
The history of the second-wave feminist movement in Canada is receiving renewed interest from media- and cultural-studies scholars. Valerie Korinek's fascinating study of Chate-laine magazine and its postwar feminist agenda, Roughing It in the Suburbs, was published in 2000. As a worthy companion, there is now Barbara Freeman's recently published book on media agenda-setting in Canada at the peak of feminist activism in the country. With little home-grown material available, feminist media scholars in Canada have looked at the history of the movement through the lens of the American experience. It is becoming all too clear that not only were our experiences structured in very different ways, but so too were their representation in women's magazines and in the mainstream news reporting of the day. Freeman's contribution to that history highlights that unique position through a comprehensive content analysis of Canadian media reporting with a strong social-history context about the leaders and their struggles; it should be taken seriously by the masculinist establishment.

The central narrative of the book relies upon a unique event in Canadian women's history, the Royal Commission on the Status of Women, convened in 1967 with the final report submitted late in 1970. Feminist activists from all walks of life (but mostly the white, urban middle class) attempted to address issues ranging from birth control, abortion, and daycare to rural women and labour to the legal status of aboriginal women. This was an effort to bring women's issues to the mainstream of governmental, corporate, and social agendas. As such, it depended to a certain degree on the attention of major news outlets and a commitment from them to treat the commission as a hard-news story. That in and of itself is an important study, since women's issues had long been relegated to their own section, nestled between recipes for maple baked beans and fashion tips on accessorizing for the office. However, Freeman goes further in her analysis. She examines the labour practices of Canadian journalism during this time and women's efforts to gain credibility in the field by looking at the difficulties they faced in reporting on the commission. We learn how they used it as a framing device to explore a broad range of women's issues and claim them as important to the nation as a whole.

By incorporating industry and discourse analysis, Freeman weaves a sophisticated critique of the intransigent attitudes toward feminism and reminds us of how hard the fight was for what is often dismissed as trivial today. She quotes from the Canadian Press Style Guide of 1974, four years after the submission of the commission's report:

 Certain militant members of the women's liberation movement wish to be known as Ms. (with period, pronounced miz or muz) rather than Miss or Mrs., which they term degrading. Such use is not common in Canada so use Ms. only when insistently requested. All stories using Ms. should mention the request and say whether the woman in question is married or single—not as a putdown but as a matter of news interest. (p. 135)

The resentful and condescending tone of this directive drives home the extent to which women had to struggle for credibility and respect. The notion that a woman's marital status counted as "newsworthy" and the suggestion that such terminology was un-Canadian also illustrate the overwhelmingly parochial and middle-class attitude of mainstream Canadian media at this time. It's a stunning quote and worthy of close analysis. Lack of such analysis is perhaps the main weakness of the book. As is so often the case with social-history works that bring to light a wealth of archival material, Freeman too often lets that material speak for itself.
Perhaps the best chapter in the book is “Ladies Reminded They’re Women” (chap. 3). This is one of the few topics that is organized to allow for some critical reflection and academic analysis. Here, Freeman examines the way the leaders of the royal commission were photographed, illustrated for editorial cartoons, and described in the news reporting. Using a feminist cultural and media studies framework, she investigates how the media reinforced conventional notions of appropriate femininity by undermining those very characteristics in the leaders and then criticizing them for it. Unflattering photos with mouths agape, endless drawings of fat hens with flowered hats and brandishing rolling pins, tangential references to their maternal or marital status were all easy tropes to ridicule the leaders and suggest that they weren’t representative of real Canadian women. Freeman explores these questions of representation and provides a more critical rather than exclusively historical context.

In other chapters on issues such as reproductive control, aboriginal women, and working mothers, the analysis can appear too localized and historically specific. This could lead to a dismissal of the overall argument about women’s ongoing struggle to have their issues recognized in the mainstream media—both as newsmakers and news professionals. It may be too easy for those not sympathetic to feminism to claim that this book highlights the past and that the issues at stake have long since been resolved. While CP may now allow the use of “Ms.,” the subtle ways in which women’s issues remain in a subordinate position in the news is not given enough attention. The obvious reason for it is that Freeman chose a specifically historical time period, yet history works best when it shines a light on the present. That light could have been a bit brighter in this case.

In the acknowledgments, we learn that this book is a revised dissertation. As with many works of this kind, its language can sometimes be stiff and information-repetitive. That said, Freeman is an engaging writer who knows how to tell a good story—and she has plenty of them here. By zeroing in on the commission, it can be argued that she privileges the liberal-feminist position to the exclusion of much radical activity occurring in Canada at the time. Yet her reasons for doing so are laid out clearly from the beginning, and she makes enough reference to other avenues of exploration to suggest that her version isn’t the complete picture. A lengthy bibliography of archival and interview materials offers a rich resource for those who want to continue to explore the field of Canadian feminist-media studies and the history of feminism in this country. There is still a lot to say, and Freeman has done an excellent job of giving us the tools with which to say it.

References

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