

Thinking Beyond Celebration: Woman Icons, Feminism and History
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Abstract:

Since the 1970s women's historians have in the main looked to women subjects in the past as feminist forbears who can provide inspiration and examples for the present. In the wake of a 'crisis of representation' it was recognised that women in the past possessed diverse identities, most notably gender and sexuality, race and class. Yet underlying new analyses, a feminist perspective that celebrated women (however multiple their identities might be) continued to dominate the writing of women's, gender and feminist histories. For example, while the women and imperialism literature recognised that women effectively oppressed other women, the focus was largely on celebrating the women who opposed and transgressed colonialism and imperialism.

Alternatively, this paper continues a theme in my work on female imperialism, turning to the politically conservative women who were active in constructing hegemonic identities, upholding the status quo. Moving the historiography of women's, gender and feminist history 'beyond celebration', I turn to the complex workings of feminist and patriarchal politics in the past. I address the tension and relationship between a) recovering women's agency in the past and b) critically treating the structures in which women were engaged. Further complicating the equation, I turn to women as complicit in the construction of traditional history. I explore the concept of 'icon' as a way beyond 'role models' and celebration, introducing the potential for global comparisons.

I

Since the 1970s women's historians have in the main looked to women subjects in the past as feminist forbears who can provide inspiration and examples for the present. From a strategic feminist perspective, with all of the misogyny in the world, the thought of contributing to knowledge in a way that denigrates women in the past, and by implication puts us down in the present and serves to doom us in the future, is not at all appealing.

In her breathtaking synthesis of 25 years of scholarship on 250 years of European history Karen Offen traces the term 'feminism' back to French political discourse during the 1870s, where it first appeared as a synonym for women's emancipation. She considers feminism a campaign to end women's subordination to men, effectively moving beyond male hegemony.¹ Writing women's history arose as a central and important part of the European feminist emancipatory project. Most recently, women's history has drawn inspiration from a

second wave of feminism that advanced women's liberation from a sexist society in which women were unequal.

Women's history was also embedded in the counter-culture climate of the late 1960s and early 1970s where there was an attempt to change society by liberation from racism, class oppression and sexism. Challenging History was thus part of a wider challenge posed by the 'new' social histories that questioned grand narratives in historical explanation. Ethnic history (race) labour history (class) and women's history (gender/sex) all shared the common objective of challenging/altering/re-defining history – and importantly challenging contemporary hegemony through a reconsideration of the past, and giving hitherto excluded subjects a place in history. In all approaches the personal was political with connections to the anti-racist, civil rights, socialist, and feminist movements. Significantly, the new histories were divided by essential subjects and standpoints. No matter how sympathetic they were to each other they often developed in parallel, each privileging their defining subject.

Women's history started out by recovering and celebrating women's past experiences. It grew phenomenally and changed rapidly. A feminist conscience underpinned research, driven by a quest to a) show that women were important, not the 'second sex', but in possession of a history b) to explain women's contemporary conditions and c) to search for role models in the past whose achievements and successes could be claimed. Topics that reflected such excavations were studies highlighting women's quest for equality such as the history of first wave feminism, suffrage, and 'firsts' for women in parliament, politics, and education. Linked to women's contemporary concerns, women's struggle for control over their bodies was examined. And in the search for role models, and excavating women's cultural history, there was a celebration of women artists, writers, painters, and performers.

There was of course overlap with the other new histories, especially with labour history (women and work) and family history that were early to consider gender relations.² As Joan Scott summarised women's history:

Inspired directly or indirectly by the political agenda of the women's movement, historians have not only documented the lives of average women in various historical periods but they have charted as well changes in the economic, educational, and political positions of women

of various classes in city and country and in nation-states. Bookshelves are being filled with biographies of forgotten women, chronicles of feminist movements, and the collected letters of female authors; the book title treat subjects as disparate as suffrage and birth control. Journals have appeared that are devoted exclusively to women's studies and to the even more specialized area of women's history.³

II

A tension emerged in the historiography between approaches that, often grounded in liberal feminism, considered women as equal; those, often a part of socialist feminism, that emphasised the importance of capitalism; and those, often influenced by a radical/cultural feminist perspective that considered women as 'different' and bound 'together in physical and emotional intimacy',⁴ where a sub-culture of women's rituals and traditions was 'a source of strength and identity that afforded supportive sisterly relations'.⁵ According to the woman's culture approach, women's past experiences could not be presumed to mirror the portion of male reality that most historians had chosen to highlight.

