

Selections from *Historians without Borders*: Presidential Address by Mary Lynn Stewart

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The tipping point in my conversion to women's history occurred in 1969, when I was a graduate student at Columbia University in New York. But it occurred in a non-credit, off-campus graduate seminar in history conducted by pioneers of women's history like Gerda Lerner and Joan Kelly Gadol. This was the most demanding and rewarding course I ever took, because we all devoted a lot of time to finding elusive reading material and came to each

session prepared to debate our interpretations of what was very fresh material. To those who dismiss this period of women's history as mere recovery history, without any theory, I agree that we searched high and low for documents and secondary sources, but I disagree about not using theory. In my case, I drew heavily on Simone de Beauvoir's *Second Sex*, with its useful notions of women's situation and historical contingency.

We were explorers in nearly uncharted territory. I say nearly uncharted because we quickly discovered an earlier generation of historians whose superb scholarship on women had escaped our notice, since these works had not been assigned in any course or been included on any comprehensive exam bibliography. I understand that other historians excavating what they thought were untapped lodes of historical data, have also uncovered predecessors who had been excised from the historiographical record.

In marathon negotiations with the departmental curriculum committee at Columbia, we concentrated on including women in Western Civilization courses. The dominant progressive narrative considered women ahistorical, so women barely played cameo roles in history courses. When they entered the scene, they were identified as exceptional women; on the rare occasion that anyone alluded to femininity, it was eternal, or the negation of history as progress. Most of us refused to focus on "exceptional" women or accept the notion of an eternal feminine.ⁱ We were grappling with essentialism, but did yet not have the language to talk about it. Here too we ran into the problem of patriarchal structure versus women's agency.ⁱⁱ It would take several years to articulate ideas about the coexistence of flexible structures and limited agency, notably the concepts of patriarchies in the plural, capable of change, and structured choice within patriarchies.

We grappled with the need for multiple histories, not just a single narrative. (We did not yet have the term master narrative.) We encountered the “fear of plurality” that still informs efforts to be more inclusive, fears that still lead to the near exclusion of women in, for instance, the national historical canon in Holland, imposed in 2004.ⁱⁱⁱ Other excluded groups, such as people of colour, have met resistance when they argued for a more representative history.

This extracurricular women’s history course was the only occasion I had as a student to observe women as professors of history. Their enthusiasm and intellectual rigour inspire me to this day. Many in that seminar continue to teach women’s history or women’s studies. I spent twenty-eight years in a joint appointment with Women’s Studies and History and I am now full time in the recently renamed Department of Gender, Sexuality and Women’s Studies at Simon Fraser University. In my thirty-eight years teaching career, I have tried to recreate the unadulterated pleasure in learning that I felt in that seminar. As the boundaries of historical inquiry opened to include other previously-unrecognized subjects, such as disabled people, gays, lesbians and transgendered people, some of my students **have** experienced that joy of discovery.

The other impetus for my interest in women’s history was the women’s movement. During the campaign for abortion rights in New York State, I began attending what would later be called consciousness-raising sessions at Columbia. However, our large group of university students, including such feminist luminaries as Kate Millet and Ti-Grace Atkinson, focused on practical issues like acquiring more women’s washrooms on campus—and liberating men’s rooms—when we got no results. Like getting access to birth control pills—and occupying the student health centre when we were ignored—and lobbying for what became the first police unit dedicated to sex crimes, the Special Victims Unit that is now the subject of a TV series and was most recently the backdrop for the “perp walk” of Dominique Strauss-Kohn. When I returned to Canada in 1977, I joined an equally vibrant women’s movement.

When I began teaching, I was further drawn to women’s history, because I began to realize that history itself was gendered and that this was linked to the predominance of men in history departments. When I was first hired in a department of history at a women’s college, Smith College in Northampton, Massachusetts, I was still naïve enough to be impressed by the fact that the department employed three women and eleven men. I soon realized that there were informal gender barriers that I had not imagined. The most ironic and frustrating one was opposition to teaching women’s history at a women’s college—until, that is, influential alumnae (aka large donors) urged the department at least to offer a course during the centennial of the College in 1975. After I joined the History Department at Simon Fraser University in 1977, it was acceptable to teach women’s history, because the only two tenure-track women—the other one was an earlier President of the CHA, Nikki Strong-Boag—were jointly-appointed with Women’s Studies. For fifteen years, I was one of only two women in a department of twenty-eight tenure-track faculty members. At SFU, I bumped into the attitude that two tenured women were quite enough for a department, an opinion expressed in hiring battles when Nikki and I tried to persuade the department to hire promising women. Even after the walls of history departments had been breached,

some tried to defend the perimeters from outsiders. These prejudices and battles prevailed until the early nineties, when a few more women were hired. **Not** incidentally, many more have been added since then.

Meanwhile, I took advantage of the inter-disciplinarity of Women's Studies, notably when I conceived of a book on the history of modern women's clothing that used symbolic anthropology to detect the meaning of fashion along with a political economy of the couture business in interwar France. In the late 1980s, I helped form Academic Women at SFU to organize other faculty women, many of whom felt very isolated in their departments. Although we lobbied for and got an employment equity officer and a pay equity review, we also attended each others' talks. These talks expanded our horizons and enriched our scholarship. To belabour the metaphor, we benefitted from excursions over disciplinary borders. Other multi-disciplinary societies serve the same purpose.

ⁱ Sylvia Paletschek, "Opening up Narrow Boundaries: Memory Culture, Historiography and Excluded Histories from a Gendered Perspective," in *Gendering Historiography: Beyond National Canons*, ed. Angelika Epple and Angelika Schaser (Frankfurt: Campus Verlag, 2009), p. 168.

ⁱⁱ Judith M. Bennett, *History Matters: Patriarchy and the Challenge of Feminism*, (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2006) pp. 68 and 129.

ⁱⁱⁱ "Introduction. Multiple Histories? Changing Perspectives on Modern Historiography," and Maria Grever, "Fear of Plurality: Historical Culture and Historiographical Canonization in Western Europe," in Epple and Schaser.