

COLLECTIVE PILGRIMAGE:
REMEMBRANCES OF MARY



Mary O'Brien, March 4th, 1996. Photo: Mark O'Neill, courtesy of The Toronto Sun

Collective Pilgrimage

The Political Personal

BY MARY O'BRIEN

I experience feminism as a way of life: if it is a "cause," it is not the kind of cause which we associate with separate effects: it is a moral and political cause, a set of social relationships which changes one's view of the world.

I have been asked how the women's movement has influenced my work. When I thought about that, I found how difficult it is to think in that way because I just don't see two things, two processes. The feminist movement and my work as a teacher and a theorist are not related—they are in fact fused. This has been so for many feminists since the bold declaration 25 years ago that the personal is political. But I think it is even more than that. Feminism creates a new view of the world, of our lives, of our ambitions, of knowledge itself. The masculine tradition of knowing, of trying to understand anything, is one of "making distinctions," of separating things out from their context so that they can be looked at one at a time, so that they can be defined and understood as objects. Our male-manufactured culture is full of these divisions, including not only the well-known separation of nature and culture, of mind and body and—perhaps most important to our topic—the division between our private lives and our public lives. This distinction has served men well: it enables them to conduct large parts of their own lives in a secretive way and call that public life. When I grew up, it was customary for most men, for example, not to tell their wives how much they earned, where they had been—though one could often deduce that by the way they smelled—or even how they voted or who their friends were. Despite all this, they called women "the secretive sex," but as they also regarded women as incorrigible gossips, it was very confusing. Men have not ever been much bothered by the contradictions in their view of women, which they have used mostly as a justification for their own superiority: male "definitions" of femininity always say more about men's illusions than women's realities.

Perhaps it is the very fragility of the notion of superiority, the sense that it might not be true, which has accounted over the centuries for a great

deal of male bombast and reliance on simple violence to resolve any sneaking feeling that their superiority was not as obvious as they have been taught it is. But in any case, this separation of who we are at home and who we are outside of the home is one which feminism has challenged. In challenging it, we also challenge this whole notion that separation of things makes it easier to understand what they mean, the whole self-serving logic of cause and effect. I would find it really weird to say that being a feminist has *caused* me to do certain things in particular ways. I don't, for example, teach women's studies *because* I am a feminist; I don't try hard to overcome the prejudices which male society has taught me with regard to such things as racism, as fear of otherness in sexual orientation or language or culture because I am a feminist. I don't struggle against the "common sense" which says that power relations are the only way to create an orderly social life or that there are some problems which can only be solved by violence because I am a feminist. I struggle with all these things because I experience feminism as a way of life: if it is a "cause," it is not the kind of cause which we associate with separate effects: it is a moral and political cause, a set of social relationships which changes one's view of the world, which "takes over" one's life, not in a dictatorial sense, but in the sense of learning together how things are related rather than teaching how they are separated. Teaching and learning are not separate "roles"



Mary O'Brien and Cath McNaughton

for women, but two sides of one petal. Feminism is a way of beginning to know and experience the possibility of coherence in our lives. Such an integration of life and history can only be winkled out by collective action from the fragmented, broken up, view of reality which men have made. This has a lot of significance for the way we live. For example, we cannot accept as "truth" propositions that might is right, that violence is natural, or that the good earth is there as "our" (i.e. "man's") imprisoned plaything, and we can ravage it, despoil it, take what we want and leave "someone else" to clean up our mess. The "someone else" who clean up messes have so often been women, and women's very intelligent claim that it would be easier not to make the mess in the first place has not been recognized as the good sense it is, but has been called nagging. An honourable occupation, in my view, but it has to be done in public as well as private, and preferably by a strong and united community of nags rather than by single voices.

