presence in the workforce, but it does not address entrepreneurship.

My study does answer the call of Creese and Strong-Boag to take gender into account in British Columbia.[18] It also builds on more recent important contributions to family and gender history in western Canada. Adele Perry's *On the Edge of Empire: Gender, Race, and the Making of British Columbia, 1849-1871* is invaluable in its examination of colonial gender and race relations, although it does not move into the twentieth century. Chris Clarkson's *Domestic Reforms: Political Visions and Family Regulation in British Columbia, 1862-1940* touches on gender and family in British Columbia. Even so, these more recent contributions rarely separate female entrepreneurs from the female labour force.

While others have researched some aspects of female business ownership in the province, they have focused on nineteenth-century businesswomen and have rarely noted the relatively high rates of female entrepreneurship in British Columbia. Sylvia Van Kirk argues in "A Vital Presence: Women in the Cariboo Gold Rush, 1862-1875" that women had an impact on gold rush society "out of all proportion to their numbers,"

but she does not directly compare entrepreneurial women in British Columbia to women elsewhere.[19] While useful for understanding women in a particular time and place, Van Kirk's article does not make larger connections to the rest of the province or to the rest of Canada and deals only with the 1860s and early 1870s.

Peter Baskerville has examined mid-nineteenth-century businesswomen in an urban context.[20] His 1993 article on enterprising urban women in British Columbia is an exception to the general paucity of scholarship on entrepreneurial women, and his observation that historians have assumed women did not pursue entrepreneurial activity is still valid.[21] Baskerville also addresses the relationships between self-employment, marriage, and bearing children and suggests that studying self-employed women provides a way of "uncovering, at all class levels, the hopes, fears and aspirations of individuals within families."[22] His recognition of the importance of these variables prompted, in part, my considerations of marital status, age, and family among self-employed women across a broader time period.

Beyond these works, most research on entrepreneurial women in the province has been limited to biographical sketches, celebratory vignettes in local history publications, or short commentaries in studies about work or about women in the province more generally.[23] It has also largely been confined to studies of the nineteenth century. Robin Fisher noted in 1993 that British Columbia's historians should be thinking about getting into the twentieth century; we are now starting to do so, but in the field of gender/business history, the steps have been tentative.[24]

Research into how gender shaped women's entrepreneurial choices is almost non-existent. And despite the value of the works mentioned here, book-length studies that interrogate employment, family, and gender in British Columbia are lacking. The contribution of my research is threefold: it broadens our understanding of gender and work in the province; it broadens our understanding of women's family obligations in twentieth-century British Columbia; and it contributes to a little-known facet of the larger historiography of women in the labour force, female self-employment. There is a need to differentiate between types of women's work. Gender alone cannot unify all working women's experiences, and self-employed women were not the same as their wage-earning counterparts. The "proportionately smaller female population exercised a variety of options in tailoring their British Columbian life-course," and my work demonstrates that businesswomen also exercised these options in multiple ways.[25]

Scholars who are beginning to interrogate the intersection of gender and business history still form a small group. Research published in this

area has been almost entirely American, and much of it dates to the late 1990s. The US literature suggests that gender is not widely acknowledged in the field of business history, in which women are largely absent except as helpmeets to men. Mary Yeager states in the introduction to *Women in Business* that there is "no theory of entrepreneurship, no theory of the firm, no theory of contracts or of marriage, no theory of the family, no feminist theory that adequately explains the history of women in business."[26] Similarly, gender and business historian Wendy Gamber suggests that "historians of women in business who venture forth in search of interpretative contexts are apt to return empty-handed."[27] Female entrepreneurs "fall between a number of historiographical cracks," which may explain the dearth of scholars willing to combine the fields of gender and business history.[28]

