

Mary O'Brien

Feminist Activist, Teacher and Scholar

BY HELEN JEFFERSON LENSKYJ

Several hundred people, mostly women, participated in the founding meeting of the Feminist Party of Canada (FPC) in the OISE auditorium in the summer of 1979. This was an historical moment: the first Canadian attempt to establish a political party on feminist principles. This was also a personal benchmark—the first feminist political event I had ever attended. More importantly, it marked the first time I met Mary O'Brien. When Mary stood to address the audience, she was greeted with spontaneous applause. Knowing nothing about the speakers' backgrounds, I was a little surprised at this response to a white-haired, middle-aged woman. Then she began to speak, and I realized we were in the presence of a powerful orator and a formidable intellect. In a speech that was both moving and profound, Mary deconstructed the concept of the "eternal woman"—a combination of caring mother, passive sex-goddess, and evil witch/healer. She proceeded to contrast the patriarchal politics of domination, violation, and militarism with the feminist politics of integration and life-affirmation in a thought-provoking analysis which set the stage for the next steps in developing a feminist political party.

The FPC flourished for a time under the guidance of a number of veteran feminist activists, with Mary as one of the major forces. Her experience in the Labour Party in Scotland, in combination with her unique feminist political analysis, made her a leading member of the FPC (although, on principle, the organization did not have an actual leader). She was a tireless member of numerous subcommittees, a forthright and quotable spokeswoman to the media, and a source of wicked humour. Requests from the mass media, as well as from professional and academic organizations, resulted in a very heavy schedule of public speaking engagements for Mary, on top of the demands of her university work. However, watching her on the podium, one could readily see the joy and enthusiasm that she brought to this task.

I had the privilege of working with Mary as a graduate student at OISE from 1980 to 1983, and then as a colleague until her early retirement. As the first Ph.D. candidate whom Mary supervised, I found her support and inspiration invaluable, even though—or perhaps because—her stated policy as a supervisor was not to "hold students' hands." In my experience, her supervision style achieved a good balance, by providing direction and challenge

while at the same time promoting autonomy. She had a clear understanding of the need to prepare students to be independent scholars and discerning critics of their own and others' work.

On the practical matter of writing a thesis, Mary's advice was to write two pages of next-to-final draft every day. This may not sound dramatic, but, translated to actual practice, it means that a thesis can be written in three to six months, rather than three to six years. Mary encouraged her students to complete their degrees and begin their careers as feminist teachers and researchers. As someone whose own career was tragically shortened by health problems, Mary understood the urgency for women to gain qualifications and start changing the academy. In her home department of Sociology in Education at OISE (as it was then called), her influence has been permanent and profound: many of the courses she developed are still being taught, and her pioneering work on the politics of reproduction continues to influence the scholarship of both students and faculty. Of course, this influence is not limited to OISE; Mary's name and work are internationally recognized and respected.

In 1986, when Mary began to experience some memory problems, she asked me to team-teach her course, Education and the Sociology of Women and Gender Relations. She had developed this course, which was among the first offered in Women's Studies at OISE, in the 1970s, and it routinely attracted 20 to 30 students, as did most of her other courses. The large class sizes became onerous for Mary as her health deteriorated, but, from the students' perspective, one positive outcome was the significant number of women and men who had the opportunity to take part in her courses during her relatively short teaching career.

Although Mary had been my supervisor, I had not taken courses with her as a student, and it was as a co-instructor that I first had the joy of witnessing Mary in action as a teacher. She was relaxed, entertaining, and profound—all

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at the same time. When we met briefly in her office just before the first class, I watched in awe as she tore a page from a small notebook, wrote down a few points, and then proceeded to deliver an hour-long lecture to the assembled group of students (with discussion, of course, interspersed). In the days when OISE was not smoke-free, Mary would settle back with her cup of tea and cigarette in the cafeteria during the class break and regale students with stories. She was fond of teasing me for my interest in sport and recreation: blowing smoke in my general direction, she would pronounce that I was so fit that a bit of smoke wouldn't hurt me.

In the March 1983, Mary did a television interview with Robert Fulford. Discussing feminism and the politics of reproduction with a less than sympathetic host, she was lively, accessible and relentless. This was Mary in her intellectual prime. A few short years later, I watched the video with great sadness, because in contrast to Mary's

current state, it was clear that the memory loss had already taken its toll. We are most fortunate to have, as a legacy, Mary's ground-breaking book, *The Politics of Reproduction* (1981), her collection of essays, *Reproducing the World* (1989), (skillfully assembled and edited by another former graduate student, Somer Brodribb), and many published journal articles. In 1989, a special issue of the OISE journal *Resources for Feminist Research* (Volume 18, Number 3) was dedicated to the work of Mary O'Brien, with articles by international scholars applying her theoretical insights and reflecting her influence.

And, on an individual note, some of us are fortunate enough to be able to hear, in our imaginations, Mary's wonderful Scottish voice, talking about feminist ideas, feminist politics, feminist friendship ... thank you, Mary.

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MARY O'BRIEN

VI

Once I thought
That
As I grew older
Kids
Would reproach me
For
My childlessness.

Poltergeists
of those swarming
sperms
inhospitably routed
at the portcullis
of my cervix

Now it seems
That
Their reproach goes to
Those
Who bore them. Yes.
Those,
Rather than me.

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