# Mrs. Canada Goes Global: Canadian First Wave Feminism Revisited

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### **Abstract**

An intensive re-examination of first wave feminism in Canada is long overdue, especially in light of new and important questions which have been raised in the international literature. A more systematic exploration of feminism and the making of Canada is essential most notably as it relates to citizenship, imperialism and internationalism.

#### Résumé

Une ré-étude de la première vague du féminisme au Canada est échue depuis bien longtemps, surtout vu les nouvelles et importantes questions qui ont été soulevées dans la littérature internationale. Une exploration plus systématique du féminisme et de la création du Canada est essentielle plus notamment en ce qui a trait à la citoyenneté, l'impérialisme et l'internationalisme.

The recently celebrated thirty-fifth anniversary of the Canadian Committee on Women's History (CCWH) at the Congress of Humanities and Social Sciences, June 2005 in London, Ontario, highlighted the tremendous growth and increasing sophistication of feminist historical scholarship in this country over the past three decades. Yet in the midst of these celebrations, discussion among women's and gender historians made it clear that the field remains seriously underdeveloped in the history of first wave and second wave feminism. For an academic field which emerged out of and has continued to draw inspiration from women's feminist activism in Canada, as Linda Kealey eloquently pointed out in one of the CCWH anniversary sessions, there is a certain irony that questions related to women, social justice and historical change have not received enough scrutiny. An intensive re-examination of first-wave feminism is long overdue, especially in light of new and important questions which have been raised in the international literature. If we are to better understand feminism and the making of Canada a more systematic exploration of citizenship, imperialism and internationalism is essential.

First wave feminism received much scholarly attention in this country as the field of women's history burgeoned in the 1970s and 1980s (Bacchi 1983; Gorham 1975 & 1976; Kealey 1979; Strong-Boag 1977 & 1987). Little research on has been done on women's political beliefs and activism in the last fifteen years. Like feminist social historians elsewhere, scholars here turned away from political history to explore other dimensions of women's lives and of gender. As Melanie Nolan and Caroline Daley have pointed out, first wave feminism came to be "dismissed and discredited in the heady

optimism of the second wave." Suffrage history was seen by many as elitist and old-fashioned (Nolan and Daley 1994, 3). Yet in the early 1990s a growing number of feminist scholars internationally began to return to political history and to "rediscover," "rethink," "re-root," or "re-read" earlier interpretations of first wave feminism (Baker 2002; Grimshaw 1994; Hewitt 2001; Kwon 1999). The work of Australian women's historians (Bulbeck 1994; Curthoys 1994; Grimshaw 2001; Lake 1994 & 2001; Paisley 1998 & 2000) has focused not just on developments within specific countries, but has studied feminist thought and activism in the broader and often overlapping contexts of imperial and international politics (D'Itri 1999; Fletcher, Mayhall and Levine 2000; Sinha, Guy and Woolacott 1999; Smitely 2002; Tyrell 1991). They combine political, social and cultural history (Burton 2000; Glenn 2000; Tickner 1988). These international trends have not been adopted in the Canadian historiography to any extent.

The limitations of the existing Canadian literature are readily apparent. Since the mid-1980s, virtually nothing has been produced about the relationship between anglophone and francophone feminists or any attempted comparisons drawn between how such women conceived of political equality and citizenship (Danylewicz 1987; Fournier 1982). Neither has the extent to which earlier generations of feminists attempted to overcome the linguistic divide and how they might have influenced one another been studied.

Linda Kealey, Janice Newton and Joan Sangster have made important contributions to our understanding of socialist feminism (Kealey 1998; Newton 1995; Sangster 1989) while others have examined working-class women "who organized as auxiliary members, consumers and supporters of radical causes" (Sangster 2000, 57). But we know little about how such women engaged with or retreated from other first wave feminist issues such as temperance and suffrage.

While the contributions of Protestant women to various social reform and political causes have been well documented and fully justified (Christie 2000; Valverde 1992), Catholic women, especially those outside of francophone Quebec, are overlooked. Marta Danylewicz has studied the relationship between nuns and lay women in the rise of feminism in Montreal (Danylewicz 1987), but other collaborations among Catholic women elsewhere remain unknown. Margot Duley's study of the suffrage movement in Newfoundland notes the presence of Catholic women but does not analyse how these women's religion shaped their involvement and the politics of the suffrage movement (Duley 1993a & 1993b). Catholic women played a less prominent role in various feminist initiatives at the turn of the twentieth century, but precisely how and why needs to be further analyzed and documentation of what contributions they did make is required. A more in-depth exploration of Halifax, Saint John and St. John's and of northeastern Nova Scotia and eastern Ontario, which have sizeable Irish and Scottish Catholic populations, is also needed.

