

Women's History, Gender Politics and the Interpretation of Canadian Historic Sites: Some Examples from Ontario

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Abstract

Although women's history has flourished in Canada for over thirty years, this has had little impact on historic sites in Ontario, which are dominated by military themes and male interpreters. Research shows that this is historically inaccurate, and that women were well represented at military sites in the past.

Résumé

Quoique l'histoire des femmes ait prospéré au Canada pour plus de trente ans, cela n'a eu que peu d'impact sur les sites historiques en Ontario qui sont dominés par des thèmes militaires et des interprètes mâles. La recherche démontre que ceci est historiquement inexact, et que les femmes étaient bien représentées dans les sites militaires dans le passé.

If the public is not aware of the history of Canadian women, then it is not the result of neglect by scholars. Three decades of women's history in Canada have produced impressive results that historians can and should be proud of. Almost from the start, Canadian historians skipped over the early stages of "compensatory" women's history to look at those who were more than "women worthies" succeeding according to a male model. One of our earliest scholars of women, Sylvia Van Kirk, in her now-classic *Many Tender Ties*,¹ examined native women's role in fur trade society, and subsequent historians have moved beyond that to investigate such themes as women's work, immigrant women, women in the peace and labour movements, including the politics of race and the gendered nature of social relations more broadly defined. For example, *Rethinking Canada: The Promise of Women's History* has gone through four editions since it was first published in 1986. The most recent volume includes articles on topics as diverse as merchant women, the gender of language, violence against women, Japanese immigrant brides, the uses of oral history, lesbian imagery in women's magazines, Mennonite refugee women, First Nations women and women in the Atlantic fishery.² Canadian university history textbooks, which needed the corrective of the alternate version presented by the two editions of *Canadian Women: A History*³ have recently begun to make concerted efforts to include the realities of gender in their accounts of our national history.⁴

Canadian historians of women surely cannot rest on their laurels, however, for much work remains to be done in the field. Despite all this scholarly

activity, Canadians seem to be woefully unaware of women's involvement in our national past. Recently, the Canadian Broadcasting Corporation held an on-line poll to see who was the "Most Important Canadian" of all time and of the 50 top picks, only six were women. Of the top four of these, ranked 35th overall was Laura Secord, made famous doubtless not just for her walk through the woods to warn the British of the impending American attack in the War of 1812, but also for the later appropriation of her name by a candy company. Nellie McClung, suffragist, social reformer and author, narrowly beat popular entertainer Celine Dion at 25th and 27th respectively. They were all trounced however, by Shania Twain, a country music singer from northern Ontario who topped all of the other women at position 18. Clearly, women's history remains the preserve of academics. Have we been researching and writing prolifically for naught this past 30 years? Evidently very little of what we have done has permeated the public consciousness.

Aside from educational institutions, where do most Canadians learn their history? One important source of information is national historic sites. Museums and other heritage markers such as plaques have had a poor record in interpreting history so that both genders are equally represented. Of approximately 1,600 historic commemorations made by the Historic Sites and Monuments Board of Canada since its inception in 1919, "only eighty-nine are commemorations of women or of institutions that were primarily associated with women." Almost half of these have been made in the last decade in response to the growing field of women's history.⁵ It is encouraging that new commemorations are being made on an on-going basis. Recently, an effort has been made to acknowledge women's history by highlighting these commemorations on the Parks Canada website, and by developing virtual exhibits on-line. Despite this, "there still remains much to be done to improve the representation of women in Parks Canada's program."⁶

Budget cutbacks have made it difficult to make extensive changes at most historic sites to better represent women, or to develop major new ones. Although feminist historians have made great advances in uncovering and establishing women's and gender history as vital and respected fields of study, to date this has had a limited impact on the interpretation of public historic sites.

