

WOMEN'S STUDIES IN FOCUS

The Work of Veronica Strong-Boag

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Introduction by Nancy M. Forestell, Guest Editor

Veronica Strong-Boag, Canadian Feminist Historian

The pieces in this cluster originated from a roundtable, "Veronica Strong-Boag, Canadian Feminist Historian: An Assessment and Appreciation" at the 2010 Canadian Committee on Women's History conference held in Vancouver. A multiple award-winning feminist scholar who has published numerous books, edited collections, and journal articles, Veronica Strong-Boag has had an enormous influence on Canadian history in general and Canadian women's and gender history in particular. Throughout an academic career which has now spanned almost four decades, Strong-Boag has taught undergraduates and supervised graduate students in history, women's and gender studies, and educational studies. Her impressive body of research includes historical studies of feminism, female pacifists, women in suburbia, E. Pauline Johnson, child welfare, adoption, and fostering. As the pieces in this cluster well illustrate, Strong-Boag is admired and respected by her feminist colleagues as an esteemed academic, supportive mentor, and committed feminist.

Veronica Strong-Boag, Historienne féministe canadienne

Les pièces de ce groupe ont vu le jour à partir d'une table ronde présentée en 2010 à Vancouver, dans le cadre de la conférence présentée par le Comité canadien sur l'histoire des femmes, et intitulée "Veronica Strong-Boag, historienne féministe canadienne: évaluation et appréciation". Universitaire féministe, lauréate de multiples prix, ayant publié de nombreux livres, des collections éditées et des articles scientifiques,

Veronica Strong-Boag a eu une énorme influence dans le domaine de l'histoire canadienne en général, et en particulier sur l'histoire des femmes et sur le genre. Au fil d'une carrière qui s'étale maintenant sur près de quatre décennies, Strong-Boag a enseigné à plusieurs étudiants de premier cycle et a supervisé des étudiants de cycles supérieurs en histoire, en études sur les femmes et sur le genre, et en études sur l'éducation. Son impressionnant répertoire de recherche comprend des études sur l'histoire du féminisme, sur les pacifistes féministes, les femmes dans les banlieues, E. Pauline Johnson, le bien-être des enfants, l'adoption et les familles d'accueil. Tel que le démontrent les pièces de ce groupe, Strong-Boag est admirée et respectée par ses pairs féministes. Elle est une universitaire appréciée, un mentor d'été et une féministe engagée.

Rethinking Veronica Strong-Boag

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Over the past 35 years, Veronica Strong-Boag has generated a marvelous record of scholarly publication, producing path-

breaking studies that have resulted in a rich and important corpus of scholarly work. A prolific author whose work has earned impressive national awards, Strong-Boag has also been a mentor and advocate, insisting on the importance of feminist scholarship and fighting for a more just Canada.

Strong-Boag's academic career began with her doctoral dissertation, *The Parliament of Women: The National Council of Women of Canada, 1893–1929* (1976), which she defended in 1975 and published the following year in the National Museum of Man's "Mercury Series." That pioneering study assessed the work of the National Council of Women (NCW) in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, exploring how the organization and its diverse membership struggled to represent women across Canada. By 1980, Strong-Boag had a second publication to her credit, an edited volume titled *A Woman with a Purpose: The Diaries of Elizabeth Smith, 1872–1884* (Smith 1980), which brought the writing of one of Canada's first female doctors into public view.

Strong-Boag's early work placed her at the centre of a generation of young feminist historians in Canada who had pursued graduate degrees in the 1970s and, in doing so, proved that women's history was a legitimate field of scholarly research. Many of these historians came together to produce a path-breaking collection of essays, *A Not Unreasonable Claim: Women and Reform in Canada, 1880s–1920s* (Kealey, 1979), which reassessed the successes and failures of Canada's first women's movement. Strong-Boag's article in that collection, "Canada's Women's Doctors: Feminism Constrained" (1979), explored the professional and political circumstances faced by Canada's first women doctors, and interrogated the contradictions of class and gender they faced. Together, the authors of *A Not Unreasonable Claim* offered a sometimes harsh and certainly unflinching reappraisal of what late nineteenth- and early twentieth-century female activists had accomplished. In the process, the authors of that volume laid the groundwork for a new genre of engaged, critical feminist history in Canada.