Much of the research focusses on central Canada, especially Ontario and westward. E.R. Forbes' 1989 work on Edith Archibald remains one of the very few works, for example, on the women's movement in Nova Scotia (Forbes 1989). This regional imbalance restricts what can be said about so-called national perceptions and politics, and limits understanding of potentially useful regional variations.

Finally, the actual struggle for suffrage has elicited rather cursory study. Our last comprehensive work on the suffrage movement was Catherine Cleverdon's The Woman Suffrage Movement in Canada (Cleverdon 1950). Carol Lee Bacchi's Liberation Deferred, the last book-length treatment of Canadian suffrage, published in 1983, concentrates only on those Bacchi called "overt" suffragists, namely those who were members of official suffrage organizations (Bacchi 1983).

Veronica Strong-Boag's piece on the "citizenship debates," which took place over the 1885 Franchise Act, sheds new light on federal politicians' views of female suffrage, yet we have only the broad outlines of opposition to and support for the franchise and feminism (Strong-Boag 2002).

Over the past decade, scholars have considered the charge, first made by Carol Lee Bacchi and later elaborated upon by Mariana Valverde, that first wave Canadian feminists were racist (Bacchi 1983; Valverde 1992 & 2000). "[E]ntrenched polarities" developed among historians with some scholars uniformly condemning the beliefs and actions of first wave feminism while others sought to defend them. Janice Fiamengo avoids both "the reductive conclusion that all first wave feminist writing promoted a monolithic racism," and arguments that early feminists not be judged so harshly for being "a product of their age" (Fiamengo 2002a, 154). In examining the race thinking of Nellie McClung and others, she has discerned ambiguity, contradiction, and variation: "because it demonstrates that white supremacy, undeniably the dominant ideology...was nonetheless not absolute in Canadian society before World War II" (Fiamengo 2002a, 155 & 2002b). Literary critics have been contributing much to our understanding of racialization and racism within the first wave (Henderson 2003; Mukherjee 1995), but richly detailed studies by historians that are more attentive to the connections between discourse and action, and the broader political and social context, are needed. We also need studies of what Anglo-Celtic women thought about women of colour and Aboriginal women, and their interactions, and how women of colour and Aboriginal women themselves may have conceived of female activism. Jane Rhodes has done some work on the African-Canadian abolitionist, writer and feminist Mary Ann Shadd Cary, and Peggy Bristow has researched Black women's community activism in Buxton and Chatham (Bristow

1994; Rhodes 1998). More is required.

The Canadian literature remains underdeveloped. There is deficient information about an array of individuals, organizations and forms of interaction or non-interaction, and of how gender, race, ethnicity, class, religion, region and nation intersected with one another in shaping ideas, actions, and relationships. Canadians have not drawn inspiration and insights from the international literature.

The Politics of Colonization, the Politics of Empire

New imperial studies and post-colonial theory have had a profound impact on the international historical literature on first wave feminism, with books such as Burdens of History by Antoinette Burton being particularly influential (Burton 1994). Ruth Roach Pierson rewrites Canadian history within a broader framework by posing questions about the relationship between colonialism and imperialism, including the complex gendered and racial relationships between "colonizer and colonized" (Pierson 1998). Cecilia Morgan has written about Canadian travelers to the imperial centre of London, and Adele Perry on the white settlement of British Columbia (Morgan 2001 & 2003; Perry 2001 & 2004). The non-Canadian literature has demonstrated the essential importance of revising the approach to the history of feminism. As Burton has noted, "the category of feminism itself emerged from the historical context of modern European colonialism and anti-colonial struggles" (1994, 6). Extensive research has been done elsewhere about the evolution of feminism and its connection to the British imperial context. Marilyn Lake argues that earlier Australian feminists' sense of themselves "was constituted in these years around the turn of the century within an imperialist framework, in terms of dichotomies drawn between the 'civilized,' and the 'primitive,' 'Europeans' and 'natives,' 'advanced' and 'backward'" (Lake 1994). The South African feminist literature accounts for the further complexity of a feminist movement forged in a context where both the indigenous population as well as a population of non-British European origin - the Afrikaners - had been colonized (Gaitskill 2002; Scully 2000; Vincent 1999a & b). Such work illustrates the importance of investigating the historically contingent and contextually specific development of feminism in a white settler colony and then former colony with ongoing political, social, and cultural ties to empire.

