

# *The Woman Speaks Her Mind: The Role of Oral Histories in Documenting Women's Participation in the Antigonish Movement*

*Judith Flora MacLean*

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At a 1942 general staff conference of the St. Francis Xavier University Extension Department in Antigonish, Nova Scotia, two female field workers gave speeches on the participation of women in co-operatives. The Extension Department, founded and led by Father Moses M. Coady, coordinated the activities of what came to be known as the Antigonish Movement, a program of adult education and co-operative development which flourished in the Maritimes during the 1930s. Movement leaders recognized the importance of female participation in its programs: in 1933 a Women's Division was created within the Extension Department and this operated until 1944. During its existence, the Women's Division set up study clubs and administered programs which promoted both women's traditional role as homemakers and their new role as "cooperators" using credit unions and co-operative stores.<sup>1</sup>

The primary objective of our research<sup>2</sup> is to document the ideology and actual participation of women in the movement. We are looking at the seven counties of Eastern Nova Scotia (co-extensive with the Roman Catholic Diocese of Antigonish), during the years 1918 through 1945. Oral histories are one of several types of data being gathered. Others include primary written sources, such as private and public archival collections, personal papers, and various government documents, such as census returns and departmental reports. To date, we have collected over sixty-five interviews with women who were either staff members of the university extension department which coordinated the movement or women who lived in communities where the movement was active.

The 1942 staff conference, at which the two women spoke, was held to reflect on past achievements and plan future directions for the department. The speeches were subsequently published by the department in a pamphlet with the somewhat curious title "The Woman

## 50 Let's Mobilize The Women



Extension Department  
St. Francis Xavier University  
Antigonish, N. S.

Cover illustration of mimeographed pamphlet "Let's Mobilize The Women", produced c. 1942 by the Extension Department, St. Francis Xavier University. Use of pamphlet courtesy of St. Francis Xavier University Archives.

Speaks Her Mind.” Both of them urged greater involvement by women in co-operatives; one even suggested that “some of our failures have been because of the fact that we have not given women their rightful place in this movement” (MacKinnon 6). More intriguing, however, is the following quotation which reflects several themes respecting the use and interpretation of oral evidence which emerge from our research:

In evaluating the work in the past one should not be too critical. It is amazing that so much has been accomplished in spite of the lack of workers and money. Women have contributed to the movement so much that cannot be shown on a balance sheet! You can't add up such things as encouragement and loyalty. (Delaney 15)

We have found that in order to document such things as women's encouragement and loyalty, oral histories play a critical role, especially when combined with other written sources.<sup>3</sup> They have broadened our interpretation of the movement to include the many and varied “amazing” accomplishments of women achieved despite the lack of workers and money. We have experienced as well a shift in the course of our inquiry: oral histories have directed our attention more to the women themselves and the role of the movement within their lives (rather than the reverse). By doing this, we have come to temper our initial critical analysis which had been based on apparent low rates of formal participation and restricted opportunities for women in the movement.

The female members of the original Extension Department staff played major roles during the depression years in administering Antigonish Movement programs. This group includes the first secretaries of the department, the two Sisters of Saint Martha<sup>4</sup> who were responsible for the Women's Division, and a few other field workers. As the sole surviving members of the original Extension staff, they are still called upon to discuss the movement philosophy and reminisce about the early days and especially the charismatic figure of Coady and other male leaders. Their own work, however, has never been adequately treated in either the academic or popular literature on the movement except for several passing remarks about their important contributions.<sup>5</sup> We recognized the unique opportunity we had to hear and tell their stories.

Our interviews with these women critically enhanced the written record by redressing the anonymity inherent in their roles as women office workers. The two Sisters of Saint Martha involved in

the movement worked under the additional constraints of communal religious life which limited actions outside the convent. The work of all these staff women accounts for much of the written materials generated by the movement, including correspondence, pamphlets, speeches, and newspaper articles. Besides these extant records, their attendance at conferences and meetings was usually recorded in minutes and ledgerbooks. All of these documents are part of the large Extension Department Archives collection and were available for our review prior to conducting interviews. The difficulty in using them, however, was that much of their work was either unsigned or attributed to others. For example, secretaries often drafted and signed correspondence on behalf of Coady. One of the secretaries was expressly hired to research and help draft Coady's only published book, *Masters of Their Own Destiny* (1939). One of the sisters became anonymously responsible for the numerous illustrations and graphics which appeared on posters, charts, and pamphlets. Thus, one important task in the interview was attempting to determine authorship of various documents.

