



Margaret Gillett

*The Seahorse Society**

When a paper for a conference on "Women" turns up with a name like "The Seahorse Society," it is probably more necessary than usual that the author should offer some explanation of her paper's title. Well, it is really very simple, very obvious: I want to think about formal education and sexism and acculturation, about the adjustment of individuals to the imperatives of social tradition and biological nature, about conformity and imagination; and what I want us to realize is that there are dozens of different ways to do things, that we are missing the boat if we think we are following nature and if we have never considered the seahorse.

The seahorse is, as you know, a small fish found in warm waters. Its appearance suggests that of a horse, with an elongated head and snout supported by a portion of the abdomen that resembles a neck. It swims gently in an upright position, not horizontally like most other fish. Its body is covered with rectangular, not square, bony plates with spines at their junctures. The most significant characteristic of this little fish is that the male seahorse has an abdominal pouch in which the eggs are laid and where they are fed from the father's blood supply until they hatch. After the gestation period, the father reportedly goes through the pangs of birth as he expels the live young from his pouch. For a little while, the pouch also remains as a haven for the young fry. Here we have a case of the almost unthinkable — male maternity. And there are other variations, for example, the banded and Florida pipe fish males hatch

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their young in a groove or pouch along their bellies; the male tilapia that lives in African rivers and Indonesian ponds scoops up with its mouth eggs laid by the female, then foregoes eating for two weeks while the eggs hatch in its mouth, and this time the mouth serves as a haven for the fry until they are big enough to take care of themselves. The American gaff topsail fish does much the same thing, while the male Australian kurtus incubates the eggs on his forehead.

Of course, you may claim that these are all oddities, that they are quirks of nature like the aninga (or snake bird) that swims under water; or the platypus, that mixed-up mammal which lays eggs, suckles its young, has a ducklike bill and a beaverlike tail; or the rabbits, fish and spiders and so forth which seem to know no mother love except a healthy appetite that causes them to devour their babies. You may think that these aberrations have nothing to do with us and, furthermore, that if these odd fish are members of the Seahorse Society, then you do not want any part of it. But I suggest that they should not be entirely rejected as models for our society at large. Admittedly, like all paradigms, they do not fit exactly, but I think the lesson they have for us is that a reversal of the traditional and the expected can be shown to work, that life is replete with possibilities. They indicate that not always and exclusively are females the ones who hatch the eggs and not always and exclusively are males the ones to conceive ideas. And it follows, that if we continue to use nothing but the standardized patterns from the past, the same old sex role models, we are cheating ourselves and our heirs. In other words, if we continue to expect people to behave in certain ways, think in certain modes, grow up with certain expectations, be trained in certain skills, perform certain functions, adopt certain roles purely on the basis of sex, purely on the basis of their reproductive organs, then we are being blind, unfair, ridiculous.

You may think that this is the obvious by now, that I am beating a dead horse (or seahorse), that consciousness has been raised, that the message has been received. Regretfully, I do not think that this is the case.

I grant that during the last ten years or so — roughly since the publication of Betty Friedan's *The Feminine Mystique* — a great many consciousnesses have been raised, a great many scales have fallen off a great many eyes, a great many myths have been shattered, and a great many pedestals have crumbled. However, the fragments of stereotypes have an uncanny way of reassembling themselves, rather like the pieces in one of Norman McLaren's animations. We are surely all aware that the history of ideas or of social development is by no means neatly linear and even though historians and social anthropologists and other scholars may currently deny the validity

of antique aphorisms such as "Biology is destiny" or "Ontogeny recapitulates phylogeny," these pesky deterministic notions keep re-asserting themselves — together with the myth of female inferiority and the practice of providing differentiated educational opportunities and expectations for girls and boys. (Similarly, with other prejudices — for example, race, that the issue of school bussing that was live in the American South in the '50s, is now alive and well in Boston.) Even though women are presently participating in the educational enterprise from the rank of Minister on down, yet we cannot expect the history of women in education to be one continuous account of success and amelioration from now on. On the contrary, I suspect that the forward thrust of the Women's Lib movement may be in some imminent danger of being blunted, at least temporarily.

