PRELIMINARIES TO A STUDY OF WOMEN IN ALBERTA, 1890-1929

by Eliane Leslau Silverman

Dr. Eliane Leslau Silverman teaches history at the University of Calgary. Earlier versions of Dr. Silverman's article were presented at the meeting of the Canadian Historical Association, held in Fredericton in June 1977, and of the Canadian Oral History Association, held in Edmonton in September 1977. The research for the Women in Alberta project was funded by the Department of Film and Literary Arts, Ministry of Culture, Province of Alberta, and this support is gratefully acknowledged.

Historians have long felt that written documents lack human direction and spontaneity. They often reveal only formal relationships, and are innocent especially of the lives of women. Twentieth century technology has given us the tape recorder, which has liberated us from dependence on the written word. We are now able to write about people who did not, perhaps could not, record their own stories. Oral histories offer a means of reconstructing and interpreting their lives and values. The interviews I have done with women who were born in or migrated to Alberta before 1929 are revealing new sources of information, taken directly from the participants' experience in a frontier society, involving the subject's perception of the historical process and her own place in it. With the completed collection of the data, historians of western Canada and novelists who wish to draw on the narratives will have at their disposal a source hithertofore unexplored and unrecorded, extraordinarily rich in revelation of personal reactions to daily work, policies, religion, and human relationships. Indeed anyone, professional or not, will find here the words of the people who lived these experiences. Without a culture a human being is not human; without a past there is no culture. Women need to be restored a knowledge of their past.

I have concluded 130 interviews with women from all over the province. They range in age from fifty-five to ninety-eight; they represent rural and urban populations. They arrived between 1890 and 1929; they became farmers, housewives, mothers, nurses, teachers, businesswomen, maids, midwives. They represent a variety of ethnic groups: Finns, Norwegians, Scots, Germans, Russians. Their religions are as varied, including Anglicans, Methodists, Jews, Russian Orthodox, Fundamentalists, and non-believers. Some of them were poor and remained so; some arrived with nothing but hope and fulfilled their dreams. Some were wealthy on arriving and lost their money, while others retained always an upper class style of life. In short, they represent all economic and social classes, a variety of religions and professions, regional diversity: all the multiplicity of the west.

I was not seeking typicality or representativeness, for I very much doubt that such a thing exists. I am hoping rather to compile a rich and varied collection which will convey the heterogeneity of this province's past. I have no desire to homogenize the population; I do not want to select two Anglicans as typical of English Anglicans, or two typical Russian Jews. The more women I meet in my work, the less I believe that is possible or desirable. The events in the lives of the women with whom I have been speaking are varied, and even more varied are their responses. In fidelity to the women's experiences I feel the need to

allow them each to speak for themselves, and not merely to impose a pattern on them. While some of the daily events do indeed resemble each other, their modes of dealing with them are personal; it is this personal inflection and response that must be preserved.

The interviews themselves have been both personally and intellectually rewarding. The women are a constant source of wonder. Each of them has a different story to tell; each tells it in her own way, some straight-forwardly, almost dispassionately, others eloquently and movingly. The simplest language can sometimes be the most deeply effective; joy and sorrow can be expressed in all kinds of ways. I believe also that for the women to whom I am talking the interviews are an important experience. In the vast loneliness of old age, communication becomes an island of refuge. I have not found forgetfulness to be a problem. "The memories that emerge from oblivion are more beautiful than the experiences themselves," Proust wrote; the memories have a vitality. As physical limitations grow greater, as death comes nearer, the mechanisms geared to the future are given up, and this further clears the way for the return of the past. The women want to share their experiences; for many of them the chance of communicating them is as richly rewarding as it is for me. The "statistics" become persons. I am constantly amazed.

And yet, patterns did begin to emerge. As I questioned women on a large variety of subjects, beginning with migration and early adaptation to the new environment, then dealing with childhood and adolescence, relations between men and women, birth, contraception, professional life, household work, church activities, relations among women, and social life, it became evident that the material gathered displayed in some instances the sort of organization familiar to historians of frontier societies. In other areas it indicated that new categories and new understandings must be sought. As an historian I am concerned with employing that data to enrich our comprehension of the past. I should like to share with you some very preliminary, very tentative findings that have emerged from my collection of women's own words, about their own experience.