By the late 1980s the feminist movement was large and diverse, leading to much contestation over different forms of feminism. Likewise, women's history experienced important debates. First, the bifurcation of equality and difference was shattered, as potently played-out in America by the Sears case.⁶ Second, the influential dichotomous 'public' and 'private' spheres framework was seen as increasingly limiting. As Linda Kerber succinctly articulated the concept of 'separate spheres' was:

primarily a trope, employed by people in the past to characterize power relations for which they had no other words and that they could not acknowledge because they could not name, and by historians in our own times as they groped for a device that might dispel the confusion of anecdote and impose narrative and analytical order on the anarchy of inherited evidence, the better to comprehend the world in which we live'.⁷

Third, as part of a step in recasting 'the whole' of history, there was a strong current towards considering gender relations in history.

The anxiety and debate was part of a move towards post-structural thinking that led women's history to a 'crisis of representation'. It was recognised that women in the past possessed diverse identities, most often named as gender and sexuality, race and class. Feminism was based upon a universal woman subject and the exclusion of the histories of 'women of colour', and 'marginalized' women including Lesbian history made visible by the

crisis of representation led to the fragmentation of the woman subject herself. Instead, multiple past oppressions that cross cut gender, race and class were revealed. As Mary Spongberg has written:

Difference feminism broke from the universalising and essentialising tendencies of cultural feminism, which was criticized as elitist, heterosexist, racist and Eurocentric. Feminists informed by the politics of difference challenged the idea of a 'unique female experience', claiming that the experience of white middle-class women had become hegemonic, suppressing the experiences of women who did not belong to this dominant group.⁸

Historiographically, paralysis replaced the confident gusto that pervaded women's and gender history from the 1970s to the late 1980s. In a context where more historical research on women than ever before was conducted, and women's history increased its foothold in the academy, there was a move beyond celebration.⁹ A parallel distancing from a likewise fragmented feminist movement occurred and, along with the other social sciences and humanities, women's history underwent a theoretical turn with feminist post-structural approaches championed by scholars such as Denise Riley, Joan W. Scott and Catherine Hall.¹⁰

Diversity in methodological approach became the order of the day, with knowledges situated in local context, making generalization dangerous, and transnational comparison undesirable. One had to have a position to write *from*, lest risk being accused of writing for 'others'. As Laura Lee Downs has commented women's and gender history are now 'characterized by a kind of theoretical eclecticism in which scholars deploy a range of tools and approaches better to understand the ways that gender, as social/discursive category and as lived experience, has shaped human history'.¹¹ Ironically, a theoretical turn witnessed the same small number of Anglo-American scholars being quoted by a globally scattered number of authors. And often these male theorists did not write from a feminist perspective.

III

Given the crisis of representation, it made sense for the study of gender, race and colonialism to become a large, diverse, and international area of inquiry during the last decade. Prominent journals have devoted special issues to research and discussion, scholars interested in gender and race in the history of nation, empire and colony have gathered at

conferences, and edited collections and monographs have multiplied.¹² Anna Davin's 1978 article 'Imperialism and Motherhood' initiated examination of the crucial importance of gender in imperialism.¹³ Subsequent work recovered and celebrated White woman's presence in imperialism.¹⁴ But such an approach was considered problematic by those who linked gender and race, and thought White women complicit in imperial projects. Clearly it was insufficient to uncritically recover and chronicle women's presence as colonizers.¹⁵ This realization led to recognition that some White women were in agreement with racist practices and had economically and morally benefited from their beliefs.¹⁶ As Anne McClintock explains in *Imperial Leather: Gender, Race and Sexuality in the Colonial Contest*, White women were not 'the hapless onlookers of empire, but were ambiguously complicit both as colonisers and colonized, privileged and restricted, acted upon and acting'.¹⁷ Linked to wider questioning in women's history as to the invisibility of women of colour, the term 'White' was unpacked, to as Vron Ware explains 'get away from the assumption that to be White is to be normal, while to be not-White is to occupy a racial category with all its attendant meanings'.¹⁸

