

# INTRODUCTION

---

ANNALEE GOLZ AND LYNNE MARKS

I N THE EARLY 1980s, British Columbia was in the forefront of Canadian work in the newly emerging field of women's history. A major women's history conference was held in 1984 at Camosun College in Victoria. *Not Just Pin Money: Selected Essays on the History of Women's Work in British Columbia*, which included the proceedings of the conference, as well as the earlier anthology, *In Her Own Right: Selected Essays on Women's History in B.C.*, were among the first scholarly publications in the field of Canadian women's history.<sup>1</sup> In subsequent years, however, while ongoing work was being undertaken on B.C. women's history, relatively few studies were being published on this subject. An exception to this trend was the 1992 anthology, *British Columbia Reconsidered: Essays on Women*, which presented both historical and contemporary explorations of various aspects of B.C. women's experiences.<sup>2</sup>

In the fall of 1992, a group of University of Victoria history graduate students, having recently established a women's history study group and thus still being full of energy, enthusiasm, and ambition, decided that it was important to discover what work was being done in B.C. women's history. They decided that the best way to do this would be to organize a conference. After recruiting a few interested faculty to the project, the planning and organization of the conference began. The conference, held in June 1994 at the University of Victoria, was entitled *BC and Beyond: Gender Histories*, which reflected the analytical shifts occurring in the field of women's history both in Canada and internationally. Ten years after the conference at Camosun Col-

<sup>1</sup> Barbara K. Latham and Roberta J. Pazdro, eds., *Not Just Pin Money: Selected Essays on the History of Women's Work in British Columbia* (Victoria: Camosun College, 1984); Barbara Latham and Cathy Kess, *In Her Own Right: Selected Essays on Women's History in B.C.*, (Victoria: Camosun College, 1980).

<sup>2</sup> Gillian Creese and Veronica Strong-Boag, eds., *British Columbia Reconsidered: Essays on Women* (Vancouver: Press Gang, 1992).

lege, many of us no longer define ourselves as women's historians, but prefer to be known as gender historians. As Gillian Creese and Veronica Strong-Boag note in this issue in "Taking Gender into Account in British Columbia," scholars have come to recognize that it is not sufficient to study women in isolation as has often been the case in women's history. Rather, it is essential to integrate work on women's history into a broader framework by studying how gender as a category constructs and shapes the lives of both women and men.

The response to the conference's call for papers was overwhelming; we had had no idea that so much excellent and innovative work was being done in the field. The final conference programme included 54 papers, of which 46 were on B.C. gender history topics.<sup>3</sup> What the two-day conference clearly revealed was that B.C. gender history is indeed a vibrant and growing field of scholarship. We also discovered that even though much of the work in B.C. gender history is being done by historians, anthropologists, sociologists, political scientists, literary scholars, economists, and archeologists are also active in the field and presented important work at the conference. Furthermore, while the majority of participants were working in B.C., the conference demonstrated that a significant number of scholars from other regions of Canada — and beyond — are also contributing vitally to the field of B.C. gender history. Many of the conference papers, by both B.C. and non-B.C. scholars, addressed subjects that are presently at the forefront of Canadian and international scholarship in gender history, while others represented topics of ongoing importance within the field.

Our plans for the conference had always included the publication of at least some of the papers presented. By a fortunate coincidence, we discovered that *BC Studies* was planning a gender history issue for the spring of 1995. While the journal's editor had already accepted two papers for this forthcoming issue, he most graciously agreed to have two of the conference organizers take over as guest editors of the special issue. Consequently, we are able to publish a selection of some of the best conference papers, which represent only a small sample of the excellent work that was presented at the conference. Many presenters were not able to submit their work to us, since it was already committed elsewhere. During the competitive selection process, we had to make some very difficult choices, and unfortunately some very interesting studies could not be accepted. Nonetheless, the papers

<sup>3</sup> In an effort to provide an opportunity for B.C. historians to present their work on non-B.C. topics, the remainder of the papers fell into this second category.

included in this issue do reflect many of the most important themes in the field of B.C. gender history.

As Gillian Creese and Veronica Strong-Boag point out in "Taking Gender Into Account," most B.C. historians have ignored a central theoretical insight of gender history: that masculinity is as much a socially constructed category as is femininity. A recognition of this important concept can transform our understanding of a range of historical issues. Marlene Epp's paper, "Alternative Service and Alternative Gender Roles: Conscientious Objectors in B.C. during World War II," provides a fascinating discussion of how notions of masculinity and femininity were both challenged and re-shaped among Mennonite conscientious objectors in B.C. during World War II. Helen Brown's study, "Gender and Space: Constructing the Public School Teaching Staff in Nanaimo, 1891-1914," demonstrates how the hiring decisions of Nanaimo school board trustees reflected and shaped dominant gender roles for both male and female teachers. Adele Perry, in her article, "'Oh, I'm just sick of the faces of men': Gender-Imbalance, Race, Sexuality, and Sociability in Nineteenth-Century British Columbia," challenges our previous understanding of the social and sexual implications of the relative scarcity of non-aboriginal women in early B.C., by reassessing the meaning of masculine sexuality. Perry's article can also be situated in the emerging field of the history of sexuality, both in Canada and internationally. Robert Campbell's study, "Ladies and Escorts': Social Policy and Gender Segregation in British Columbia Beer Parlours, 1925-1945," also makes a significant contribution to the underexamined history of sexuality in B.C. He argues that concerns about allowing women into beer parlours were based largely on fears of female sexuality, and particularly on the medical and moral dangers supposedly posed by female prostitutes.