New directions in the field were explored in a special 1998 issue of the *Business History Review* that addressed the cross-disciplinary aspects of studying businesswomen. In this issue, Gamber suggests that three subdisciplines of historical inquiry – business, labour, and women's history – can provide insights, but that inherent contradictions between subdisciplines complicate the task of writing about women in business. Interest in the field has also developed hand in hand with the development of gender history. Joan Wallach Scott's seminal 1986 article "Gender: A Useful Category of Historical Analysis" first opened the doors for historians to develop "gender as an analytic category."[29] And in her contribution to the *Business History Review,* Scott suggests that gender "is a useful category of analysis in business history, but also that using it is no easy matter."[30] She reminds us that "reconciling questions about women's access, experience, and status with questions about firms, markets, and economies is not an easy task."[31]

Women in Business, a three-volume collection edited by Mary Yeager, brings the themes of gender and business together and draws on the American historiography of the mid- to late 1990s. Yeager suggests that with "more women and men in academia alert to issues of gender and culture, the boundaries distinguishing the sub-fields of history blurred."[32] By the 1990s, historians of women had "begun to recover the histories of business buried in the interstices of the economy, in local neighbourhoods, in motels and hotels, in the beauty and funeral parlours, laundries, and boutiques" and, she adds, the "engendering of business history had begun."[33]

There have been other American contributions to the field, dating from the mid- to late 1990s. In addition to articles that may be seen as "thoughts on the history of business and the history of women," as one is subtitled,

Gamber also wrote *The Female Economy: The Millinery and Dressmaking Trades, 1860-1930.*[34] She has specifically examined female entrepreneurs from a gendered perspective. Others in the field include Angel Kwolek-Folland, who has written about the rise of office work and white-collar professional women.[35] She defines business broadly to include wage-earning and self-employed women. In her 1998 book *Incorporating Women*, she includes the business experiences of "entrepreneurs, women as members of family businesses, the business aspects of professionalization and women's roles as slaves, laborers, wage earners and managers."[36]

Gamber maintains that many scholars have been unable "to 'see' women as the proprietors of business concerns, let alone place them in any interpretative context."[37] The resulting problem is that "existing accounts (most of them the work of women's, not business, historians) either mention businesswomen in passing or celebrate the achievements of those who enjoyed unusual visibility or success."[38] I have attempted, as Gamber proposes, to place businesswomen in an interpretative context, examining them in relation to men, in relation to other women, and in relation to their families. This has not been done in histories of Canadian business, in which women are mentioned as exceptional actors either in the arena of business or in the arena of womanhood. Michael Bliss dismisses businesswomen almost completely in *Northern Enterprise: Five Centuries of Canadian Business.* The book jacket proclaims that Bliss surveys "the entire history of business in Canada" and tells the story of "enterprising men and women willing to take incredible risks."[39] This is not the case, for his attention to women is limited. He does not therefore actually survey the "entire" history.

Bliss notes that some wealthy male entrepreneurs who had hoped to pass down the family business "had no children or were dynastically crippled by having given birth to daughters."[40] Bliss, who presumably meant that the wives of these entrepreneurs gave birth, argues that when sons "were not there to ... take the helm it was necessary to go outside the family." Daughters were "not thought to have managerial potential or aspirations. What right-minded woman, almost certainly destined for marriage and motherhood, would think of business as a career, even if she did have a head for it?"[41] Bliss did not allow for the possibility that women could be mothers, wives, *and* businesswomen. In fact, marriage and motherhood did not impede most businesswomen. Sometimes it was the presence of unreliable husbands or dependent children that led women to entrepreneurship.

Other Canadian business histories have also given little space to female entrepreneurship, although they have not dismissed businesswomen as confidently as Bliss. *A Concise History of Business in Canada* by Graham Taylor and Peter Baskerville, published in 1994, is a broad study of the connections between Canadian business development and the evolution of capitalism. Like Bliss, Taylor and Baskerville cover an extensive period, from the 1600s to the 1990s. Their work focuses on larger themes rather than on microstudies of individual businesspeople. The individuals who get attention in the book are "heroic" men of business, those who acquired vast wealth and power; Sir Adam Beck, C.D. Howe, and other elite white men of business are mentioned in passing, as are family dynasties led by men, such as the Crosby or McCain families.[42]

