

## QUESTIONING NATIONAL MODELS : THE HISTORY OF WOMEN TEACHERS IN A COMPARATIVE PERSPECTIVE

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Paradoxically, historians of education have often tended toward narrow parochialism in their studies of national systems, institutions, and actors, despite a long tradition of international exchange on the subject of education. Particularly during the modern period, as national educational systems emerged, educational administrators and pedagogues traveled widely in order to comment on how other people and other nations conceived the business of educating the rich and the poor, boys and girls. And yet, historians have rarely responded to the challenges this cross-cultural exchange encouraged. When women and gender historians entered the conversation, perspectives changed, and a comparative dimension did emerge concerning in particular the history of women teachers. Focusing on issues such as feminization and professionalization, women and gender historians have published stimulating comparative analyses, but for linguistic reasons the models of reference and the points of comparison tend to focus almost exclusively on English-speaking countries: England, Canada, the United States, or Australia.<sup>1</sup> When one considers Dutch or Scandinavian histories of women teachers, once again the implicit point of comparison becomes the Anglo-

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<sup>1</sup> An early publication that belies this generalization offers a collection of articles on women teachers in England, the United States, Germany, the Netherlands, Denmark, Australia and New Zealand : Patricia Schmuck, ed., *Women Educators. Employees of Schools in Western countries* (Albany: New York State University Press, 1984). For a general comparative overview of the historiography on women teachers see, Mineke van Essen and Rebecca Rogers, "Ecrire l'histoire des enseignantes: Enjeux et perspectives internationales", *Histoire de l'Éducation* 98 (2003): 5-35.

American world.<sup>2</sup> This paper seeks to enter this discussion by looking first at the questions which have emerged within the Anglo-American tradition and then comparing them with French models of writing the history of women teachers. The object of this comparison is to bring France into the story, but also to see how a more global history of women teachers might usefully focus on the issue of cross-cultural travel and exchange to introduce new, less national perspectives. Given my research specialty, I will use the example of French teachers in this final section of my presentation to illustrate the benefits of this sort of cross-cultural analysis.

### **Feminization and professionalization: a relatively familiar story**

When women and gender historians first began to explore the history of women teachers, in the early 1980s, they focused on issues that interested labor and educational historians alike: what socio-economic factors explained women's entrance into the profession, how did women teachers' status compare with that of men, how did the process of professionalization affect women in particular (notably through marriage bars), and how did the increasing presence of women teachers contribute to gendering the profession. These studies traced similar developments throughout the western world, notably the way the emergence of a "domestic ideology" in the nineteenth century, granted women a certain degree of authority in the education of children, opening the teaching profession to women with a certain level of education themselves. As a result, teaching at the elementary level in particular experienced a process of feminization.

An early interest in comparative perspectives, often generated within the context of international conferences, highlighted, however, the very different levels of feminization

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<sup>2</sup> See, for example, the work of Carol Gold, *Educating Middle-Class Daughters. Private Girls Schools in Copenhagen, 1790-1820*, Copenhagen, The Royal Library Museum Tusulanum Press, 1996; Mineke van Essen, "Strategies of Women Teachers, 1860-1920: feminization in Dutch elementary and secondary schools from a comparative perspective", *History of Education* 28 (1999): 413-33. The latter also engages actively with debates within German historiography.

within the West. In 1901 in Prussia, for example, only 15.5% of elementary teachers were women, while in France the percentage was about 50%; in England and Russia the elementary school profession was dominated by women who occupied almost 75% of the positions, and, by 1920 in the United States, 86% of teachers were women.<sup>3</sup> These very different degrees of feminization encouraged more nuanced analyses of the factors at work in this process and helped move the history of women teachers into a far wider dialogue than other aspects of the history of education (the comparative history of schools or students, for example).

The issue of professionalization emerged in tandem with feminization, as historians examined more carefully the conditions required to enter the teaching profession, the nature of teacher training, the emergence of professional associations and the culture of professionalism that emerged. Women and gender historians highlighted the male character of professionalization and the efforts women made to move from the status of amateurs to professionals. These studies often focused on the ways feminist groups contributed to opening the doors that allowed women to don professional garb. In American and British historiography this interest in showing how women entered the profession was accompanied by a spate of biographical studies that positioned women as historical actors shaping broader structural changes.

