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Presidential Address: National Unity and the Politics of Political History

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Article abstract

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PRESIDENTIAL ADDRESS/ DISCOURS DE LA PRÉSIDENTE

National Unity and the Politics of Political History

GAIL CUTHBERT BRANDT

Résumé

The latest lengthy round of constitutional discussions has once again highlighted Canadians' desire and need to know their history. But which history? In the opinion of some historians, Canadianists have done a disservice to their compatriots by forsaking national political history in favour of increasingly specialized research into areas such as women's history, regional history, working class history and ethnic history.

This call for a renewed emphasis on national political history raises the central issue of how to produce a history that accurately represents the experience of the diverse elements which constitute the Canadian community. An examination of some selected themes from women's history suggests that a reconceptualization of political history and its relationship to social history would result in a more integrated and meaningful approach to our collective past.

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Les dernières discussions constitutionnelles ont démontré que les Canadiens désirent et doivent connaître leur histoire. Mais de quelle histoire s'agit-il? Selon certains historiens, les canadianistes ont desservi leurs compatriotes en concentrant leurs recherches sur l'histoire des femmes, des régions, des travailleurs ou des groupes ethniques, cela aux dépens de l'histoire politique nationale.

Cet appel à l'histoire politique amène une question d'importance: comment rédiger un historique qui représente correctement l'expérience vécue par les humains qui forment la communauté canadienne? En examinant certains des thèmes traités par l'histoire des femmes, on en vient à penser qu'une reconceptualisation de l'histoire politique, qui tiendrait mieux compte qu'auparavant du tissu social, résulterait en une approche de notre passé qui serait à la fois plus englobante et plus significative.

Rarely has a CHA president had such a rich variety of obvious topics for the annual presidential address as this year, for 1992 is a year marking the celebration of many significant anniversaries. Thousands of words have already been spoken and written on

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both sides of the Atlantic Ocean on the occasion of the 500th anniversary of the arrival of Columbus in the Americas. Indeed, for many of us, one of our first encounters with an historic date that remained indelibly etched on our memories, came in the form of the oft-heard childhood rhyme, "In fourteen hundred and ninety-two, Columbus sailed the ocean blue."

1992 also marks the 350th anniversary of the founding of the great city of Montreal, a city whose history has been inextricably inter-twined with that of the entire nation. Indeed, Montreal's history as a dominant metropolitan centre has laid the basis for an entire school of Canadian historiography.

Considerably less publicized than the achievements of either Columbus or of Montreal's founder, Paul de Chomedey, sieur de Maisonneuve, is that of Mary Wollstonecraft who published her seminal work, *A Vindication of the Rights of Woman*, in 1792. Such was its immediate impact that a second edition was issued in the same year, and shortly thereafter publishers in France, Ireland and the United States began to market their own editions. The continued significance of this work, and the feminist tradition it inspired, makes this 200th anniversary of special significance for women in many nations throughout the world.

For Canadians, this is the anniversary of yet another signal historical event, one that continues to affect profoundly the lives of each and every one of us — the introduction of the federal income tax system as a temporary war measure seventy-five years ago last month! Given the overwhelmingly negative feelings associated with that event, however, and the presence in this hall of persons much more qualified than I to expound on the scintillating history of federal income tax legislation, I have decided to forego that topic.

That leaves me with yet another more obvious choice for the focus of this address — the 125th anniversary of Confederation. And indeed, given our presence here in Charlottetown in such close proximity to the very room in which the first decisions were taken that eventually led to the creation of Canada, what could be more fitting than to reflect briefly on the current state of the writing of history in this country? While my remarks will focus specifically on Canadian history, and many of my examples will be drawn from women's history, I hope that at least some of the issues I raise will prove relevant to historians who specialize in other areas.