While Taylor and Baskerville stress the growth of big business, they note the continued importance of individual small business owners to Canadian business history. However, it is primarily in the book's epilogue that they address the importance of examining new "challenges" to Canadian business history, such as gender relations and the importance of female-run businesses. In 2008, Baskerville revisited the connections between gender and business in *A Silent Revolution? Gender and Wealth in English Canada, 1860-1930*. The book is not solely about self-employed women, but it is about property and business ownership as it relates to women's acquisition of wealth. Baskerville details the ways in which women controlled wealth and exercised their economic rights with a rather high degree of independence, correcting our sense that Canadian women were not major economic players in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries.[43] This is one important part of female entrepreneurship, although the vast majority of female business owners in my study were running small businesses in which survival rated more highly than wealth acquisition. Managing investments was not on their radar.

The size of businesses is important to the field, and some scholars have done important research on small-scale entrepreneurs. John Benson defines the penny capitalist as a "working man or woman who went into business on a small scale in the hope of profit (but with the possibility of loss) and made him (or her) self responsible for every facet of the enterprise."[44] This is a good term for understanding female entrepreneurs, who were often penny capitalists. Benson includes women in this definition, found in his 1983 publication *The Penny Capitalists: A Study of Nineteenth-Century Working-Class Entrepreneurs.* He also specifically discusses Canadian women's experiences in *Entrepreneurism in Canada: A History of "Penny*

Capitalists." Benson suggests that women were pushed into penny capitalism, running "food and accommodations" types of businesses usually because of extreme poverty brought on by the death or disappearance of a spouse. But "nagging poverty" also drove married women to run small businesses, and he argues that many small enterprises are not quantifiable and are missed by census data.[45]

This is corroborated by Bettina Bradbury. In her examination of working-class families in mid-nineteenth-century Montreal, she points out that raising animals, gardening, domestic production, and taking in boarders were all methods of "retaining an element of self-sufficiency" for working-class families.[46] Even though they may not have been recognized as forms of entrepreneurship in the census, Bradbury argues that such strategies were forms of penny capitalism – although she does not refer to them as specifically entrepreneurial.

Labour historians have discussed working-class female penny capitalists in many contexts. While they have researched boarding-house keepers and women who sold butter, milk, and eggs or sewed in their homes, they have rarely identified them as entrepreneurial. When Canadian historians have acknowledged the existence of such entrepreneurial initiatives, they have examined them as non-wage contributions to family survival, as Bradbury has, or as temporary actions on the part of very poor women to cushion the blows of immediate financial crisis or seasonal unemployment, as Benson explains. My work reconceptualizes these interpretations of women's endeavours. Removing them from the history of the family economy and highlighting the ways in which their endeavours were entrepreneurial affords women a legitimate place among the self-employed: they ought to be viewed as in and of the business world, rather than being seen as home workers or secondary earners.

Theoretical Considerations

Incorporating the history of women with the history of business, without simply adding in women and celebrating the fact that they were in the field at all, is part of the challenge of a gendered history of female entrepreneurship. Joan Wallach Scott argues that the history of businesswomen cannot rest on the "emancipatory impulses of women's history."[47] Yet she also notes that while the study of separate spheres and the celebration of women-specific experiences of entrepreneurship may not be useful approaches, it is clear that "some kind of segregation did still exist in the

world of business ... Specialization rested on sex-segregated markets."[48] Businesswomen were different in some ways from businessmen, and the differences deserve exploration. However, the interaction between men and women and between gender and business must be given consideration.

The great benefit to applying an understanding that business is not gender-neutral to the history of business is that it permits the historian to view female entrepreneurs as businesspeople and as women. Making allowances for gender does not necessitate a retelling of the story of men in business; rather, it allows us to bring women into the history of business, focusing on them and accounting for the influence of sex and gender. Acknowledging gender means acknowledging that women's activities as entrepreneurs may or may not differ from men's, but that both men and women are involved. The challenge is to understand the experiences of female business owners in relation to male business owners, dealing with the differences without separating the two groups into entirely separate spheres.

