

USING ORAL SOURCES FOR WOMEN'S HISTORY:
SASKATCHEWAN COOPERATIVE COMMONWEALTH WOMEN
AND THE
"ENORMOUS CONDESCENSION OF POSTERITY"

by Georgina M. Taylor

Cet article décrit les expériences d'un auteur qui a utilisé l'histoire orale afin de documenter le rôle des femmes dans le Parti social démocratique du Canada (PSDC) en Saskatchewan. Son jugement sur la valeur de l'histoire orale résulte d'une entrevue que lui a accordée une "pionnière" du PSDC, Sophia Dixon. Madame Dixon, une femme intelligente et très bien informée, a pu combler le vide créé par des sources insuffisantes et a pu également expliquer le sens de plusieurs documents incompréhensibles. Tout en poursuivant ses recherches universitaires, l'auteur a réuni de bons arguments en faveur de la technique de l'histoire orale, dans un important exposé sur la méthodologie historique; elle a entrepris ensuite, dans le cadre d'un projet d'histoire orale pour le "Saskatchewan Archives Board", une étude approfondie sur le rôle des femmes dans le PSDC.

Les enregistrements ont pu servir de sources à l'auteur pour sa thèse de maîtrise: "Equals or Partners? An Examination of How Saskatchewan Women Reconcile Their Political Activities with Traditional Roles for Women" (Université de la Saskatchewan, 1983). Ces sources se sont avérées particulièrement utiles à la documentation des dilemmes personnels et privés des femmes actives au sein du PSDC, dans les années 30 et 40. Toutefois, l'auteur nous avertit que si les sources orales sont utilisées isolément, comme ce fut le cas pour de nombreuses histoires populaires, le résultat risque d'être imprécis et incomplet. Par conséquent, l'auteur n'a pu documenter sa thèse de façon adéquate et précise qu'en combinant les sources orales et écrites.

L'auteur conclut en disant que, dû à la négligence des historiens, il reste encore beaucoup de documentation à rassembler sur la participation des femmes dans les partis politiques au Canada. Dans une tentative de créer une histoire plus démocratique, l'histoire orale peut être d'une source inestimable, si elle est utilisée avec les sources documentaires existantes.

The history of Saskatchewan Cooperative Commonwealth Federation (CCF) women illustrates clearly how oral sources can be used to advantage in the writing of history by both popular and academic historians. Although oral sources were essential in the writing I have done, first as a historian of popular history for the general public and then in the academic field, I was not always as convinced as I am now of their usefulness.¹

In 1979 Lewis H. Thomas presented a paper to the Canadian Historical Association on "The CCF Victory in Saskatchewan, 1944". He concluded the paper by stating that, compared to other provinces, Saskatchewan during the years T.C. Douglas was premier had "a disproportionate number of citizens and immigrants who were active in the party or the affairs of government". He suggested historians of Saskatchewan will not be able to ignore these "strong-minded, rigorous and colourful personalities, including at least a dozen women". These "socialists" were, he said, "leading participants in the political process".² Thomas had raised an interesting question as to what role women had played in the CCF.

A brief survey of the standard historiography of the Saskatchewan CCF revealed very little about women. Most historians had concentrated on the party's structure, its ideology, its electoral record, and its male leaders. It seemed that by making this assertion Dr. Thomas was suggesting that historians would be well-advised to "rescue" women from what E.P. Thompson referred to as "the enormous condescension of posterity".³ It was almost as if there was a historical amnesia at work which had condescendingly concluded that because the work of women was taken for granted or given scarce mention in well-known historical works it followed that they had not contributed much to the CCF in Saskatchewan. Dr. Thomas had good historical and personal reasons for challenging this view. Gertrude Telford, his mother-in-law whom he loved and respected, had been a pioneer in the CCF movement.⁴ My curiosity was aroused by the Thomas paper and I went in search of further information. Popular historians had furnished a few answers by uncovering several of the leading women.

Academic history must be thoroughly documented; nothing goes into a good piece of academic writing that cannot be footnoted with the source in which it is found and the location of the source. This helps to guarantee the reliability of the statements because other historians can check the sources. Conservative academic historians often frown upon oral sources because they cannot always be relocated and because many academics doubt the accuracy of the human memory. But an interview with Sophia Dixon, a CCF pioneer, had shown me that oral sources could be quite helpful.⁵ So, for a historiography class I did a research paper on oral history. One book was particularly good. The Voice of the Past; Oral History (Oxford University Press, 1978) by the English historian Paul Thompson presented a convincing argument that oral sources used properly and carefully can be just as reliable as documentary sources. Thompson argued persuasively that oral history can give information about groups of people whose lives are rarely mentioned in traditional history books. He claimed that more democratic history can be written using a combination of oral and written sources than by using documentary sources alone. Armed with such respectable methodological justifications I launched into real oral history.

