

chased, the micro-loans borrowed and repaid, the houses built and wells restored (and Crowell gives an excellent account, illustrated by the tales of particular women involved and empowered). But SEWA believes that the way these efforts occurred, incorporating necessary lessons about autonomy, constitutes the most important part of what the organization is able to do. Another account of the group is called *Where Women are Leaders* (Kalima Rose. London: Zed Books Ltd., 1992). This is what SEWA sees as its job: to combat rural deprivation as it has urban poverty, by *the creation of women leaders*. By comparison, HAD, unable to chalk up any concrete successes in relation to the partition of the island, nevertheless sees some process of *supra-communal personal contact and learning among women* as the most important thing it can achieve. Notice what the larger goals are: rural development and national reunification. These are goals that the relevant local political powers have endorsed. But they do not much like the organizations' way of seeking them. Although both nations have a formal commitment to gender equality, and India in particular has mandated affirmative action, both of these books document male resistance at all levels to any female assertiveness, independent grouping, or women-centred action.

SEWA is quite clear about the appropriate procedures, which have been carefully worked out over time: the use of "spearhead" groups (of women) to develop local leadership among women with a goal of generating income where necessary and in general making it more ample and secure. The tools of co-operative organizing and micro-credit are well-developed; Crowell spells out how they were adapted to a particularly bleak rural environment HAD, drawing on the lessons of conflict resolution and feminism, had a less clear map, and members seem to have spent most of their time working out just how to co-operate across ingrained hostilities. But both groups,

by their existence and activities, were pioneering.

SEWA is a large and politically sophisticated grouping that has had measurable impact through its many campaigns; HAD is a small one, influential mainly on its own members. Yet the comparison of these two women's organizations shows that the marginalized may have resources, that women can join to act together across class and caste and ethnic boundaries. Even more important, these two studies of women's organizations make clearer the political context of each and also demonstrate new procedural options that would be valid more widely.

Which is why we need to learn about the women of the South, including the subjects of these two books. If only the policy-makers of the world would also do so.

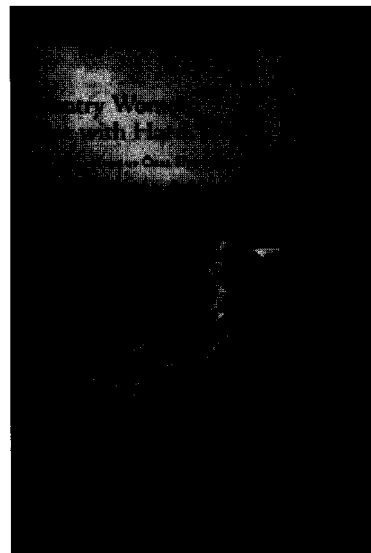
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COUNTRY WOMEN COPE WITH HARD TIMES: A COLLECTION OF ORAL HISTORIES

Melissa Walker, Ed.
Columbia, South Carolina: University of South Carolina Press, 2004

REVIEWED BY LEE EVERTS

Melissa Walker speaks of growing up with the stories of her grandparents and their friends echoing



throughout her childhood. Their words recounted the hardships that accompanied the early twentieth-century farm years. As Walker confides to us, this experience guided her own path, one eventually leading to the work contained within *Country Women Cope With Hard Times*. In this collection of stories, Walker invites us to share a glimpse of the lives of women who grew up during the early twentieth-century in east Tennessee and upstate South Carolina of the United States. The lives of these women have played out against a backdrop defined by the struggles and successes of farming, world wars, the Depression, and the routines that characterised their daily rounds. The intention of this collection is to grant readers insight into the ways in which these women experienced these conditions.

Guiding our path into these stories, Walker provides an initial overview of the historical, social, and cultural context of the period. For instance, characteristics of the agricultural system or the attributes of the Depression years create additional texture for the subsequent stories. Taking care to preserve the thread of the original interviews, Walker has deftly transformed the original 'question and answer' approach into coherent narrative accounts. Having done so, each of the

chapters focuses on the story of a particular woman, the only exception being one that takes the form of a dialogue between two sisters, Dorothy Skinner and Virginia Skinner Harris. After providing a brief biographical sketch at the head of each chapter, the voice of Melissa Walker recedes into the background as these women tell their stories.

As we read, their words often evoke our appreciation for their courage and resourcefulness, our sympathy as they recount difficult experiences and even our laughter as they relate a funny story filed away in their memories. Korola Neville Lee speaks of an accident in which she killed a child, her vivid account conveying how deeply etched the incident is in her memory. While women such as Evelyn Petree Lewellyn acknowledge the challenges that often defined the Depression years, the tenor of her story as well as that of others is ultimately one of success. Elsewhere, Ruth Hatchette McBrayer and Mary Webb Quinn represent and exude an energy that exemplifies an unstoppable determination.

Despite the richness of these stories, the usual questions emerge. Has not time distorted the memories of these women? If so, what is the value of their stories beyond mere enjoyment? Responding to such concerns, Walker refers to the complexity of our memories—how we remember is as critical in oral history as the what. For instance, we lose our sense of when something happened as these memories become reordered according to the meaning of the event in our lives. As a result, the stories in this collection grant us access to histories that may diverge from that of men whose lives were also irrevocably affected by the tumult of the Depression and the world wars. While these stories periodically intersect with more traditional histories, Walker explains how the value of oral history lies in its ability to create a window into the mindset of the historical actors. The merit of these stories, then, goes beyond pro-

viding facts concerning life for women in early twentieth-century Tennessee or South Carolina. They help us to understand the relationship these women have established with their personal pasts and the meaningfulness they have assigned to the various events and people that appear in their stories. However, do these stories have relevance beyond this part of the United States?

In many ways they do, for the thoughts and ideas these stories invoke find an easy affinity with the experiences of women in places like Canada. Certainly conditions such as the Depression, the world wars or the challenges of farming were widespread. A glance at the local histories of some rural communities in the prairies would find women whose lives followed a similar daily round and who experienced similar challenges. For those of us looking on, this collection not only provides insight into the lives of women in Tennessee or South Carolina. This collection of stories also hints at the mindset of Canadian women who would no doubt nod and smile at the experiences described here or perhaps wince at the memory of similar setbacks. These stories defy time and space, striking a chord a little closer to home.

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PILGRIMS IN LOVE

Frances Beer
Toronto: Inanna Publications, 2004

REVIEWED BY SHELAGH WILKINSON

“By God! if wommen hadde
writen stories,
As clerkes han withinne hire
oratories,
They wolde han writen of men
more wikkednesse
Than al the mark of Adam may
redresse.”

Chaucer has his Wife of Bath speak these lines in her prologue to her tale (ll. 693-696). Immediately we know that the author is revealing the political reality of a woman's place in a man's world. Chaucer gives his Alison a long—virtuoso—prologue compared to the other pilgrims and we learn much about her life with her five husbands. When I taught a gender studies course I always used Chaucer and his Wife to introduce a fourteenth-century feminist perspective in literature. I am not a medievalist, and know none of the specifics of fourteenth-century life. For me it was enough to have a male author willing to share with us such an early, robust, feminist character. Imagine my joy when I read Frances Beer's book and heard Alison speak of her life, and the lives of other women, in frank and honest detail, giving us 'insider' knowledge about gender inequities and how women circumvented them.

As Beer says in the introduction she has kept to the details that Chaucer has given in his *Canterbury Tales*; but, for me, what is significant is that she has allowed herself to fill in his silences. This is not an academic analysis, although the research and the scholarship are impeccable. Instead it is truly a novella told with wit and grace—and it's a page-turner. Again we have a virtuoso perform-