For all these reasons, this study incorporates gender into the history of business. I argue, as have other Canadian gender historians, that women's lives are "no less rich or complex than men's, and that women's lives do not necessarily share the same rhythms."[49] Certainly, the importance of gender history in particular lies in the way in which it can "take us beyond the study of the subject 'woman.'"[50] While I acknowledge the importance of studying both men and women as gendered subjects and accept that they interact in the history of business in all kinds of gendered ways, this study nonetheless privileges the history of women. If the goal of gender history is in part to study relations between the sexes, it is also, as Gisela Bock maintains in her seminal essay on women's history and gender history, to study relations within the sexes. In arguing for a gender-encompassing approach rather than a gender-neutral approach, women's history can be "gender history par excellence."[51] Women's lives are as rich, complicated, and diverse as men's, and yet little has been written about the diverse experiences of businesswomen. It is possible and necessary to insert gender as a category of analysis into the history of businesswomen and to privilege only their stories over the already-established historiography of male businessmen.

Gender has become entwined with two additional analytical categories: class and race or ethnicity. As the authors of the Canadian collection *Gender Conflicts* emphasize, "just as gender is equally, though distinctly, constitutive for men and women, so, too, class and race or ethnicity inform the lives of all women."[52] Although *Gender Conflicts* was published in 1992,

these words reflect a trend that has not waned in the intervening years: gender, class, and race have been intertwined in much of the Canadian social history published since the early 1990s.

Class is a difficult analytical category to apply to the history of businesswomen. Many female entrepreneurs ran very small businesses that lay at what Gamber refers to as the "murky boundaries of public and private, profit-seeking and philanthropic, wage labour and entrepreneurship, legitimate and illegitimate enterprise."[53] As Yeager points out, businesswomen's lives tell us "more about hopes and expectations than spectacular achievements; more about the property-less than the property-blessed ... more about petty market traders than rich merchants; more about service than manufacturing ... more about family strategies than managerial strategies."[54] Yet the fact that some women pursued "an option [self-employment] that suggested a somewhat individualistic outlook" and "wittingly or unwittingly set themselves 'above' those they served" means that self-employed women are not easily categorized.[55] In a narrow Marxist sense, businesswomen own the means of production. Since they are not members of the wage-earning proletariat, self-employed women are capitalists and, by extension, members of the middle or upper classes. The small size of their businesses and the fact that many businesswomen did not have employees suggests that they were members of the petite bourgeoisie (a less privileged group amongst the capitalist class), or as Benson suggests, penny capitalists.

For Marx, the petite bourgeoisie, which included small business owners, worked in order to survive, and members of this group sometimes had divided interests.[56] Thus, the question for our purposes: "At what point does a small businessman [or woman] stop being petty bourgeois" and become either a member of the upper class, Marx's capitalists, or a member of the working class, Marx's proletariat?[57] Should we, as Joan Scott asks, view businesswomen as workers or capitalists?[58] Clearly, definitions of class are complicated and point to another of the historiographical cracks that hinder the study of businesswomen: labour history has not integrated the histories of working women who happen to be self-employed into histories of working-class, wage-earning women – or, if they appear, their entrepreneurship is minimized. "Despite their proprietary status," female proprietors often remained within the working class.[59] Most female entrepreneurs in British Columbia did not acquire wealth by running small boarding houses, laundries, or hair salons. Most of the women documented in the first half of this study were "petty proprietors."[60] They operated small and financially vulnerable home-based businesses.