Other overlooked aspects of the movement also became apparent as the staff women described their work in the Extension office and out in the field. The initial stages of organization of study clubs, credit unions, cooperatives, and leadership training courses depended heavily on the vast amounts of clerical and other administrative work done largely by these women. Armed with only manual typewriters and a mimeograph machine, these secretaries and field workers performed a countless variety of administrative tasks: typing and retyping mailing lists and labels, reproducing thousands of mimeographed announcements, form letters, handouts, and agendas, providing bookkeeping supplies for newly established credit unions, packing hundreds of boxes of pamphlets sent regularly to study clubs and books from the Extension's lending library sent to anyone requesting them. This was in addition to extensive travelling by field workers and the usual duties of the secretaries, such as typing the considerable correspondence and other writings by Coady and other staff which increased along with the movement's gathering fame.<sup>6</sup>

In portraying this hectic pace of activities, the staff women created vivid impressions of the unique intensity of spirit and dedication that pervaded the Extension Department in the 1930s. Traditional descriptions tend to emphasize the role of parish priests and the magnetic appeal of (male) leaders in promoting the movement. Certainly many of our interviews provided additional evidence for these factors. But what also emerges from the staff women's stories about dynamics within the department is that these men recognized the exceptional abilities of these women and were quite skillful in

utilizing and appreciating their talents.

Some of the problems we experienced during the interviews themselves are noteworthy for the methodological issues raised. In approaching a few of the women involved, we encountered reluctance to be interviewed (on certain topics or at all) and scepticism about our research objectives. These women appeared to feel responsible for protecting the mythology that had developed around the personalities and momentous events of the movement's beginnings and to have misgivings about anyone who might challenge or betray those myths. Research focusing on women aroused the suspicion that we were making distinctions that the movement philosophy and leaders were not. When questioned about their Extension work, a few of the women also continued to insist on their own anonymity by humbly discounting their contributions. A related problem was the fact that, even though the primary topic of our interviews was women's participation in the movement, we also wanted to ask broader questions about their life history, such as family, education, and later careers. When we did turn to these matters, the response was sometimes, "Why do you want to know about that?" or, "Oh, that's not important."<sup>7</sup>

Initially, we were certainly tempted to dismiss these concerns, given our own confidence that inquiry into the various aspects of women's lives had an intrinsic value in and of itself. We were also fortified by empirical evidence indicating significant gender differences in movement participation. Included in the evidence were, in fact, documents written by the women themselves. However, the women's concerns had a troubling persistence, surfacing when least wanted or expected, in the midst of our eager pursuit of data and conclusions, waiting to be addressed. In the first place, we had to acknowledge them, if only to overcome the reluctance by the women and gain their cooperation. "Why do you want to know that?" is a legitimate question. Secondly, the certain likelihood of selective recall, distortion, or even suppression of facts that might accompany these concerns had to be interpreted along with the rest of the testimony.<sup>8</sup> Most importantly, however, is the recognition of what has been called "the violence that can be done to other people's consciousness by imposing our own terms on it" (Thompson "Life Histories" 293). In an oral history interview we have the opportunity and privilege of hearing how someone views his or her own life. There is a challenge in constructing a useful interpretation of these necessarily subjective accounts. We must preserve the integrity of individual testimony while at the same time explore how representative it might be of the time in question. For example, the admonition cited above by a key staff woman that "one must not be too critical" when examining the role of women in the movement must be somehow incorporated

into our analysis. Important questions then become what did she regard as "too critical" and how does that compare to the standards we are applying today? Also, there is the further consideration that this particular statement was made in 1942, twelve years into the movement's work, and at a time when there were certain hopes of rectifying the movement's shortcomings. It was not necessarily shared by other staff women, either then or now.

One method used to evoke shared sentiments as opposed to individual predilections for recalling the past was a group interview which proved beneficial in several ways. After our initial round of individual interviews, we met with several of the staff women together to review the biographical summaries we compiled, present tentative findings, and ask questions on a few selected topics. Sometimes disagreeing with or adding to each other's responses, their collective memories brought out information in a way not possible individually.

