In 1970, I took a summer job as a copy girl (yes, that was the job title) at the Ottawa Journal, working in a newsroom that was typical of its times: a dingy, cluttered, loud, and distinctly male milieu. A handful of women worked in the main newsroom, but most of the paper’s female reporters and editors had their desks in the Women’s Department, a newsroom within a newsroom that produced the women’s pages of the paper.

There were not a lot of women news workers at the Ottawa Journal in 1970—perhaps a dozen in all—but we were a pretty diverse group. We ranged in age from the teens to 70-plus. (The eldest fessed up one day that she could not afford to retire and had been lying about her age for years.) We were single and married, widowed and divorced, non-parents and parents with partners and parents without partners, feminists and non-feminists, heterosexuals and lesbians—though this last group kept pretty quiet about it. Some covered crime, courts, or politics; others wrote about social issues, food, or fashion. Some saw journalism as a career, others as merely a job. For a few—like the glamorous, older, Bette Davis look-alike who covered Society with an imperious, gloved hand—it was a way to solidify their social position.

Memories of those Journal women flooded back when I picked up Marjory Lang’s book, Women Who Made the News, a survey of Canadian women journalists in the years between 1880 and 1945. Lang, who teaches history at Langara College in Vancouver, B.C., offers a wealth of stories about some of those very women, as well as their colleagues and predecessors in the English-language media, mainly newspapers, from coast to coast. The stories represent the central appeal—and the central problem—of a work of this type: how do you paint a group portrait of thousands of individuals? Or to put it another way, how do you paint a professional portrait of a subset of an occupation whose claim to professional status is less than compelling? Journalists, after all, become journalists by professing themselves to be journalists. Their claim to professional status is their latest byline, not their education or training.

Susan Crean’s solution in her 1985 look at contemporary newswomen was to foreground the stars of the business, in part because they had led interesting lives and had good anecdotes to tell, but also to set them up as role models for other women. Lang takes a different, and more scholarly, approach. She organizes her impressive collection of individual stories into a series of largely descriptive, themed chapters. Some focus on a particular time period, but most cover the entire period under study, from the late nineteenth century to the end of the Second World War. The first half of the book examines the working lives of women journalists. The second deals with the particular work those women did, work that differed in significant ways from that done by newsmen. The women’s pages of newspapers, she notes, had a chatty, personal tone, “distinct from the terse and tense relation of current affairs that defined the rest of the paper” (p. 10). The
women’s editor often created her own public persona, as a surrogate friend and confidante of the reader.

Lang situates her themes in their broader social and economic context. Two chapters on the evolution of the women’s pages of newspapers, for example, detail the commercial motives behind the creation of special sections for women, as well as the kind of material they published. She argues that the contribution of women journalists to a specifically feminine culture of consumerism has largely been ignored in studies of mass consumer culture. In addition, she points out that the “adversarial relationship which modern commentators assume to exist between the newsroom and the advertising department did not necessarily invade the consciousness of women journalists before the Second World War” (p. 164). Indeed, providing consumer advice was a central mission of the women’s pages.

Similarly, her chapter on the rise and fall of “club reporters” offers a short social history of the rise and fall of women’s clubs themselves. Especially in the era before women got the vote, the club movement was at the heart of social life for many Canadian women, and covering those clubs allowed ambitious women journalists the chance to engage in the great debates of their time. Right from the start, she notes, “the relationship between clubwomen and presswomen was a mutually self-serving alliance” (p. 217). But as women found other routes to power, the centrality of the clubs to women’s social and political lives diminished. So, too, did the professional opportunities a journalist might reap in covering the clubs.

Like Crean, Lang deals with the stars of the day—people like E. Cora Hind, Kit Coleman, or Sara Jeannette Duncan. But she also covers a wide array of lesser lights—the women who never made it big, and some who barely made it at all. Throughout the text she provides compelling evidence to show that regardless of status, the stars and the might-have-beens all faced the same patterns of discrimination. They were underpaid, discouraged from competing with men, and derided for a lack of femininity when they did. She finds, for example, that the experience of the small cadre of Canadian women war correspondents bears out historian Julia Edwards’ (1988) contention that those who succeeded were seen as unique, not as evidence of what women could achieve.

Lang’s research took her into the files of the Canadian Women’s Press Club, an organization founded in 1904 with the twin goals of providing mutual support and promoting the professional advancement of women journalists. Here she found a treasure trove of material: not just membership rolls, newsletters, and meeting minutes but the papers of individual members, scrapbooks, letters, the texts of speeches, published and unpublished sketches, and even poems and novels. Lang draws liberally and well on this material; it animates the pages of her text.

But while her thematic approach is successful on the whole, there are times when the book gets repetitive. Her organizational scheme means that individual stories sometimes appear in bits and pieces, scattered across several chapters. For example, the story of Kit Coleman, who reigned over “Kit’s Kingdom” at the
Toronto Mail, was a founding member of the Canadian Women’s Press Club, and was one of the first women war correspondents, shows up in chapters 2, 3, 5, 6, and 9.

In addition, the quality of the chapters is a bit uneven. By the time she gets to the final one, “Women Journalists on the News Side,” Lang seems to have run out of steam a bit. (Though perhaps this reflects a similar loss of vitality at the women’s press club.) That is a pity because it is this chapter that offers the bridge between the women journalists of the past and present. The Women’s Department at the Ottawa Journal was in its final days by the time I got there. In the name of equality and egalitarianism (and, one suspects, economy), Women’s Departments disappeared in the 1960s and 1970s. Their older occupants retired or moved on; the younger ones moved out into the broader newsroom.

There they met a host of new challenges—new beats to cover, new sources to deal with, new editors to please—but a lot of old ones as well. Lang notes that the most difficult track of all for a woman to succeed in “was the most ordinary,” the job of general news reporter (p. 249). The stereotypes women had to fight against were formidable. In her epilogue she recounts an anecdote by Doris Milligan, who buttonholed her boss one day in 1949 to find out why he objected to women journalists. His list of complaints (p. 284) would have sounded all too familiar to the generations of women journalists who populate the pages of Lang’s book: women are sick more than men, they skim over things, they are too emotional, they lack stamina, they quibble, they put husband and home ahead of job, and so on.

Lang’s book does not seek to make much of a contribution to theory, feminist or otherwise. Rather, she aims to provide a well-researched, detailed social history, and to paint a portrait of an occupation that is notoriously reluctant to have its picture taken. While journalists may be convinced to undertake co-operative action—like joining a union, for example—they are a remarkably individualistic bunch. This may help explain why, as Lang notes, women who got into journalism in the second half of the twentieth century tended to lack “any sense of a female tradition in journalism” (p. 287). Lang manages to capture many of the nuances of the newspaper business and the women who worked in it in a book that is also a pretty good read. It is certain to become an essential text for anyone doing research on the professional status of women journalists in Canada.

References

Catherine McKercher
Carleton University