

Comptes rendus — Book Reviews

N.E.S. GRIFFITHS. — *Penelope's Web*. Toronto: Oxford University Press, 1976.

Penelope's Web is a valuable and provocative study of the changing social position of Canadian and European women during the last four hundred years. Naomi Griffiths' conviction of "the value of the historical approach for a clearer understanding of present discontents" and her determination to "talk about what had happened in the past as opposed to what many people said had happened" drew loud and prolonged plaudits from one who shares her interest both in contemporary feminism and in history. My applause continued throughout *Penelope's Web*, although at times it was diminished by my desire to argue. But it was a desire to argue not to reject; the thesis of the book is always stimulating even when evoking from me Griffiths' own reaction to others' appeals to history, "it didn't happen that way."

Griffiths attempts to formulate and explain the historical pattern of women's role in society. Her own special period is the seventeenth century and that is where, after a survey of prominent contemporary views and their weaknesses, she begins her search for the explanation of present-day discrimination against women. Carefully defining her terms, she argues that in community life, women had an important recognized place; they fulfilled necessary functions and were valued accordingly. She cites examples of the independence enjoyed by women because of the need felt by the community for the fruits of their particular labours. If a husband and wife provided a service, the widow might continue to provide it if the community found it convenient. But gradually the wishes of the community lost their predominance as society, which she defines as "the formal organization of the community to produce an ordered pattern of life desired by the group", became all pervasive, and centralized power imposed uniform practices. The particular needs of Nether Poppleton and Clappison's Corners were subsumed under the dicta of London and Ottawa. This change took place during quite a brief period (and here my applause began to waver, the brief period being my own special interest), when women had been placed on a pedestal of delicate inutility by the newly affluent middle class created by the industrial revolution. Consequently it was the physically and mentally enfeebled ideal of the nineteenth century which was enshrined in society's multiplying laws, laws which controlled community life into the twentieth century. Griffiths argues her thesis very persuasively.

My loudest "it didn't happen that way" came when the nineteenth century was described in terms that fit it into her schema. Not that the schema is invalid (and even if so it would still be valuable because provocative) but some qualification appears to me essential to encompass or at least exclude the exceptions which spring to mind. Griffiths slips into the implication that the nineteenth century bears the major responsibility for the ideas that subordinated women to men. I can cite as many pre-nineteenth-century examples of discrimination as she can examples of useful activity; and there are as many examples of successful nineteenth-century women. Indeed I would argue that the nineteenth century did more to challenge age-old assumptions about the inferior place of women in the natural order than any other century, including our own. It was then that a small group of men and women worked with marked success to show that there was no longer in a technologically advancing society the justification for the traditional Christian relegation of women to a low level in God's scale of creation.

So frequently only one side of nineteenth-century attitudes is seen by those interested in feminism and these attitudes are attributed to that century alone. It seems to be necessary to argue that once people could see, became blind and now must see again. The nineteenth century, however, did not originate but inherited ideas about the place of women, ideas which one group tried to foster and which another smaller group, whose best-known spokesman was John Stuart Mill, argued were anachronistic. Here Griffiths and I are in close, but not complete, agreement for although she would argue no more than that equality had been in the pipeline not in the barrel, I would argue that equality had been only in the prospector's claim and disappeared in the blow of inequality. She cites examples of equality in rude communities. I would agree there was often equality in drudgery, but that such equality is not of much worth, and in any case inequality of the sexes has always appeared most obviously in the levels of society where leisure was enjoyed. The nineteenth century rescued more women from drudgery because it rescued more men from drudgery but then, in the name of civilization, it gave the women nothing to do. The nineteenth-century middle class harked back to earlier ideals in an attempt to imitate their betters and idealized their women as morally superior although still intellectually and physically inferior. This elevation to them was progress and the "them" is both male and female. Well, it was better than being inferior in every way, as in Genesis, or equal in drudgery, as in the fields.