Piecing together information from our interviews and written sources, we are in the process of assembling a kind of group biography of the staff women in which several common themes are emerging. All of the women recruited by the Extension Department either had strong family ties to the Catholic church and university institutional structure that dominated the movement or had established reputations of academic excellence or, in most cases, both.<sup>9</sup> Like many other young educated Nova Scotia women of their time, all but one had low paying teaching jobs for the first few years after finishing school. Within the confines of traditional feminine roles, these office and fieldworkers often did their extension work anonymously or behind the scenes; on the other hand, they each thrived on this opportunity to use and further develop their education and skills, and in the process, broke many traditions. The nuns, for example, were allowed to forgo some of their customary restrictions due to the long hours and travelling schedules required by their fieldwork. This break with tradition is reflected as well in their subsequent jobs. Both trained home economists, they later branched out to receive graduate degrees and start careers in library science and social work. The two secretaries went on to become successive managing editors of the *Maritime Cooperator* monthly newspaper, while at the same time raising families. Another field worker remained active in the co-operative movement. Thus, as a group they represented a broad spectrum of emerging female professions of this period. There is a certain irony, too, in the fact that their work as Extension staff members, so critical to both the movement programs and the formation of their later professional careers, was in sharp contrast to the work of the wives and mothers in the communities at whom the movement was directed.

The majority of our oral histories were collected in these communities; the nature and method of these interviews differed substantially from those with the staff women. In most cases, we had very little information about the women prior to the interview, other than perhaps their name (or their husband's) may have appeared on study club or conference attendance lists. Our referrals came primarily by word-of-mouth, sometimes utilizing the same parish network on which the Extension Department relied for recruiting.<sup>10</sup> Although we had ready a number of key questions in several topic areas, the interviews were unstructured. The areas which we attempted to cover in each session primarily were related to movement activities (such as study clubs, handicrafts, conferences, credit unions, and co-operative stores), but also included aspects of childhood and family history, education, domestic labour, and community life.

The results of the interviews on these topics is wide ranging, but some interesting generalizations are possible. A few of the women could be considered active formal participants of the movement in the sense that they were actual members of study clubs or co-ops; the typical oral evidence, however, was indeed that of the "encouragement and loyalty" variety, a more informal participation which took many forms of varying intensity. What is also apparent is the importance this informal support of wives and daughters had for those families which considered themselves good co-operators. General criticisms of the movement leadership were expressed by a few women as well, particularly resentment over how communities relied too heavily on the guidance of outside organizers, such as the extension fieldworkers.

In addition to documenting aspects of movement participation not otherwise available from written sources, the interviews suggested clues to other facets of community life in which women played more dominant roles. References to a host of other activities, such as the Catholic Women's League, Home and School Associations, Girls Clubs (later part of 4-H), Women's Institutes, and Agricultural Extension, led us to more closely examine the reports, journals, and other documents relating to those organizations. We now have a more comprehensive understanding of the Extension Department and the program of cooperation it promoted as part of a network of institutions committed to rural reforms that were undergoing their initial stages of development during the 1920s and

1930s. Taken as a whole, it better captures as well the full extent of women's involvement.

We experienced a few variations in subject and interviewer worth noting. A number of interviews ended up being with wives and husbands together; as with our other group interviews, the nature of the interaction between the subjects was often as revealing as the individual or shared stories they told. Also, we were referred to several children of active co-operators. Most of them are now in their sixties or older. Their keen recollections, though touched at times by filial attachments, gave us a unique and valuable perspective on their parents' activities. They also suggest the strong impact the movement had on its second generation of participants. Finally, the differing backgrounds and approaches of the three interviewers produced noticeably distinctive types of interviews. One of us never failed to probe intensively about aspects of material culture and the processes of domestic rural life. Another tended more to elicit the feelings and expectations which participants entertained when they did things. The third interviewer was able to interview relatives and others in his parent's community; his knowledge of individuals and the shared understandings of rural Cape Breton Scottish culture provided a different starting point for questions.

All of these variations in method demonstrated to us how oral histories truly represent a kind of dialogue between two individuals, which then becomes part of an ongoing process of research and analysis. Our work is still in progress; at this point, having incorporated the information from our initial interviews with our written sources, follow-up interviews with some women to pursue further specific questions and corroborate findings would be most useful and are planned.

In summary, oral histories have made a significant contribution to our efforts to examine women's participation in the Antigonish Movement. Interviews with the staff women have been a means to supplement and interpret the written record of their work. Those interviews with women in the communities have allowed us to discover for the first time their relationship to the work of the movement. In all instances, collecting and interpreting oral histories compel us to shift our focus more to the individual and collective lives of women and their experiences. Their presence as subjects thus assures a more complete view, not only of the movement itself but also of the options women had at that time for work, family and community life.

