

## *Review Articles*

### ***Declaring a Scotch Verdict: Common Elements in Women's History***

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**'We're Rooted Here and They Can't Pull Us Up': Essays in African Canadian Women's History.** PEGGY BRISTOW, coord., Dionne Brand, Linda Carty, Afua P. Cooper, Sylvia Hamilton, Adrienne Shadd. Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1994. 248 p. ISBN 0-8020-6881-2.

**Improper Advances: Rape and Heterosexual Conflict in Ontario, 1880-1929.** KAREN DUBINSKY. Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1993. 228 p. ISBN 0-226-16754-2.

**What's Cooking in Women's History: An Introductory Guide to Preserving Archival Records About Women.** NORTHERN ALBERTA WOMEN'S ARCHIVES ASSOCIATION (NAWAA). Edmonton: NAWAA & Women's Program and Resource Centre, Faculty of Extension, University of Alberta, 1993.

American historian Lillian Faderman's *The Scotch Verdict* reconstructs the 1810 libel suit by Edinburgh school teachers Miss Marianne Woods and Miss Jane Pirie against Dame Cumming Gordon. The suit was an attempt to reconstruct their damaged reputations from accusations of immoral conduct. Dame Cumming Gordon had withdrawn her granddaughter, Miss Jane Cumming, from the girls' school run by Pirie and Woods. The cause for removal was the young Cumming's accusation that the school teachers were engaging in sexual acts together. As rumour of this accusation spread, all of the parents withdrew their daughters, leaving the school in economic ruin. This relatively simple tale, in Faderman's reconstruction, reflects nineteenth-century sexual moral codes, class structures, and the dramatic power of "reputation" for women. This moral tale was adapted for contemporary audiences in Lillian Hellman's play *The Children's Hour*, as well as a popular film version by the same name. The result of the case was a "scotch verdict" — a decision in Scottish law declaring a verdict of not proven or an inconclusive decision.<sup>1</sup> Despite the apparent success of having alleged immoralities declared inconclusive, the damage to the school and the women's reputation had been done.

The case and Faderman's treatment reveal subtleties about the nature of archival documentation as it relates to women, and private life. The inconclusive nature of the accusations may have been attributed to the lack of hard "evidence" about private life and, specifically, sexual life. The evidence in this case owed much to a nineteenth-century school girl's maturing interest in sexuality, an active imagination, and a remarkable dramatic flair. While the evolution of historical discourse on sexuality has permitted the reasonable conclusion that the women likely had a personal relationship, and allowed the identification of likely villains (i.e., the Cummings), and victims (i.e., the school teachers), we can, of course, never really know for sure.

Certainties about private life, or knowing for sure, are undoubtedly one of the frustrations for social and women's historians. Women's historians have long made the case that locating evidence, ranging from merely suggestive to conclusive, on women's lives is complicated by a cluster of factors all implicating archival institutions. First, there is the accusation that archives have not acquired women's records. Whether born of conspiracy or benign neglect, this argument has been mediated somewhat by the realization that exacting documentation of women's lives may not exist, particularly for the majority of women. Where documentation does exist, often in the form of manuscript and organizational records, it is limited to a sector of society (usually white upper-middle class women). Second, where documentation exists it is affected by the cultural and social mores of the day. Faderman, for example, has pointed out that details of sexual relations would likely not be documented as they might be today. Finally, there is a difference between records created by women and those created by others which refer, either directly or by omission, to women's lives. The lessons learned from meeting these obstacles converge in numerous new works in women's and social history annually. While "knowing for sure" may be impossible, the strategy in averting scotch verdicts of history is in reading between the lines or against the grain of existing records.

These three books are neither fully representative of works in women's history and archives nor are they arbitrary selections of new works. *We're Rooted Here and They Can't Pull Us Up': Essays in African Canadian Women's History* by Peggy Bristow et al., and Karen Dubinksy's *Improper Advances: Rape and Heterosexual Conflict in Ontario, 1880-1929* exemplify innovative reading through the grain of existing documentation, specifically on the ubiquitous nature of sexual violence and on race and gender. Inconclusive in the sense of announcing elusive historical truths, but rigorous, convincing, and suggestive, both studies mark provocative areas of analysis. Both follow in a tradition of challenging consensus-based views of Canadian history. Both balance doubts about the extent to which archival holdings can provide evidence of, or insights into, women's private lives with research illustrating that records reveal more than they intended. The Northern Alberta Women's Archives Association's *What's Cooking in Women's History: An Introductory Guide to Preserving Archival Records About Women* transforms this balance into a dual purpose guide for archivists and the research/donating public. All three share a concern with the history of resistance and its resulting evidence, and are written with impassioned commitments to women's history.

*'We're Rooted Here and They Can't Pull Us Up': Essays in African Canadian Women's History* is a collection of six essays. Its aim is to provide reading on Black women's history for use in schools, as well as to encourage the further exploration of Black women's history. Equally significant is the authors' interest in revising Canadian history with an anti-racist perspective. The introduction provides a critique of the lack of gender analysis in works on Black history in Canada, and the white middle-class bias in Canadian women's history. Noting where previous writing has minimized or discounted documentation about Black women or, in the case of some white women's history, omitted Black women entirely, this introduction lays a revisionist foundation for future research.