By 1982—when I moved to British Columbia to do my doctorate in history at Simon Fraser University under her supervision—Strong-Boag had embarked on a substantive new project, one that shifted her focus from the relatively elite women of the National Council of Women to lives of more "ordinary" women in the interwar decades. *The New Day Recalled: The Lives of Girls and Women in English Canada, 1919–1939* (1988) earned the prestigious John A. Macdonald Prize, awarded by the Canadian Historical Association for the best monograph in Canadian history. From that project, Strong-Boag moved onto the 1950s to examine the lives of Canadian women after the Second World War, when the growth of suburbs and post-war consumer affluence re-entrenched women's place in domesticity and the nuclear family (Strong-Boag 1991). Before long, biography once again attracted Strong-Boag's scholarly interest, and in 2000 Strong-Boag and Carol Gerson co-authored a fascinating biography of acclaimed Mohawk poet and author, Pauline Johnson. *Paddling Her Own Canoe* (2000) won the Raymond Klibansky Prize, awarded by the Canadian Federation for the Humanities and Social Sciences. Her continued interest in women's writing prompted Strong-Boag to co-edit—with her dear friend Michelle Lynn Rosa—an annotated republication of Nellie McClung's two memoirs, *Clearing in the West* and *The Stream Runs Fast* (Strong-Boag and Rosa 2003). The social histories of women and children were never far away, though, and in recent years, Strong-Boag's two new books have reassessed the place of adoption and fostering as forms of family formation in modern Canada (Strong-Boag 2006, 2011).

While generating this remarkable record of original work, Strong-Boag has continued to make other significant scholarly contributions, ranging from her editorial work on major collections—including the edited collection, *Rethinking Canada: The Promise of Women's History* (Strong-Boag, Gleason, and Perry 2002)—to her work as president of the Canadian Historical Association and her service on the Board of Parks Canada. Strong-Boag's achievements have earned her impressive research funding, scholarly awards,

and national recognition, including her 2001 appointment as a Fellow of the Royal Society of Canada.

Several key features characterize Strong-Boag's scholarly work. Her publications rest on rich, complex, and commanding empirical research. She presents research and arguments through tightly crafted sentences in paragraphs that demand that the reader "keep up" with the almost dizzying pace of the story being told. (When my own graduate students are struggling to explain a particularly complicated narrative, I often tell them to consult Strong-Boag's work as a model as to how make a point economically, without losing detail—to write what I call a "Nikki sentence.") Through the depth and complexity of her research, Strong-Boag's scholarship captures the range and diversity of women's experiences, illuminating the lives of those who have too long been ignored by conventional historical narratives. Her publications stand as a constant challenge to naysayers who have claimed that Canadian women's history is slim or dull.

I include the modifier "Canadian" because Strong-Boag is a self-defined feminist and nationalist (Strong-Boag 1994). Her work speaks to Canadians and to Canadian issues. She does not shy away from keeping "Canada" in the title of her works, and bubbling through her research is the confidence that Canadians can build a more equitable society. While Strong-Boag is interested in the structures that produce gendered experiences and the ways that women and girls (and often boys) experience those structures, demands for political solutions are never far from the page. Through her research, Strong-Boag criticizes state policies that fail to promote equality and demands that politicians, policymakers, and ordinary citizens work to reduce, rather than widen, inequalities in Canadian society.

To be sure, Strong-Boag's nationalism is not uncomplicated. She is attentive to the profound differences that make the histories of French Canada and of Quebec distinct from that of "English Canada" (a moniker that lies in the subtitle of two of her books). Throughout, Strong-Boag interrogates how gender, class, ethnicity, indigeneity, sexuality,

and ability effect how Canadians experience their citizenship (or lack thereof). In her recent work in particular, Strong-Boag acknowledges the distinctive experiences that characterize indigenous peoples' histories and the national identities that shape their claims for justice (for example, Strong-Boag et al. 1999). Recognizing that local governments were responsible for many of Canada's health, education, and child welfare programs, Strong-Boag explores the policies of municipal and provincial authorities as well as those of the federal state.

"Canada" is, in Strong-Boag's work, a complicated identity and a contested political unit. It is also a nation that she believes can and must do better to achieve social justice; thus producing a useful and usable version of the past underpins Strong-Boag's scholarly pursuits. While her work reflects the theoretical turns of the past 30 years and is enriched by international scholarship and debate, Strong-Boag seeks to generate research that is meaningful to contemporary issues and politics in Canadian communities. We see this in the range of audiences to whom Strong-Boag has aimed her work; she publishes in leading history journals and presents at scholarly conferences, but she also disseminates her research to practitioners in women's studies, health studies, indigenous studies, Canadian studies, as well as to educators, nurses, and social workers, and to those interested in adoption, children's rights, and public history. Her publications have been directed to academic audiences, but also to popular audiences and policy makers.

