

Women Volunteer to Go to Prison: A History of the Elizabeth Fry Society of B.C., 1939-1989, by Lee Stewart. Victoria: Orca, 1993. xiv, 207 pp. Illus. \$16.95 paper.

Writing a commissioned history is a daunting task; it involves questions of authorial autonomy, voice and integrity. How does one write the history of an organization with all its members peering over one's shoulder, so to speak, searching for mistakes or differing interpretations? Lee Stewart knows well the pitfalls of such an undertaking as she shows in *Women Volunteer to Go to Prison*. Written to commemorate the 50th anniversary of the Elizabeth Fry Society in British Columbia, the volume chronicles the institutional history of the group founded in 1939. Stewart worked with a group of Fry women who criticized each chapter. The author is to be congratulated for the collaborative achievement which goes far towards recording the little-known history of a women's volunteer group. Writing to the specifications of a group, however, also has its problems and limitations.

Organized into nine chapters, the book begins with an account of the early days of the organization, founded under the aegis of the Provincial Council of Women. The first two chapters also discuss social reform and penal reform, the latter through a brief recapping of the life of Elizabeth Fry, the nineteenth century English Quaker woman, whose work inspired the B.C. effort. The subsequent three chapters discuss voluntary efforts at Oakalla (women's prison), in provincial industrial schools for girls, and at group homes. Chapter 6 explores the collective identity of the volunteers, while chapter 7 looks at attempts to build bridges between the institutions and the community. The efforts to close the Kingston Penitentiary for women are chronicled in chapter 8, while the last chapter summarizes events and brings the narrative up to the present.

Under the Fry Society's direction, Stewart was asked to write a history that tells the story of the organization and downplays the role of individuals whether inmates or volunteers. In following this request, Stewart has produced a sometimes dry, institutional history, lacking the colour of individual personalities and motivations. Because the historian is telling the story of the organization based on the latter's records in large part, the pace of developments seems artificially controlled and regularized. While Stewart mentions reading secondary sources, newspapers, government documents, and other pieces of primary evidence in addition to the Fry records, the reader is struck by the dominance of organizationally-generated material. This

strengthens the tendency of the author to stay within the parameters of the group, and to leave interesting questions unasked or undeveloped. The reader, for instance, does not get a sense of where this group fits into the "social reform" spectrum in the province — why was the Provincial Council of Women so involved in penal reform? Did the emphasis reflect the interests of the leadership? Who exactly were the women involved and what in their class backgrounds and family/political connections led them to this particular area of women's voluntary work?

Stewart also makes some assertions at the conceptual level that demand more evidence. The parallel men's organization, the John Howard Society, for example, is discussed as arising from social gospel roots and from concerns that male offenders commit crimes for economically related reasons. Stewart seems to accept that women choose collective, voluntary, social work for different, gender-related reasons tied to the history of women in social reform. Similarly, she accepts the Fry view that female offenders' problems stemmed from improper socialization and lack of education, areas related to individual or family deficiencies. While the explanation for the men's organization seems to indicate one type of class framework (a critical, left of center perspective), the explanatory framework for women adheres to a much more conservative and upper middle class conceptualization that eschews economic/class explanations in favour of individual or family failings. This underlines a major drawback in the volume: little attention is paid to the class backgrounds and motivations of the Fry volunteers, as noted above. In addition, there is little critical comment on the racial/ethnic tensions Fry women and Native women inmates must have felt at least at some points, given the disproportionate numbers of Native women in conflict with the law (36). Indeed, the impression one gets from Stewart is that the volunteers acted as patrons for the less fortunate, especially young Native women who had fewer years of schooling and less experience with the corrupting urban environment. Given what we know about white attitudes to Natives, now and in the past, the lack of any discussion about racism is extremely regrettable.

There are some other interesting avenues not developed here as well. The tension between voluntarism and professionalism is mentioned, but not addressed very concretely. Here again, class may have played an important role. Who were the professionals, as opposed to the volunteers? Not only were they undoubtedly younger, they may also have been from a less prestigious social stratum; volunteers may

have seen the professionals as less experienced and lower in status than themselves. A related question touched on in the narrative, but not developed, is the interesting mention of several mother-daughter pairs working within the organization. To what extent did daughters follow their mothers in volunteer work? Did they become professional social workers instead of volunteers? As a reader, one is left to ponder the possibilities here.

Finally, the volume raises the old question of whether these women can be considered feminists, thereby opening a whole debate about the nature of feminism. Here Stewart seems to vacillate, sometimes viewing the female voluntary tradition as separate from the concerns of feminism (chapter 9), and at other times, particularly in the first two chapters, as part of a maternal feminist tradition. Perhaps part of the problem is the lack of an adequate concept of feminism in the post-suffrage era. Stewart is left with two different and probably inappropriate models for the period between 1920s and the late 1960s when a recognizable modern feminism emerged. Conceptual problems such as these detract from the potential impact of the book.

Women Volunteer to Go to Prison will be read by specialists — BC women's historians, historians of social reform, women's organizations, and those interested in the Elizabeth Fry Society and related organizations — but it will not inspire a wider readership in women's history, gender history or women's studies because it does not offer a sustained analytical framework or new insights into social reform or feminism. What it does provide is the organizational history of a pioneer penal reform group and some very intriguing questions that other historians might find worth pursuing.

Memorial University of Newfoundland

LINDA KEALEY