Quand j'étais jeune fille, je fréquentais une petite école de rang du comté d'Oxford, pas trop loin d'Ingersoll, petite ville renommée non seulement pour son fromage et un citoyen qui écrivait de la mauvaise poésie, mais aussi comme le lieu où a été créée l'une des premières ligues impérialistes, en 1884. De sa place d'honneur, sur le mur de devant de la salle de classe, une très jeune reine Elisabeth régnait sur ses sujets juvéniles. Chaque printemps, les dames du chapitre local de l'"Imperial Order Daughters of the Empire" venaient à l'école pour fêter avec nous le "Empire Day". Nous les gratifions en chantant avec un enthousiasme acharné "We'll Never Let the Old Flag Fall", "The Maple Leaf Forever", et "Marching to Pretoria". De toute évidence, les idées anti-impérialistes et pacifistes d'Agnes Macphail n'avaient pas encore réussi à percer notre petit coin de l'Ontario.

Et pourtant, ce ne sont pas les exploits de John Graves Simcoe ou de Laura Secord ou d'autres personnes intimement liées à notre héritage loyaliste et britannique qui furent le sujet de nos premières leçons d'histoire. Je me rappelle très nettement de ma première rencontre avec le passé canadien: je devais créer des bandes dessinées qui racontaient les aventures de nos illustres fondateurs (bien sûr, il n'était jamais question de traiter des fondatrices dans les écoles publiques). Qui furent, alors, les sujets de mes bandes dessinées? C'étaient Robert Cavelier de Lasalle, Pierre Gaultier de Varennes et de La Vérendrye et Pierre-Esprit Radisson. Si je m'arrête sur ces détails, c'est parce que je sais que je ne fus pas la seule à vivre cette expérience. D'après le témoignage d'autres Canadiens élevés hors du Québec, l'histoire de la Nouvelle-France leur a aussi servi d'introduction à l'étude du passé. Pour nos amis francophones du Québec, cela expliquera peut-être pourquoi il est pour nous si difficile d'envisager le départ du Québec de la Confédération canadienne. S'il devait y avoir une telle rupture, nous aurions la sensation accablante d'avoir perdu une partie importante de notre propre identité.

As a result of the recent constitutional turmoil, issues concerning the role of history and historians in the promotion of Canadian unity have become central once again. One of the recurring themes of the testimony presented by "ordinary Canadians" in the various citizens' forums organized by the Spicer Task Force on National Unity was that Canadians do not know their history, and they want more Canadian history taught in provincial education systems. Similarly, the results of a national survey undertaken recently for the Canadian Studies Association reflect a strong desire on the part of the 1,628 respondents to learn more about their national history. In Quebec too, both francophones and anglophones reported that they wanted to be better informed about Canadian history and Canadian heritage.¹

Ironically, Canadians' perceptions that their national history is in a frail and underdeveloped state occur at a time when historical research about this country is in its most advanced state ever. As professional historians, we are all too familiar with the ongoing problem of trying to stay on top of the most recent research in just a limited number of areas of specialization, for the number of scholarly monographs and articles increases at a dizzying pace. Indeed, this very proliferation of research areas has caused some to sound the nationalist alarm bells, and to proclaim that the problem is one of too much history, or more accurately, too much history of the wrong kind. While there have been important variations in the purpose and tone underlying these declarations, their authors suggest that the considerable scholarly attention more recently channelled into women's history, regional history, working class history, and ethnic history has led to a neglect of the writing of national history. In his provocative address delivered as part of the celebrations marking the 100th anniversary of the Department of History at the University of Toronto last fall, Professor Michael Bliss argued that "the writing of Canadian history has become specialized, fragmented and in both substance and audience appeal, privatized." He criticized Canadian historians, including himself, for abdicating "their role as interpreters of the evolution of our public community . . ."²

1. *Association for Canadian Studies Bulletin. Bulletin de l'AEC*, 13 (Summer 1992): 13.

2. Michael Bliss, "Privatizing the Mind: The Sundering of Canadian History, the Sundering of Canada," Creighton Centennial Lecture, delivered 18 October 1991. Reprinted as "Frag-

A few weeks later, an article appeared in the *Globe and Mail* written by a man who never had the opportunity to meet his father who had died fighting for this country during the Second World War. The son denounced a recently published Canadian history book for neglecting the story of Canadian men's contribution to the war effort while including essays that focussed specifically on the war experience of women and Japanese Canadians.³ Although one of the editors of the book responded in a letter to the editor that the book was a compilation of articles designed to supplement — not replace — a companion text containing a standard account of men's activities during the war, this correction seemed to go unnoticed in many quarters. Here was yet more grist for the mills of those who decry the demise of "our good old national history", and the perversion of historians who have apparently succumbed to the siren-call of "political correctness" by concentrating on various discontented and discordant factions.