There is no doubt that Strong-Boag's scholarship has been tremendously influential in charting the terrain of women's history in Canada and in claiming a place for women's historians in universities and in public intellectual life. But Strong-Boag has also been personally influential for those of us who have been lucky enough to have her as a teacher, a colleague, and a friend. She has been a generous mentor to junior scholars. As a graduate supervisor, she helped kick-start our careers through co-authored publications (see, for example, Mennill and Strong-Boag 2008 or Strong-Boag and McPherson 1986). Strong-Boag has brought younger colleagues

onto editorial teams and then has passed the mantle of leadership over to those colleagues. The best example of this is the women's history reader, *Rethinking Canada*. Originally edited by Strong-Boag and Anita Clair Fellman, new scholars were added to the editorial group, and the sixth edition is in the capable hands of Mona Gleason, Adele Perry and Tamara Myers (2011). Strong-Boag has been vocal privately and publicly in defence of new scholarship, new scholars, and new perspectives. Her 1994 Canadian Historical Association Presidential Address was one such example. Her address "Contested Space" (1994) argued that questions of sexual violence against women and children be considered as a legitimate and necessary area of historical research—a painful topic that had to be confronted if historians were to make a meaningful contribution to justice and equality in Canadian society. In her address, Strong-Boag critiqued those senior colleagues who used their own place of privilege to bemoan the proliferation of histories focusing on gender, or class, or race, or ethnicity, or sexuality. Strong-Boag wrote: "In point of fact, the old history, like the old politics, or the old literary or philosophical canon, with their preoccupation with white male elites and their common failure to interrogate power relations and address the reality of oppression within Canadian society, has rarely been adequately equipped to characterize the reality of the past or to address the many pressing questions of the day" (Strong-Boag 1994, 5–6). For those of us who were moving into professional careers, Strong-Boag's pointed defence of the value of "deep diversity" was inspiring.

As one of her first doctoral students, I have benefitted from Strong-Boag's generosity and leadership as long as anyone. In the first year of my doctoral program at Simon Fraser University in 1982, I took a course on the history of medicine with Angus McLaren, a professor at the University of Victoria who graciously agreed to take on this extra teaching at his friend Strong-Boag's request. At some point in the course, Dr. McLaren and I were chatting about doing graduate work in history and he said, "It must be very interesting to have a female supervisor like Strong-

Boag as a role model." I must have looked perplexed, because McLaren went on to explain. He noted that Strong-Boag had a partner and a child and a career; she insisted that she be able to fulfill all those roles—that her status as a mother not be ignored nor assumed to be a reason she could not be a leading member of her department or her profession. I have often thought about that conversation over the years, as I myself have tried to balance family life with work. Having Strong-Boag as a supervisor and role model helped me shape my own household as a place where child care is shared, domestic work is valued, and women's paid work is not seen as trivial or secondary. At the same time, I have tried to ensure that my own history department is a place where people with families—diverse forms of families—are equally welcome and where commitment to family is not seen as antithetical to being a good colleague.

In offering these reflections on Strong-Boag's career, I am keenly aware that her commitment to incisive, feminist critique has not always been easy, professionally or personally. About her latest publication, *Fostering Nation? Canada Confronts Its History of Childhood Disadvantage* (2011), Strong-Boag acknowledges: it "is not a happy book...Sadness and anger in this volume flow from its investigations of both the recurring anguish of youngsters and the apparently profound indifference of so many adults" (1). Strong-Boag's willingness to invest her own personal emotions as she exposes the often painful and personal stories of Canadians who have been disadvantaged and maltreated remains inspiring.

Veronica Strong-Boag and Canadian Feminist Histories

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Attempting to capture, even in a modest way, the contributions of Veronica Strong-Boag to the field of Canadian women's and

gender history is a rather daunting task. Strong-Boag has not only been extraordinarily prolific, but her scholarship has also been of enormous consequence. In the opening sentence of *A Parliament of Women* published in 1976, she made the apt observation that, “The history of Canadian women has yet to be written” (Strong-Boag 1976, 1). It is in no small measure due to her very considerable efforts that, almost thirty-five years later, we have such a flourishing field of scholarship, and that numerous aspects of Canadian women’s history have been written, revised, and debated.

At the outset I’d like to make a few brief observations about Strong-Boag’s feminist praxis as an academic, which she has applied to the benefit of her students and her peers, and which can be evidenced in her historical scholarship. Along with others, I have been greatly impressed by her dedication to and promotion of women’s history specifically as well as women’s studies and feminist scholarship more generally in this country. She has also successfully collaborated with numerous feminist scholars, often across disciplinary boundaries, on various projects. As many of us have found, working collaboratively is not without its complications or difficulties; that Strong-Boag has done it so often and so well is a real credit to her. In addition to mentoring and supporting many feminist historians, she has also devoted extensive time and effort to bringing her scholarship and that of other women’s historians to non-academic audiences, in addition to making strategic and well thought out interventions in various historical and contemporary discussions as a public intellectual. And finally, Strong-Boag is to be greatly admired for the way in which she has so skillfully debated, and on occasion rather heatedly confronted, male peers about the merits and contributions of work in women’s history. I’ve never asked Strong-Boag, but I have wondered whether she’s ever found herself consciously channelling a bit of Nellie McClung’s vaunted abilities on such occasions.