The relative neglect of women at historic sites is certainly ironic, as it has been well documented in recent years that women were largely responsible for spearheading historic preservation initiatives in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries in Canada.⁷ Made up of volunteers rather than professionals, many of these local historical societies had collection mandates that were nonexistent, haphazard or poorly documented. Because of lack of funds they were dependent on donations: all too often items from people's attics that they no longer wanted but did not want to throw away. The good news, as was found in a research project conducted at the Peterborough Centennial Museum and Archives, is that many items thus collected are relevant to women's history. The task of documenting these resources and organizing them according to a coherent theme to exhibit to the public requires not only political will, but funding, always a scarce resource.⁸

Many of the sites preserved by women's organizations were houses, and it is not surprising that traditionally, when women have been represented in museums, they tend to appear in a domestic setting. These museums take as their departure point the Victorian doctrine of separate spheres for the genders with women in the domestic rather than the public world. This also presents a vision of history which assumes that Anglo-Saxon middle-class values prevailed everywhere. Where women who do not fit this mold are represented, it is generally as servants in bourgeois homes. As Sian Jones has pointed out, such sites

perpetuate the idea that, "women have spent all of history in the kitchen"⁹ or at least supervising servants who perform this domestic labour. "This narrow model of gender roles," she points out, "derived from analyses of the middle-class in late 19th-century industrial societies is applied by museums with almost universal vigour."¹⁰ Not only do women tend to be overrepresented in "house museums," ironically these historic sites are often established because of the man who once lived there, as is the case with Bellevue House in Kingston, Ontario, which was considered worthy of commemoration because Canada's first Prime Minister, Sir John A. Macdonald, lived there for a few months in the late 1840s. Recently public historians have suggested ways in which house museums might present a less stereotypical view of the past, by using them as an entry point into discussing individual women's lives or the hard reality of the domestic servants working there.¹¹ These possibilities are exciting, but rarely realized. All too often the static Victorian parlor is displayed as the sole source of information about middle-class women's lives, with the costume exhibit of fancy dresses a close second. As Patricia West has observed, "It is paradoxical that the historic house museum, largely initiated by women's voluntary associations and embodying the domestic life of the past, should need active revision in order to represent women's history. Yet widespread revision is necessary, for these museums have a long history of memorializing the economic and political activity of wealthy white men."¹² The women in the background to these men are shadowy stereotypes of unchanging Victorian womanhood, whether entertaining at tea in the parlor or scrubbing pots in the kitchen.¹³

Another way in which women have been represented in public history parallels the early development of women's history. Thus women who have "crossed over" from the private to the public world of business, politics and culture are represented. It is in

this area of "compensatory history" of "women worthies," that is, those who measure up to the male standard, that we find most recent initiatives to redress the underrepresentation of women in history. As Alan McCullough has pointed out, beginning in the early 1990s, Parks Canada began to realize that women's history could no longer be ignored, and a new policy was developed which gave it priority, along with the history of aboriginal people and cultural communities. This was developed and refined through a series of consultations held in the early to mid-1990s since there was little women's history expertise on staff in Parks Canada and no funds for new positions.¹⁴ Fritz Pannekoek has pointed out that there was apparently so little internal expertise in Canadian women's history at that time that, for a national symposium organized in 1994 to celebrate the 75th anniversary of the Historic Sites and Monuments Board, American examples were used in the talk presented by Dolores Hayden on women's history.¹⁵ Although admirable in her effort to introduce the history of marginalized peoples through examining a black midwife, Latina union organizers and Japanese-American flower-growers, there were similar diverse examples that could have been culled from Canadian scholarship.

Many historians will recall that several years ago the Historic Sites and Monuments Board made a concerted effort to identify women of achievement for the purposes of placing plaques. I wrote a background paper on one of them, E. Cora Hind.¹⁶ She was accepted by the Board for historic commemoration because I was able to show, consistent with the Board's guidelines, that she was a person who "made an outstanding and lasting contribution to Canadian history."¹⁷ Hind was a prominent newspaperwoman and an internationally recognized expert on agricultural matters, so the job was easy. Another example of compensatory public history, outside of the publicly funded domain, is the recent commemoration of the "Famous Five" of the

Person's Case with a wonderful and unconventional statue on Parliament Hill. Nellie McClung, Emily Murphy, Irene Parlby, Henrietta Muir Edwards and Louise McKinney are famous in this context because of their public political role in gaining women the legal right to be persons under British law. By citing these examples, I intend no criticism of either of these initiatives. In fact, I fully support them both. But those of us who have been thinking and writing about women's history for many years know that this can only be the beginning. The public history of women is not all about finding individuals who behave like men, as numerous historians have argued before me.¹⁸ Some movement has of late already been made in this direction with the emphasis placed by Parks Canada on the theme of women and healthcare, both as caregivers and patients. The recent commemoration of Women's College Hospital in Toronto, as well as a new interpretive emphasis on hospital sites run by religious orders, are examples of the shift in this direction.¹⁹ A recent study by Anmarie Adams in which she examines the lives of women living in nursing residences at Montreal's Royal Victoria Hospital shows at least one interesting way of approaching this theme.²⁰ Aside from these new initiatives, exhibits about the realities of women's lives are launched on an infrequent basis by museums as staff and funding permit.²¹ But still, we must be forced to conclude that despite these encouraging steps in the right direction, the content of women's history at most historic sites remains very inadequate.

