

Book Reviews

Margaret Gillett.

WE WALKED VERY WARILY: A History of Women at McGill.

Montreal: Eden Press Women's Publications, 1981.

496 pp. \$18.95.

This is, in several ways, an extraordinary book. "I would have no embarrassment in acknowledging that this work is honestly feminist," says the author. It is written with passion, as the history of the struggle of women against men - a struggle to win something nearer to equality of rights, opportunities and rewards. Men (except for a few of the enlightened) are generally viewed as the enemies, the obstructors, even as the oppressors. Nearly all the achievements of women are presented as victories over those who tried to block them.

Some would regard a book written in this spirit as more polemical than historical. The aim of the historian, at least in theory, should be to record conflict without taking part in it. But any reviewer approaching Margaret Gillett's book with an historian's disapproval is likely, sooner or later, to find himself considerably disarmed.

He is disarmed from the start by the author's honesty. She does not (like many historians) conceal partiality under a studied appearance of detachment. Immediately, she "declares an interest." She admits she is part of the struggle she records. Soon the reader realizes that her personal commitment has given a lively strength to her style, such as a cool detachment might have depleted.

The reader at once is caught up in the pace and intensity of the narrative and is carried forward, even despite himself, without loss of attention. He finds himself in the midst of the battle. He hears (perhaps even feels) the whack and whirr. There are no quiet interludes, no green pastures or still waters. There is no discharge in this war.

"The quality of the scholarship is left for the critic to judge," says the author. The critic must judge it highly. The whole question of women at McGill University, from the beginning to the present day, has been meticulously researched. All sources are given in footnotes. This reviewer has added them; they number over 500. Many refer to documents or give supplementary information. It all amounts to formidable scholarship.

Not only is the style vigorous and the scholarship real; the reader is made aware (even at times uncomfortably aware) that women have met with much unfair obstruction. They really were, as the author contends, given lesser scope than their ambitions and qualifications deserved.

Here the author's vehemence, though at times excessive, is tempered by an impressive degree of understanding. Women at McGill were not only struggling against the opposition of particular men in particular positions of authority. They were struggling against the ideas and attitudes prevailing at that time. Such ideas and attitudes were reflected in the minds of male authorities at McGill, rather than originating with them.

This awareness, which seldom fails, immensely broadens the significance of the book. Though a concentrated study of the situation of women in one university, it becomes in effect a study of the situation of women almost everywhere, as they fought for the right to higher education, then for the right to put it to full use. It becomes not only a study on local history (which it is), but a treatment of a universal theme.

The greatest drama of the conflict appears in the duel, not between a man and a woman, but between two men - Principal Sir William Dawson and the professor of philosophy Dr. John Clark Murray. Both favoured higher education for women. Each had a different idea as to what form that education should take.

Dawson believed such an education should fit women to be better wives and mothers - not to contest for their bread in the rivalries of the marketplace. Murray wanted women to be free to enjoy any form of education they wished, to acquire any knowledge the university offered, and to put it to any use.

Both men fought from sincere conviction. Though Margaret Gillett, as would be expected, is heartily on the side of Professor Murray, she respects Principal Dawson's sense of moral obligation, mistaken though she believes him to have been. While she finds Dawson at times unbearably sanctimonious, she concedes that Murray could too readily resort to sophistry.

In a preliminary chapter on Principal Dawson's personality

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Margaret Gillett, using manuscript materials not previously published, gives one of the most sympathetic and perceptive estimates of Dawson that have so far been written. She says: "John William Dawson was clearly not a misogynist, in many ways he was a humanitarian." He was "the Principal who held some of the most profoundly conservative beliefs but who was instrumental in facilitating some of the most forward-looking changes at McGill."

The chief deficiency of the book is the "noisiness" of its perpetual agitation. At times it gets on the reader's nerves. A little more restraint might have aided her cause and the quality of her writing.

Nor does the author confront one of the chief difficulties in the feminist cause, a difficulty Principal Dawson perceived. If women are to compete with men on equal terms, what will they do with the uncompetitive burdens of childbirth and mothering? Stephen Leacock, in an address before the Women's Canadian Club, wondered whether women, enjoying the excitements and rewards of their new competitive role, might not choose to have very few children, or none at all. And if they were to prefer this option, what would be the effect on eugenics, if the most active, intelligent and enterprising women failed to reproduce these characteristics?

Though Margaret Gillett does not deal with this issue (and it scarcely came within the scope of her book), it is notable from her history that most of the women who made breakthroughs into new achievements at McGill had few, if any, children.

In any case, **We Walked Very Warily** is what the English would call "a good read." Though some readers may be annoyed, few indeed are likely to stop reading. And the reader will find himself thinking more than ever about the controversy that Margaret Gillett presents and shares. That, in itself, is a significant achievement for any writer, especially for an historian.

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