

# University Women: A History of Women and Higher Education in Canada

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## *Book Review/Recension d'ouvrage*

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### **University Women: A History of Women and Higher Education in Canada**

by Sara Z. MacDonald

McGill-Queen's University Press, 2021, 424 pages

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In *University Women: A History of Women and Higher Education in Canada*, author Dr. Sara MacDonald discusses the gradual inclusion of women into Canada's undergraduate student body at 19 universities and colleges (see Appendix 1) between 1870-1930. Through historical analysis, MacDonald aims to answer the book's central question: "Did the rapid adoption of coeducation work for or against the interests of women?" (p. 6). The book is framed around the argument that university education for women in Canada was radical because of its focus on coeducation, rather than through separate women's colleges. The differences between these two modes are highlighted as significant because "from the beginning, coeducation was tied not only to the much larger issue of women's work, but also more explicitly to competition with men for employment" (p. 2). While pointing to the use of gender theory as an analytical framework, MacDonald also addresses racial and class inequities, noting that "during the period covered by this book, the experience of schooling at all levels was determined by social class, and, for some, curtailed completely by their race or indigeneity" (p. 5-6). Although the bulk of the text focuses on white, middle-class Anglo-Canadian women who were among Canada's first female university students and graduates, MacDonald is clear in acknowledging that this group was both small and highly privileged.

## Organization

*University Women* tells its story through narratives of individual women and specific groups at universities across Canada. The book is divided into two major sections plus an introduction and conclusion. It is closed out by four useful appendices that include valuable lists of the dates of specific moments in the entrance of women into Canadian universities.

### Section 1: Campaigns for Access

Chapter 1 addresses the role of the Church and the idea of progress in women's inclusion into higher education. MacDonald describes differences between struggles for women's inclusion in Canada alongside descriptions of the same in the United Kingdom and the United States. Secondary school pathways towards and away from higher education are also discussed, as well as the increased role of churches in girl's schooling. A recurring focal point of the book—the fight for women to wear academic dress at university or at graduation—is raised again here.

Chapter 2 raises the issues of race, eugenics, and colonialism in Canada. The chapter presents the discourse in the late 1800s surrounding race and gender with a focus on the way in which the topics were treated at the time. This section may read strangely for those not used to analyses that are not more squarely in the critical frame. Although MacDonald does state that the "goal in this book is to connect discourse to transformative social action; to explore issues of race and gender at the popular level of ideology, beliefs, and attitudes" (p. 10), the chapter does not strongly connect racist and sexist writings with critical analyses.

In Chapter 3 the text returns to specific policies regarding Canadian women's colleges; their pros and cons, supporters and detractors, and the systems abroad they were based on. The discussion is very specific to each college and each type of college; the appendices on timing of the inclusion of women may be of interest here for the reader who wants to keep track of a timeline of access.

## Section 2: Post-Arrival of Women

In Chapter 4, the book addresses what it meant to be an undergraduate; what coursework, activities, societies students would be a part of, and how women were seen to fit (or not) into that. MacDonald characterizes different aspects of student life that women were included in, rejected from, or in which they chose not to participate. This chapter will be fascinating for anyone researching student life. The proportions of female and male students in the student body (p. 181) are starkly different from the balance in more recent years (Statistics Canada, 2021).

Chapter 5 turns to the WWI era, women's suffrage, and protests. This era is framed as one of self-government of women, and fears of women taking over certain areas of study, like the arts (p. 232). In Chapter 6, the book turns to the post-WWI era, and changes to student life that some critics saw as negative. The value of a degree and its applicability to the world of work is discussed with many examples of specific women's thoughts or questions from archival sources.

## Conclusion and Appendices

The conclusion ends oddly, with the final paragraph talking partially about academic dress, and partially about work post-graduation. The four appendices that follow, however, are excellent sources of information that address the first admission dates for women, the first female university graduates, women's colleges affiliated with larger universities, and the first women's residences and Deans of women. These appendices provide a timeline for the entirety of the book and help to set checkpoints in the chapters' narratives. Reading the appendices before the main text would help readers to have a better idea of the pace of events that unfold throughout the book.

## Summary

*University Women* provides a historical analysis of approximately 60 years of efforts to give some Canadian women access to higher education. The book is successful in creating tableaux that help to characterize the fight for access to university at the time. The book succeeds in its goal of linking societal beliefs and attitudes about education and

work to those of gender, but race is given a much less thorough treatment. While MacDonald's writing remains largely objective in tone, the quotes of women graduates and students at the time help to assert that coeducation worked in the interests of the Canadian women who were able to attend university at the time. *University Women* is appropriate for readers who are interested in: gender in higher education; Canadian higher education policy changes; and the role of the Church in Canada's universities and school systems.

## Reference

Statistics Canada. (2021). *Postsecondary graduates, by field of study, International Standard Classification of Education, age group and gender*. <https://doi.org/10.25318/3710013501-eng>