This leads me to the main focus of my comments, that being Strong-Boag’s prodigious scholarship on first-wave feminism, a

topic which she began researching as a graduate student and one which she has returned to with regular frequency throughout her academic career. While I considered myself relatively well acquainted with this impressive body of scholarship, I acquired an even greater level of respect and admiration in the midst of working on the *Documenting First Wave Feminisms* project (Moynagh and Forestell 2011) as I read and reread Strong-Boag’s work on the National Council of Women of Canada, Pauline Johnson, the citizenship debates of 1885, and anti-feminism (and this is just a partial list).

As a clear indication of the successful academic path she would subsequently forge, Strong-Boag was just beginning her doctorate when she wrote an introductory contextual essay for *In Times Like These*, a collection of Nellie McClung’s political writings which was first published in 1915 (Strong-Boag 1972). One would be hard pressed to identify this essay as the work of a young graduate student as even then she demonstrated a deft understanding of social and political reform in Canada during the early twentieth century. Moreover, the essay was not an uncritical celebration of this female activist; rather, while she duly noted McClung’s various accomplishments, Strong-Boag also observed how her middle-class status and rural bias made it difficult for McClung to “to appraise industrial problems realistically” and commented upon her “ambivalence towards non-British immigrants” (Strong-Boag 1972, 6). Reading *In Times Like These* for an undergraduate assignment in the late 1970s was actually my first introduction to the field of women’s history and it was pivotal in spurring my enthusiasm for this burgeoning field.

Strong-Boag’s early work on first-wave feminism was crucial, I would argue, in establishing Canadian women as a legitimate subject of historical study. Of course, I am referring in part to the ongoing efforts by feminist scholars such as Strong-Boag to demonstrate both the importance of interrogating women’s lives in the past and of gender as a central category of historical analysis. But just as significantly, she illustrated that Canadian history was neither parochial nor dull, and that, at least in the way she was doing it,

Canadian history could be innovative and worthy of serious academic pursuit. In my view, Strong-Boag conveyed an unwavering confidence from the outset that Canadian feminist historians need not view themselves as inferior to practitioners in other fields of history.

One among many noteworthy aspects of her study of the National Council of Women of Canada, and something which became a hallmark of Strong-Boag's scholarship, was her close attentiveness to the specificity of the Canadian national context. In *The Parliament of Women* (1976), she demonstrated how the particular political, cultural, and linguistic features of Canadian society shaped how women reformers conceived of and acted upon various feminist issues. At the same time, she did not present the women involved as somehow hermetically sealed within national boundaries or influenced only by national forces. Throughout this study, in fact, she consistently pointed to the significance of imperial connections and sentiments, and the cross-border connections which persisted with American and British feminists.

To some degree, Strong-Boag's analysis of the National Council fit within the widely accepted historical periodization of feminism at the time; she noted that women's reform efforts experienced a rather sharp decline in membership and influence in the 1920s and concluded that, "Querulously disdainful of remedies urged by Council critics, the NCWC faltered badly during the post-war decade" (Strong-Boag 1976, 413). Let me be clear: she was never so categorical or unnuanced in her assessment that the end of the First World War heralded the end of the first wave, but in later work such as that on pacifist women, she revised her pessimistic evaluation of feminist activism during the 1920s. Her study of peacemaking women in the inter-war period presented a wide cross-section of Canadian women involved in a critical dialogue over finding an effective means to end armed conflict and their ongoing insistence that a feminist perspective had much to contribute to anti-militarist political debate and action (Strong-Boag 1987).