The danger comes from two principal sources. The first, paradoxically, from the very success of the Movement. Women's Liberation is visible in the growing number of Women's Studies courses, programs and centers all over North America; in the U.S. Constitutional Equal Rights Amendment, Title IX of the Education Amendments of 1972 and Women's Educational Equity Act of 1973; in the fact that there was a Canadian Royal Commission on the Status of Women and now we have Status of Women Councils in every Province; in the success of *Ms.* magazine and the enormous outpouring of the "new" women's literature; in the declaration of 1975 as International Women's Year. All of these major developments, plus token women in almost every field of endeavor and at almost every level, are enough to generate not only a backlash from M.C.P.'s but complacency from women themselves. Lots of us go around dreaming that "we've never had it so good." We are guilty of forgetting that while the number of women in higher education is up, the proportion of women to men in graduate studies has declined since the '30s; that while women's salaries have increased, the relationship to men's salaries has fallen.

The second source of danger for the Movement comes from the general mood of conservatism that has quieted the campuses for the last couple of years and which, in turn, may stem from a general sense of ennui concerning radicalism and the sobering impacts of Watergate and inflation. We need constant reminding of these kinds of dangers. We need a Seahorse Society to help us ride out the waves of complacency and conservatism that keep breaking over us.

Consider for example, that women were admitted to Canadian universities about a hundred years ago. In 1875, Mount Allison was not only the first university in Canada, but the first in the British Empire, to grant a bachelor's degree to a woman. (It was a B.Sc. to Grace Annie Lockhart.) Mount A conferred its first B.A. to a woman in 1882, Acadia followed two years later. Meanwhile,

Dalhousie had admitted women in 1881 and McGill got around to it in 1884, thanks to an endowment by Sir Donald A. Smith (later Lord Strathcona) and the leadership of Principal John William Dawson. At the time, of course, there was considerable opposition and much controversy over the issue of co-education. So, even once they were in, women at McGill, as elsewhere, had to overcome many impediments.

Women students were segregated in the classrooms and in the library; they were required to wait for lectures in a special waiting room; they were chaperoned at all times; their names were entered on a separate page of the matriculation book; they took their examinations separately and their examination results were announced in a different room at a different time from those of the men. They were denied the right to wear academic dress until they petitioned for it and for a long time the privilege of being elected a Fellow of the University was withheld. What to call graduates caused much discussion — for how could ladies possibly be bachelors of anything? — with the result that special terms were adopted — “baccalaurea,” “magistra,” and “doctrix.”

In addition to grappling with the major issue of their academic credibility, the first women students had to overcome a host of little insults that generate a stressful psychological atmosphere and that require long-term fortitude to overcome. But they did it, they overcame the social slights and they proved themselves academically at the examinations.

Nevertheless, almost half a century later, we find one of McGill's heroes, Stephen Leacock, writing about women students not, as it happens, on his own campus, but at Oxford:

To a profound scholar like myself, the presence of young women, many of them most attractive, flitting up and down the streets of Oxford in their caps and gowns, is very distressing.

Who is to blame for this and how they first got in I do not know. But I understand that they first of all built a private college of their own close to Oxford, and then they edged themselves in foot by foot In any case the women are now all over the place. They attend the college lectures, they row in a boat, and they perambulate the High Street. They are even offering a serious competition against the men. Last year they carried off the ping-pong championship and took the chancellor's prize for needlework, while in music, cooking and millinery the men are said to be nowhere.

There is no doubt that unless Oxford puts the women out while there is yet time, they will overrun the whole university. What this means to the progress of learning few can tell and those who know are afraid to say.

Cambridge University, I am glad to see, still sets its face sternly against this innovation. I am reluctant to count any superiority in the University of Cambridge . . . but I must admit that Cambridge has chosen the wiser part.²

The supporters of male chauvinism were very lucky indeed to have Leacock on their side, not just because he was famous, but because his weapon was laughter, a notoriously difficult spear to turn into a plow-share. I do not want to digress too far into Leacock's attitude to women, but may I just mention that in some of his other works he abandoned the light touch and forthrightly claimed, "The ordinary woman cannot do the ordinary man's work. She never has and never will. The reasons why she can't are so many, that is, she *can't* in so many different ways, that it is not worth while to try to name them. *Women need not more freedom but less.*"

But in spite of Leacock and his like-minded colleagues, women were at McGill to stay. We all know, of course, that for minority persons to break into any institution is just the beginning of troubles. James Meredith must have had a horrible time as the first negro at "Old Miss," just as Claire Kirkland Casgrain must have had a horrible time as the only woman in the Quebec National Assembly, where she was the butt of Noel Tremblay's vicious attacks. (*Le Journal des Débats* records numerous incredible personal insults directed toward Mme Casgrain by this former professor of French Literature at Laval University, with snide allusions to her menstrual cycle and provocative suggestions about the causes of her alleged short-temper.) All of this means simply that you have to keep fighting, that you have to keep conquering the stereotypes. You have to remember the seahorse.