I have in fact been fortunate in my own life in that I have always lived with women. In fact, much of my personal share of life's misery has come from the fact that I didn't know for a long time how fortunate I was, and kept trying to fit into uncomfortable behavioural corsets of conformity. My mother left my brother and *myself* when I was four, an event which caused me some anguish until I was old enough to analyze what kind of man my poor, weak father actually was. But he was fortunately serving the British Empire, which made him arrogant but kept him far away. I lived with his three sisters. Then, in my teens, I entered the nursing profession and lived for half a dozen years in nurses' residences. After I had slogged through nursing training—which in those days took longer than a Ph.D.—I shared houses with other nurses, and in fact I still live with another nurse. For about the first 20 years of this kind of life of sisterhood and fun, the women's movement was not especially visible, though there has always been among nurses a sort of contradictory seam of experience composed of great pride in the history of nursing and the tradition of service and a seething resentment against poor rewards, long hours, and the arrogance of the medical profession. In my own case, I eventually became a nursing administra-

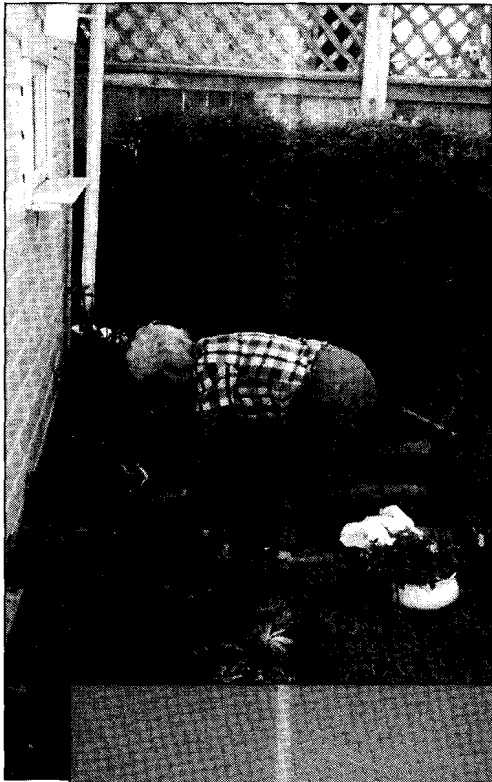


tor, and the fun was replaced by that wrenching futility of responsibility without authority which eventually drove me out of the profession. Nonetheless, the years of experience of living with, working with,

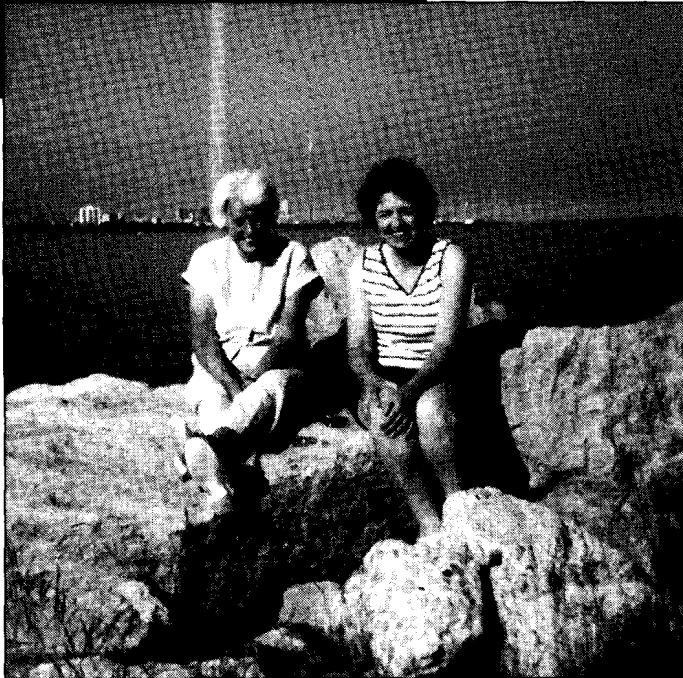


and deeply respecting women seasoned me to greet the upsurge of feminism like something I had always known was struggling for a clearer place in history.

