

**WHISPERS FROM THE PAST:  
SELECTIONS FROM THE  
WRITINGS OF NEW BRUN-  
SWICK WOMEN**

Elizabeth W. McGahan. Fredericton:  
Goose Lane Editions, 1986.

**Rebecca Leaman**

On the cover of *Whispers From The Past*, a picnic group of the last century crowds the deck of a river steamer. Predominantly women, the passengers pose stiffly for the camera; some turn away, self-conscious or self-absorbed. The effect is that of a slightly uneasy assemblage of personalities, of an ostensibly insignificant event given historical significance through the fact of the photographic record.

The effect of the book itself is similar. Subtitled *Selections from the Writings of New Brunswick Women*, this collection is drawn from letters and diaries, school-girl compositions and minutes of meetings, words never intended for publication. Without the unifying direction of the introduction, this would be a tantalizing yet disjointed work, a fragment of patch-work too restricted to show its design. Elizabeth McGahan provides a measure of perspective; the larger patterns begin to emerge.

These are not, as the introduction points out, the "dramatic echoes" of history. The twenty selections here, none of them the work of professional writers, "reveal unpretentiously the fundamental divisions which are a part of the normal structure of society" by reflecting the everyday concerns of ordinary women over more than a century.

The diversity of sources and forms is perhaps the most notable feature, together with the sometimes startling honesty and

evocative power of the small sentiments expressed. "I am ten years old," wrote Ann Carlyle in 1916. "Mother told me yesterday that now I must keep a diary as a little girl's school days are the happiest days of her life." Her account of her first day at a private school, printed in its journal, is a delight for its author's blunt observations: "I expected the principal to be a big lady with a loud voice and spectacles. That is what they are always like in story books but this one looked just like a human being..."

The diaries and letters of three young women follow, providing some insights into typical concerns and attitudes. One selection, letters from fifteen-year-old Clara Winifred Fritz, written to her mother from a voyage to Indochina in 1903-04, is intriguing in itself but seems to have been included more for its novelty than for any immediate relevance to the cumulative image of the "ordinary life" of women.

Among the most valuable contributions are the excerpts from the minutes of the Young Women's Patriotic Association, identified as perhaps the "first formal organization founded by... single young women." Their interests appear to have broadened gradually from financial support of the war effort (World War I) to "bettering social conditions" among immigrant girls. The early foundations of social work are also documented in the records of two other women's groups, the Daughters of Israel and The Haven, which were concerned with the welfare of disadvantaged children and of unwed mothers: "The committee feel that the influence of these young lives, snatched from sinful surroundings and trained for the Master's service, may lead to results in the years to come which only the eye of the Infinite can trace."

Elsewhere appear the minutes of a

church-based mothers' group, essentially a support group, connected with several such organizations in the New England states. The religious influence is a strong presence in such writings, and equally so in many of the more private records. Elizabeth Innes, a mid-wife of the 1830s-'50s, one of the two single working women represented, shows her deep convictions and personal doubts in her reflections on her advancing age; and in her notebook of community events and medicines, she copies the Biblical text for a sermon which seems to have made an impression: "Take this Child away and nurse it for me and I will give the [sic] thy wages."

The other nineteenth-century working woman is a shadowy figure, her contribution a long list of expenses involved in the operation of a boarding house in 1861. While this may be of some historical interest, its value to the collection is certainly questionable.

On the other hand, one unusual letter, from the mother of a runaway apprentice to her son's master, is eloquent testimony to "the latent abuses of the indenture system" in place in 1839. Written when her rage had scarcely cooled, the words have both passion and dignity; they are profoundly moving.

It is unfortunate that the focus of this book is not always sharp, nor the selections balanced in their importance and appeal. To the general reader, however, this is a flaw which should not detract from the pleasure of dipping into the daily lives of these women. There are gems here, and the collection strikes a comfortable note between enlightenment and entertainment. At its best, it is an affectionate treatment, and thought-provoking. The voices of *Whispers From The Past* are intensely individual, human and vital.

**TAKING THE VEIL: AN AL-  
TERNATIVE TO MARRIAGE,  
MOTHERHOOD AND SPIN-  
STERHOOD IN QUEBEC, 1840-  
1920**

Marta Danylewycz. Toronto: McClelland and Stewart, 1987.

**Elizabeth M. Smyth**

*Taking the Veil: An Alternative to Marriage, Motherhood and Spinsterhood in Quebec 1840-1920* is an intriguing investigation of the complex world of two Roman Catholic religious women's communities. As the title indicates, the study

is much more than an historical foray into the unexplored and often stereotyped world of convent life. Through an analysis of two very different communities — the teaching sisters of the Congregation de Notre Dame and the nursing sisters of the Sisters of Misericorde — Marta Danylewycz illuminates the multi-faceted roles which women in religious life play in the social history of Quebec. By reviewing the experience of women in religious orders and documenting their expansive sphere of influence beyond the convent walls, Danylewycz demonstrates that there exist significant links between nuns and feminists.

*Taking the Veil* is the legacy of Marta

Danylewycz to her colleagues and to future generations of scholars. It is her posthumous challenge to social historians and sociologists to continue her work and to further explore, investigate and analyze the complexities of women's historical experiences in late nineteenth and early twentieth-century Quebec society. The study grew from Danylewycz's 1981 doctoral thesis at the Ontario Institute for Studies in Education. At the time of her death, she was in the final stages of preparing revisions to this manuscript. Three of her colleagues, Alison Prentice, William Westfall and Paul-André Linteau assumed the formidable task of completing the editing of the manuscript. The