Pour ceux et celles d'entre nous qui ne travaillent pas dans les domaines spécifiques de l'histoire constitutionnelle ou de l'histoire politique, ces critiques font réfléchir. Devons-nous nous considérer comme des traîtres à notre État-nation, ou à notre discipline, si nos recherches ne débouchent pas directement sur des questions d'ordre politique ou constitutionnel, ou si nous concentrons notre attention sur des provinces ou des régions? Et comment nos collègues, spécialistes dans les domaines non-canadiens, doivent-elles ou doivent-ils évaluer leur rôle? Les inquiétudes sincères au sujet de l'histoire que nous, historiens et historiennes de métier, sommes en train d'écrire, me semblent être basées sur un certain nombre d'hypothèses et de visions de notre pays et de notre métier fort discutables. D'abord, ces rêves d'une histoire nationale me semblent très influencés par une perspective centraliste, sinon torontoise. Dans cette perspective, étudier les périphéries, promouvoir l'histoire régionale et locale paraissent menacer l'unité nationale. Comment résoudre, cependant, les tensions actuelles? Comment arriver à des ententes si on n'a pas une bonne compréhension des traditions, des problèmes et des aspirations des diverses régions qui constituent le Canada? Il faut se rendre compte de nos différences pour arriver à définir ce que nous avons en commun. Il y a quinze ans, dans un discours présidentiel très perspicace, intitulé "National Unity and the Uses of History", Margaret Prang a fait référence à une certaine conception de l'histoire: "... the haunting vision, rooted in long tradition, of explicitly national history as the only ultimately important history and the only one that serves 'national unity'." Elle a ensuite démontré la nécessité d'explorer les identités régionales: "To the extent that we contribute to an understanding of the structure and texture of human communities and of how they have lived together or failed to live together in the past and to the degree that we are able to illuminate the tensions and compromises that must characterize a pluralist society we will honour our obligations to Canada."⁴

mented History, Fragmented Canada," *University of Toronto Magazine* 19 (Winter 1991): 8-9.

3. Robert Martin, "How I lost my father — twice," *The Globe and Mail* (11 November 1991) A18.
4. Margaret Prang, "National Unity and the Uses of History," *Canadian Historical Association, Historical Papers, Communications Historiques* (1977): 7-9.

L'appel pour la primauté de l'histoire dite nationale et politique serait beaucoup plus séduisant si ses promoteurs ne semblaient pas avoir une conception très traditionnelle et très limitée de la politique. Selon ce modèle, les activités d'une élite, composée jusqu'à tout récemment d'hommes de race blanche manipulant les leviers du pouvoir au niveau fédéral, sont considérées comme les plus importantes. Sur une marche inférieure, qui illustre la hiérarchie de l'importance historique, se trouvent la politique provinciale et ses praticiens, et bien plus bas au-dessous d'eux, les gens qui remplissent des fonctions officielles dans leurs communautés locales. La politique est conçue surtout en termes d'activités partisans et électorales; et ces activités sont auréolées d'une importance fondamentale. Il y a tendance aussi à opposer l'histoire politique et l'histoire sociale, comme s'il fallait choisir l'une ou l'autre, comme si les deux se situaient dans des camps opposés. Et pourtant, cette façon d'interpréter la vie humaine en termes de dichotomies va à l'encontre de notre propre expérience.

The significant interconnections between the social and political were clearly illustrated here at Charlottetown during the now famous conference of 1864. When the Canadians arrived here, they were virtual gate crashers, come to present a bold — many said ill-conceived and foolhardy — scheme for a union of all British North American colonies at a conference ostensibly organized to discuss Maritime union. At that time, to quote an eminent specialist of this period, the United Canadas were already "not in very good odour in the Maritimes,"⁵ because of their fractious and violent history, and their withdrawal of support for the Maritimers' pet project, the Intercolonial Railway. And yet, within a few days, the Canadian representatives had effectively seized the momentum, and were being extravagantly feted by the elite of Maritime society.