Firstly, a history of exceptional or notable women does not tell us much about the significance of women's activities to society as a whole. It is evident to me that women of different classes have different historical experiences, which we must understand. Drawing on the Alberta experience, a new and potentially classless society, class stratification seems quickly to have developed in urban and rural settings. Rhetoric and CPR advertisements notwithstanding, limitless possibilities were not available for immigrants; much of their economic future was predisposed by their social past. At least, women's perceptions of their new experience on the frontier was influenced by their past and by their expectations. Hence I found often that middle class eastern women, whether they came as married or as single women, or middle class English women expected that they would participate in the life of the community ultimately as consumers rather than as producers. They often brought with them not only the material accoutrements of middle class life, but the personal expectation that, to the extent that women would participate in political life, they would be not only the wives of community leaders, but would themselves hold positions of a certain status, in the church for example.

Immigrants from eastern Europe, by contrast, who often left their countries out of sheer economic necessity, had little expectation of anything but, hopefully, survival. They told me of their husbands' working out for more established farmers during most of the summer, leaving the women on isolated farms to clear land and tend livestock as best they could, in addition to looking after the house and children, with little expectation of a social life, let alone community involvement. The extent of that involvement might be an infrequent visit to a distant neighbour or, later, attendance at an occasional church service. What I am suggesting is that it would be a mistake to homogenize Albertan women's experiences; class lines became rigidly drawn. Whether or not they were based on ethnic considerations I have not yet determined. I would suggest at this point that more important than ethnic background was language; women who did not ultimately learn English, or who spoke with a heavy accent, very often remained isolated. While in economic terms they might become members of the rural middle class, they did not participate in that class socially, unless the town near which they lived was composed largely of people who spoke their own language. Merely to study notable women -- women who participated, say, in United Farmers of Alberta activities early on -- will provide but a glimpse of a missing history. It will not help us in understanding the experience and history of working class city women and of many farm women.

I would tentatively suggest that the experience of women who had defined themselves as middle class in the first instance had a very different experience on the frontier than did lower class women. They were received differently by their neighbours; they might be feared as haughty and self-important on the one hand, or venerated as capable on the other. They might suffer or rejoice in their new situation. In any event, arriving as middle class meant a reception, and often a response, in a new society very different from that of a working class women. The latter was not likely to be surprised at being ignored or reviled; kindness shown her was often a surprise. Barriers, as a result, often grew up between women of different classes. These sometimes took the form of the urban-rural split; more significantly for women it took this form: experiences that women could have shared -- loneliness, exhaustion, excessive childbearing, insanity -- and could have understood and dealt with in the community of other women, were for the most part experienced by women alone, or within a family structure, but not in a communal structure. As prairie women were separated both by distance, language, custom, and most importantly by class, their travails became private and personal. Their anxieties and fears did not transcend the familial domain to enter the social, let alone a homosocial female environment, to create an incipient feminist consciousness. I would suggest that the rapid growth of social hierarchy must cause us to question the whole literature on the growth of the women's rights movement in Canada, which has used as its sources the writings of the elite of that movement. In fact, my evidence would suggest that most women in Alberta felt no particular interest in, let alone affinity for, the women's rights movement, which they saw addressing the problems of middle class women. Women, rather than drawing together in strong common cause, were separated from each other by family and class. It appears that prairie women did not engage in altering political realities because they defined themselves as part of a private realm they could not transcend. Collective action remained the preserve of the few educated and articulate women who self-consciously asserted their bonds with each other and, while seeming to address all women, were in fact saying nothing that could enlist the enthusiasm of working class women. Too much separated by class divisions, women did not unite in common cause.