Furthermore, historic sites are not just national monuments, they are also workplaces. And generally, they are workplaces populated by men. Public historic sites in Ontario, like elsewhere in Canada, are dominated by military themes associated with canals, towers and forts. There are only a few sites which have a peacetime emphasis, such as Upper Canada Village. One of the most impressive sites in the province is Fort Henry, situated in a commanding position on a bluff

overlooking Kingston, Ontario. It is a focal point of local tourism and an extremely important vehicle for interpreting Canada's past to the thousands of visitors who see it every year. As a military site it has been dominated by the Fort Henry Guard, a highly trained group of young male Queen's University students who for many decades have given stellar performances of precision military drills and spectacular sunset ceremonies complete with real cannon and rifle shot. Their marching is a sight to behold, and they occasionally parade in Kingston on important civic occasions, totally outperforming the less well drilled local Princess of Wales Militia Regiment. Over the years, the Guard developed into a kind of paramilitary brotherhood, with its own traditions, annual dinners and regular reunions. Women have not been part of this, even after a handful of young women portraying soldier's wives were introduced to Fort Henry in the 1980s. It was an unpleasant surprise to them to find that their former classmates and friends treated them as second class citizens when working at the Fort.

All this changed in the early 1990s, however. During the brief tenure of the New Democratic Party in Ontario, employment equity legislation was passed, and Fort Henry is a provincial government workplace just like any other. The Fort at that time employed about 150 students, of which perhaps 10 were women. There was consternation about how to integrate women into the history of the Fort, and the only possible solution that was envisioned was to have them perform as men. And so, heresy of heresies, women were admitted to the Fort Henry guard! The initial reaction to this was predictable, and there was quite an uproar in the Kingston Historical Society. The debate unsurprisingly resulted in oppositional positions. On one side, there were the sticklers for historical authenticity. Women weren't in the guard then, so they shouldn't be now. And, although there are several known cases of women who did pass as men in the British military (including

a British medical officer Dr. James Barry, who actually served in Upper Canada for a time), one has to concede the point.²² Some would see this as yet another example of the tyranny of the feminist politically correct, who are considered to be irrational proselytizers who ride roughshod over liberty, individual rights and common sense everywhere. I wonder how many would make a similar argument, however, if the issue was that of introducing men who were not of white Anglo-Saxon heritage to the Guard. Should we, for example, bar Italians, East Asians, First Nations and Blacks because their presence is not historically authentic? Clearly, in both moral and legal terms, the answer would be no.

On the other side of the debate were those whose main concern was progress and equity. It is after all, a job and a performance. Why can't a woman play a man? The male jobs are more fun and have more prestige, so why should women be excluded from them? I have to admit to having sympathies on both sides of this debate. As an historian, I have some hesitation at the thought of dressing up women to be male soldiers. As a feminist, I think they should not be denied access to these extremely good jobs. But in any case, the deed has been done. By and large, the public has responded positively to the inclusion of women in the guard, although it has been said that the "old boys" of the Guard are still not reconciled to it.²³

Another Kingston landmark historic site, Bellevue House, provides an interesting contrast to the equity issues at Fort Henry. There have never been more than about 10 interpretive staff employed there, of which about two were male gardeners working outside the house. The rest of the staff were women working inside in various domestic roles such as cook or maid. A little more than 15 years ago, Bellevue House was charged with discrimination under the Canadian Human Rights Commission by a man who had been denied one of the higher paying female positions. There was a scramble to figure out how to cope with

this challenge, and finally it was decided that since Sir John A. Macdonald's wife was a near invalid, that there would have been a doctor on site, and that her brother had once stayed for a three-week visit, so that he could be there also. No one seriously considered dressing the men up as parlor maids or cooks. Now, although the ratio of men and women working at Bellevue house varies from season to season depending on the qualifications of the pool of applicants, there are an equal number of interpretive roles available for them. No one has to feel silly or out of place in their performances, and staff at Bellevue consider the program to be greatly enriched by these additions.²⁴ In comparison, at Fort Henry, of a now pared-down seasonal staff of about 75-100, about 30 are women. The women cycle in and out of the 4 or 5 interpretive female roles, but the men do not. No one has ever challenged the Fort under human rights legislation.²⁵