The success of the political discussions at Charlottetown was directly related to the dazzling and exhausting round of social events filling the interstices of the formal sessions. Several historians have commented on the importance of the quantities of champagne and lobsters consumed, and of the camaraderie that developed among the delegates during the lavish suppers and balls. Few, however, have bothered to ask who organized these events, who presided at them, or whose labour went into the painstaking production of the seemingly endless courses of food, or the making of the elaborate decorations. Consequently, few Canadians are aware of the significant role women of the time played during the conference. Mrs. Dundas, wife of the Lieutenant-Governor of Prince Edward Island, and the wives of Maritime politicians such as Mercy Haine Coles and Mrs. Havilland used their social skills to help transform the mutual ignorance and suspicion of Canadians and Maritimers into the personal bonds of esteem and friendship which facilitated political accommodation and new constitutional arrangements. As this Island's well-known historian, Francis Bolger, has suggested "... much was accomplished in a social milieu rather than at the conference table ... that aspect then has to be emphasized with respect to Confederation, the role that the women played because they would be the people that would be doing much of the preparatory work for the social occasions in not only preparing for them but in hosting them."⁶ Not

5. P. B. Waite, *The Charlottetown Conference*, Centennial Historical Booklet No. 6 (Ottawa, 1967), 9.

6. Francis Bolger as quoted in "Mothers of Confederation," transcript of a programme prepared by Moira Dann and presented on CBC "Ideas," 6 September 1989, 2, 3.

surprisingly, however, the women were acknowledged at the closing banquet with only the "seventh and last toast", and were prevented by convention from responding on their own behalf.⁷

Later that autumn of 1864, at the Quebec conference, women once again played their accustomed roles of hostesses and tension managers exceedingly well. The stresses and strains that accumulated each day as a result of the intense wranglings were largely dissipated each evening in the glittering entertainments orchestrated by the women. At one of the opening banquets, John A. was Mrs. Pope's dinner companion, while George-Etienne Cartier escorted Mrs. Coles.⁸ While we cannot reconstruct the dinner conversation, there is little doubt that the women's social graces were pressed into service to help forge new political alliances. Their influence, including that of at least one wife who was not present, was considerable. As long ago as 1927, in a paper presented before this association, Frank Underhill stressed the importance that George Brown's marriage to the young, cultured and intelligent Anne Nelson, had in transforming him from the intransigent Grit and sworn arch-enemy of John A. into a more moderate and accommodating politician. "Perhaps the real father of Confederation," stated Underhill, "was Mrs. Brown."⁹ Anne Brown's influence was subsequently traced more thoroughly by J. M. S. Careless in yet another paper read before this organization, and this time she was more appropriately designated the "Mother of Confederation".¹⁰ Yet, in most Canadian history courses and textbooks there are few acknowledgements of women's role in forging and maintaining a Canadian political culture.

I am not proposing that the insertion here or there of a reference to how a certain woman who moved in elite circles exerted political influence is a sufficient corrective to the standard approach to political history. Both in social and historiographical terms we are well beyond accepting as satisfactory the time-worn aphorisms "behind every great man there is a great woman" or "the hand that rocks the cradle rules the world". However, as Professor Careless stressed in his discussion of the relationship between Anne and George Brown, the public world of partisan politics and constitution-making is intimately connected to the private life of the family: "... his [Brown's] public conduct was so much affected by his private concerns, centered in his wife and family, that the former cannot be properly described without reference to the latter."¹¹ More recently, with reference to an entirely different social and political context, Joy Parr has stressed the interconnectedness of family and civic involvement for men: "Fine distinctions were drawn in eligibility for municipal office and municipal support between males who were family men and males who were not."¹²

7. "Mothers of Confederation," 3.

8. "Mothers of Confederation", 4-6.

9. F. H. Underhill, "Some Aspects of Upper Canadian Radical Opinion in the Decade before Confederation," *Canadian Historical Association Annual Report for 1927*, 59.

10. J. M. S. Careless, "George Brown and the Mother of Confederation, 1864," *Canadian Historical Association Annual Report*, (1960): 57-73.

11. Careless, 57.

12. Joy Parr, *The Gender of Breadwinners: Women, Men and Change in Two Industrial Towns, 1880-1950* (Toronto, 1990), 205.