The essays consider Black women's history in Canada between the seventeenth century and the immediate post World War II period. The necessary selection of topics for this vast terrain include studies of Black women's experiences in Nova Scotia (between the mid-1600s and the 1920s); Black women's role in and experience of the underground railroad in Canada; the lives of Black women in Buxton and Chatham, Ontario, between 1850 and 1865; the career of nineteenth-century Ontario school teacher Mary Bibb; Black women's war-time labour through oral history accounts; and finally, the relationship between Black women and the Canadian state.

Balancing the lines of difference between men and women and commonality with African Canadian men, these articles do offer new and interesting information, even for a casual reader of history. There is an acute awareness of the dearth of documentation by or about Black women and a reasonable scepticism about the evidence where it does appear. This scepticism is critical to having readers, particularly students of all types of history, become more aware of the factors affecting or informing the creation of documentation. These education attempts are effective in Peggy Bristow's provocative study of Buxton and Chatham, where she refers to the potentially unreliable nature of census data that did not count seasonal workers, thus misrepresenting Black participation. The strategy is also useful where the authors note that documentation exists only about Black women and not necessarily *by* them. The strategy is less useful in other essays where the authors offer questions such as "what must it have been like to abandon one's children in order to escape to freedom/a domestic servant/or to be a slave?" to underline the lack of real evidence. While there is this reluctance to undertake reasonable speculation in these essays, the authors read against the grain of primarily secondary sources, as well as census, church, and private manuscript records to reveal a history of active life and resistance by Black women in Canada. This is, admittedly, only a foundation—but a courageous one.

Records revealing more than what appears on the surface are the focus of Karen Dubinsky's *Improper Advances: Rape and Heterosexual Conflict in Ontario, 1880-1929*. Using Ontario court records for 400 women involved in sexual crime cases between 1880 and 1929, Dubinsky produces an extraordinary study of sexual violence, sexual crime, and the complexities of heterosexual relations in the nineteenth century. While the court records tell about the villains and victims of alleged sexual crimes, Dubinsky's reading between the lines reveal the texture and landscape of relations between men and women as they were viewed by the courts. Without the vulgar play by play of court proceedings to which we have

increasingly become accustomed, these records reveal more—a safe terrain for conjecture about the nature of private life in this period. Records of prosecutions for sexual offenses allow the study of “emotional and sexual intimacy, power, betrayal, and broken promises.”<sup>22</sup> Avoiding the sometimes numbing minutiae of historical detail, this study weaves social analysis, compelling historiography, and a lesson in understanding how to formulate conclusions about women, resistance, and private life.

Guides to women's records often act as the quiet truce or compromise between archives and research communities both seeking to understand the apparent absence and compelling need for women's records. *What's Cooking in Women's History: An Introductory Guide to Preserving Archival Records About Women* by the Northern Alberta Women's Archives Association achieves this task by consolidating a brief critical historiography, user-friendly information about the nature and purpose of archives, and suggestions on the “read-between-the-lines” character of women's history and research. Unlike institutional or thematic guides on women, this Alberta-focused *Guide* is a basic manual on women's history and records accessibly written for novice users, historians, archivists, as well as potential donors. Section subtitles in the *Guide* reflect truisms borne of the struggle over the last twenty years between women's history and traditional historiography and women's history and archival institutions: “Ignored by Historians” reminds us that the writing of history has suffered in its focus on men and, later, only great Canadian women; “Underrepresented and Buried” makes the point that where archives have acquired records, the cryptic nature of catalogues and description ascribe a negligible role to women. As part of the purpose of this *Guide* is to encourage acquisition of women's records, NAWAA offers a refreshing perspective defending archives as consistently underfunded cultural institutions (with specific references to the plights of the Provincial Archives of Alberta and the University of Alberta Archives).

Myopic initially perhaps, but saved from a villainous reputation, archivists are depicted as cooperative partners in promoting the preservation of women's history. There are, however, recommendations for archives including the call to increase acquisitions from Native, minority, poor, working class women, lesbians, and women's organizations, to select staff to specialize in women's acquisitions, to reappraise existing collections to locate women's material, and to enhance description to highlight women's material. I read these as somewhat impractical suggestions following on the recognition of resource limitations, but appreciate and support them as calls to remind archivists of the value-laden nature of previous acquisition policies. Perhaps most significant is the *Guide's* reference to alternate forms of documentation, including material culture, which offer evidence of women's lives and experiences. Bristow and Dubinsky's studies are lessons in not relying exclusively on the promise of the quintessential “woman's record” as this documentation rarely exists.

There are undoubtedly numerous works emerging in history which make increasing use of alternate strategies to come up with conclusions. These three works offer a portrait of active resistance which, as outlined in the Alberta guide, are not documented at least explicitly. While hardly required reading for archivists, they provide insights into emerging and needed areas of enquiry.

**Notes**

- 1 Lillian Faderman, *Scotch Verdict* (New York, 1993).
- 2 Karen Dubinsky, *Improper Advances: Rape and Heterosexual Conflict in Ontario, 1880-1929* (Chicago, 1993), p. 4.