Another important aspect of Strong-Boag's scholarship has been her thoughtful interventions into discussions about the racial politics of the Canadian women's movement. Although she had pointed to the ethnocentrism of individual feminists and different collective reform initiatives in her early historical scholarship, Strong-Boag would readily admit that it was not until the 1990s that her work began to engage more fully with questions related to race and racism, as best exemplified by the anthology *Painting the Maple*, and her work with Carol Gerson on Pauline Johnson (Strong-Boag et al. 1999; Strong-Boag and Gerson 2000). In her piece, "A Red Girl's Reasoning," she claimed a place and space for Johnson as an important feminist figure who viewed the oppression of indigenous women as arising from racism and colonialism. Strong-Boag utilized the concepts of ambiguity, ambivalence, and contradiction in her examination of Johnson, concepts that other scholars would only begin to employ with regularity much later (Strong-Boag 1998). Moreover, in her article on the 1885 debates over voting rights, Strong-Boag explored the fault lines of gender, race, and settler/indigenous status in shaping political citizenship in Canada (Strong-Boag 2002). And along with her co-editors Mona Gleason and Adele Perry in *Rethinking Canada*, she usefully called for the need to move beyond entrenched polarities over whether first-wave feminists were or were not racist (Strong-Boag, Gleason, and Perry 2002).

More recently, Strong-Boag has embarked on a new project, "An Edifying Couple: Lord and Lady Aberdeen, Liberal Aristocrats, Reformers, and Vice Regal Activists in an Imperial World (1877–1939)." I am especially interested in that aspect of the project which will explore what Strong-Boag refers to as the aristocratic imperial feminism of Lady Aberdeen, whose political beliefs took shape in the midst of her husband's government appointments in Scotland, Ireland, and Canada. Certainly Aberdeen had an enduring influence on the Canadian women's movement, although arguably in ways which, at least in some respects, were quite problematic. Without question, this project promises to provide valuable insights into the historical

intersections of feminism with concepts of colonialism, imperialism, the nation, and national identities.

I am aware that Strong-Boag intends to retire in the next few years, but I fully expect that this will simply free her to devote more concentrated time to research. In the meantime, it would be beneficial for the feminist historical community to continue to draw upon her vast repository of knowledge and cumulative wisdom about Canadian history in general and women's history in particular.

The Enduring Legacy of *The New Day Recalled*: The Politics and Practice of Women's History

Lara Campbell, Associate Professor, Department of Gender, Sexuality and Women's Studies, Simon Fraser University, has published on the history of gender, family, and the welfare state in the 1930s. Her current research focuses on the gender politics of the Vietnam antiwar movement.

In the first line of *The New Day Recalled: Lives of Girls and Women in English Canada, 1919–1939* (1988), Veronica Strong-Boag writes, “Rethinking the past is never easy” (ix). From her early research on the National Council of Women, to her work with the aptly named and influential text *Rethinking Canada: The Promise of Women's History* (see, for example, Strong-Boag, Gleason and Perry 2002) to her recent work on fostering, childhood, and caregiving (Strong-Boag 2006, 2011), Strong-Boag has continually challenged historians to rewrite and rethink the world of Canadian history. Her prolific output and her influence in the field make it difficult to briefly address the legacy of her work, but after some thought, I decided to structure my remarks around *The New Day Recalled*. This book is a synthesis of women's history in English Canada in the interwar period, structured around a life course approach from girlhood to old age. It asks the question: what happened to women's lives after winning federal suffrage (for most though not all women) in 1918? I will begin my reflection on the *New*

Day Recalled by situating it within its period of publication and the historical profession at the time, turn to briefly look at some of the content, and end by looking at how questions about feminism and feminist activism are raised in the book and in Strong-Boag's life work in general.

The New Day Recalled was published in 1988, the year before I entered undergraduate studies at McMaster University. When I began graduate studies at the University of Toronto in 1993, this was one of the first books I was introduced to in Canadian women's history. As a beginning M.A. student, my experiences studying and reading women's history were limited, probably because my undergraduate training reflected the state of the historical profession in the late 1980s and early 1990s. When I recently researched book reviews from this period, I was a bit surprised to see how many monographs in women's history were being published around the same time period. A simple library search will show the utter explosion of books in the field of women's history in this period; just a few examples include Pierson, *They're Still Women after All* (1986); Dumont/Clio Collective, *Quebec Women* (1987); Brouwer, *New Women For God* (1990); Sangster, *Dreams of Equality* (1989); Cohen, *Women's Work, Markets, and Economic Development* (1988); Lévesque, *La norme et les déviantes* (1989); Backhouse, *Petticoats and Prejudice* (1991); Frager, *Sweatshop Strife* (1992); Dubinsky, *Improper Advances* (1993); Bradbury, *Working Families* (1993); Swyripa, *Wedded to the Cause* (1993); and Potter-MacKinnon, *While the Women only Wept* (1993).

Despite the incredibly rich women's history that was being written, very little of this work had filtered down into undergraduate teaching. In other words, my fellow history students and I took a great many courses on Romanticism and Revolution, the Industrial Revolution, or Pre-Confederation Canadian History. Most survey courses were not interested in incorporating a social history of women's everyday lives, let alone a history of feminism. As a result, my interest in women and gender was sparked not by studying hist-

ory, but by training in social work, with its emphasis on social justice and feminist theory.