In 1991, the Canadian historian Alison Prentice and the Australian historian Marjorie Theobald published an important collection of articles that remains a reference today. By structuring their analysis around the division between women teaching in the private and the public sphere, the authors implicitly paid heed to the ways the concept of public and private spheres dominated Anglo-American scholarship in these years. The diversity of educational situations in the countries under examination—England, Australia, Canada and the United States—introduced a number of new themes in addition to questions concerning feminization

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<sup>3</sup> James Albisetti, “The Feminization of Teaching in the Nineteenth Century: a Comparative perspective”, *History of Education* 22 (1993): 223-263.

and professionalization, notably that of the impact of private teachers. The editors of the volume encouraged the development of more comparative perspectives between Protestant and Catholic teachers, lay and religious teachers, and urged historians to study more carefully teacher training, class-room practices, and questions concerning the formation of identity. Indeed, the emergence of comparative perspectives concerning women teachers tended to highlight the diversity of national situations but, aside from the work of James Albisetti, the emerging understanding of the history of women teachers paid little attention to France, or indeed any of the Mediterranean countries, where national school systems emerged often in uncomfortable rivalry with an existing private religious sector.

### **Introducing the French story**

Histories of French women teachers are relatively limited for reasons that have to do with the state of women's history in France and the weight of Republican historiography in understanding the emergence of a national system of education over the course of the nineteenth century. The dominant French interpretation emphasized how later nineteenth-century Republican politicians tore women and girls from the arms of the Church in order to place them within public secular schools in front of public lay teachers. Within this interpretation there was little ideological space for women actors, be they teachers or feminists, since the State was presented as the primary agent in the process of introducing education to girls. Not surprisingly, then, most studies of French women teachers from the outset have been written by American or British historians influenced notably by an interest in the process of professionalization.<sup>4</sup> Nonetheless, no general history of French elementary

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<sup>4</sup> Peter Meyers, "Primary Schoolteachers in Nineteenth-Century France: A Study of Professionalization Through Conflict," *History of Education Quarterly* (1985): 21-40; Sharif Gemie, *Women and Schooling in France, 1814-1914* (Keele: Keele University Press, 1995); Anne Quartararo, *Women Teachers and Popular Education in Nineteenth-Century France. Social Values and Corporate Identity at the Normal School Institution* (Newark: University of Delaware Press, 1995). Interestingly, historians of France have produced virtually no biographies of major female educators.

schoolteachers exists that includes the study of the thousands of nuns who educated girls in France throughout the century (in 1865, 56% of female students had nuns as teachers).<sup>5</sup> Recent work has sought to reposition nuns more clearly as major actors within the teaching profession, highlighting the ways their actions contributed to enduring representations of what the ideal woman teacher should be: modest, devoted, and single.<sup>6</sup>

My own work over the last ten years or so has sought to introduce a more complex vision of French women teachers by studying both the lay and religious women who taught middle-class girls within the private sector during the nineteenth century.<sup>7</sup> Borrowing conceptual tools framed within a primarily Anglo-American dialogue, I have argued that the private sector introduced incipient processes of professionalization, notably teacher certification and teacher training, well before the State intervened in the late nineteenth century. I have sought specifically to show that nuns were not just the fanatical superstitious figures of Republican imagination, but that some organized pedagogical training centers and actively sought to improve the quality of teaching within their orders. At the end of the century in France, nuns and the women within the private sector were the only teachers training girls to pass the *baccalauréat*, the diploma allowed women to pursue training at the university. Women teachers at the public *lycées* and *collèges*, which were founded only in 1880, taught lessons designed to prepare girls for lives of domesticity and the degree girls received at the end of their studies opened no professional doors.

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<sup>5</sup> See the recent collection of articles that deplores the absence of more detailed studies of both lay and religious women teachers: *La féminisation de l'enseignement, une histoire de femmes ?*, presented by François Jacquet-Francillon—*Mélanges de la Maison Saint-Exupéry*, (Lille, 2000): 141-228.

<sup>6</sup> See, in particular, the work of Sarah Curtis, *Educating the Faithful: Religion, Schooling, and Society in Nineteenth-Century France* (De Kalb: Northern Illinois Press, 2000).

<sup>7</sup> See Rebecca Rogers, *From the Salon to the Schoolroom: Educating Bourgeois Girls in Nineteenth-Century France* (University Park: Penn State University Press, 2005).

The arguments I have developed about French women teachers clearly owe an intellectual debt to the work of American and British women and gender historians.<sup>8</sup> By seeking to position women as actors in the story of institutional development, I have downplayed the role of the State and introduced debates about professionalization and professional identity which have been little explored by French historians. Above all, I have explored the archives of religious orders and sought to understand their growth and institutional success by defining nuns as teachers, not hapless pawns in the bitter struggle between the Catholic church and anticlerical Republicans. My encounter with religious archives is what first encouraged me to move my study of French women teachers onto foreign soils and to consider the implications of their activities in the context of the cross-cultural exchanges mentioned in the introduction.