Secondly, I should like to suggest that the social hierarchy that came to separate women from each other also served to define men in relation to each other, and that women's presence was central to constructing that hierarchy. The sort of activities in which women engaged, in farms or cities, certainly allowed men to benefit economically; but just as importantly it aided men in placing themselves within a social scheme in relation to other men. For example, middle class wives with leisure, domestic service, and time to engage in community activities helped to define their men's status by their dress, by their demeanour, and by the nature of their community involvement. Men might build the sod house; but women asked for cupboards in which to place dishes, rather than stacking them on the floor. Farm wives asked for wooden floors rather than packed dirt. They asked for curtains. They sought better housing, cleaner conditions, more accessible schooling. As women sought to improve their physical circumstances, their men's status began to rise through a visual, graphic presentation of their improving economic status. A "good" wife was one who improved the material circumstances of her family and who thereby, showing physically the fruits of men's labour, altered the status of immigrants. In short, I am suggesting that the presence of wives implicitly constructed a social hierarchy for men. This point is strongly supported, I think, by the incidents recounted by women concerning bachelors in their communities. Bachelors might become wealthy, but so long as they did not have women to express the fruits of their labour, they did not figure in the social scheme of the community. Women's work contributed to the economy; but so also did their work, paid or unpaid, allow men the possibility of defining their place in a new society. This, I think, is a crucially important new way of integrating women's history into the scheme of the Canadian past, a way of understanding women's past as central to the social, economic, and ultimately political lives of men too.

Thirdly, I should like to suggest that we need also to look at the lives of women as different sorts of lives than men's. There is a growing body of literature on women as a subculture; the material I have been gathering supports the need for examination of women's lives on their own terms. Women defined themselves self-consciously as women, and therefore we must take from the informants themselves the clue to look for evidence of a separate women's culture. A large number of the subjects we discussed in interviews are categories that have not been adequately investigated by historians, and yet which are central to the lives of women: sexuality, reproduction, childbearing, role indoctrination, sexual values. Since these have traditionally been central in women's lives, we begin now to have material to explore the possibility that what we call women's history may be in fact the study of a separate women's culture. I have adequate evidence that in work life, in status, in experiences, women's lives were simply different from those of men. And yet, we must recall that the separateness existed within the context of a patriarchal society. The women I interviewed indicated that they made efforts to attain autonomy, often among the society of other women in similar circumstances. The meetings for coffee, for example, intensified women's identity with each other; they provided settings within which they could discuss issues and tell jokes that they did often not share with their men or their children. The deeply felt affinity with midwives is another indication of women's sense of themselves as women during an experience which they shared as their own particular domain. Women indicated to me that they developed sets of rituals, mostly unconsciously, which in some cases persist until today. For instance, the Saturday night dance was a community function, including men, women, and children, but the preparing of sandwiches and cakes in the kitchen was solely a woman's function which formed the basis of an interchange among

women. Cooking for threshing crews too, a chore women often shared, provided them also a means of defining themselves as separate from men even when they themselves might be working at the threshing too to some degree. The marriage rituals were not only the joining of husband and wife, but often included the passing of advice among women. Such examples could be proliferated in all areas which are uniquely part of the female experience, and need to be investigated as part of the story we want to tell about women.

Finally, from the material I have gathered from women comes evidence that the traditional periodization of history, based on men's values and men's experiences, may be only marginally useful when we examine the lives of women, and perhaps of many men. For example, World War I has traditionally been considered a turning point for the twentieth century. When questioning women closely about the war, I found that beyond the fact that someone they knew died or that they had knitted for the Red Cross, it was not a particularly significant experience for them. Much more meaningful was the influenza epidemic that followed it; they experienced and felt that. It was always I who brought up questions about the war, but each of those who experienced the flu epidemic mentioned the subject herself, unsolicited. Another example: the Great Depression was indeed a turning point for the economy generally and for many people specifically. Still, many Albertans were living in depressed circumstances well before that time, and for them -- and we need to be alert to this -- 1929 did not mark a turning point. By contrast, marriage may have provided the watershed in women's lives. It sometimes meant the end of independence; it often meant the beginning of the migration, following a husband wherever he chose to go. The decision to remain single, whether taken consciously or unwittingly, might provide a similar turning point. It becomes obvious that we can take nothing for granted. The migrations made by women and their adaptations to a frontier society can serve to alert us to the need for a scholarly migration of our own.