The New Day Recalled was therefore a very important book for me as a graduate student, because its very structure, which was both synthetic and structured around the story of women's life course, made the case that the field of women's history was both rich and deep. It is difficult to write a historical synthesis, for example, without drawing on an abundance of both primary and secondary materials. The book is therefore as much a political document as it is an important historical monograph, in the sense that it made a case for the intellectual importance and historical rigour of the field as a whole. As a result, my future research and writing was done in a different environment, one in which I rarely needed to defend my interest in women's history. However, when I look at the long list of books published in this period, I realize how much I owe that level of comfort to Strong-Boag and to her colleagues across the country.

In preparing these remarks, I have found it interesting to look at how much the field of women's history has, and has not, changed. *The New Day Recalled*, and Strong-Boag's work in general, has been influential, pushing the work done by early women's historians beyond the public worlds of work, politics, and suffrage. Not that these themes were, or are, unimportant. But Strong-Boag's work makes clear how seriously she took the history of the private, the social, and the everyday. *The New Day Recalled* covers girlhood and youth, birthing and mothering, the process of aging, and the worlds of leisure and fun. The exhaustive and ongoing work done by women's and gender historians in these areas today are all testament to the importance of her early work and her profound influence in the field of women's history.

The New Day Recalled is also unequivocally and unapologetically a women's history. Strong-Boag made a strong case for the fundamental importance of framing her book around the stories and lives of girls and women, and not around a comparative analysis of men and women, boys and girls. It is striking, in retrospect, that historians writing

women's history in the 1980s had to articulate this justification; in 1988, a book that was a synthesis and a relational analysis of men's and women's lives would literally have been impossible to write. Developments in the histories of gender, masculinity, and sexuality have changed, shaped, and challenged the field of women's history, and perhaps only now, over twenty years later, will historians be closer to writing such a history.

Finally, I'd like to end by pointing out that the questions that Strong-Boag suggests were fundamental to this period remain deeply relevant concerns in the twenty-first century. For example, she points out that women worked together across a variety of differences to fight for, and ultimately win, suffrage. Despite this important victory, the hopes of the most optimistic activists were not realized: women remained divided by class, region, race, age, and religion. Strong-Boag sums up the dilemma succinctly, arguing that "tactics for ensuring equality seemed not much clearer at the end of these two decades than they had at the beginning" (Strong-Boag, 1988, 198). These debates and concerns, about the nature of equality, or even the definition of woman, sex, or gender, persist today. Though feminists may articulate the central issues differently, the underlying concerns are as relevant now as they were in the interwar period. How do we ensure gender equality when many of us can't agree on what equality even means, let alone how we might get there? The work we do as feminist historians may not answer these questions definitively, but continuing to honestly ask them, of ourselves, of our work, and of each other, remains vitally important.

The scholarly work academics do is important, of course, or I would like to think so. But it remains crucial to seek ways to take our work—and often ourselves—into larger communities. When I spoke to Vancouver historical interpreter Jolene Cumming, for example, she reminded me that Strong-Boag's dedication to women's history has a vibrant life outside the university: many people are inspired by her work, whether they are graduate students, teachers, public historians, community activists, or social workers. Strong-Boag speaks about feminist issues on

radio and in newspapers, has co-written reports on the devastating impact of government cutbacks on women's lives, and has organized conferences on women's and children's poverty, health, and education. Making connections between the past and present realities of women's lives in public venues can be challenging, and making allies across differences remains just plain hard. But knowing that feminists have struggled to do this throughout our history, and that many continue that struggle today, gives that difficulty and struggle both a valuable context and an honourable history.

Caring for Feminist History: Relationality in the Work of Veronica Strong-Boag

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Veronica Strong-Boag's work demonstrates relational care. This attribute is not meant to conjure the stereotypical images of nurturing and emotionality that have been historically imposed on women educators and scholars. The need to value an ethic of care within academia, as brought to our attention by Carol Gilligan, is certainly exemplified by Strong-Boag throughout her career (Gilligan 1982). But here care references not a certain model of behaviour, but a deep devotion to the relationality of feminist history. This devotion, of course, includes Strong-Boag's production of a new generation of critical scholars. I, for instance, have greatly benefited from this mentorship as one of her recent doctoral students. More poignantly, however, it encompasses Strong-Boag's attention to caregiving through dynamic models of relationships in her scholarship, especially in her most recent work on the history of children and youth.