Canadians have only begun to take this fully into account. How did the imperial framework influence the policies and priorities of women's organizations? How did imperialism shape the outlook of individual feminists? Catherine Cavanaugh's piece on Irene Parlby, "Imperial Daughter," maintains that Parlby's "vision of an inclusive West remained circumscribed by race" and shaped fundamentally by British imperialism (Cavanaugh 2000, 117). Janice Fiamengo's otherwise careful explication of the race thinking of Nellie McClung and others acknowledges the "the imperialist foundations" of early feminism in Canada, but does not attempt to elucidate the precise nature of such imperialism in this national context or to consider whether or how it might have changed over the course of the nineteenth century and into the twentieth century (Fiamengo 2002a & b).

In the British imperial context scholars have drawn attention to the implications of the emergence of feminism alongside the displacement and oppression of indigenous peoples. Patricia Grimshaw has noted about feminists and their supporters in New Zealand and Australia that "[they] made their case for equity and justice for the female sex in societies immersed in negative constructions of indigenous peoples of both sexes" (Grimshaw 2001, 33). White middle-class feminists asserted entitlement to civil and other rights national contexts "founded imperialism." Grimshaw and Anne Curthoys maintain that feminists came to see themselves as colonizers (Curthoys 1994; Grimshaw 2001). Indigenous women would become the subject of study and the object of activism at the same time as the women's movement became more self-conscious of its traditionally exclusionary politics and practices. The absence of work on the interconnections between feminism, feminists and First Nations peoples in Canada calls into serious question the narrative of female activism and emancipation.

Published research by the American historians Gail Landsman, Delores Janiewski and most recently, Margaret Jacobs (Jacobs 1999; Janiewski 1998; Landsman 1992) has explored the complex and often contradictory relationships between white feminists and Native American women in the context of white colonization and eventual indigenous dispossession. They explore how Native American women from specific tribes served as "inspiration" for early white feminists in the United States as they were perceived to have a cultural heritage which accorded women certain rights and direct political involvement. Feminists "used the example of Native American women to criticize the patriarchal nature of their own society, to construct an interpretation of the origins of women's subordination, and to demonstrate the contingent, historical, and man-made creation of patriarchy through law and social custom" (Janiewski 1998, 70).

This literature highlights the influence of the Iroquois matriarchal heritage. Given that the Iroquois occupied lands which traversed the border between United States and Canada, and that cross-border contacts were commonplace between American and Canadian feminists over the course of the late nineteenth century and early twentieth century, it is likely that representations of and interactions with Iroquois women influenced the women's movement. The ambiguous figure of E. Pauline Johnson, or Tekahhionwake, a woman of mixed Mohawk (part of the Iroquois Confederacy) and Anglo-Celtic heritage who was a well-known performer, writer and poet in the late

nineteenth century and early twentieth century, has been the subject of studies by Veronica Strong-Boag and Carol Gerson, as well as Cecilia Morgan (Gerson and Strong-Boag 2002; Strong-Boag and Gerson 2000; Morgan 2003). Johnson spoke repeatedly about and for Aboriginal women but what formal or informal connections were forged between herself and the women's movement remains unknown or the extent to which she herself identified as a feminist remains unclear.

Katie Pickles and Shauna Wilton's work on the Imperial Order of the Daughters of the Empire (IODE) examines British imperial ties within the women's movement. Founded in 1900 to give assistance to Canadian troops involved in the Boer War, the IODE developed into one of the largest women's organizations in the country. Their purpose "was to promote patriotism and ties to the Empire" through various educational and charitable endeavours (Pickles 2002a & b; Wilton 2000). Pickles and Wilton document the kinds of activities IODE women engaged in and address how members shaped and were shaped by contemporary discourses relating to empire, race, and female citizenship. Nonetheless, there is considerable confusion in their work as to whether IODE members can be categorized as feminists or not. British historians such as Julia Bush and Antoinette Burton have taken pains to provide some demarcation between female imperialists and imperial feminists (Burton 1994; Bush 1998, 282 and 2000). Wilton refers to the maternal feminism of IODE members but concludes it was not a feminist organization. Pickles uses female imperialism in one publication title and imperial feminism in another. Further examination of the IODE would appear to be in order, including its links to other women's organizations within and outside of Canada promoting imperial sentiments.