During the summers of 1980 and 1981 I did an oral history project for the Saskatchewan Archives Board (SAB) about the role of Saskatchewan women in the CCF. I talked to countless people and recorded interviews with thirty-four of the best-informed people.⁶ The interviews ranged from forty-five minutes to ten hours. Each interview is different but usually an interview covers: biographical data; family and social background; political influences and ideas during youth; involvement in the CCF and related organizations such as the farm movement; arranging time for party work, family life, other work; personal ideology about

the role of women in society and politics; personal definitions of socialism; memories of particular events such as the region "riot"; personal outlook; and finally the interviewee's present situation.

These tapes were summarized and deposited in the Saskatchewan Archives. The SAB finding guide for the collection states:

The grassroots organization of the CCF was its power base and women were very much a part of it. There exists an obvious disparity in the available documentation and sources on the CCF leadership and the role of women. This oral history collection serves to narrow this gap and contains a veritable wealth of information.

In doing this project I was creating original sources which are available to the public at the Archives. For example, an interview I recorded in 1982 with Marjorie Cooper was used by a journalist who wrote an article for the Regina Leader-Post when Cooper died recently.⁷

I was also able to use the tapes as sources when I wrote a Master's thesis titled "Equals and Partners? An Examination of How Saskatchewan Women Reconciled Their Political Activities for the Cooperative Commonwealth Federation with Traditional Roles for Women."⁸ It dealt with the central dilemma of many women who work outside their homes or are involved in public life. A book from England influenced the choice of specific topic, the method and the sources. Jill Norris and Jill Liddington's "No cause can be won between dinner and tea, and most of us who were married had to work with One Hand Tied Behind Us": The Rise of the Radical Women's Suffrage Movement (London: Virgo, 1978) presented a promising historiographical pattern. By crossing historical compartments such as "political history", "labour history", and "social history" and by using documentary and oral sources, Liddington and Norris were able to uncover the previously hidden history of women from northern England who combined their political activities with their work at home and in the mills and factories.

"Equals and Partners?" is divided into three sections.⁹ The first section focuses on the traditional roles of women in the province by looking at the reproductive, productive, and volunteer work they did. Hundreds of women worked for the CCF by doing traditional auxiliary work which fell into four categories: work at home to free other people, usually men, to work for the CCF; supplying and preparing food for CCF gatherings and billeting CCF people; fund-raising; and election support services. There was a sizable minority of women in the Party who did other work in addition. The thesis concentrated on twelve such women: Marjorie Cooper, Sophia Dixon, Elsie Gorius, Louise Lucas, Betsy Naylor, Dorise Nielsen, Gladys Strum, Gertrude Telford, Beatrice Trew, Olive Wells, Pemrose Whelan and Thora Wiggins. The second section of the thesis dealt with the work these twelve women did as political educators, political organizers and constituency workers, and in running for elected office provincially and federally as legislators or within the party itself. The final section of the thesis dealt with the way in which the twelve women reconciled all their roles. The thesis hypothesizes that these twelve women were able to expand the political role of women by successfully reconciling their traditional roles as homemakers, wives and mothers with their political activities for the CCF.

Only by balancing oral and documentary sources was it possible to do the topic. The documentary sources are scattered and uneven. There are four particular imbalances in the documents: first, there is more documentary evidence on the early time period in the 1930s and 40s than there is for the later periods up to 1967; second, there is much less information on women organizers than there is on women as political educators or on women and elected office; third, there is a great deal more evidence on women's public lives than there is on their private lives; and fourth, there is a particular dearth of information on one of the twelve women. Dorise Nielsen joined the Communist Party so access to many sets of papers which may tell of her political activities is restricted.