While feminist relational theory is not an explicit lens used by Strong-Boag, it is

exemplified in her writings on children and youth.¹ This application of relationality acknowledges that at the heart of any story, particularly the history of Canadian nationhood, is the making and remaking of relationships. The good, the bad, and the ugly are laid bare in Strong-Boag's scholarship. Relationality also speaks to human agency as contextually embedded (Downie and Llewellyn 2011). Strong-Boag's work interrogates how our choices have implications for others locally and internationally (e.g., Strong-Boag and Bagga 2009). Furthermore, relational theory responds to the inadequacies of much liberal/neo-liberal social and political theory that characterizes the self as individualistic, and thus liberty as protected through non-interference and negative rights (Llewellyn 2011). Strong-Boag's contributions to academia are justice-oriented, identifying and seeking to protect the conditions of relationships that may allow nations, communities, and individuals to flourish (Llewellyn 2011; see also Koggel 1998).

The claim that, as humans, we live in a range of relationships is not startling for feminist historians. Relational theory takes a more fundamental stance, however, that connection plays a constitutive role in defining who and how we are and what we have and will become (Nedelsky 1989, 7–8). As Caroline Whitbeck (1989) explains, "being a person requires that one have a history of relationships with other people; and the realization of the self can be achieved only in and through relationships and practices" (68). Forgetting and hiding the history of relationships has been a destructive feature of both our nation's and our children's pasts. This is the central contention of Strong-Boag's research into the history of adoption. She writes in *Finding Families, Finding Ourselves: English Canada Encounters Adoption from the Nineteenth Century to the 1990s* (2006) that, "entry into new relations has regularly demanded surrender of the past, or at least critical elements of the past, on terms largely agreeable to the host" (ix). Modern adoption legislation assumed that adoptees' connections with birth parents and communities might well be dangerous—birth families and their customs were depicted as criminal or

incompetent based on class and racial respectability. As Strong-Boag details, sealed records, concealed illegitimacy, and restricted power of consent promised a clean slate after the First World War (2006, 31). Adoption appeared a good news story, as “bad beginnings” were erased. This supported, as Strong-Boag argues, domestic scripts of nuclear family stability and normality, and thus national mythologies of homogeneity and common citizenship (see also Strong-Boag 2004, 2005). She writes of this Western classic rescue story of disadvantaged children as follows: “White and middle-class households save the world, especially its more savage bits, one child at a time, and their complicity in the conditions of war, unemployment, poverty and general tragedy that commonly propel youngsters into the arms of others is nicely sidestepped” (2006, ix). Such is the story Canadians have told themselves about the clean slate of assimilation of indigenous children through residential schools and the 1960s scoop, and the institutionalization of mentally ill and physically disabled young people (Strong-Boag 2006, 135–173; see also Strong-Boag 2007). Adoption scripts embraced cultural genocide and structural inequality. Strong-Boag notes the irony that inequality made adoption necessary for survival and was often beneficial for many children. She traces open adoption, human rights, and community care movements that since the 1960s have provided an impetus to restore relations so that we may live in “domestic pluralism” (Strong-Boag 2006, 244). Strong-Boag (2006) argues, however, that remnants of familial romantic essentialism as serving the “best interests” of the child continue to “disable the future” (244). Strong-Boag’s (2006) position is that, “Reality, for all its complications and horrors, is ultimately a far better guide than mythologies to finding loving families and getting life right in general” (xi).

Strong-Boag’s work as a feminist historian helps us to understand how good and bad relationships operate to make and remake the self. This recognition enables reflection upon how individuals exercise agency to change and shape relationships. A relational concept of self asserts that individuals have the capacity to choose for themselves,

but that choice cannot and is not made alone—our choices require others and have implications for others (Sherwin 1998). It is essential, as Jennifer Nedelsky (1989) suggests, “to combine the claim of the constitutiveness of social relations with the value of self-determination” (9). Strong-Boag commits herself to this task in her most recent book, *Fostering Nation? Canada Confronts Its History of Childhood Disadvantage* (2011). She argues that the study of child neglect too often becomes a study of the failure of individual women in fulfilling their “natural” duties, rather than a struggle for survival, connection, and rights (Strong-Boag 2011, 208). Images of the “squaw,” the unwed, or the battered justified the apprehension of children from women deemed to be inferior mothers. Modernity required “real” mothers who altruistically fostered children in patriarchal relations without an eye to compensation from the state (Strong-Boag 2011, 280–291). Grandmothers and aunts, Strong-Boag explains, often filled these roles (see also Strong-Boag 2009). For many women, fostering was an empowering and satisfying job. For others, the recurring failure by the state to sufficiently value caring labour resulted in burnout. By the late twentieth century, Strong-Boag argues, women increasingly refused to subsidize child protection and support a system unwilling to rethink familial relations. She writes that a fostering crisis and children’s needs “cannot be met until citizens acknowledge that caregiving is an exhaustible resource that needs to be nourished” (Strong-Boag 2011, 306). *Fostering Nation?* illustrates that self-determination for women sits in relationship to the self-determination of children.