The other aspect of my own experience which I think prepared me for the feminist renaissance was my long association with socialist politics. I'm not sure now what turned me to socialism, except perhaps that my father was that peculiar British anomaly, the working-class Tory. But I think, too, that my passion for the written word was a major factor. I had an important great aunt who introduced me to Shakespeare as a child, and a lifelong love of language which, as a feminist, I now feel I sometimes practice as a sort of secret vice, telling myself that I'm really doing feminist critique when I am often just indulging in pure aesthetic pleasure. Patriarchy thrives on its own contradictions! However, Shakespeare's work is hardly a road to socialism, and that road appeared, I think, because of the political struggles of the depression in the 1930s and my proletarian sense of deprivation and outrage. Like all of the children I knew, I was expected to go to work at 14, but I suppose we were a little bit upwardly mobile, for I did



not go to a factory or a shop, as my aunty did, but to lick stamps in an office. In fact, had it not been for the war-time "emergency" I would never have become a nurse at all; admission requirements were slack because of all the mayhem going on. As it was, I met in nursing a couple of committed socialist Quakers and turned my reading appetite on socialist literature. I thus



discovered shadows of the long underground history of women in the socialist movement. I also acquired a hero, Bertrand Russell, which made me a pacifist and an ardently ignorant devotee of "Free Love." As you can imagine, I was relatively bruised in the process of discovering that it was never free, this love, and not always loving. It was, however, decades before I knew about Dora Russell. After the war, I joined the Scottish Labour Party, and began to work in earnest in parliamentary politicking. I also discovered the women's section of the Labour Party, which talked of its heroines and its loving memories of the suffrage battles while the men tried to pin on the section the job of fund-raising through sales and other "events." The "Events" committee was seen by the men as the

suitable sphere for women socialists, but I learned good lessons in how to keep the boys right. I had actually been nominated to the parliamentary candidates roster in 1957 when the crises broke in both the capitalist and Communist camps. The Suez affair and the invasion of Hungary took me out of patriarchal politics forever, with their greedy self-interest and the political bankruptcy which offered no route but violence, violence, and more violence. I decided to come to Canada, simply because I felt that Europe was hopelessly decadent and corrupt, soiling its cultural inheritance in a desperate attempt to resist American takeover of the capital markets. So I retired from politics for some years and went back to reading Marx and other socialist literature, worrying about why I couldn't bring myself to marry, becoming a nursing administrator, and cultivating women's friendship.

But the lust for knowledge persisted, and I started to take classes at Sir George Williams in Montreal and, when I moved to Toronto, at Atkinson. I started with Shakespeare, of course, but soon discovered that, in my immodest opinion, none of these academics knew and lived his work like I did. One was counting commas in *Hamlet* on a primitive computer: mistakenly, I was more shocked by the rape of the text than impressed by the technology. Then came the 1960s, and I watched with some bewilderment the apostles of the new free love, and ached a bit for their ultimate disillusionment. But then came feminism, growing steadily from the eternal underground to start its new and, I think, final pilgrimage to a better world. I don't know when I resolved to go back to school and to write a feminist thesis. I know I had a lot of trouble finding a committee and I realize now that I frightened quite a lot of people. Had I been an ordinary graduate student—a young male, that is—my proposal to rework the whole of philosophy could have been dismissed out of hand, and would have been. Had I been a younger woman, with very scanty support in the men's world of political science, I doubt if I would have attempted it. But here I was, grey-haired, forty-five, and battle-scarred, telling young academics that I had to revise Hegel and Marx—from a feminist perspective. And as I battled for my intellectual integrity, suddenly they were there,

the women. Students, underpaid part-timers, secretaries, black women, lesbian women, Latin women, women who had been standing alone, reviled and laughed at every time they stood up to protest sexist language, course biases, unfair labour practices.