Meanwhile, McGill like the other Canadian universities has been aware, somewhat dimly, of sexism. The report of the Senate Committee on Discrimination as to Sex in the University which came out in 1971 showed a familiar Canada-wide pattern, one that was revealed in AUCC reports of 1970 and 1972. In general terms, these studies show part-time enrolment of undergraduates, male and female, are approximately equal, but full-time undergraduate enrolment reveals about half as many females as males; in graduate study, the higher the degree, the poorer the representation of females relative to males; most full-time university women teachers are concentrated in the lower ranks (77% were assistant professors or lecturers); there is a significant male/female salary discrepancy at all ranks, and a low representation of females as administrators and members of the Boards of Governors.⁴

A symposium on "The Response of Canadian Universities to Feminism" was held recently in Toronto. I am eager to get the report and to discover whether the participants believed that matters are improving. I already know that the University of Toronto and the University of British Columbia have voted funds to compensate women for the injustices in salaries and promotion they have suffered over the years.⁵ McGill does not appear to have responded dramatically to the recommendations of its 1971 report on Dis-

crimination and Sex, in fact the Committee to implement it seems to have died in Senate this year with hardly a whimper. However, both the *McGill News* (the Graduate Society publication) and the *McGill Reporter* deal with the issue of women at the university from time to time and "profile" individual women. According to Andrew Allen, the Information Officer, the *Reporter* does not actively go out in search of "Found Women" à la *Ms. Magazine*. Women are reported in the *Reporter* on the basis of merit and interest. This is a healthy situation, I agree, but I think we still need some active searching out. Women's historical contribution to education has first to be hypothesized and then discovered. The forces of tradition keep us hidden from history in so many devious and deadening ways. Some examples close to home may show how the system works.

Item: In 1966, I published a textbook, *A History of Education: Thought and Practice* with McGraw-Hill of Canada. The publishers allowed me to call myself "Margaret Gillett" on the inside, but they insisted that the author's name on the outside cover be "M. Gillett" because it sounded more solid, scholarly, respectable — in a word, male.

Item: In 1972, a colleague at a Western university, contemplating a book of biographical essays on Canadian educators, asked if I would write the chapter on a certain Quebec educational functionary and sent me a proposed table of contents. There was not one woman in the list. I pointed this out, acknowledging that the editors might have to dig to find appropriate women but believing that they would not have to delve much deeper than they had for the cadaverous collection of good, grey men they had disinterred for this project. I looked into the remains of the man they had assigned me and considered him best left buried. So the book is now out without my chapter, but it does include two women among the eighteen men.⁶

Item: This year, more or less by accident, I was asked to comment on the names of Quebecers suggested for inclusion in Vol. XI of the *Dictionnaire biographique du Canada* (personnages décédés entre 1881 - 1890). Despite all the educational work that was going on in the convents alone, there was not one woman under consideration.

It seems incredible that, in this day and age, women can be utterly overlooked; the more so when you think that over a century ago Mrs. Hale had produced a book called *Woman's Record or Sketches of all Distinguished Women from the Creation to A.D. 1868 arranged in Four Eras with Selections from Authoresses of Each Era*. Mrs. Hale had found 229 women worthy of inclusion, which shows what you can do if you try. (Incidentally, she dedicated the work to "the men of America, who show in their laws and customs, respecting Women, ideas more just and feelings more noble than were ever evinced by men of any other nation . . .") On the

Canadian scene, Henry J. Morgan had published in 1862 *Sketches of Celebrated Canadians*. He was on a kind of crusade to find and preserve, hoping that "hereby some worthy names and memories may not be allowed to pass into oblivion."⁷ He produced a total of 509 entries — four of whom were women,⁸ to whom he accorded five pages out of 779. However, in 1903, Morgan published another collection of biographies — this time, *Types of Canadian Women*. He confessed in his introduction:

It was . . . only within recent years that I contemplated (vaguely at first) the making of such a book as this — a book in which the "predominant partner" has only a casual share. Once the idea had taken possession of my mind, I felt like a convert from whose eyes the scales had fallen.