It is also the case that a businesswoman's relationship to the means of production and her level of financial success are not the only markers of class status. Social status, not linked directly to income, is part of one's class position. Marriage, family, and community affiliation inform one's class and status, and the types of businesses women owned could also indicate their social status and their degree of class privilege. In general, this study addresses women's social status and the sizes and types of businesses they operated. This does not mean I want to ignore women's class position; instead, my understanding of class is related to the size and type of business and the social position of the business owner more than the profitability of the business. A small hat shop with an elite clientele in an affluent retail area was very different from a small boarding house in a working-class neighbourhood, despite the fact that they might have generated similar levels of income. The women documented in the first half of my study may not have consciously considered their class position, but they did operate small businesses in which it seems that survival and a measure of independence took precedence over achieving great fortunes or increasing social status. They also lived with and worked with what we might call the proletariat. In some senses, these women were the proletariat of female business owners. On the other hand, women who belonged to BPW clubs sometimes ran small businesses with little profitability, yet it appears they considered themselves (by association or community prominence and by a sense of status and privilege) members of the middle class. The members of the BPW clubs discussed in the second half of this book were middle- and upper-class women, a particular group of professional, white, educated women of privilege in British Columbia. They would have felt they had little in common with working-class businesswomen, even though the profits and sizes of their business were similar.

Furthermore, although the ability to legally own property was important and may demonstrate that some women who held real estate had higher levels of status or income, owning property was not a necessary prerequisite of owning a business. I am less concerned here with the legal question of ownership than with women's declarations of their status as entrepreneurs in the census, business directories, and media. If they saw their work as entrepreneurial and if the census recognized them as self-employed, then for all intents and purposes they owned businesses, if not the buildings in which they operated.

That female business owners "defy easy categorization" in all kinds of ways should not lead us to abandon the question of their class status.[61] It is imperative to keep class status in mind, just as it is imperative not to

assume that all businesswomen were automatically marginalized or that all businesswomen were automatically removed from the working class by virtue of owning a business. It is the case, however, that we do not have records for many of the most marginalized. Few businesswomen left records of their lives in print, and educated middle- to upper-class women left more written records of their lives than did lower-class women. The less numerous businesswomen who joined the BPW clubs do not represent the majority, but they are the women who left documents that tell us about their lives and aspirations. In this respect, the voices of the self-employed businesswomen heard most in this book are the voices of a relatively privileged group.

Race and ethnicity have also gone hand in hand with gender as categories of historical analysis. This study could be accused of ignoring more nuanced aspects of race and ethnicity in the history of businesswomen. However, just as gender history is not only the study of women, the history of race is not only the study of women of colour. My research focuses on Anglo-Canadian women who occupied "a position of race privilege."[62] That they were white women is not an indication that race was absent or that race cannot be used as an analytical category. The members of the BPW clubs did not interrogate their whiteness or their privilege; rather, they accepted it as fact. But they were privileged, nonetheless, and their race *and* class privilege was entwined with gender. In researching the history of white women, we may be tempted to bemoan their powerlessness as women, but we must also address their power as *white* women.

Of course, non-white, non-Anglo-Canadian women also operated businesses. Their stories do not appear in the records of the BPW clubs. They are among the more numerous, and more marginal, self-employed women documented in the first half of this study. The 1901 census recorded specific examples in British Columbia of First Nations women who were enumerated as hunter/fisher/farmers and who declared their status as self-employed.[63] The 1931 census included, in its data on British Columbia, the number of stores operated by "persons of Chinese and Japanese Origins." These figures show that about 12.9 percent of all Japanese and Chinese storekeepers in the province in 1931 were female. When all storekeepers in British Columbia were considered, a slightly lower percentage (12.3) were female.[64] Non-white women also appear in other sources, such as city directories: in 1918, *Wrigley's British Columbia Directory* listed Mrs. K. Ushijima, who operated a dry goods store and worked as a dressmaker in Vancouver.[65] One Japanese woman's small business is portrayed in

Tomoko Makabe's *Picture Brides*. Hana Murata describes the dressmaking business she opened in the late 1920s in Vancouver. Murata was twice-divorced, an unusual situation for any woman at the time, and she decided she was "going to work no matter what" rather than risking a third unhappy marriage.[66] She expresses pride in her independence: "I'd managed to stand on my own two feet and was confident I could make my way in life."[67] She ran the business for almost twenty years.[68] Murata also explains that in Vancouver "there were a lot of Japanese dressmakers, they say about 40 in those days, but not many like me, a woman working alone."[69]

