

**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 patchwork 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

resulting publication is a tribute to the scholarship and the memory of Danylewycz as well as to the strength of the academic and personal bonds within the Canadian Social History community.

Taking the Veil is a very significant study for historians and sociologists. It presents a thought-provoking view of the roles of nuns in the province of Quebec from 1840-1920; Danylewycz suggests that the years between 1840-1920 represent a distinct period in the history of convents in Quebec. Within this period, the rise in the number of women entering religious life led to transfer of control of education and social services from laity to religious. The period ends with the rise in feminism and the movement among lay women to regain control in those areas.

Danylewycz discusses two recently articulated hypotheses which attempt to explain the rise in the number and significance of convents in Quebec. The first is that of Bernard Denault, who suggests that religious communities were French Canada's solution to the problem of redundant women; the second is the interpretation by women scholars that convents were a manifestation of what she labels "surrogate feminism." Danylewycz suggests that both interpretations may well be evidence of what she describes as "the persistence of a certain preconceived attitude towards the role of women in society."

Danylewycz argues that while industrialization, urbanization, migration and the politics of the Catholic Church in Quebec in both the ecclesiastical and secular realms all contributed to a rise in vocations among women, one cannot underestimate the personal professional and spiritual quests which motivated women to seek out religious life. The successful campaign of the Catholic Church to gain control over education and social services in the province of Quebec created the demand for women who sought careers defined by service to humanity. Theologically, these changes coincided with the growth of Marilogy in the province of Quebec — especially in the concept of the Immaculate Conception which Danylewycz concludes "was analogous to the ideology of true womanhood." The number of vocations among women grew — and with the changes in regulations concerning the size and chartering of convents, expansion occurred in convent life throughout Quebec. Danylewycz suggests that the decision to enter a convent and undertake the life of a nun was a very calculated one — one which entailed a critical self-evaluation to assess the

extent to which the young woman's needs interests and aspirations fit with those of the community of which she sought to become a member. Danylewycz concludes that the veil was a mantle under which nineteenth and twentieth-century Quebec women "pursued life-long careers, wielded power, and... entered the public sphere <thus> overcoming the disadvantage of being a woman in a man's world."

Danylewycz divides her study into seven segments. An introduction provides both a rationale and an historiographical setting, exposing the reader to the variety of source materials upon which the author drew. The body of the book is composed of five chapters which give the reader a sense of historical and social context before proceeding to an in-depth analysis of the Congregation de Notre Dame and the Sisters of Misericorde. The concluding chapter is perhaps the most engrossing. It begs the further historical and sociological investigation of the relationship between and among the experience of women in religious communities, the wider experience of women in society and traditional social and cultural history.

Danylewycz chose to restrict her study of life in religious communities to two non-cloistered orders — the Congregation de Notre Dame and the Sisters of Misericorde. The Congregation de Notre Dame is a large teaching order whose influence in sheer numbers alone in primary, secondary and tertiary education institutions not only Quebec but also North America is very significant. Its philosophy, history, administration and socio-economic fabric is compared and contrasted with that of the Sisters of Misericorde. The Sisters of Misericorde grew from a group of lay women caring for unwed mothers and their children to an order with great influence in both health services and social services. These two orders were selected because of the availability and accessibility of primary archival material and because there were sufficient data available to construct a wide sample. Simultaneously, these two orders were sufficiently different from each other in their work, the class of women attracted and their internal politics to facilitate a good comparison.

From materials available in the National, Provincial and convent archives, Danylewycz constructs quantitative and qualitative data to paint a detailed picture of the alternative lifestyle offered within those communities and the relationship between the religious community and the larger secular community of which con-

vent was an integral part. The study is peppered by numerical charts and by glimpses into the lives of the women in the communities — from diaries of nuns, students in schools and records of community meetings. A mosaic emerges for two communities which served the needs of different types of women seeking the experience of a religious life — two communities which filled different needs within society at large. What is common to both communities is the way in which key women emerge who take initiatives to forge strong formal links between the convent and the community — as well as the numerous personal links established between the sisters and lay women.

Danylewycz traces the lives and careers of a number of significant women in religious life who shaped the social history of nineteenth and early twentieth-century Quebec. She discusses at length the work of Sister Ste. Anne-Marie Bengele who successfully led the campaign to establish a Congregation de Notre Dame-administered women's college in Montreal. The history of Marie J. Gerin-Lajoie is equally important. A graduate of the Congregation de Notre Dame schools, Gerin-Lajoie founded the order of the Institute de Notre Dame du Bon Conseil, a social-work order which Danylewycz assesses as one of the "strongest affirmations of the links between Quebec social feminism and religious life."

Taking the Veil raises many questions for further study. Danylewycz suggests that "religion offered women a career and perhaps this choice held back the tide of feminism." To what extent is this born out in the exploration of other religious orders within the province of Quebec? What was the relationship among the other religious communities in Quebec, Ontario and the Maritimes? To what extent were individuals such as Abbé Lionel Groulx who taught in the Congregation de Notre Dame schools influenced by the structures which they saw around them? What is the relationship between nuns and feminism in other parts of Canada? North America? Europe?

It is truly a great loss to Canadian academia that Marta Danylewycz's life was tragically ended in the ascending stages of her career. Yet, her continuing posthumous contribution to social history may well be in stimulating the further examination of the complex relationships which existed among women of religious communities, lay women and the larger historical communities in which they lived, worked and prayed.