Griffiths falls into one pit (apart from such small but unfortunate holes, dug perhaps by her secondary sources, as misspelling Macaulay's name and misdating the Newcomen engine) which is so commonly seen as sure ground that I must take direct issue. In so doing I think I am, in fact, strengthening her thesis. She writes (on page 162): "In other words, it is not enough to describe Europe at the end of the nineteenth century as a repressive sexist and exploitive society. It was also a society that could be roused to defend individual rights, the liberties of women and the needs of the powerless. While all European states enacted legislation closing the doors on direct political power for women, the fight for votes for women occurred in all these states." I have already argued against the implication of "at the end of the nineteenth century" and would, in another place, against the implication that earlier societies had not cared about individual rights and the needs of the powerless but my quarrel in this context is with the last sentence. "Legislation closing the doors" was not enacted, at least not in the usual sense of "closing". When legislation was enacted in Brivain in 1832, 1867 and 1884 increasing the number of voters, women it is true were not given the vote, but the omission was only leaving closed a door which custom had long since bolted. The legislators refused until 1918 to open the front door and give women the Parliamentary franchise, (although some side doors had been unbarred earlier), but refusing to open a door is not the same thing as closing it. In other areas also legislation institutionalized the status quo. My argument supports Griffiths' thesis which she, in my view, weakens by slipping into the common but incorrect posture of casting stones at the Victorians.

My championing of the nineteenth century is intended as a qualification not a refutation of Griffiths' views. I agree with her in seeing that, with the development of the power of society, women's chances to assert equality were lessened. The natural readjustment of the balance between the sexes which might have taken place as physical strength became a less important criterion of value in the community would certainly be hampered by the imposition of society's regulations. If there could have been social advances without strong centralized control, then I think one can argue that women would have gradually gained equality in Nether Poppleton and Clappison's Corners. Small isolated communities use whatever

benefits them. If women's skills became of equal value with men's because women could now operate telephones where before they could not carry messages through miles of mud and snow, women's status might have been enhanced. The traditional views about women's place, which were being institutionalized in the many Acts establishing the nineteenth-century bureaucracy, undoubtedly acted as a drag.

So let not my disagreements suggest belittlement. *Penelope's Web* is an important work and Naomi Griffiths a very stimulating thinker. And her main thesis is well argued: many communities showed signs of moving towards equality, even political equality, until centralized authority institutionalized the status quo and prevented, or at the very least, hindered changes by enshrining traditional attitudes. My disagreement is only about the kind and amount of blame the nineteenth century should bear.

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HUBERT CHARBONNEAU. — *Vie et mort de nos ancêtres. Étude démographique.* Montréal, Les Presses de l'Université de Montréal, 1975. Dans la collection *Démographie canadienne*.

La démographie canadienne se porte de mieux en mieux. L'œuvre colossale de Cyprien Tanguay, publiée de 1871 à 1890, inaugurait avec ses qualités et ses défauts une pratique de la généalogie qui n'approchait pas encore la démographie. Archange Godbout, o.f.m., construisit ensuite, avec le soin de l'artisan méticuleux, d'abondants dossiers qui corrigeaient ou complétaient l'apport de son prédécesseur. Puis, vint Jacques Henripin, dont la *Population canadienne au début du XVIII^e siècle*, constitua au Canada français en 1954 la première analyse démographique substantielle. La démographie était enfin lancée et le mouvement s'est maintenu avec Henripin et ceux qu'il a formés. Hubert Charbonneau, après divers articles marquants (dont ceux qu'il a faits sur les recensements de 1666 et de 1667), vient de publier une étude, *Vie et mort de nos ancêtres*, où le démographe manie à plaisir tous les recours de la technique de la démographie.

C'est un ouvrage statistique sur la mortalité, la nuptialité et la fécondité d'un nombre restreint de nos ancêtres. Ayant entrepris avec son équipe du Département de démographie de l'Université de Montréal, «la reconstruction intégrale et par ordinateur de la population canadienne-française depuis ses origines», Charbonneau a d'abord voulu mettre la main à une première étude exploratoire. Le champ est un échantillon précis: 691 familles, qui groupent 4 280 enfants; toutes «familles formées au Canada avant 1700, par des hommes dont le nom commence par A et B (jusqu'à Brassard inclusivement)».

La source en est tirée de l'œuvre de Tanguay, revue et corrigée par Godbout; et Charbonneau, conscient du péril de cette méthode, ajoute: «Notre plus grand espoir est que ce soit la dernière du genre». Il demeure aussi conscient de la fragilité de son échantillon, qui couvrirait 14,6% des familles canadiennes du XVII^e siècle, et il reconnaît que cet échantillon «n'est pas parfaitement représentatif de l'ensemble de la population canadienne du XVII^e siècle, puisque les immigrants n'ayant jamais contracté mariage au Canada nous échappent». De même, tout le long de son livre, il se met en garde et il met son lecteur en garde contre trop d'assurance; il écrit, par exemple (et ceci revient sans cesse): «Gardons-nous toutefois de conclusions hâtives, car ces résultats conservent une évidente fragi-