It was the dire conditions of Saskatchewan in the thirties which pulled many women into the CCF and allowed them to adapt their traditional role in order to accommodate political work. Louise Lucas articulated these ideas, when she told a 1932 audience:

United we stand, divided they rule... The home may be the place for women but the question that we are faced with is whether we shall have homes in a short time if the present conditions continue. Conditions are steadily growing worse for the farmer and the woman on the farm. Therefore women must band together to better conditions for this and future generations, to enable them to go out into the world to meet the requirements nobly and honestly.¹⁰

The twelve women in the study attempted to create a role for themselves as equals and partners with the men in the movement. In the end they were accepted as partners but not as equals. Their role was that of junior partners in the movement. Even so they did not seem to regret their years in the CCF, knowing their work was essential. They rejoiced in the success of their Movement, and they looked forward to a brighter future. Thora Wiggins in her taped interview expressed these sentiments:

In the past...women were the workers in the Party organization, getting the men elected, keeping the political home fires burning. I hope that the role in the future will change...I hope women will recognize their potential as leaders and take action in becoming candidates, that they will be able to stand side by side with the men in our struggle to bring about a just society for everyone. In other words a true socialism which places humanity first.¹¹

Having dealt with the advantages of using a combination of oral and written sources it is necessary to look at some of the problems also. Combining oral and documentary sources was the only way the particular topic of my thesis could be covered adequately but it was not a simple process. One of the problems was the question of footnoting. Interviews, because of the sheer quantity of information, are difficult to categorize and organize. I was encouraged by my professors to go ahead with the topic using a combination of oral and documentary sources but not all scholars respect oral sources. In order to get around this skepticism and because of the ethical questions involved, I footnoted my thesis extensively; it is in effect double-footnoted. Ethically I am averse to using phrases or ideas from interviews without acknowledging the particular interviewees; as educated people we are stealing from others, who often have less formal education than we do, if we do not

footnote thoroughly. As my work progressed it became apparent that this approach is a difficult task, even for a mature student. It is best used at a more advanced level of academic work or by experienced writers of popular history.

The historiography of Saskatchewan CCF women offers a good example of an experienced writer who agreed to use a similar approach. J.F.C. Wright based The Louise Lucas Story: This Time Tomorrow on an oral source. The stormy birth of his book is a part of the history of Saskatchewan CCF women. Wright had won the Governor General's award for non-fiction in 1940 for Slava bohu, a book about Doukhobors.¹² In 1945 Louise Lucas, who was often called "the Mother of the CCF", was dying of cancer.¹³ She had put a great deal of energy into political work and had never been able to slow down enough to write her memoirs. Wright was asked to come to her deathbed so that she could dictate her memories to him.¹⁴ Olive Wells, whom Lucas was grooming for a political career, was present for a few days also.¹⁵ Lucas dictated for several days until her strength gave out the day before she died. Unfortunately she had only managed to cover her years as a leader of the United Farmers of Canada Saskatchewan Section (UFC) and she had not covered her vital years of CCF work.¹⁶

Several people were anxious for Wright to produce a book using these incomplete memoirs. A committee was formed, the members being Lucas's daughter Eloise Metheral, Gertrude Telford who knew good historical methods and had worked closely with Lucas, and Ann Logan.¹⁷ Lucas's papers were loaned to Wright and it was agreed he would write a biography of Lucas using the dictated notes and documentary sources. Telford contributed \$200.00 and Logan paid Wright \$100.00 per month plus travel expenses.¹⁸

Unfortunately when he produced a manuscript in 1948 the committee would not agree to it being published. They objected to part of his interpretation and to his research. It appears that he had written mainly from his own memories of the farm movement and from the dictated notes for the UFC period but he had not checked the available documents for the period. Nor had he researched and written on the CCF years.¹⁹ Wright may well have discovered the fact that writing good history by combining oral and written sources requires not only experience but also plenty of hard work and tenacity. For a time the committee continued to pay him in the hopes that he would do more on the manuscript. When this did not happen the payments were discontinued.²⁰ Wright's performance might well have been related to his alcoholism; in any case the manuscript went into his attic. Several years later Wright's wife, Diana, hauled it down from the attic and edited the manuscript extensively. She had some help from Wright whom she apparently cajoled into writing the necessary transitional passages.²¹ The book was published in 1965, much to the surprise of the people who had formed the committee.²²

The Wright who wrote Slava bohu had been a capable, experienced writer. The committee had believed that if he had used documentary sources in combination with the dictated memoirs, the biography of Lucas had the potential to be very good. As it reads now it is inaccurate and incomplete.²³ Of limited value historically, it should be used only in conjunction with the taped interviews I did with Eloise Metheral, Margaret Thomas who is Gertrude Telford's daughter, Olive Wells and Diana Wright, his widow. Although The Louise Lucas Story has some beautiful lyrical

passages, particularly those describing the prairies on which Lucas lived, it is noteworthy mainly as an example of how a writer can go awry when using an oral source in isolation. It cannot be compared favorably with books which combine various types of sources such as Joyce Hibbert's The War Brides (Scarborough: The New American Library of Canada Limited, 1978) nor with books which use many oral sources like Elaine Leslau Silverman's The Last Best West: Women on the Alberta Frontier, 1880-1930 (Montreal: Eden Books, 1984).