Internationalism and Transnationalism

Imperial politics overlapped with international concerns. Non-Canadian literature examines international networks forged among feminists and the various transnational organizations that they created. Mini Sinha, Donna Guy, and Angela Woolacott argue in Feminism and Internationalism that "Recent feminist scholarship has raised new questions about the local and the global contexts of women's movements and feminisms world-wide" (Sinha, Guy and Woolacott 1999) only occasionally. American historians Bonnie Anderson and Nancy Hewitt have convincingly argued that feminist internationalism can be traced well back into the mid-nineteenth century (Anderson 2000; Hewitt 2001). Conventional interpretations of feminist history can therefore be dramatically reworked. By "re-embedding" American feminist initiatives in the world of the mid-nineteenth century, one can uncover "an alternative foundation for modern feminism" which was "rooted in communitarian values and organic conceptions of both oppression and liberation" (Hewitt 2001, 136).

An increasing array of transnational feminist organizations was created from the late nineteenth century onwards. Feminists formed international connections, often building upon existing personal and ties concerning temperance, political suffrage, prostitution, pacifism, women's legal rights and socialism. Leila Rupp documents the development of the International Council of Women, the International Alliance of Women, and the International League of Peace and Freedom. She traces both the conflict and community created within these international women's organizations, seeing them not as opposites, "but as part of the same process by which women came together across national borders to create a sense of belonging and to work and sometimes live together" (Rupp 1997, 10). Canada was among the first countries to form a national section in all of these organizations and feminists here would actively participate in them,

but the exact nature of the involvement is unknown. Canada's ICW national section was called the National Council of Women of Canada and its then President, Lady Aberdeen, would become the long term president of the ICW. Canada hosted, in 1909, one of the only quinquennial congresses of the ICW outside of the US. There is obviously a great deal here of potential importance to Canadian historians.

Canadian ties to Britain and the British Empire were fundamental in the creation of another international organization in the early twentieth century, the British Dominions Woman Suffrage Union (BDWSU) formed in 1914. Australian historians Angela Woolacott and Marilyn Lake note its impetus was to allow feminists in the self-governing dominions of the empire to join together, and that "enfranchised Australian and New Zealand women might help Canadian and South African women also attain the vote" (Lake 1994; Woolacott 2000). More needs to be known about Canadian feminist involvement and the impact of this kind of direct international support. One could also look at the possible connections and disconnections between the discussion which took place within the BDWSU over the inclusion of women from India and the widespread public debate in Canada over the immigration of Indian women which took place during the same period of time. Ena Dua has deftly analyzed the debate, known as the "Hindu Woman's Question," but the precise involvement of Canadian women activists and potential links to the international feminist movement remain unstudied (Dua 1999a & b; 2000; 2004).

The BDWSU assumed the name of the British Commonwealth League (BCL) in 1925 and broadened its mandate beyond the franchise, and became "Commonwealth feminists." As Woolacott explains, "Commonwealth feminism (as opposed to imperial feminism)...suggested that the enfranchised (white) women citizens of the dominions, not just British women, were responsible for their less fortunate imperial

sisters" (Woolacott 2000, 221). Australian scholars have noted the various ways in which indigenous women became a key subject of inquiry and discussion within the British Commonwealth League in the 1920s (Woolacott 2001, Lake 1999). In Australia, feminists involved in the BCL "actively sought to prod the Australian government into responsible action and effect improvements in the lives of Aboriginal women." Feminists felt both superior to and responsible for Aboriginal women. Canadian feminists attended the same meetings of the BCL when the situation of indigenous women was explored extensively. So what occurred in this country? How did the experiences of feminists here and the specific dynamics of First Nations issues shape their participation in the BCL on this topic?

The Pan-Pacific Women's Association (PPWA), formed in 1928, was part of the rapid expansion of feminist internationalism in the inter-war period. The organization included such countries from the Pacific rim as New Zealand, the US, Japan, China, Somoa and Canada - along with India. The organization met every couple of years, including in Vancouver in 1937, to promote cross-cultural understanding between East and West and to follow a social reform agenda aimed at establishing social and economic standards for urban and rural, as well as islander women throughout the Asian Region. Australian scholars such as Fiona Paisley have maintained that the PPWA represented a "less xenophobic internationalism [which] provided a new conceptual space for East/West internationalism within which Australians found themselves well placed" (Paisley 2002, 109). Australian involvement in the PPWA further de-centred imperial feminism, allowing for a degree of cooperation, however tenuous, on women's issues across developed/developing divides (Woolacott 1999). There is evidence of Canadian feminist involvement in this organization in which conceptions of the Orient and Orientalism got played out between and among different groups of women, but there is little if any coverage of

