

Book Reviews

No Place Like Home: Diaries and Letters of Nova Scotia Women, 1771-1938. MARGARET CONRAD, TONI LAIDLAW, and DONNA SMYTH, eds. Halifax: Formar Publishing Company Limited, 1988. 305 p. ISBN 0-88780-066-1 \$19.95 (pa.).

Historians of women's experience spent much of the 1980s searching for evidence of a unique women's culture. One of the most persuasive and influential of those who unearthed a previously hidden female world of "great emotional strength and intensity" was Carroll Smith-Rosenberg (*Disorderly Conduct*, 1985). Her analysis was based on the correspondence and diaries of women and men in thirty-five Protestant and middle-class American families between the 1760s and the 1880s. This examination led her to a society

characterized in large part by rigid gender-role differentiation within the family and within society as a whole, leading to the emotional segregation of women and men. The roles of daughter and mother shaded imperceptibly and ineluctably into each other, while the biological realities of frequent pregnancies, childbirth, nursing and menopause bound women together in physical and emotional intimacy. It was within just such a social framework . . . that a specifically female world did develop, a world built around a generic and unself-conscious pattern of single-sex or homosocial networks. ("The Female World of Love and Ritual," in *Disorderly Conduct*, p. 60)

Smith-Rosenberg argued that the true nature of women's separate sphere could only be learned through unpublished manuscripts and private records, such as diaries and letters, where the women chroniclers traced the contours of their culture by describing unself-consciously their work, rituals, and hopes. The most explicit of these records, frequently letters, were written to other women who identified closely with the sentiments and the language usage. Thus, suggested Smith-Rosenberg, a separate female discourse with its own vocabulary and nuance, conceptual systems, and behavioural norms emerged and was recorded in forms of documentation which women made particularly their own ("Hearing Women's Words" in *Disorderly Conduct*, pp. 30-39).

What Smith-Rosenberg has done for the exposition of American women's culture, Margaret Conrad, Toni Laidlaw, and Donna Smyth have undertaken for Nova Scotia. In fact, this fascinating collection of diary excerpts and letters of fifteen Nova Scotia women more than just supports the contentions made by Smith-Rosenberg. In spite of

the impressive number of collections surveyed by Smith-Rosenberg, hers was a more homogenous grouping in many respects than is the collection presented in this volume. Where Smith-Rosenberg's women all represent families of the American middle class, the accounts in *No Place Like Home* describe the fortunes of gentlewomen, those in the middle class, and representatives of the working class. Smith-Rosenberg's subjects all fall into that period of the late eighteenth and nineteenth centuries that has been so heavily mined by historians in the past decade, while the Nova Scotian women span the mid-eighteenth to mid-twentieth centuries. In addition, the editors have succeeded in uncovering the diaries of several women who travelled from the province to the United States and across Canada, the "comers and goers" as they have termed them. This provides another important dimension to the continuity of women's culture, even though that culture is dislocated from its original, nurturant base. As well, women representing the range of religious affiliation are well represented. Eliza Ann Chipman, a "born again" evangelical in the early nineteenth century, writes: "This is a happy day (in some measure) to my immortal soul, having sat with great delight under the preached word by a Minister of the Gospel," while Ella Liscombe found her escape from her oppressive office job during the 1930s not in religious inspiration but through movies and novels. "It was teeming rain and a bad night to start out a foot but I was anxious to see 'Anne of Green Gables' as it was here Christmas Eve before and we could not go on that account . . . we enjoyed it." There are single, widowed, married, and separated women — women with fifteen children and no children.

Finally, the Nova Scotia collection contains records of women rarely available to historians — those with very little formal education — as well as the more typical sources of those who prided themselves on their intellectual powers and training. Unpublished letters and diaries, some held in family archives and others collected by the Public Archives of Nova Scotia, Acadia University, University College of Cape Breton, and the Hector Centre Trust in Pictou, have been annotated by cooperative genealogists to place the subjects in the context of extended family units and societal trends. The skills of the professional historian are thus enriched to an unusual degree by the genealogists' craft. Privately published diaries, one of which was serialized in the *Wolfville Acadian*, also help to tell the stories of the women whose place in history has already been quietly recognized.