In conclusion, what do these works on CCF women tell us about using oral sources for women's history? Many groups of women suffer from the "enormous condescension of posterity". With some notable exceptions historians until recent years have ignored them completely or recorded their lives with sparse inaccuracy. Many still do so. Women's experience and their life cycles do not always fit male patterns. During the last fifteen years there has been excellent research done about women's history in Canada. Unfortunately, in spite of the high quality of the historical research on Canadian women, it is rarely included in general historical studies. Some areas of women's history have been studied more than others; however, the involvement of women in political parties in Canada is one of the areas which was neglected until 1982. A great deal remains to be done on the history of Saskatchewan women.²⁴

If the stories of women are to go down in our written history we cannot rely on documentary sources alone. Oral sources are tremendously helpful but used in isolation they are not always adequate either. As difficult as it is, one way to paint better pictures of the lives of women in the past is to combine documentary sources with oral sources to create a more democratic history. This kind of history can take into consideration the work of women, such as the Saskatchewan CCF women, rather than simply concentrating on a few male leaders or on depersonalized numerical reports of the party machine.

The position of women is often not taken into consideration by writers of general studies on politics. Gladys Strum expressed her frustration with a similar neglect by CCF officials in 1941 during a big push at political organization. The Party was paying other organizers but not Strum, so she could not hire domestic help for the family farm. She was coping with the central dilemma of many Saskatchewan CCF women, how to be a good farm woman (or a homemaker in town) and also be politically active. Strum later was the first woman in Canada to be a president of a political party, then she was an MP and still later an MLA. In 1941 she showed the kind of assertiveness a woman needed to attain such positions²⁵ when she wrote a series of letters to CCF officials protesting about their discrimination against her:

It is slowly dawning on me that I'm supposed to be partically a full-time CCF organizer - without pay ... This morning I'm about to do the family wash --- which I couldn't do last week because I spent the entire week in Souris-Estevan ... God knows what I'm going to talk about [at a meeting in Highview]. Perhaps I'll warn women to stay out of politics... Somebody is crazy --- I'm beginning to suspect its me... I must get busy at the washing -- the water's hot. I'm eating breakfast interspersing these paragraphs with toast and coffee. I have two solid weeks and two days of CCF meetings ahead. I'll have to be put on as organizer or quit. After all, I have a husband and family. Yet. Does the CCF ever contest divorce suits as correspondent? [Sic].²⁶

She was put on as a paid organizer.

NOTES

1. I would like to thank Cornelius Jaenen of the University of Ottawa and Wesley Weber of Carleton University for reading earlier drafts of this paper and making helpful suggestions and Julie Harris for typing and for her suggestions. Discussions with Marilyn Barber and James Taylor were very helpful also.
2. Lewis H. Thomas, "The CCF Victory, 1944", a paper presented at the 1979 meeting of the Canadian Historical Association. Later published in Saskatchewan History, Vol. 34 (Winter, 1981), p. 15.
3. E.P. Thompson, The Making of the British Working Class (Middlesex: Penguin Books, 1963), p. 13.
4. Saskatchewan Archives Board (hereafter referred to as the SAB) taped interview with Margaret (Telford) Thomas. The tapes referred to in this paper are held by the SAB in the "Cooperative Commonwealth Women Collection". (see fn. 6 below). Dr. Thomas later dedicated The Making of a Socialist: The Recollections of T.C. Douglas ed. Lewis H. Thomas (Edmonton: The University of Alberta Press, 1982) "to Gertrude S. Telford, 1887-1978".
5. Georgina Taylor, "Sophia Dixon: Progressive Always - Indifferent Never", Saskatoon History, Vol. 1 (1980), pp. 25-31.
6. SAB, "Cooperative Commonwealth Women Collection".

Interviewer: Georgina Taylor
Year: June, 1980 to March, 1982
Call Numbers: R:5827 to R:5874; R-8130 to R-8166
7. "'Sweetheart' of the NDP Dies at 82", Leader-Post September 13, 1984.
8. Georgina M. Taylor, "Equals and Partners? An Examination of How Saskatchewan Women Reconciled Their Political Activities for the Cooperative Commonwealth Federation with Traditional Roles for Women", M.A. Thesis, University of Saskatchewan. Publication pending by the University of Alberta Press and the University of Nebraska Press.
9. While research for the thesis was underway other researchers in Canada were also studying CCF women, two of whom were doing work directly related to Saskatchewan. Elizabeth Smillie, "Dorise Nielsen", an unpublished Honours Thesis, Trent University, 1981. Joan Sangster, "The Role of Women in the C.C.F., from the Regina Convention to World War II" a paper presented at the "Building the Cooperative Commonwealth Conference", Regina, June 23-25, 1983, publication of the proceedings pending by the Canadian Plains REsearch Centre. The author presented a paper at the same conference. Georgina M. Taylor, "Saskatchewan CCF Women and Nominations for the Office of MLA and MP". Sangster has since then completed a doctoral dissertation on women in the CCF and the Communist Party in Canada.