Another interesting example of how gender politics plays itself out at an Ontario historic site is found at Fort Wellington, in the small town of Prescott on the St. Lawrence River. Like Fort Henry, this was designated as a model military site, with the somewhat earlier interpretation date of 1846. As at Fort Henry, the presence of a small number of military wives was assumed, since it was known that according to military regulations of the day, for every hundred men, six wives were permitted with their children to be "on the strength," that is, given rations and allowed to live in barracks. The interior of the barracks was austere and simply furnished, with wooden cots, no personal possessions, and military-issue tin plates and mugs on a plain, long all-purpose wooden table. On the face of it, this seemed to be a reasonable and historically accurate portrayal of the site.

Some years ago, I was hired on contract by Parks Canada to research the history of Fort Wellington, largely because an archeological dig undertaken on the site in 1990-1991 had yielded results which had

amazed everyone. The excavation had taken place at the location of the former latrine. We are not talking about just any single occupant outhouse, but a larger structure that could accommodate several people at once, and had separate compartments for soldiers, women and officers - thus allowing archaeological analysis of the remains not only by gender but also by class. When I began this work the archaeologists were just beginning to analyze their results and I was fortunate to be able to sit in on some of their meetings where they earnestly discussed such matters as the calculation of levels of slideage from one part of the latrine to another in order to determine just who had left what behind. For this latrine was not just used for the obvious purposes - it was also a dumping ground for all kinds of trash. The tale that was told by ordinary garbage was a remarkable one. What was unearthed was an astonishing variety of materials that one would not normally expect to find at a military site - artifacts that told of a rich domestic life, with, among other things, an amazing variety of tableware, glassware, trinkets, children's toys, shoes belonging to women and children as well as to men, brightly painted tea cups and plates in multitudes of different patterns, egg cups, miniature cups and saucers, bottles for condiments and patent medicines and even writing slates and slate pencils. The artifacts are an amazing sight, astonishing in their variety and number from such a small site. There are literally thousands of pieces of ceramics alone. The stereotype is, of course, that there would be tin plates on the barracks table at meal time, not floral patterned tea sets. Clearly life at the Fort was not uniform or spartan, but in fact was much more richly textured and domestic than anyone had imagined.²⁶ My assignment, and I was specifically hired because of my knowledge of women's and family history, was to explain how this could be so.²⁷

The military unit that was stationed at Prescott - and indeed across British North America - in

the 1840s was the Royal Canadian Rifle Regiment (RCRR), which was a special regiment of long-serving loyal soldiers formed from existing British line regiments to combat the epidemic of desertion that was taking place across the American border. They were given some incentives to enlist: such as slightly higher pay, permission to work in their spare time, a guarantee that they would never be posted outside of Canada and most importantly, the allowance of twice the number of wives per company - 12 instead of 6. In practice, however, my research showed that many more than the regulation numbers of wives were actually enrolled. Those men who were most likely to be attracted to a stable and stationary regiment were also most likely to be married. The regulations which on paper appeared inflexible were in fact informally bent to accommodate this. In 1842 according to inspection returns, 20% of the men were married and this grew to 33% in 1846, reaching a high of almost 53% by 1851. By that date, the number of children with the regiment was almost exactly equal to the number of men - 839 to 840. My estimates for Fort Wellington show that by 1851-2, despite 16 families showing on the census as living in Prescott, there were 45 men in barracks, 38 women and about 70 to 80 children, a minimum total of 153 people in three open barrack rooms designed to hold 85 men.²⁸ Single soldiers ate in a mess system together, but married couples ate their meals in family units. This would mean that every day there would be the bustle and commotion of numerous individual breakfasts, dinners and teas being prepared, which goes a long way to explain all of the domestic articles found on site at Fort Wellington. Even though beds were folded away during the day, the storage of all the clothing, personal items and dishes used by the families living there must have made the barracks rooms extremely crowded.