Most recently, women's agency has been further complicated in work on imperialism through a focus on women's raced and classed bodies as a vital 'contact zone'. During colonization, women and bodies mattered and were bound up in creating and perpetuating an often hidden, complex, contradictory and fraught history.¹⁹ Women occupied the spaces of colonial encounter between aboriginals and newcomers, as both colonizers, and the colonized, transgressing restrictive boundaries and making history. In varied sites of encounter, Aboriginal women, White women travellers, missionaries and settlers were all integral to the colonial project. The feminist concern with women's struggle to control their own bodies²⁰ is receiving attention, often engaging with the ideas of Foucault and Derrida.²¹ Work has turned to consider contact zones, metropolitan power and the significance of empires.²² Antoinette Burton suggests that just as colonies were, so too was the United Kingdom a site of contact,²³ and that 'like colonial modernities, themselves, the latest work on gender and empire must be considered as unfinished and therefore as open to re-interpretation as any other material

practice or discursive regime'.²⁴ There is a growing interest in the experiences of Indian, Canadian and Australian women in the United Kingdom, their position in the imperial metropolis and discourses of modernity providing key themes.²⁵

Yet underlying new analyses, a feminist perspective that celebrates women (however multiple their identities might be) continues to dominate the writing of women's, gender and feminist histories. For example, while the gender and imperialism literature recognises that women effectively oppressed other women, the focus remains largely (and most comfortably) on celebrating the women who opposed and transgressed colonialism and imperialism. In the chapter 'Women's Mission to Empire' in *The Making of Modern Woman*, Lynn Abrams is most comfortable when discussing Burton and Midgley's work on feminist women's part in the anti-slavery campaign, and women's feminist efforts within an imperial framework.²⁶

Alternatively, my research on Canada's Imperial Order Daughters of the Empire (IODE) a patriotic group of female imperialists, turns to politically conservative women who were active in constructing Anglo-Celtic hegemonic identities, therefore upholding the status quo.²⁷ My work uncovers the IODE'S part in the construction of an Anglo-Canadian identity that celebrated all things British and advanced Canada's destiny as a part of the British Empire. Moving the historiography of women's, gender and feminist history beyond celebration, I turn to the complex workings of feminist and patriarchal politics in the past, addressing the tension and relationship between a) recovering women's agency in the past and b) critically treating the structures in which women were engaged. The history of the IODE and its part in the making of Anglo-Canada in the image of Britain demands that we constantly challenge those whom we choose as agents in explaining the past.

My work wrestles with a current tension in feminism. On one hand, I retain a group of women subjects as the standpoint of my research. I possess a great respect for and a sense of awe towards the IODE, an influential, efficient, clever, sometimes ruthless, and proud organization. Through its work this group of women, albeit affluent and Anglo-Celtic women, has struggled to make an impact in a sexist society, playing no small part in improving the lot of women. It has done so with sharp and organized efficiency. Yet, while I show how much

of an impact the IODE has had on Canada, mindful of work on gender, race and colonialism, there can no longer be an uncritical celebration.

It is now clear that women were not uniformly marginalized, or able to be neatly categorized as part of a 'minority concern'.²⁸ Indeed the history of the IODE provides evidence of women's complicity in racism and oppression, revealing the need to moving beyond the uniform celebration of women's work and to instead examine the contradictory and complex position of, on one hand, extending help to those perceived to be in need, while, on the other, supporting the patriarchal and imperial practices which had led to that need in the first place.

Women's agency in the past can now be considered along broader lines than previous essentialist confines. In terms of their feminist politics, not all women's organizations can be categorized in a straightforward manner. The IODE was first and foremost patriotic, and often advanced a conservative politics. Yet to label the IODE 'conservative' is not to do justice to the complex workings of feminist and patriarchal politics. In some of its patriotic work, even that which on the surface privileged a returned serviceman, such as War Memorial Scholarships, the IODE was supportive of women. As with all areas of its educational work, the presence of members who believed women to be the equals of men and deserving of equality of opportunity, a considerable number of them teachers themselves, ensured that the IODE offered strong support for women's education at all levels. In the landmark cause of first-wave feminism, women's suffrage, the IODE was a central player because it was considered patriotically credible. Amidst World War I, with the hope of boosting support for conscription, the Canadian Government enfranchised British subjects over 21 years of age with a close relative serving in the Canadian or British forces.²⁹

In an organization that was premised upon a willingness to speak out on citizenship, among the IODE's membership were important firsts for Canadian women: two of the first women academics (Wilhelmina Gordon and Mary Bollert); Canada's first woman mayor (Charlotte Whitton); the first woman Canadian federal minister (Ellen Fairclough); the first woman provincial lieutenant-governor and the first woman chancellor of a Canadian

university (both Pauline McGibbon). These women were therefore role models, yet their conservative politics has meant an awkward placing in the history of feminism.

