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Origins of Women's History at University of New Brunswick *(Fredericton Campus)*

D. Gillian Thompson

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Origins of Women's History at University of New Brunswick *(Fredericton Campus)*

THE TEACHING OF WOMEN'S HISTORY ON the Fredericton campus of the University of New Brunswick, though foreshadowed by a single Extension course on English women offered in the 1970s, was a phenomenon which began in earnest in the early 1980s. By then a number of women scholars in Economics and Sociology at St. Thomas University and in the Psychology Department at UNB had launched highly successful disciplinary courses in women's studies, though no formal Women's Studies programme yet existed at either university in Fredericton. UNB's programme would not be launched until 1986.

It is indisputable that my own course on European women was the first women's history course to get into the UNB *Calendar* and to be offered regularly, starting in 1981, I believe. But the impetus for courses in women's history came from the Canadian section of the Department of History. We now disagree about whether it was Murray Young, with his depth of knowledge of the history of New Brunswick society, or Bill Acheson, with his vast understanding of Canadian social history, who first recognised the need for courses in women's history. But it was certainly the Atlantic regional historian Ernie Forbes, already known for publication in the field of women's history, who one day, perhaps even in the late 1970s, came to my office and, in no uncertain terms, informed me of the need for a women's history course that would have to be taught by me, as I was then (as for my first 15 years of a 32-year career here) the only female member of the Department of History. So although the impetus came from the Canadianists, the first course in women's history was a European course. In this we may have been a little unusual. If there was a clear trend among Atlantic Canadian universities, it appears to have been that specialists in the history of North America took the first step and then departments added a European and possibly a world history component later, as they felt the need or gained the resources.

As I was the only woman and a Europeanist, there was no question as to which direction UNB might choose to start. Forewarned of the need to make what now seems to me to have been a career change, I took advantage of contacts in several parts of the country with women Europeanists who had launched courses on women in the "Plato to NATO" vein. I got their bibliographies and course outlines, including that of Natalie Zemon Davis, once of the University of Toronto, and set to work. My first women's history course reflected my own specialisation and was an upper level social history of European women from the Middle Ages to the French Revolution. We had a very limited choice of textbooks until well into the 1980s, and, indeed, the only text specifically written for that period, by Merry Wiesner, would not appear until the early 1990s. The lack of a text in those early days did not seem to constitute a problem. About 20 students assembled for the first meeting of the course, and after that there was no looking back. I have given that course, later subdivided so that my main upper-level course concentrated on the period 1400 to 1800, for more than two decades. And it has generally attracted respectable numbers. Some 45 students are taking it in the winter term of 2004. It is old-fashioned social history done in a fairly rigorous fashion; I hope it is suitable background for students who also take other

European courses in that and a later period. A new departure in a related field occurred in the later-1990s when Beverly Lemire introduced her upper-level "Women's Voices" course, which is based on the social/cultural history of Western women to the 20th century. I also added during this same period an introduction to women's history at the second-year level called "Women in History", which considers a broad range of topics, periods and places. Essentially, it is supposed to be "World History". Though the emphasis remains on Europe of the past 500 years, we cast our minds back as far as the Palaeolithic period and the Bronze age in discussions of women's early involvement in the production of clothing and in horticulture, the origins of patriarchy and women's place in historical demography. Increasingly, the sections on family incorporate reference to India and China while those on women in religion refer to several Islamic countries. Not a perfect approach perhaps, but the result is an apparently popular introductory course which, at more than 75 students in the autumn of 2003, was larger than ever.

The other women's history course which was introduced in the early 1980s was, of course, a social history of Canadian women, and I would say it followed my original course by a couple of years, so was introduced circa 1983. Approximately 60 students were in the first class. It came into existence in a typically masculine way (remember, I had no women colleagues at the professorial level until Beverly Lemire joined us in 1987). In about 1982, the Canadianists – Bill Acheson, Phil Buckner, Bernie Vigod, Ernie Forbes and David Frank – were coordinating their timetables and, on the basis of an established roster, were determining who should teach which subject in the next year. The all-male Canadian section recognised that Bill Acheson's and Ernie Forbes' interests were such that it would probably make sense for one of them to offer a course on Canadian women, but that for either to do so would be difficult because of their prior commitments to courses in their own sub-fields. Ernie Forbes would not give up any of his several courses on the Atlantic Provinces and Bill Acheson was spread much too thin, with myriad courses ranging from economics to religion, from the colonial period to the present. Phil Buckner was editor of *Acadiensis* and Acadiensis Press and generally committed to offering service courses. But at the meeting in question, when the issue came up, it was Phil Buckner who announced he had developed an interest in Canadian women's history and that he was planning to introduce a new course in the following year.

And so was born the upper-level course known as "A History of Women in Canadian Society", the brain-child of a man. It would be regularly taught by Phil Buckner in the years until his retirement in 1999. For a time, while Phil was still with us, it was also taught by a couple of our very able women Ph.D. students and, for a longer time, mainly through the Extension Department by the Université de Montréal-trained independent scholar Wendy Johnston. It is now one of the courses taught by Linda Kealey. In the summer of 2003, Phil Buckner told me that as he prepared to teach it for the first time, he was a little apprehensive about offering a course on the history of women. His apprehension was not allayed by what happened in the first few minutes of the first meeting of his new course. Alone, he walked into the classroom, knowing that he had to get things right. And, as he started to take his notes out of his briefcase, he was unfortunate enough to be the object of a catcall. "Oh, shit!", cried out a young woman in the back row, "A man – a man – is going to teach this course!" Yet she apparently stayed. Phil Buckner had been aware that he would be negotiating

his way through a minefield; now he worried that "there was no way to get out of there alive". But of course he did survive and the course prospered.