Strong-Boag writes in “Long Time Coming: The Century of the Canadian Child?” that “just as women deserve in their own right to be the focus of attention by scholars, so too do children” (2000, 132). In addition to her books, Strong-Boag makes clear in her numerous articles and edited collections on childhood that understanding the world from children’s perspectives is no easy task (e.g., Gleason et al. 2010; Warsh and Strong-Boag 2005). Impoverished children have left limited records, which leaves scholars to break the silence through case records and adult mem-

ories. Documenting the tales of children is nonetheless necessary, Strong-Boag argues, to expose the gap between modern ideals of childhood and young people's actual experiences (2000, 134). Since the nineteenth century, child welfare agents have promised improved conditions for future citizens, but adult care has always been contingent on character. Children's stories of care, foregrounded when possible in Strong-Boag's writings, detail disadvantage compounded by government underfunding, overtaxed social workers, and adult prejudice. Among the numerous personal accounts she provides, the reader hears from working-class children who, when they communicated unhappiness to middle-class experts, were readily pathologized as non-compliant youth (Strong-Boag 2011, 331). These memories demonstrate that children seized some control over their lives, whether through violence or pursuing education. Strong-Boag (2011) argues that "even injured youngsters have their own agendas and that these do not necessarily fit adult priorities" (350). Ever present in her work is the idea that children's sense of self, which is always mediated by the structures of location, must garner the attention of policy-makers to improve Canada's future.

The relational conception of self in Strong-Boag's work affirms the well-worn expression that no man, or in this case woman or child, is an island. Instead, relational selves are situated bodies with particular spaces, histories, cultures, and economies. What difference does it make that Strong-Boag embraces a relational concept of self in her research? Despite progress to recognize children's rights following the Second World War, Strong-Boag traces the damaging shift in the 1980s to neo-liberal policies. At that time, the obligation of rights became an individualistic enterprise based on the morality of the market (2011, 367–69). She discusses the inattentiveness of Canadians to the collapse of social security, including broken promises by the government for a national daycare policy. Increasingly privatized remedies result in bad news for children with increased reports of domestic violence and with an increased burden of care placed on women. Strong-Boag details these effects in

her public policy writing, including the co-production with Gillian Creese of two major reports: *Losing Ground: The Effects of Government Cutbacks on Women in British Columbia, 2001–2005* (2005) and *Still Waiting for Justice: Provincial Policies and Gender Inequality in BC 2001–2008* (2008). In this latter report, Creese and Strong-Boag (2008) demonstrate that British Columbia's status as the province with the highest rate of poverty, which mostly affects single mothers, is "directly related to Liberal policies, including reductions in income assistance levels, low minimum wage rates, disappearing higher-wage jobs in the public sector, and reduced access to childcare" (2). The impact on children, they document, is that they comprised more than a third of the 76,000 people using food banks in 2007; furthermore, only 80,000 supervised daycare spaces were available in 2004, there was a 28 percent dropout rate among 18 year olds between 2003 and 2005, and there were increased reports of abuse and suicide among youth (Creese and Strong-Boag 2008).

Strong-Boag's scholarship, in both her historical and public advocacy writings, questions abstract individualism associated with liberal/neo-liberal political arrangements or the view that how we live is a source of concern for the individual self and that rights are the realization of self-interest (Llewellyn 2011). She relentlessly warns that if we continue to pretend that the individuated, rational, competitive, and possessive self is the central focal point of society, then we will surely fail in our efforts to address the complexities of disadvantaged children and fail to create positive circumstances for the adults who care for them. Put more simply, justice is at stake for children, and the adults who care for them, if we do not pay attention to relationality in society and in the work of Veronica Strong-Boag. As Strong-Boag writes in *Fostering Nation?* (2011), "Happy outcomes, like the unhappy ones so often chronicled here, are ultimately the product of human will. Governments and Canadians can choose to do better" (20). Veronica Strong-Boag has chosen to do better in her relational-based scholarship on women, children, and youth. Her writing, as well as her supervision and

collegiality, ensures that a vibrant community of justice-oriented feminist historians continues to flourish in Canada and around the world.

Endnotes

1. This framework comes from the work of feminist scholars in law and philosophy who address the implications of key feminist relational concepts. See, in particular, the work of Jocelyn Downie and Jennifer Llewellyn (2011), Christine Koggel (1998), and Jennifer Nedelsky (1989).

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