#### Notes

1. For descriptions of the Antigonish Movement, there are a number of doctoral dissertations; see Francis J. Miffen, "The Antigonish Movement: A Revitalization Movement in Eastern Nova Scotia"; R. James Sacouman, "Social Origins of Antigonish Movement Cooperative Associations in Eastern Nova Scotia";

Daniel William MacInnes, "Clerics, Fishermen, Farmers and Workers: The Antigonish Movement and Identity in Eastern Nova Scotia 1928–1939"; and Anne McDonald Alexander, "The Meaning of Liberation in Adult Education as Revealed by Moses Coady and the Antigonish Movement." Recent articles which provide insight include R. James Sacouman, "Underdevelopment and the Structural Origins of Antigonish Movement Co-operatives in Eastern Nova Scotia"; Ernest Stabler, "James Tompkins and Moses Coady: The Antigonish Movement in Nova Scotia"; Jim Lotz and Michael R. Welton, "Knowledge for the People': The Origins and Development of the Antigonish Movement"; and Gregory Baum, "Catholics in Eastern Nova Scotia." For popular first-hand accounts, see Ida Delaney, *By Their Own Hands: A Fieldworker's Account of the Antigonish Movement*; Malcolm MacLellan, *Coady Remembered*; and F. Waldo Walsh, *We Fought for the Little Man: My Sixty Years in Agriculture*. A reliable chronology of the movement may be found in Alexander Fraser Laidlaw, *Campus and Community: The Global Impact of the Antigonish Movement* and its relationship to other co-operative movements is described in Ian MacPherson, *Each for All: A History of the Co-operative Movement in English Canada, 1900–1945*).

2. This study has been funded by the Women and Work Strategic Grants division of the Social Sciences and Humanities Research Council of Canada. My colleague, Dan MacInnes, has assisted me in the preparation of this paper. Linda Little conducted a number of the interviews during the winter of 1989–1990 and both Linda MacDonald and Frances Baker have transcribed the collected interviews. I wish to express my gratitude to all of them.
3. For discussions on the theory and method of oral history see Paul Thompson, *Oral History: The Voice of the Past*; David K. Dunaway and Willa K. Baum, eds., *Oral History: An Interdisciplinary Anthology*; and Edward D. Ives, *The Tape-Recorded Interview: A Manual for Fieldworkers in Folklore and Oral History*. For specific references to women and the use of oral history see Susan N.G. Geiger, "Women's Life Histories: Method and Content"; and Susan Mann Trofimenkoff, "Feminist Biography."
4. In 1894 the Diocese of Antigonish established the Congregation of the Sisters of Saint Martha primarily to perform domestic duties at the university. Initially a mission of the Sisters of Charity based in Halifax, the order separated from them in 1900; in 1917, it became independent from the university. During that time the congregation extended its apostolate to caring of the sick, with many of the sisters being trained in nursing and hospital administration, and in the 1920s to social work and teaching.
5. As early as 1961 J. R. Kidd noted the "absence of a full account of the work of some of the women of Antigonish" (Kidd 12). Twenty-four years later, Alexander made a similar point when she wrote that "the movement would not have flourished as it did without the work of the women...the subject for another study..." (Alexander 163).
6. It is interesting to note that during this period, there was only one other secretary on campus, in the rector's office. Some of the women mentioned that on occasion they were also called upon to do typing for professors from other departments.
7. On a few occasions, one or more of these factors resulted in the disheartening experience, not unfamiliar to most oral historians, of listening to a delightful story which, at the request of the subject, was not recorded.
8. For example, at a point in one of our interviews, a staff woman told us "there are some things we'll never tell". This statement is frustrating, to say the least, but it also tells us something about the loyalty the movement inspired.
9. For example, one woman's uncle had been the rector of St. Francis Xavier University and three of her aunts were senior nuns teaching at Mount Saint Bernard, the women's affiliated college run by the Congregation de Notre Dame. Two others were successive winners of the highest academic honours in the graduating class, one of whom grew up in the parish of a prominent priest associated with the movement. Another gained notoriety for her writing on the student newspaper, during the first year in which women were on the editorial staff.
10. One of our most successful field trips was one where a parish priest and a nun, herself a daughter of an active co-operator, assisted us by providing suggestions of people to contact. The interviewer stayed at the convents in the communities.

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