### **Placing French teachers into other national historiographies**

The influence of post-colonial perspectives within Anglo-American scholarship has encouraged women and gender historians to shift their gaze from the metropole to empire and to take the dynamics of imperialism seriously in understanding processes often studied solely within a national context.<sup>9</sup> Since colonization often involved the creation of schools, sources exist showing how women teachers participated in what the French defined as the “civilizing mission”, moving to colonial territories and establishing institutions for girls. In France the women who participated most actively in this “mission” were nuns, who settled not only in French colonial lands but also more widely throughout the world, including Australia. In 1890, for example, the teachers within the congregation de Saint-Joseph de Cluny were

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<sup>8</sup> A word perhaps to explain my institutional and intellectual positioning: I was educated as an undergraduate in the United States and did my graduate work in France. I began my teaching career at the University of Iowa, and have spent the past eleven years at the Université Marc Bloch in Strasbourg. As a bi-national, I am undoubtedly more concerned than most to encourage the dialogue between French and English-speaking historians.

<sup>9</sup> For an example of such a perspective that focuses on women teachers, see Joyce Goodman, “Des enseignantes du secondaire dans l’Empire britannique. Identités professionnelles, genre et mission religieuse”, *Histoire de l’éducation* 98 (2003) : 109-132.

teaching girls all over the map: in French colonies, but also in Italy, Portugal, Trinidad, Sierra Leone, Fiji, Peru, and the United States.<sup>10</sup> But French women, or women who were educated in France, were present as well in other countries as lay women teachers and as governesses, a story that for the most part remains to be written.<sup>11</sup>

A focus on the activities of French women teachers on foreign soils changes the sorts of questions that have traditionally dominated the historiography concerning teachers and the teaching profession, suggesting ways of writing another sort of history more attentive to issues of cultural interaction than institutional processes. Religious and educational historians have long been aware that French religious orders set up schools outside of France, notably in the decades between 1880 and 1910 when nuns were evicted first from the public teaching sector (1886) and then from teaching altogether (1904). Most studies, however, have traced this “diaspora” from the perspective of religious or missionary history, rarely looking at the teachers and the schools they set up from the perspective of cultural exchange. The studies that do exist, however, highlight how teaching allowed women to travel and to interact with non-French populations. These interactions, whether as representatives of a specific religious order or agents of an imperial state, reveal how French women teachers established educational models whose cultural influence has begun to receive some historical attention. In England, for example, Susan O’Brien has explored how the presence of French teaching nuns introduced a unique flavor to British Catholic life.<sup>12</sup> In the United States a number of

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<sup>10</sup> Private archives of the congrégation de Saint-Joseph de Cluny, 156 AP I, 207, « Établissements de la congrégation de Saint-Joseph de Cluny dans les colonies françaises et à l'étranger ».

<sup>11</sup> Marjorie Theobald notes the presence of Parisian-educated women teachers in Melbourne in the mid-nineteenth century, “‘Mere accomplishments’? Melbourne’s Early Ladies’ Schools Reconsidered”, in Prentice and Thebold, *Women who Taught*.

<sup>12</sup> . Susan O’Brien, “French Nuns in Nineteenth-century England.” *Past and Present* 154 (February 1997): 142-180.

historians have shown how French nuns contributed to the emergence of a vibrant Catholic culture through the widespread creation of both elementary and secondary schools.<sup>13</sup>

My own study of French teachers in African colonies as well as the United States has sought to highlight the specificities of a French academic culture, which emerged, for example, in schools established in both Saint-Louis, Senegal and Saint Louis, Missouri in the United States. Naturally, French religious teachers shifted their expectations in response to their student body and taught differently when addressing African versus European or American girls. Still, the French religious diaspora contributed, through the establishment of schools, to spreading a model of French culture with a unique focus on rules, discipline and the lessons of polite society, a focus that emerges in countless memoirs of women who were educated by French nuns. Consider, for example, the novelist Mary McCarthy who was placed at the age of eleven in the Forest Ridge convent of the Sacred Heart nuns in Seattle in 1923. She emphasizes the impact of a “highly centralized order, versed in clockwork obedience to authority. Their institutions follow a pattern laid down for them in France in the early nineteenth-century—clipped and pollarded as a garden and stately as a minuet.”<sup>14</sup> Awed by the French words and the austerity of daily life she describes an environment governed by rules she constantly circumvented, and where the rituals of form prevailed over content. For Sissy O’Brien, who attended the boarding schools of the Fidèles Compagnes de Jésus at Bruff, county Limerick in Ireland, French education was a language, a discipline, and a way of organizing daily life. In her memoirs, *The Farm by Lough Gur*, she describes Nanny telling her “That’s the French way of making a bed: all the rules are French.”<sup>15</sup> For upwardly mobile families throughout the western world, French education for girls transmitted the virtues of *politesse* and *goût*.