In addition to providing further evidence for many of the contentions made by Smith-Rosenberg, the Nova Scotia collection provides evidence of the need for caution in accepting some of her more extreme assertions. "At the heart" of the female world, she suggests,

lay intense devotion and identification between mothers and daughters. . . .
They often slept with one another throughout the daughters' adolescence,
wept unashamedly at separation, and rejoiced at reunions. ("Hearing
Women's Words," p. 32)

The mother-daughter bond, in Smith-Rosenberg's view, isolated women from men ever more steadily as the female world of private discourse intensified. The Nova Scotian women in this volume, it must be emphasized, do demonstrate an abiding attachment to their mothers (and other women), far more noticeably than to their fathers. In 1850 Margaret Dickie Michener recorded in her diary:

When I arose this morning I took a walk down the new road to the shore
and back on the old one before breakfast. Sister Ann was here when I
returned. I am glad Maria is so near by as we can be together often. Mother

was here to see me today and visited Mary also. It seems she and father are very much stirred up over our plans for going to the States. They do not like the idea at all and are feeling badly.

Nevertheless, this is not a world from which men are banished. Most of these women are on good terms with the men in their lives, often choosing to spend their discretionary time in mixed company pursuing common interests. For example, Hannah Richardson, who emigrated at age twenty-seven from Yarmouth County to work in a shoe factory in Lynn, Massachusetts, had a wide circle of female and male friends, including her brother with whom she attended church and temperance lectures, visited mutual friends, and travelled to Boston: "In the evening Than, Joe, Hattie P., Abbey and I went to West Lynn to Abby's uncle's Mr. Elliott's. Spent a very pleasant evening."

One is left amazed at the strength and tenacity of these women, regardless of the period, marital status, or class. When one considers only the physical demands on the nineteenth-century woman, it is difficult to imagine women having the energy to keep a regular journal. Louisa Collins' weekly chores in 1815 included haymaking, churning butter, spinning, reeling, weaving, sewing, cooking, washing, gathering berries, and house-cleaning. Yet, she still found time for three-mile walks, social calls, "rural hops," and "ropery romps." Lest we think that this was just a nineteenth-century phenomenon of the young, we have the fascinating and moving portrait of Laura Kaulback Sleuwhite, grandmother of Margaret Conrad and fifty years a widow by 1936. As a fifty-six-year-old grandmother, Slauenwhite became housekeeper to the Chesley family, which necessitated her cooking, fancy and bread baking, sewing, knitting, and heavy cleaning. Still, there was time for chicken suppers in the Parish Hall, the Woman's Institute, the Rebecca Lodge, and church services. A poor widow and dependent on employers in her waning years, Laura Slauenwhite put the best face on her situation: "I'm doing what is best for all of us" and resolved to enjoy her busy life. Slauenwhite's cheerful observation of her less-than-easy lot is exhibited by most of the women diarists and writers in this collection. Faced with adversity — and there is a great deal of adversity — they make the best of the situation and carry on, guarding their complaints and hurt feelings closely and yet expressing them in these rich but often overlooked sources.

No Place Like Home is a valuable addition to the record of women's activities and thoughts as they span almost two centuries in Nova Scotia. These diary accounts and letters remain a powerful testimony of women's culture and fortitude in Maritime Canada. Moreover, they speak directly to archivists to urge them to preserve more of these unusual and rare sources reflecting private discourse, especially when that discourse is at odds with the mainstream patriarchal voices of the era.

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La Scrittura. Ideologia e rappresentazione. ARMANDO PETRUCCI. Torino: Giulio Einaudi editore s.p.a., Piccola Biblioteca Einaudi 472, 1986. xxv, 190 p. ISBN 88-06-59733-7.

This book is an attempt to reconstruct by means of examples the modes of production and use, the characteristics, and the functions of "displayed writings" from the twelfth century to the present. In the words of the author, a *displayed writing* is any type of writing which is meant to be read at a distance by a great number of persons, that is, a