It was in the unlikely act of writing a doctoral thesis that my life, lived as a constant and often devastating battle with incoherence, suddenly jelled. Just like the lift you get when you're stirring the jam which seems to be getting thinner and thinner, when suddenly the wooden spoon feels that resistance, the colour deepens, the texture richens, the frothy bubbles become a deeply satisfying, ever-thickening roll—my thesis topic began to jell in just this way. As I discussed it with the women who were not

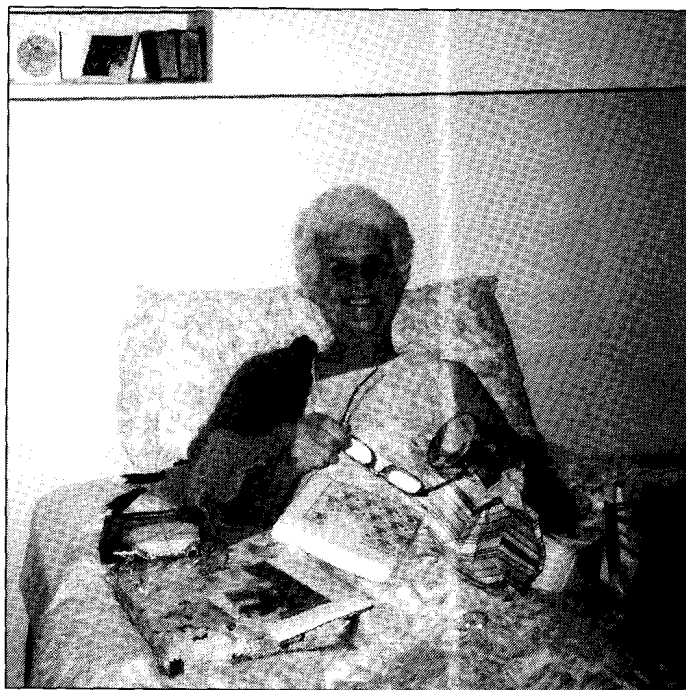
who were, I began to see that it was not “my” thesis. Life has to be lived in a certain way if all the pieces can come together, and for me it was the historical context of feminism that made this possible. Here was the self-educated working-class kid, refusing to accept conventional interpretations of experience for the good reason that they made no sense and I hadn’t been indoctrinated early enough. Here was the erstwhile free-lover, finally understanding the ruinous perversity of separating sexuality from social life and from species life and, often enough, from the joy of unifying one’s body with one’s feelings and one’s mind. Here was that starry-eyed young nurse, learning the error of believing that the social construction of caring for other meant the belittling of the self, who did not know the difference between an exploited skivvy and a proud servant; here was the good-time friend who thought that the essence of a good time was just getting the right guys there and who had taken women’s friendships for granted; here was the socialist who believed that social and political change was a public affair in which men of good will could overcome their baptism and confirmation in the paths of violence to create the utopian community in which women would magically gain equality; here was the cynical administrator, believing that competence could be some kind of substitute for morality. Here, above all, was the midwife, who had watched the magic of a new birth without realizing that she was watching the most profound and necessary level of the making of history. Above all, here was the critic who delved into the history of male versions of wisdom and said, “I don’t believe it”—and finally discovered that she was not alone.

This is not the accepted “objective” framework for what academic calls “the development of a thesis project.” But then, the whole history of thinking in the male tradition consists of a radical and self-defeating individualism: sit in a hole in a wall somewhere and meditate and then write down what you have thought. So serious and lonely is the act of thinking for men that they have frequently felt it necessary to lock themselves up in man-centred and putatively celibate communities to do it. Lonely pilgrims, these great men, weighed down with the weight of their brains, their learning from other men, and the immense burden of their self-regard. To be sure, solitude is an important part of the intellectual life, but it is not one whit more important, and is probably much less important, than solitude for the mother of small children—and not, for her, only when she is too tired to think. But thinking in the abstract—a great masculine value, this capacity for abstract thought—is being in nothingness in the most radical way. What does one think about? Oneself and one’s being, if we are to believe the philosopher who said “I think therefore I am.” Even if we extend the notion to that of unifying thinking with action, there is not much to do by oneself. Bringing my own quite ordinary women’s life experiences into my intellectual labours was ultimately to understand that intellectual labour is essentially collec-