Il faut aller encore plus loin, reconceptualiser la politique pour inclure des activités, des acteurs et des actrices que l'on n'incluait guère dans les anciennes définitions et les anciennes hiérarchies de signification. Les syndicats, les regroupements féminins, les mouvements pacifistes, et les organisations ethniques ont toujours eu une dimension politique, car ils se sont penchés sur des questions relatives à la distribution et du contrôle des ressources dans leurs communautés et dans leurs sociétés. Pour sa part, Yolande Cohen a proposé le concept de "contre-pouvoir" pour décrire le contexte dans lequel les femmes ont entrepris leurs diverses actions.¹³ Beaucoup d'entre elles ont préféré oeuvrer dans leurs propres organismes plutôt que dans les partis politiques traditionnels, et elles ont opté pour le consensus plutôt que pour la confrontation. C'est en étudiant les liens entre les institutions politiques et ces mouvements sociaux que l'on peut arriver à une meilleure compréhension de la politique.

Les historiennes anglophones et francophones ont aussi commencé à identifier une autre influence politique majeure que les femmes ont exercée à partir de 1920. Il s'agit de la création de fondations de l'État-providence. Au Québec, cette contribution des femmes possède une histoire très longue et très riche. À l'instar de fondatrices telles que Marie de l'Incarnation, Marguerite d'Youville et les Hospitalières, les religieuses ont doté la province d'une panoplie d'hôpitaux, orphelinats, crèches et refuges pour les démunis de la société. Les femmes laïques canadiennes-françaises ont aussi aidé de diverses façons à mettre en place un réseau d'assistance sociale. Oeuvrant dans les organismes tels que la Fédération nationale Saint-Jean-Baptiste, l'Association des femmes canadiennes-françaises, et les Cercles de fermières, elles ont lutté contre l'ignorance, la maladie, la pauvreté, et la négligence. Leur bénévolat a pourvu les fondations de maintes institutions sociales. Alors, il n'est pas surprenant que les premiers cours en travail social au Québec aient été organisés par une jeune femme, Marie Gérin-Lajoie, fille d'une féministe de premier rang qui avait fondé la Fédération nationale Saint-Jean-Baptiste. En 1923, Marie Gérin-Lajoie fonda sa propre communauté religieuse, l'Institut Notre-Dame-du-Bon-Conseil, pour enseigner le travail social à des soeurs et à des femmes laïques. Ce n'est qu'en 1939 que l'Université de Montréal commença à offrir une formation dans ce domaine.

Comme les Québécoises, les femmes canadiennes-anglaises ont aussi doté leurs communautés d'un éventail d'institutions, accomplissant ainsi un travail préparatoire à une intervention plus directe de l'État dans la société pour assurer le bien-être de ses citoyens. Par leurs oeuvres charitables et éducatives auprès des enfants, des pauvres, et des immigrants, elles ont pris connaissance d'importants problèmes socio-économiques. Ce sont les femmes réformistes qui ont demandé un rôle plus interventionniste de la part du gouvernement. Réunies dans des organismes tels que le "National Council of Women of Canada" et la "Woman's Christian Temperance Union", elles savaient comment faire du lobbying et comment utiliser le système politique afin d'obtenir des réformes. Ceci dit, comment se fait-il que la plupart des études de base du développement de l'État-providence négligent de signaler la contribution de ces milliers de femmes?

13. Yolande Cohen, *Femmes et contre-pouvoir* (Montreal, 1987).

This failure among most historians who label themselves "political" historians to integrate women into their analyses reflects the fact that history was developing as a formal academic discipline at precisely the same time that "political" and "social" were being oppositionally constructed. Men in power not only allowed but encouraged the "other sex" to engage in redeeming and reforming society. "Political" was construed as male, pre-eminent, hard and aggressive; "social", as female, extraneous, soft and nurturing. According to British philosopher, Denise Riley, "one striking effect of the conceptualising of this 'social' is its dislocation of the 'political'. The latter takes on an intensified air of privacy and invulnerability, of 'high' politics associated with juridical and governmental power in a restricted manner."¹⁴ It was both a challenge and an achievement for late nineteenth century social feminism to reconnect these two domains. By extending the skills they had developed in the social realm and by invoking every woman's concerns for the family and society, reform-minded women eventually won the rights of citizenship so long denied half of the population. Is it a mere coincidence that the introduction of the first wave of social legislation in this country — mother's allowances, old age pensions, improved divorce and child custody laws — occurred immediately following the election of the first women to legislative bodies in Canada?