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<sup>13</sup> Coburn, Carol K. and Martha Smith. *Spirited Lives: How Nuns Shaped Catholic Culture and American Life, 1836-1920*, (Chapel Hill, NC: University of North Carolina Press, 1999).

<sup>14</sup> Mary McCarthy, *Memories of a Catholic Girlhood* (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1957), 89

<sup>15</sup> My thanks to Margaret MacCurtain for this reference.

### **Concluding remarks on teachers, labor history, and global history**

This preliminary exploration of how French women teachers transmitted certain cultural values beyond France suggests the importance of engaging in a more active discussion among national historiographies in a perspective that might usefully look toward labor and immigrant history for models to engage in this discussion. I suspect I am not alone among specialists of women teachers in not positioning myself naturally within the field of labor history, particularly since my own research focus is on middle-class rather than on working-class women. But in conclusion I thought it might be useful in this panel on labor history to think about what how labor history might offer ways of engaging in the dialogue across national borders I have been arguing for.

Historians of immigration have long explored the impact of foreign worker communities within working-class culture, raising questions about assimilation and integration within specific national cultures.<sup>16</sup> Such studies offer interesting perspectives that mirror in many ways the questions of religious historians exploring various aspects of a religious diaspora. What happens when one inserts women teachers and their schools within this sort of interpretive framework? What distinguishes the traveling teacher from the immigrant textile worker is, of course, education and class status. The French teachers I have examined moved to foreign lands in order to transmit the lessons and values of their homeland and often they established their reputation precisely on the basis of their “Frenchness”. They created institutions that initially preserved the characteristics of French schools and were not forced like immigrant workers to enter factories or workshops owned and operated by other national groups. But immigrant workers frequently sought to preserve aspects of their home

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<sup>16</sup> From an Anglo-French perspective, see the study of Nancy L. Green, *Ready-to-wear and ready-to-work : a century of industry and immigrants in Paris and New York* (Durham : Duke University Press, 1997).

culture and this is where schools and teachers enter the picture.<sup>17</sup> Here, historians of education need to look beyond their national borders to understand the messages transmitted within classrooms taught by “immigrant” teachers.

A recent study of Catholic education in Australia explores the impact of an educational experience within a boarding school run by French Sacred Heart nuns.<sup>18</sup> And yet, the author describes these nuns as offering an “English” education to middle-class “new” Australians in the post-war period. The international dimension of the Sacred Heart society should not mask, however, the strength of its initial ethos, which is distinctively French. What happens then when a teaching order “goes international”? This Australian example demonstrates, I would argue, the complexity of such cultural exchanges within schoolrooms across the world. By thinking more seriously about issues of travel and mobility, historians of education might usefully turn to labor historians for ways of grappling with a history of women teachers whose borders were increasingly international in the modern period. In essence, I am arguing for the need to move beyond the early comparative approaches, which allowed us to grapple with issues concerning professionalization and feminization, but were framed with respect to national paradigms. In place of comparison, a more global approach would look more carefully at traveling teachers questioning the characteristics of the school culture from which they come and exploring the impact of this culture in its interactions with other cultures. This plea for a more transnational perspective undoubtedly reflects our own increased mobility as historians in the twenty-first century, but nineteenth-century women teachers were sensitive as well to the importance of taking cultural interactions seriously when it came to the business of schooling. After visiting the Midwestern houses of the Sacred Heart in 1840, Mother

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<sup>17</sup> The history of these schools for girls is told in the United States primarily through the prism of Catholic education. For a brief overview, see Nikola Baumgarten, “Catholic education” and “Catholic teaching orders” in Linda Eisenmann, ed. *Historical Dictionary of Women’s education in the United States* (Westport, CN : Greenwood Press, 1998): 68-74.

<sup>18</sup> Christine Trimmingham Jack, *Growing Good Catholic Girls. Education and Convent Life in Australia* (Melbourne : Melbourne University Press, 2003).

Galitzine emphasized in her report back to France that success required adaptation and respect for American customs rather than trying to change them. She cautioned her superiors on the importance of recognizing other forms of belief and modes of behavior: “All that we can do and say for the success of our works and the good of the Society must vary according to circumstances, the time, the location, the people; what may be appropriate at one moment, is not at another; only flexibility and tact in the choice of methods will produce good results.”<sup>19</sup> Recognizing how teachers exerted influence through “flexibility and tact” involves moving outside of national frameworks in order to write a different, more global, women’s history.

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<sup>19</sup> Archives of the Sacred Heart(Rome), CIII, USA early history, box 4. “Note pour la Supérieure seule” (c. 1840-43), “Notes de la Mère Galitzine sur l’Amérique.”