

SECTION THREE

PEOPLE, PLACE, AND STORIES

THE “GREAT MAN” APPROACH to history has largely fallen out of favour among historians. The assumption that one powerful man’s life could, by itself, explain key eras and events was recognized as too limited, and the assumption that lone, powerful individuals made history by themselves has been criticized for ignoring the ways that history is made in local and daily contexts. The articles in this section, collective biographies of women in three different times and places, are a refreshing reminder of the powerful insights that can be gained by bringing individual lives into focus.

The power of these essays lies partly in the fact that they do not attempt a “great woman” approach. Rather, they examine stories and lives that reveal something more general about women’s experiences in their particular Wests, and about histories that comprise thousands of interesting and illuminating individual stories. These individual stories, so easy to lose in the sweeping narratives the West invites, can also re-shape those narratives in small but critical ways and re-tell them to reflect their different realities.

The title of Jean Barman's article, "Writing Women into the History of the North American Wests, One Woman at a Time," is particularly apt for this trio that illustrates the process through which focussing on individual women's lives had led historians to questions older interpretations of women's lives and their larger historical contexts. They also illuminate the process through which individual women's lives and the perspectives of individual historians interact to produce new histories and new questions.

Jean Barman focuses serially on five women who lived in British Columbia from 1849 to 1941: Emma Douse Crosby, Maria Mahoi Douglas Fisher, Annie McQueen, Jessie McQueen, and Constance Lindsey Skinner. With birth dates ranging from 1849 to 1877 and an equally diverse range of personal backgrounds, these women participated in the major decades of British Columbia's colonization. The last decades of the nineteenth century were critical years for the province, and that history looks different when seen through the life of a teacher born in Nova Scotia, a missionary's wife born in Ontario, a bi-racial Aboriginal and Hawai'ian woman, or a New York writer born in the Cariboo. Each life opens a new window on the roles of individual women within particular historical contexts, on the limiting effects of social structures, and on the power of individual choices to make a difference. The fact that all five lived lives far removed, literally or figuratively, from their birthplaces speaks to the choices they made given the constraints into which they were born. Each woman, at some point, took charge of her own life, making at least one choice that was contrary to the expectations of the day.

Barman shows how paying careful attention to the "traces" that women left behind, whether in the form of voluminous personal correspondence or the oral testimony of their descendants, can shine a light on the ways in which they did and did not conform to the expectations placed on them. When seen through the lenses of these women's stories, the history of British Columbia looks quite different. Barman's narrative shifts from woman to woman, to recreate a stage in women's historical writing sometimes referred to as "add a woman and stir."¹ As each life was added, the story might appear unconnected. It was only after adding

a number of women to inherited histories that the larger picture might be imagined in new ways.

The power of an individual narrative is even more evident in Molly Rozum's "'That Understanding with Nature': Region, Race, and Nation in Women's Stories from the Modern Canadian and American Grasslands West." Whereas Barman's five biographies had to be teased from the "traces" they left behind, the three women Rozum chronicles consciously wrote their individual experiences into bigger narratives. North Dakotan Era Bell Thompson's *American Daughter* was published in 1946, Manitoba–North Dakota resident Thorstina Jackson Walters' *Modern Sagas* appeared in 1953, and Alberta's Annora Brown published *Sketches from Life* in 1981. Thompson, Walters, and Brown shared a time (the mid-twentieth century) and a place (the northern edge of the continent's grasslands), but each wrote what might have been a shared history from her own unique perspective.

To one degree or another, all three texts engage the themes of race, women's relationships to western land, and the standard narratives of the Canadian and American Wests, probing their connections to place, the power of western masculinity to constrict the wide open spaces for women, and the meanings of borders—rural and urban, national and social—in their lives. Rozum's close analysis of these three narratives suggests that women in the twentieth-century North American West paid more attention to gender and race than nationalism, and that they forged their own intense connections to the West in defiance of Western narratives that said that women and minorities did not belong. Their combined stories offer a strong corrective to the dominance of male-centred, white-centred, and nation-centred Western narratives.

Joan Jensen's article narrows the focus even further by tracing Jensen's own distinguished career writing the history of rural women. This article makes explicit the connections between the historian's own intellectual and personal history and the process of historical inquiry. Jensen links the journey of her German grandmother, who immigrated to northern Wisconsin in the 1890s, and her own family's history across the Canada–U.S. border with the development of the broader field of rural women's

history. By tracing her own intellectual autobiography, she reminds us that the questions historians ask and the stories we tell are connected in some ways to our own lives and to the search for new connections between women's memories and the histories of the places we have called home.

As historians begin to pay more attention to the scholarly output on both sides of the border, Jensen cautions us to beware of the risk of fantasizing or romanticizing women's lives by idealizing a richer, simpler, irretrievable past. The power of truthful storytelling is to reveal the complicated, difficult, and often mundane choices that made up western women's individual lives and our collective past. The power of Jensen's advice lies in how clearly she grounds it in her own history and her own choices as a historian.

These articles remind us, too, that individuals do matter. If history is the sum of each individual's story, then each story can re-shape what "history" looks like. An individual doesn't have to be a "great man" or a man at all, or even "great," to say something significant about history or to help make it.

NOTES

1. See Gerda Lerner, *Teaching Women's History* (Washington, D.C.: American Historical Association, 1981). For a discussion of this process, see for instance Gerda Lerner, "Placing Women in History: Definitions and Challenges," in Lerner, *The Majority Finds Its Past*, 145–59, esp. 145–48. An earlier version of this article was presented as a paper at the Second Berkshire Conference on the History of Women, 1974; it was originally published in *Feminist Studies III*: 1&2 (Fall 1975): 5–14.