Beyond mapping out and analyzing organizational involvement, this recent literature on the first wave has also contributed to a rethinking of the periodization of the history of feminism. Reflecting the initial historiographical focus on developments in the United States and Britain (and somewhat secondarily in countries such as Australia, New Zealand and Canada) the term "first wave" was adopted to describe what appeared to be an upsurge in organizations, activists and political influence from the mid-nineteenth century through to the 1920s when suffrage and other reforms were attained; followed by a noticeable decline and a period of quiescence, with feminists only becoming a visible presence once again in the 1960s. Although very soon after the term's adoption scholars began to question the extent of the downturn, and hence whether "wave" was an apt designation, there was general acceptance of some form of decline during the middle decades of the twentieth century. As the historiography has developed over the last ten years with the attempted de-centring of British and American narratives of early feminism along with these new studies of international and transnational initiatives, this standard interpretation has been altered so that the first wave is now generally considered to extend into the mid-1940s. In some countries such as Egypt and Ireland the middle decades of the twentieth century, it has been shown, would be a period not of quiescence but of intensification of efforts by feminists to gain the franchise and achieve other positive social reforms for women. These years saw extensive organizing by women beyond national borders to address an array of issues. Some feminists re-directed their efforts to address the emerging debate which would take place in the League of Nations and later the United Nations over women's vs. human rights (Lake 2001; Offen 2000 & 2001). In the case of Canada, the traditional periodization of first wave feminism has remained largely intact, not because

of any explicit attempt to reconfirm it, but because so little research has yet been done on feminist activism, at least among English-Canadians, between the 1920s and the post-World War II era.<sup>2</sup>

The historiographical trend toward internationalism and transnationalism might re-inscribe middle-class women, and even more specifically, white, middle-class women, as the central focus. They had the time, resources, and skills to engage in regular correspondence and could take long overseas trips. Nolan and Daley argue: "While the recognition of international links between suffragists and suffrage organizations is important, a focus on this aspect may, inadvertently, lead us back to undue concentration on middle-class women" (Nolan and Daley 1994, 22). It is essential to go beyond the liberal-feminist international organizations to consider the socialist-feminist international women's movement. It would also be beneficial to look beyond the large organizations where white, middle-class predominated and who were the most likely to forge formal links with groups outside the country, to explore groups and initiatives at a local level where working-class and ethnic or racialized women were most active. Important links between the local and the global could be uncovered at this level.

A more concerted effort to re-enter the discussion about first wave feminism at this juncture will allow Canadian scholars to draw upon insights and innovative approaches in the non-Canadian literature (and sidestep pitfalls), and will also result in feminist historians in this country making important contributions to the international dialogue on this topic. Canadian historians may provide new ways of understanding trans-Atlantic links forged between North American and European feminists beyond those between America and Britain which continue to so dominate the historiography (Bolt 2004); the relationship between feminism and the nation as more complex than that

currently presented in the literature given the greater awareness of different and competing notions of "the nation" within this country. It is likely that the process of racialization among feminists in this white settler colony race will not fit the model developed by either Antipodean or South African scholars given the quite different processes of colonization of indigenous and other European populations as well as the divergent pattern of immigration of non-English speaking immigrants.

To borrow Nancy Hewitt's term, we need to "re-embed" Canadian first-wave feminism in the world. Mrs. Canada, one of the archetypal figures of female emancipation at the turn of the twentieth century, must "go global" (Hewitt 2001). This does not mean the end of "nation" as the subject of inquiry or frame of reference; rather, attentiveness to national context is essential. But it does mean recognizing the nation as having "permeable boundaries" and that nation needs to be placed in a larger frame of reference to empire and the world (Burton 2000). This will open whole new avenues of research and create an important means of understanding our feminist past.

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## Endnotes

1. An exception to this trend has been work done on rural women and feminism (Ambrose 1996; Ambrose and Kecknie 1999; Halpern 2001; Kecknie 2004), which offers new insights into the contributions of Ontario farm women to the early women's movement - although it is reflective of many of the ongoing weaknesses in the English Canadian literature.

2. Canadian historians not only need to extend their research forward into the mid-twentieth century but back into the nineteenth century to better situate the genesis of feminism. Little research has been done on the period prior to the 1880s, very little of it in the past several decades, and that by literary critics (Murray 2002). Possible connections between women's involvement in the abolition movement, various philanthropic endeavours, and temperance in the early nineteenth century to the later emergence of feminism, all of which have been documented as being of significance in other contexts, have yet to be established here. Thanks to Cecilia Morgan for pointing this out to me. Correspondence with Cecilia Morgan, October 2004.

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