Campbell's work explores another topic currently in the forefront of international gender history research: the role of the state. His study reveals that state regulation is more complex than is often assumed: the regulation of drinking establishments was as much about the regulation of sexuality and health as it was about alcohol consumption. The complex and historically specific nature of state regulation is also reflected in Margaret Little's "Claiming a Unique Place: The Introduction of Mothers' Pensions in B.C." Little demonstrates how the state's fears of the potential sexual immorality of single mothers, which were so central in other jurisdictions, were secondary to popular fears of "race suicide" within the B.C. context.

As a result, far more white single mothers were eligible for state assistance in early twentieth century B.C. than in other North American jurisdictions. In her article, "The Supreme Law and the Grand Law," Jo-Anne Fiske examines the state from another perspective. Providing a sophisticated analysis of two very different legal traditions, Fiske demonstrates that having aboriginal customary law accepted within the dominant legal system, which may appear to be a victory for First Nations people, can in fact serve to restrict the options of many First Nations women.

Fiske's work also raises challenging and thought-provoking questions about the very meaning and use of history, both among First Nations peoples and within the dominant legal system. Other papers also explore this question. In her innovative study of "The Diaries of the Crease Family Women," Barbara Powell demonstrates the different ways in which a mother and her daughters understood and constructed their own and their family's histories in late nineteenth century Victoria. Similarly, Alexander Freund and Laura Quilici's "Exploring Myths in Women's Narratives: Italian and German Immigrant Women in Vancouver, 1947-1961" examines the narrative forms and positive myths used by immigrant women in (re)constructing their own immigration histories, as a way of making sense of the contradictions posed by their expectations and the realities of their experiences in B.C. By exploring the ways in which Italian and German women interpreted their immigration experiences, Quilici and Freund also raise fascinating methodological questions about the meanings and uses of oral history.

Quilici and Freund explore the lives of women who by virtue of their ethnicity were considered to be outside the Anglo-Canadian mainstream of British Columbia society. The Mennonites studied by Epp would also have been defined as "other" in terms of both their ethnicity and religious convictions. While we still need to know far more about the immigration of non-British Caucasians to British Columbia, the available historical record suggests that these people were far more welcome than the Asian immigrants who arrived in British Columbia in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. Midge Ayukawa's paper reveals the particular hardships experienced by a certain group of Asian women — the Japanese picture brides, who came to B.C. married to men they had never met. As Ayukawa demonstrates, Japanese women were confronted with both the virulent racism of B.C. society and the economic hardships of life as new immigrants. Furthermore, these women had to negotiate their

lives in relation to the Meiji gender ideology, which constructed ideal womanhood in terms of “good wives and wise mothers.”

Other papers also reveal the intersecting and sometimes contradictory pressures of race, gender, and class for B.C. women. Fiske certainly shows that what can appear as a “victory” for First Nations may be anything but a victory from the perspective of many First Nations women. Race is certainly not only a concern when the focus of attention is on “non-white” women or men. Little analyses how the moral concerns of middle-class reformers about the sexual behaviour of working-class white single mothers could in certain contexts be subordinated to racial fears of the “other,” while Perry demonstrates that the meaning of white women’s scarcity in B.C. society was defined in relation to unstated racial assumptions about aboriginal women.

These papers certainly cannot hope to cover all significant topics within B.C. gender history. Readers are encouraged to seek out new work that was presented at the conference and beyond. The range of fascinating topics being explored include, to name only a few, First Nations women, Asian women, bisexual women, prostitution, reproduction, women and work, the relationship among gender, race, and religion, the role of the state, and the use of new methodologies in gender history. And many other topics remained largely unexplored. Nonetheless, while as relatively newly minted British Columbians we may be accused of boosterism, we certainly believe that the work now being done on B.C. gender history is once more in the forefront of the field within Canada. We hope that this issue of *BC Studies* will inspire those working in the area to continue their work and thus contribute to a growing and innovative domain of historical scholarship.

We would like to thank the contributors for their interest in this special issue and for their promptness in complying with our tight schedule. We would especially like to acknowledge with many thanks the reviewers, who provided such valuable feedback, and who were exemplary in meeting our often less than generous deadlines. We would also like to express our appreciation to members of the UVic History Department — Peter Baskerville, Eric Sager, and particularly Patricia Roy and Elizabeth Vibert — and to Allan Smith and Henny Winterton at *BC Studies* for their helpful advice and ongoing support. Finally, this issue would obviously not have been possible without the work of the other members of the conference organizing committee: Lana Castleman, Karen Duder, Susan Johnston, Sheila McManus, Kori Street, Carol Thornton, Tamara Vrooman, Elizabeth Vibert, and Monica Wosilius.