DISCOVERING WOMEN’S HISTORY

Originally written in 1975 for a fourth-year seminar on labour history at Glendon College, “The 1907 Bell Telephone Strike” is very much part of a moment of ‘discovery’ in Canadian women’s history. Very little was written in Canadian women’s history in the early 1970s, but by the end of the decade articles and monographs were appearing with increasing frequency, as we tried to address the silences, gaps, and malestream assumptions that had (mis)shaped history to date.¹ My treatment of the Bell Telephone strike reflected a fairly traditional historical training in terms of methodology: it drew on empirical research from sources such as government documents, personal letters, company files, and newspapers (both labour and mainstream), as a means of adding women to working-class history, which to date had concentrated more on male workers, particularly skilled ones. Unlike some of those contemporary studies of male workers, however, this article was less engaged with Marxist theory and was less concerned with questions of working-class culture.²

The article, like other women’s history of the period, was both corrective and additive. The Industrial Disputes Investigation Act (IDIA), an important theme in this article (and in other writing on the state), had often been described with reference to strikes (by men) in resource industries and railways, while scientific management and welfare capitalism were also usually defined with reference to male workers. My purpose was not only to correct this gender bias vis-à-vis these concepts but also to try to understand the views and attitudes of women workers at a more human level — however naive that may now sound. How did they see their wage work? Did they garner a sense of collectivity and comradeship from their jobs? Why did they become so militant during
the strike? Did they have a distinctive feminine working-class identity, different from that of middle-class women? While the latter question referred to gender and class relations, I would certainly now add questions about ethnicity and race.

At the time, simply locating women's actions and voices was presumed to be a valid goal for feminist historians, yet this still seemed a difficult endeavour when one relied so heavily on the records left by those with power, whether it was Mackenzie King (who seemed to reveal more of himself than anything else) or the medical experts he consulted, who saw women through their own ideological blinkers as weaker beings, seemingly ruled by their bodies — though at the time we were not speaking the language of ‘body history.’ I primarily saw the doctors’ emphasis on protecting motherhood when I read their 1907 testimony, although Carolyn Strange would later delve into this same source with new analytical tools, pointing to the doctors' preoccupation with ‘the mothers of the race’ and explaining why this kind of medical knowledge became a source of important social power.3 Recently, when I was researching the legal testimony in 1970s’ court cases about flight attendants who wished to work during their pregnancies, I was struck by a sense of déjà vu, as women’s ‘vulnerable’ bodies were still being interpreted for them by medical experts in a similar manner.4

Understanding gender ideologies, a theme being discussed in feminist writing at the time, was quite central to me. I was influenced very much by Wayne Roberts’s fine work, which attempted to reconstruct working women as both classed and gendered subjects (in modern parlance) and which tried to understand the nature of exploitation as well as when, and why, women resisted the confining and exploitative conditions of their labour.5 I started graduate school at McMaster in 1976, about the same time that Wayne was hired by Labour Studies there, and our debates and conversations about class and women’s history were important in shaping my ideas, in pushing me to think about how to define gender oppression and class exploitation as different but overlapping and interconnected processes.

Even the language in this 1978 article reflected a particular historical and political moment. I felt it was important to name things like ‘exploitation’ rather than hiding behind more subdued, nonjudgmental
language, for this meant politically identifying women’s inequality, while terms like ‘solidarity and sisterhood’ were also commonly used in the late 1960s and early 1970s, even if, ironically, there was no unified women’s movement at the time. Perhaps most telling, in a period — the 1970s — when socialist feminists (including those aligned with a Marxist-Leninist party and those not) were beginning to form separate organizations for working women, to engage in unionization campaigns, to set up separate women’s unions, and to draw together coalitions of women within the labour movement, it is not surprising that I was preoccupied primarily with wage labour and especially with union organizing. In 1979, one of my housemates was a Canadian Labour Congress staffer trying to organize bank tellers, a campaign that, even in the context of unionized Hamilton, was very difficult. There were still some who claimed that women were ‘hard to organize,’ as if they were inherently conservative, yet I thought history suggested otherwise: that women might be mobilized, though they faced immense structural and ideological barriers to unionization. History did not offer up political solutions for the present, but it did at least suggest some of the questions we needed to ask.

While the approach, methodology, and language of this piece are shaped by this particular political moment of the 1970s, I believe there are some aspects of the article that remain relevant. For one thing, I don’t think we should dismiss using very ‘traditional’ events like strikes as a focus for our research. They are moments of conflict that leave us rich sources and that may reveal far more than a chronology of events, indicating, for instance, key political debates and conflicting ideologies of the period. It is not the event but what we do with it that matters.6 Second, I would still endorse the proposition that the labour movement of the time (including some labour feminists like May Darwin) had a deep sense of “ambivalence” about wage-earning women, sometimes supporting female workers’ rights but also emphasizing an ideology of domesticity and motherhood. As Christina Burr would later argue, this idealized female domesticity stood in contrast to images of manly skill, breadwinning, and patriarchal protection, and these attributes were for many skilled workers also caught up in definitions of Anglo-Saxon superiority.7
Notes

1 One of the early books influencing me also reflected this view: Berenice Carroll, ed., *Liberating Women’s History: Theoretical and Critical Essays* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1976).


7 Christina Burr, *Spreading the Light: Work and Labour Reform in Late-Nineteenth-Century Toronto* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1999).