Unsurprisingly, I concluded from my research that the reason why there were so many domestic artifacts at Fort Wellington was because there was a

very active family life there. Although this knowledge has definitely altered how the costumed guides interpret the site to visitors, budget constraints have meant that the physical set-up has not changed much, although curtains, which were used around the beds by married couples to ensure some minimal privacy, have been added as well as some artifacts suggestive of family life. When I visited the Fort in the summer of 2004, women comprised about 30% of the staff at Fort Wellington.²⁹

How does all this relate to Fort Henry and our original discussion about historic sites? The early interpretation of Fort Henry was based heavily on a view of military life taken primarily from regulations found in published nineteenth-century regimental order books that bear only an approximate relation to real daily life in barracks. In addition, some of the more popular aspects of the current interpretation of the site - such as the famous Fort Henry sunset ceremony - are pure Hollywood, based on an imaginative choreography of various military manoeuvres and ceremonial marching that may have been carried out by certain regiments on special occasions, but were not routinely performed on-site in the 1860s. The dramatic firing of weapons and spectacular marching, however, are so enjoyed by the public and such a reliable revenue generator that they have remained a staple of the interpretive offerings at the Fort.

What was the reality of life at Fort Henry? The regiment that was stationed there in 1867, the interpretation date, was none other than the same RCRR that was at Fort Wellington. Although there had been some restrictions applied to control the numbers of women and children with the regiment after 1850, there still would have been a very great number of families living at the Fort, and there is plenty of historical evidence to document this. In recent years, this has been acknowledged by changes that have been made to the interpretation of the site which place more stress on the presence of women and children, with new

characters such as that of schoolteacher in addition to the soldier's wife. Nonetheless, the Fort is still dominated by male interpretive roles. In order to remedy this and achieve greater gender equity in staffing at Fort Henry, it should not have been necessary to commit historical anachronisms like dressing women up as men. There were many women, the daughters and wives of the men stationed there, actually living at the Fort in 1867.

Ironically, if strict historical accuracy was to be observed, young male students would not be hired at all for the Guard. Instead, men of at least 35 years of age, with a long history of alcohol abuse and chronic medical conditions similar to those gained from hard service in unhealthy tropical climates should be employed.³⁰ They would not be like the strapping physical specimens found on-site today. In fact, in recognition of the mature physique of the regiment, their uniform jacket was altered early in the regiment's history to a long belted tunic from one cut short at the waist, which, "however spruce and smart it may look with a Corps chiefly composed of young men" was not flattering to the middle-aged figure. "It must be recollected," reported the inspecting officer in 1843, "that their average age is now from thirty six to thirty seven, and by termination of their service will have arrived at forty five and upwards, a time of life, which I submit, they will not appear to advantage in a jacket cut away in the skirts, and trimmed off like fighting cocks."³¹ Many of their wives were young, however, since it was common practice for the teenaged daughters of soldiers to be provided for by marrying them off to their father's comrades. This makes the few female university students dressed as women the most historically authentic figures on site. In fact, if total authenticity is desired, then a faithful re-creation of the true living conditions at Fort Henry in 1867 would probably provoke strong censure from the local Health Unit and Fire Department, so appalling was the hygiene

and overcrowded conditions. Historical accuracy, like all sound principles, can be taken to absurd logical conclusions.

So what might be the moral of this story? In terms of gender, just because men dominated public life in the past, it clearly does not mean that there were no women there, or that even our most apparently male-focused sites cannot be interpreted to reveal a full range of gendered human activity. What three decades of feminist history should have taught us is that women are an integral part of all life, and that our imagined vision of a world populated only by men is just that - a fantasy world bearing little relation to the reality of the lived experience of either the past or the present. It is our culture's emotional investment in this imaginary past that makes it more acceptable to dress women to pass as men, than to strive to show the chaotic and rich reality of our history as it truly was. As historians we must take up the challenge of researching and writing a history of women that communicates not only primarily to ourselves and our graduate students, but is also interesting and engaging for the general public. It is only when we have accomplished this vital task that we will truly be able to congratulate ourselves on a job well done.

Endnotes

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24. My thanks to John Coleman, Operations Manager at Bellevue House, for confirming the details of staffing at Bellevue House National Historic Site.

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29. Many thanks to Dennis Carter-Edwards, Research

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