The creation of women's history courses did not stop there. Nor was Phil Buckner the only man in this department to offer a long-standing, highly successful course in women's history. Larry Shyu, for a significant number of years before his retirement in 1998, offered a "History of Asian Women" which attracted a broad spectrum of very interested students. Meantime, a number of honours seminars, taught by Beverly Lemire ("Regions, Class and Gender: Industrialization in Britain 1700-1830" as well as "Women in Industrial Britain") and David Frank ("Class, Gender and Region in Atlantic Canada"), came into existence. These seminars regularly acquaint our carefully nurtured honours students with more specialised aspects of women's history. The first lecture courses in European and Canadian women's history were in existence before the Women's Studies programme and were part of the justification for the creation of that programme in time to mark the centennial of the admission of the first woman, Mary Kingsley Tibbits, to UNB. These and the other undergraduate courses in women's history which were created later form a significant bloc in the list of core courses in the Women's Studies programme.

Graduate instruction (and the development of History of Women/History of Gender as a separate field at the graduate level) had to wait till the late 1990s. At that time, the Department of History tacitly recognised the validity of both the older social/political approach and the newer cultural/depoliticised approach to women's history. The introduction of Beverly Lemire's graduate seminar "Gender and the Creation of Modern Industrial Society" occurred in 1997 and that of Lianne McTavish's "History of Feminist Thought" in 1998. In 2000 Gail Campbell introduced her graduate seminar "Finding the Women: Sources and Methods in Women's History". Gail Campbell's long-running "North American Historical Demography" and Linda Kealey's "Canadian Social History", like earlier seminars in social history offered at the graduate level, naturally include significant components devoted to women's history. Of course, the practice of writing M.A. and Ph.D. theses on women's history topics can be traced back to the period before the teaching of any courses in women's history, even at the undergraduate level. Male members of the department for years directed impressive theses, written by women, in women's history. Now that the department includes six tenured women, that trend may have been interrupted. Hardly surprisingly, my women colleagues are currently directing more research projects in the field than has ever before been the case.

What guiding principles supported our first women's history courses? When, in July 2003, I asked this question of Phil Buckner, as the other originator of such undergraduate courses here, we noted a strong measure of agreement between us in confronting the question. In teaching women's history as social history, we wanted to expose the systemic and structural discrimination which affected women in society, regardless of who they were or where they lived. And we were aware that while the older women in our courses were painfully knowledgeable about this topic, our chief concern – the younger women students – were not. Similarly, while instructors of our women's history courses have certainly been feminists (and some of them are highly visible and committed feminists, known in other circles to be very outspoken), the challenge has sometimes been to conceal our feminism and to master the technique of understatement in order to reach those less-experienced women students who would

be put off by a strong, clear statement of our convictions. For my own part, I am grateful that my women's history courses still include at least a handful of women students who have declared that they are feminists, and who are active in feminist causes at UNB. It is possible that the proportion of such students has declined over the years, but, if so, the decline has been slight. All our women's history courses have a few male alumni; I believe the proportion of male students in such courses has stayed at less than ten per cent.

Of course, the original hope of the first instructors of women's studies courses as well as of women's history courses was that the need for separate courses on women would gradually disappear, that women's experience would be an equal component with men's in all courses. We hoped that we could have a thoroughly human discipline in which both sexes/both genders would be equally well-studied and understood. My survey of the origins of the teaching of women's history at this university must recognise that, all along, our social historians have worked towards this end, and that the development of a cultural studies approach to history has also meant the incorporation of women's experience into standard courses. Women are as much part of the curriculum in such courses as men. As Lianne McTavish has said of her undergraduate teaching: she offers a lot of courses, and among them "there is no course in which women have not played a significant role". Of course, the prize is not yet won. There is still much to be sought and demanded for this branch of the historical discipline, and there is always room for improvement. But women's history is well-established at UNB and should enjoy a very bright future.

This fact was reinforced by the appointment of Linda Kealey in 2002. Then, a few months after that event, we gained the appointment of the Canada Research Chair of Atlantic Canada Studies. The appointment of Margaret Conrad, earlier the holder of the Nancy Rowell Jackman Chair of Women's Studies at Mount Saint Vincent University, has been a most obvious triumph for women's history at UNB as well as for other aspects of the broader discipline of history. She stands – and is content to stand – as a beacon to our commitment to the practice of women's history. That practice was initiated long before her arrival on this scene.

D. GILLIAN THOMPSON

Women's History at UNB Saint John

THE LATE DR. ANN GORMAN CONDON INTRODUCED women's history at the University of New Brunswick, Saint John (UNB Saint John) in 1982, 18 years after history courses were first offered as a campus endeavour. Women's history built on the remarkable expansion of courses following the introduction of a majors program in the late 1970s, and also contributed to the establishment of the honours program by the early 1990s. These advances were achieved through the efforts of a small but committed group of historians, as the journey towards programme development in all disciplines on the Saint John campus proved challenging.

In September 1964, after years of city-based lobbying to establish a university, UNB Saint John began conducting classes in assorted downtown locations, anchored by Beaverbrook House. Five years later, in 1969, the Tucker Park campus opened