tive labour. My regard for Marx is because he understood this; my critique of Marx has been that for him the socialist collectivity was still that shadow army known to patriarchal history as “mankind.” I could not make sense of my life under that rubric: my significant others had all been women, and it was the collectivity of women, the feminist movement, which was giving me the insight and the courage to say, not, “I have something to say” but “we have something to do.”

And we have always done things—agonizingly and to the point of exhaustion and even death, we have worked and borne children, and thought and acted and wept and laughed and loved and hated and sung and danced and worked and worked, we women. But the things we have done have been considered inconsequential, particular and paltry, necessary but boring, not making history but making men comfortable. Patriarchy at least in the West and the North, but also in other parts of the world, has divided up men’s work and women’s work along evaluative lines, work done in separate places. Men make history in public; women are the handmaidens of nature in private. Men achieve, women serve. In Euro-American culture, this ancient separation of the private from the public takes the form of the patriarchal family against the capitalist or Communist state. What I have tried to do in my academic work is to show that this separation of public and private is a historical creation rooted in the

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separation of public and private is a historical creation rooted in the reality of sexual difference but developed in the cultural reality of an artificial construction of gender. We call patriarchy patriarchy because we recognize that it is in *paternity* that men have justified their self-defined superiority and their advantageously self-serving rights and privileges. Yet it is also in paternity that they face the reality of their own negation, the uncertainty of knowing who their children are. This is clearly of importance to them, for they have gone to all the historical effort of creating a private realm in which their paternity is protected and their women guarded from other men. The truth is that paternity is power and property acquired without labour and quite the opposite of motherhood, which is hard physical work as far as birthing and nurturing children is concerned. Paternity separates men from the actual world into which women are integrated through the *act of birth*. Men's and women's work is valued differently, and women's work takes place under the supervision—which may be benign, tyrannical, or violent—of men, has traditionally taken place in the private realm, and is ultimately maintained, as all power is, by the threat or practice of a right to be violent.

We are often asked: where is the women's movement? What is it doing? Isn't it being reduced to the economic and power ambitions of individual women who care nothing for less fortunate women? These are the siren songs of an enemy skilled by centuries of practice in the usurpation of women's capacity to define themselves. Battles must be fought where we are in practical everyday terms, and where women are historically and with relatively limited variation is in the private realm, even when they are working hard in the public realm, too. I believe that what is not yet clear enough to be sure of, but what seems to be happening, is that feminism has created a completely new version of revolution. Revolution, as patriarchy has defined it, is violent action in the public realm—death and chaos on the barricades and glory steeped in blood. This activity has never challenged the separation of public and private, even where it has transformed both. The feminist revolution is so novel that it has not yet been named, for it consists of non-violent action in the private realm, now understood as essentially part of public life. It is becoming clearer, surely, that the "separation" of public and private, of family and polity, is artificial. The state, the economy, and the family are spermogenetic triplets and the transformation of any one is the transformation of all. Feminism is transforming the family in a radical way, and we have difficulty in seeing the profound significance of this, for we are rightfully wary of family-based ideology. Indeed, the significance of the non-violent revolution of the private realm often seems much clearer to the desperate opposition on the far right than to us, who engage in this struggle day-by-day and sometimes do not take seriously enough our most profound revolutionary insight: that the personal is political.