There are, then, glimpses in the data of the importance of studying race and entrepreneurship in the province.[70] Yet in a larger sense, the data on female entrepreneurs in the province is extremely limited. First, there were relatively few female entrepreneurs in British Columbia, and within this small group, non-white women were an even more distinct minority. In addition, census data does not identify entrepreneurial women according to categories of ethnicity and race, with the exception of scattered information in some places, such as the 1931 census data on Japanese and Chinese storekeepers.[71] Lastly, few archival sources illuminate even the patterns of white middle-class entrepreneurs in the province. This study begins the task of incorporating women into the history of entrepreneurship but stops short of unravelling the many ethnic and racial identities of businesswomen in the province.

My research relies on quantitative sources (the Census of Canada) and qualitative sources, including the BPW club records of Vancouver and Victoria, newspaper articles, and archival collections. I provide a context within which more detailed studies of individual entrepreneurs can be researched; while individual women are discussed here, there was a need for an overview of the patterns of female self-employment in British Columbia and for a basic understanding of what kinds of women ran businesses and why they ran them. In addition to the published census returns from 1901 to 1951, I use the Canadian Families Project database – a 5 percent sample of the 1901 census – which includes far more detail about individual people, dwellings, and families than do any of the published census returns. One problem with using the 5 percent sample is that it does not include *all* self-employed women in the province or in the rest of Canada. By extension, it does not capture all types of female-operated enterprises that existed in 1901. There were relatively few entrepreneurial women in either region in 1901, and therefore the number in a 5 percent

sample is also small: the database captures sixty-eight self-employed women living in British Columbia. However, the 1901 published census returns include almost no information on women in the labour force and no information on female self-employment. The Canadian Families Project database is therefore the best available source of census information on female self-employment in 1901. Moreover, it represents occupations that were most central in female self-employment; dressmakers, boarding-house keepers, and farmers are all represented.

While female-run enterprises such as retail clothing stores, private nursing homes, hospitals, and schools do not appear in the database, British Columbia business directories for 1901 demonstrate that they did exist. The Misses Crickmay were listed in the 1900-1 directory as proprietors of the Cottage Hospital in Nelson; widow Jane George ran a fruit and tobacco store in Nanaimo; and Mrs. David Matheson ran a ladies' furnishing business in New Denver. Other enterprises not captured by the database include "Birck & Daniels Ladies Furnishing," run by Alice Daniels and the widowed Anne Jane Birck, and a "select Preparatory School," run by Mrs. Frith in Vancouver. Other women were listed in the directory as grocers, hotel proprietors, restaurant owners, and owner-operators of old-age homes and schools.[72]

Some of these enterprises would shift in importance in later decades, but their relatively small numbers in 1901 explain their absence in the 5 percent sample of the 1901 census. Other occupations that did appear in the database also appeared in the 1900-1 directory and would remain significant for decades: according to both census data and directories, many women were employed (and some were self-employed) as dressmakers, nurses, stenographers, teachers, boarding-house keepers, and farmers in 1901 British Columbia.

The first half of this book should be seen as important contextualization for the lives of businesswomen of all classes in British Columbia. The second half closely examines a group that had more options because of race and class privilege and whose members were therefore slightly different from most female entrepreneurs in the province. It fleshes out BPW clubwomen's hopes, desires, and political and social commentaries about their work in a "man's world," something that most self-employed women – those myriad laundresses and boarding-house keepers eking out a subsistence income – did not or perhaps could not take the time to document. I hope that some of the latter women's experiences can be glimpsed occasionally through the eyes of their more privileged middle-class contemporaries, who documented their club life and their experiences as entrepreneurs in

the province. The story of entrepreneurship for women in British Columbia is thus told here, with multiple techniques and lenses. The story covers women in different towns, operating a variety of businesses, but in the end the faces of female self-employment are illuminated. The ways in which these entrepreneurs were defined, and defined themselves, provide some understanding of businesswomen in male-dominated work worlds.