What remains to be examined more fully is how changing concepts of gender affected fundamental notions about the connections between the "political" and the "social" in political theory. As Joan Scott has argued, "Gender is one of the recurrent references by which political power has been conceived, legitimated and criticized . . . Political history has, in a sense, been enacted on the field of gender."¹⁵ Returning to the Charlottetown conference and the political discourse of that day, it has been noted that the metaphor of marriage was frequently invoked to describe the project at hand.¹⁶ It was a union in which the partners were clearly not equal but were supposed to be complementary, and like marriage, this union was supposed to last forever. The parties were to be bound by reciprocal obligations and rights. If one continues the analogy, it is obvious that the federal government stood in status and power to the provinces as did the nineteenth century husband to the wife, offering protection and economic support. The provinces, like the wife, were to confine themselves to social and local issues. Not surprisingly, then, just as the nineteenth century concept of marriage has been fundamentally challenged over the past three decades, so too have the underlying assumptions of Confederation been contested.

Might not constitutional historians also gain new insights into their area of specialization by widening their focus to take into account gender relations? For example, the decade-long struggle led by Canadian women activists to have women declared persons and therefore eligible for appointment to the Senate reveals as much about the underlying principles of the British North America Act, lawmakers' views of the in-

14. Denise Riley, *'Am I that Name?': Feminism and the Category of 'Women' in History* (Minneapolis, 1988), 51.

15. Joan Wallach Scott, *Gender and the Politics of History* (New York, 1988), 49.

16. "Mothers of Confederation," 2.

dividual citizen's rights, and constitutional amendment as it does about inter-war feminism. More recently, the campaign waged by women in 1980 and 1981 for the inclusion of equality provisions in the Charter of Rights and Freedoms, can be used to illustrate how dramatically the dynamics of constitution-making have changed. These historical events also raise more general issues regarding the formulation of government policy, provincial-federal relations, and individual vs. collective rights.

From its beginnings as an organized movement in the nineteenth century, an essential characteristic of feminism has been the ideological and strategic tension between individual rights and group rights. Feminists invoked the classical liberal argument of Mary Wollstonecraft, John Stuart Mill and Harriet Taylor Mill to claim for women access to higher education and to the vote. Simultaneously, many of the same feminists embraced the concept of female difference to stress women's special characteristics and aptitudes and their need for differential treatment as in the case of protective legislation. This tradition of working within a dual-rights framework undoubtedly provides Canadian feminists with a particular perspective on constitution-making, for it makes them sensitive to the claims advanced by other groups. For them, the call for special recognition put forward by aboriginal peoples, linguistic minorities and multicultural groups has a familiar ring about it. It was not the concept of Quebec as a "distinct society" in the Meech Lake Accord that gave pause to many feminists, but rather the uncertainty surrounding the hierarchy of rights that such a provision in the constitution would create, and the process by which the Accord had been produced. Contemporary Canadian feminists have developed a theoretical and practical model of asymmetry, geared toward equality of outcome rather than equality of treatment, that politicians and so-called constitutional experts would do well to consider.

Si jusqu'à ce point j'ai donné l'impression que toute la responsabilité de l'ouverture et de l'innovation repose sur les épaules des spécialistes de la politique, je voudrais quelque peu rétablir l'équilibre. C'est à nous tous et toutes de réexaminer nos prémisses et nos cadres d'analyse. Il faut remettre en question les démarcations artificielles et les hiérarchies stériles que nous avons acceptées jusqu'ici. Le grand défi est de construire une histoire de ce pays qui reflète toute sa diversité et toute sa complexité, mais en même temps il faut trouver des motifs et des orientations qui caractérisent notre culture politique et notre vie sociale. En écrivant l'histoire des groupes jusqu'ici marginalisés dans les récits nationaux, nous aurons plus de chance de rendre cette histoire plus intéressante et plus pertinente aux yeux d'un public plus nombreux.