If, however, I had been blind so long to the claims of women, I was not alone. Indeed, my "Types" might never have been dreamed of had I not been swept unconsciously into the current of the age and felt the urgency of one of its most vital movements. With what is revolutionary in that movement, I have it is true, no sympathy. But the man must be obstinate in his prejudices who disdains to acknowledge the need and the good of the reforms in female education that have begun to atone for the long injustice of the past. Of course, in the woman (as in the man) of genius there is an innate force that impels her to the attainment of what is essential for the fulfillment of her destiny. Strong desire seems not only to suggest a forecast but to create the path to its goal. It must at the same time be conceded that, even for women of privileged classes, the road for intellectual advancement was until quite recently, so uphill and arduous as to be practically prohibitive. . . .

In Canada where the status of women has always been high, the needed changes were brought to pass with less acrimony than elsewhere, and were furthered by the chivalrous generosity both of our men of learning and our men of wealth.⁹

He went on to praise Lord Strathcona and Sir J. W. Dawson of McGill for their support of women and then gave brief biographies of 354 women, while contemplating 250 more for volume II.

Even with this kind of championing, women's achievements keep getting lost. We keep drifting back to the *status quo ante* and male stereotypes begin to dominate once more. At the present time, it is possible for one writer to give a fairly glowing account of current achievements,¹⁰ but for another to be merely hopeful that we might be getting somewhere by the 21st century.¹¹ I do not think we ought to be entirely pessimistic — the very existence of this conference and many like it in recent months gives us grounds for hope. We have to recognize that while the big pendulum swings of history take place and the fads and fashions come and go, real social change may take place agglutinatively, gradually building up. Indeed, there is some evidence that we have reached a new plateau of acceptance — for instance, according to a study conducted by the Institute for

Social Research, University of Michigan, a majority of the population now approves of women's liberation and, when the label "liberation" is removed, nearly three women in four and slightly more men applaud efforts to change things for women in North American Society.¹³ This plateau can become the complacency I spoke of earlier and raised consciousnesses can also be lowered; the sustained effort to promote change can become a bore; the short cuts of stereotypes can save time and worry — it becomes easier to give in and let the principals of schools and department heads be male, rather than risk the notorious "woman" boss; it is simpler to divide classes into competitive teams on the basis of boys and girls than on any other criterion; why not let the boys be rough and expect the girls to be gentle and "good"? Why not be practical and counsel the boys into shop and the girls into home . . .? These and other sexist practices and attitudes which pervade the schools¹⁴ will keep reappearing unless we keep reminding ourselves and everyone else that our society is too sophisticated and complicated to accept the simplicities of stereotypes, that the real potentials of all human beings can be fulfilled in so many different ways, that the possibilities are almost unlimited. It is true, we may not be able to or want to model our society on our old friend, the seahorse, but we certainly should not forget him.

As for historians of education — and social historians generally — there are a number of things they can do:

1. Discard the male achievement stereotypes
2. Assume that women have made contributions to education
3. Deliberately search out and find these women
4. Reassess the records — even those which appear to be favorable to women. For example, Oberlin College, Ohio is often cited for its contribution to women's education because it was the first co-educational college in the United States, but Jill Conway has shown recently that women were admitted not because of any theory of equal educational justice but because they were thought to contribute to the mental and emotional balance of the male students and because their free domestic services made the school economically viable. In a word, the first women at Oberlin were more servants than students.¹⁴
5. Inject the women's issue into the mainstream of the history of school reform. Note that the subject of women rarely arises in the current crop of education reform literature. For example, it is not one of Ivan Illich's principal interests — I do not know that the impact of "de-schooling" on girls has been considered much at all.

This kind of revisionism and radicalism in writing the history of education is long overdue and may help create a society where the seahorse is no longer considered an odd fish.

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****Seahorse courtesy B. Jaques**