Combining race and class positions, the IODE was able to access gendered feminine as well as masculine spaces. In this way the IODE's history reveals a complex relationship to a patriarchy that understandings of which need to be complexified. Although comprised of a group of women, the IODE can not to be treated as separate from patriarchy, masculine identity and public spaces, as it helped to produce those constructions as part of its overall standpoint as national and imperial citizens. Indeed, to push the argument further, the IODE was responsible for propping up patriarchal practices. The history of the IODE shows that feminist outcomes can stem from a variety of motives, and that the effects might be useful for Anglo-Celtic women, while detrimental to others. As Karen Offen has suggested 'feminism's victories are not, strictly speaking, about getting the argument right', and that we should 'ask not what feminist theory can do for history, but what history can do for feminist theory'.³⁰

IV

One way beyond celebration is to move from considering women as role models, with the accompanying essentialist approach of rendering women good or bad, to instead, informed by a post-structural approach, view women as a part of the discourses in which they are embedded. For example, in my work on memory, colonial identity and the martyrdom of Edith Cavell, the English nurse executed by the Germans in Brussels in October 1915 for 'escorting troops to the enemy', in a post-colonial era Edith Cavell is no longer a mythological role model for a younger generation. Because she was caught-up in war-mongering propaganda and used to invent white British womanhood, she has not featured in feminist history. Examining how Cavell's life – her agency – and how her story has been told, re-told and represented, become the focus of a post-structural approach to feminist history. Narratives about Cavell are significant in revealing how our remembrances of war are deeply gendered, politically loaded, and shift with the years.³¹

Interestingly, at the time when the woman subject fragmented, and an atmosphere of caution prevailed, the popular writing of women's history turned to women as icons.³² This

seemed to indicate a mainstream catch-up with the scholarly work of the 1970s. One thinks of Judy Chicago's *The Dinner Party*, which taking a cultural feminist perspective was able to celebrate all women, even killer-women, in an all-encompassing way.³³ Yet, the broad and haphazard approach taken in the icons selected in the popular literature might offer some insight for scholarly work. For example, by no longer being confined to examining role models in the past, new women, especially those caught up in the construction of traditional history, such as Edith Cavell, become worthy of study.

The term icon has emerged to co-exist with and sometimes replace role model. Years ago an icon was simply an image. Icons then became out of reach, for worship only, held on a pedestal, to be looked up to and obeyed. As Elaine Showalter considers, 'icon' in a classical sense means 'revered symbol'.³⁴ Most recently, icons have become ordinary people and, merging with role models, considered successful trail-blazers, with the result that their lives are supposedly attainable. Today, icon language is in widespread popular usage, with distinctions between high and low culture a thing of the past.

Embracing the historiographically aware moment, traditional history itself can be critiqued through a consideration of the women who it claims as 'Great'. Because traditional heroines such as Queen Elizabeth I were implicated in maintaining the status quo and caught-up in advancing nationhood they were not at the forefront of feminist re-castings of women's place in society. The turn to multiple identities, however, allows previously deemed conservative women, those situated as part of the status quo, a more complex position. Through a discursive turn work is now reading the histories of iconic women as situated knowledges in particular times and places, revealing women's position in society – often according to past identities such as being cast as 'honorary men' or 'super feminine' and motherly. With the death of the author we can critique biographies for their representations of women. Importantly, the relationship between agency and structure becomes much more complex, if not completely collapsed. Susan Frye's work on Elizabeth I and sexuality is an example here, as is Colin Coates and Cecilia Morgan's study of Canadians Madeleine de Vercheres and Laura Secord.³⁵ There is also my own work on 'colonial sainthood' in

Australasia as examined through representations of nuns Mary MacKillop and Suzanne Aubert.³⁶