And of course, the private is not private. It is institution-

alized and has an elaborate set of myths and ideologies and "normal" practices to prop it up, a set which we call by the name of patriarchy. It's even difficult to talk about it sometimes, and the notion that there is no private life makes us properly nervous. But the real distinction I think we have to develop is not between private and public but between public life and intimate life. I talked a few moments about the need for solitude, and one might add sensual and emotional needs of an intimate nature. But the intimate life feminism presupposes is struggling to develop as something other than a power relation, and the family as we know it is just that. It is the locus of power for every man, and patriarchy is a crude form of biological determinism, for all its philosophical pretensions. Private life as we have it in our historical experience links privacy to property, so that owning a modest house or plot becomes some sort of justification of the principle that others should privately own great chunks of the earth's resources. I think this must change and in this way I remain a committed socialist, and cannot see any other economic arrangement that makes sense. Private life and private property are essentially exploitative. But I would argue that traditional socialism has not seen the relation of polity, family, and economy clearly enough, and that feminism is the only political movement which has any chance of making the radical historical transformations necessary if we are to stop the ultimate rape, the rape of the planet.

I called this chapter "Collective Pilgrimage." What sort of pilgrimage is it? Pilgrimages, traditionally, are collections of individuals united by faith going somewhere or other to have that faith affirmed. The word has religious echoes. I would not want to deny that the feminist movement is rich in spirit, but it is refreshingly free of icons and idols of saints and prophets, and surely women have had a historical bellyful of the frauds of martyrdom. The goal of our collective pilgrimage, I believe, is the pilgrimage itself, the discovery of ourselves and of our sisterhood, the knowledge of collectivity and diversity which is the condition of the new and complex form of revolution which we are creating in so many different ways. It is the rejection of competition for complementarity, of egoism for respect, of struggle to shake off the invidious distinctions between us which we have inherited without creating new ones of our own. It is the complex project to integrate the natural and cultural worlds before they are blasted asunder, and at the same time to recognize that, just as we have redefined revolution, we have redefined politics as project rather than power, as creativity rather than ruthlessness. We do not underestimate the pressure, and we are not sure we have the time left, but we are sure that we shall never give up until we have developed the way.

To make our history, our story, we must create a living legend of women doing the thing which we are always told by men we cannot do: working together. It is, of course, easier said than done, but we who have had so much doing

and so little saying in the past are developing strategies and constructing ways of expressing our projects and our desires. Feminism is not a subculture: it is a revolution. I expect the boys to remain bewildered for a long time yet before they grasp the historical significance of what we do. I hope we don't all drop with fatigue—making history is a tiring business. I hope, too, that the material world lasts long enough for us to establish the coherence of our social lives with our natural one. I hope we can find the energy to resist the powerful "thrust" to bury birth in technology controlled by powerful men. There is plenty to do. We all do different bits. Just like domestic labour: we've had lots of practice for the new kind of revolution.

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MARY O'BRIEN

XVII

It was a great night
 green days remembered
 vermilion bloodless dark
 thick with being young
 and the stirring of a thought
 that maybe the ice would go out again;
 for there was warmth
 the night
 we held the wake
 for Judy Garland

And it doesn't matter
 not a cuss
 if it was shamrock schmaltzy
 rusty, dusty
 the yellow brick road
 crass the conviction that for sure
 he would have made a difference
 the man who got away
 If sentiment is marmalade
 laced with iron filings
 and love is a banjo
 strung with taut nerve
 and joy is peanut butter
 blended with ground glass
 we had ourselves a banquet
 the night
 we held the wake
 for Judy.

MARGUERITE ANDERSEN

Mary O'Brien
 caryatide
 à l'appui généreux
 source de tant de carrières
 sorcière du savoir
 femme dont le sourire
 survient pour rassurer
 le monde des femmes
 qu'un jour justice se fera

Il ne faut pas oublier Mary O'Brien

Marguerite Anderson est écrivaine et universitaire. Elle vit à Toronto et se rappelle avec plaisir les soirées de bridge chez Mary O'Brien.