10. The Western Producer June 16, 1932. S.M. Lipset, Agrarian Socialism: Co-operative Commonwealth Federation in Saskatchewan: A Study in Political Sociology (1950; rpt. Berkeley: University of California Press, 1971).
11. SAB, Taped interview with Thora Wiggins.
12. Norah Story, The Oxford Companion to Canadian History and Literature (Toronto: Oxford University Press, 1967), pp. 22, 860. SAB, taped interview with Diana Wright.
13. SAB, taped interview with Eloise (Lucas) Metheral. Newspaper clipping, Toronto, July 28, 1942, Public Archives of Canada (hereafter referred to as PAC), CCF Papers, MG 28, IV-I, Vol. 308. It is apparent that, although Lucas was honoured with the unofficial title "the Mother of the CCF", the Saskatchewan CCF had many "mothers" and "fathers". It was a broadly based social movement which was built by hundreds of people.
14. Wright, The Louise Lucas Story: This Time Tomorrow (Montreal: Harvest House, 1965), pp. 6-13. SAB, taped interviews with Eloise (Lucas) Metheral, Olive Wells and Diana Wright.
15. SAB, taped interview with Olive Wells. J.F.C. Wright to Olive Wells, July 30, 1946, PAC, Louise Lucas Papers MG 27, III, D6, Vol. 3.
16. SAB, taped interviews with Eloise (Lucas) Metheral. Wright to Mrs. Anne Logan, April 13, 1948, PAC, Louise Lucas Papers MG27, III, D6, Vol. 3.
17. SAB, taped interviews with Metheral, Margaret (Telford) Thomas, and Diana Wright. J. Wright to Mrs. Anne Logan, March 8, 1946, April 13, 1948; J. Wright to Henry Lucas, n.d., PAC, Louise Lucas Papers, MG 27, III, D6, Vol. 3.
18. J. Wright to Henry Lucas, n.d.; [Anne Logan] 98 Fifth Avenue, Yorkton to Eloise Metheral, April 28, 1948; J. Wright to Mrs. Logan, March 8, 1946, PAC, Louise Lucas Papers, MG 27, III, D6, Vol. 3.
19. J. Wright to Mrs. Anne Logan, April 13, 1948, PAC Louise Lucas Papers, MG27, III, D6, Vol. 3.
20. SAB, taped interviews with Eloise (Lucas) Metheral and Margaret (Telford) Thomas.
21. J. Wright to Mrs. Anne Logan, April 13, 1948, PAC, Louise Lucas Papers, MG27, III, D6, Vol. 3. SAB taped interview with Diana Wright. Murray MacAdam, Making Waves, The Grindstone Story (Grindstone Island, Ont.: Grindstone Co-operative Ltd., 1984) is dedicated to Diana Wright. She donated Grindstone Island, which she inherited from her parents, to the peace movement. Making Waves has biographical articles on Diana and her parents.
22. SAB, taped interviews with Eloise (Lucas) Metheral and Margaret (Telford) Thomas.

23. Sophia Dixon, "Some Comments on the Louise Lucas Story by J.F.C. Wright (1965)", February 1980, Sophia Dixon Private Papers.
24. Ann Anderson, "Saskatchewan Women, 1880 - 1920: A Field for Study", The New Provinces: Alberta and Saskatchewan 1905-1980 (Vancouver: Tantalus Research Limited, 1973).
25. SAB, taped interviews with John Burton, Alice Caplin, Frank Coburn, Marjorie Cooper, Elsie Gorius, Betsy Naylor, I.S. Nollet, Gladys Strum, Olive Wells, Pemrose Whelan and Thora Wiggins.
26. Gladys Strum to the CCF Executive, October 13, 1942, SAB, CCF Papers B7, II, 263. See also: Strum to Mr. Williams, October 21, 1941; C. Fines to Strum, November [?], 1941 and December 15, 1941; Strum to T.C. Douglas, December 1, 1941, SAB, CCFP, B7, II, 263. Georgina M. Taylor, "Gladys Strum: Farm Woman, Teacher and Politician", Canadian Women's Studies, 1986.