Furthermore, a turn to woman icons recaptures some of the mystique of 1970s feminism, albeit in a tentative and newly exploratory way. This concerns the study of archetypes and mythology, as demonstrated in Marina Warner's work on the Virgin Mary and Joan of Arc.³⁷ It involves tapping into transnational patterns and introducing the potential for global comparisons. Without abandoning the importance of difference and the local, it is clear that there are transcultural commonalities between women's experiences in the past that after an era of historiographical specificity, feminist history might be able to address. Well-established areas of study such as womanhood and femininity, domesticity, war religion, education, politics and governance might be drawn upon. And themes already identified in the literature, such as martyrdom, death, fertility, courage, adventure, heredity status are once again of relevance. The study of icons allows for the broader picture to re-emerge after a decade of paralysis and micro-study. Ever-aware of difference, we can revisit the work of Gerda Lerner and in a post-structural way re-examine the construction of global patriarchal systems.³⁸

V

Throughout this discussion I am aware of the tendency of historiographical discussions to favour particular streams of work, privileging the familiar. In this case, I have omitted my local, New Zealand historiography. Perhaps this is because as a small country, New Zealand historians are ever-aware of what is happening elsewhere? And so I end with mention of women's place and success in New Zealand through a diverse collection of women who have become famous or 'great' as women 'Kiwi icons'.³⁹ I have chosen particular women because I believe that they are a part of a national psyche. Some women, such as aviatrix Jean Batten, have stood the test of time, remaining famous over decades. Others, such as suffragist Kate Sheppard, receded from view, only to be rediscovered in time for the 1993 women's suffrage centenary. Maori welfare reformer Te Puea Herangi, Jean Batten, opera singer Kiri Te Kanawa, sportswoman Susan Devoy and politician Jenny Shipley

all share official state recognition, having received official honours from service to the Crown. These are exceptional women who managed to ‘climb the ladder’ to the top of society. But at a time when the British Empire is no more, and New Zealand is ever-mindful of its own identity, I am also interested in throwing into the equation non-traditional famous exceptional women such as model Rachel Hunter and the stowaways the Ingham Twins.

The tool used for exploring women’s lives in this project is representation. It is through looking at representations of woman icons that important myths emerge. I have identified important characteristics in the women’s lives that have provided the keys to their success: spirituality for Suzanne Aubert, well-being for Te Puea and Kate Sheppard, courage for Jean Batten, the arts for Kiri Te Kanawa, endurance and stamina for Susan Devoy and Alison Roe, the outdoors and ‘earthiness’ for Rachel Hunter, politics for Jenny Shipley and Helen Clark, and adventure for the Ingham Twins.

Thinking beyond celebration by deconstructing those who have been celebrated, and those complicit in the construction of traditional history is my attempt to write feminist history in post-essentialist times. In a current feminist climate where those women who grew up in the 1980s with ‘girls can do anything’ slogans and with the ‘girl power’ of the 1990s, an approach that appears to be on individual women’s agency, but that reveals women’s past lives as representational and grounded in time and place-specific structures, might lead to recognition of past collective struggle. The country that was the first in the world to grant all women the vote is developing an impressive track record of other firsts for women. We are on our second woman prime minister, our second woman governor general, our first woman chief justice and first woman speaker of the house (who was previously the first woman attorney general). The largest corporation in the country, Telecom, is headed by a woman. Indeed the recent achievements of New Zealand women have led to the popular impression that women have taken over the country – engaging with women’s history is vital in ensuring that these firsts will not be lasts, a brief flash in the patriarchal pan rather than signaling a wider improvement in women’s place in New Zealand society.

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³⁷ Marina Warner, *Alone of all her Sex: the Myth and Cult of the Virgin Mary* (New York: Knopf, 1976), Marina Warner, *Joan of Arc: the Image of Female Heroism* (New York: Knopf, 1981).

³⁸ Gerda Lerner, *Women and History* (Oxford and New York: Oxford University Press, 1986-1993), v.1 The Creation of Patriarchy, v.2 The Creation of Feminist Consciousness.

³⁹ See Katie Pickles, 'Kiwi Icons and the Re-Settlement of New Zealand as Colonial Space', *The New Zealand Geographer*, 58: 2, 2002, 5-16 and Katie Pickles, 'Exceptions to the Rule: Explaining the World's First Women Presidents and Prime Ministers', *History Now*, 7: 2, 2001, 13-18.