‘We were here’ :
Exploratory Essays on Women’s History at Mount Allison University
Editor’s Introduction
by Dr. Marie Hammond Callaghan (History Department / Women’s Studies Program)

It is my great pleasure to introduce an investigative collection of undergraduate student essays covering an array of topics on the history of local women at Mount Allison University and in the town of Sackville. This idea had its genesis in a Special Topics fourth year history seminar on Canadian women (HIST 4951) offered in 2004, 2005 and 2007. Subsequently, students from these classes undertook archival history projects and presented their research papers within two academic forums. “‘We were here’: A One Day Conference Exploring Archival Research and Women’s History at Mount Allison University,” was held on Friday 18 March, 2005 at Tweedie Hall.¹ Then on Thursday March 29, 2007 an afternoon “Symposium on Gender and Women’s History at Mount Allison University” held at the President’s Cottage, University Club provided another significant scholarly forum for the presentation of original student research. These events were generously sponsored by Purdy Crawford Teaching Centre (PCTC) and Leadership Mount Allison

It should also be noted that the HIST 4951 archival research project became a source of inspiration for a highly successful International Women’s Day event at the University Club on

¹ Many thanks to Cheryl Ennals, Mount Allison University Archivist, for generously sharing this phrase from: ‘We were here’: A Guide to Selected Women’s History Sources from the Fonds d’Archives, Collections and Holdings of the Mount Allison University (MAA) Archives, compiled by Cheryl White Ennals, Mount Allison University Archives, 1996. In addition, I was deeply grateful to the 2005 conference participants, Cheryl Ennals (MAA University Archivist), Rhianna Edwards (Deputy Archivist, Acadia University), and Dr. Marilyn Fardig Whiteley (Author of Canadian Methodist Women, 1766-1925: Marys, Marthas, Mothers in Israel, Wilfred Laurier Press, 2005), as well as Dr. Andrew Nurse (Canadian Studies), Prof. Shelley Nelson (History), Dr. Carrie Macmillan (Dean of Arts, 2003-2006) and Dr. Ken Ozmon, (President of Mount Allison University, 2004-2006) for their contributions to this event.
that focused on the oral history of local Sackville women. Entitled ‘We were here: Stories from our sisters’ Mount Allison students, Frances Ross and Allison Mader, brought together several dynamic Sackville women - including Ruth Stanley, Isabelle Crawford, and Fran Read Smith - to share their insights with students, staff and faculty about how university and community life had changed for women over the past 50-75 years.

As many who are familiar with the history of Mount Allison University know so well, Mount A. became the first educational institution in Canada to grant women the right to a college degree in 1872. Several years later Grace Annie Lockhart graduated from Mount Allison with a Bachelor of Science and English Literature becoming, in 1875, the first woman in the British Empire to be awarded a Bachelors Degree. By 1882, Harriet Starr Stewart – also a Mount Allison graduate – became the second woman to graduate with a Bachelor’s degree in Canada. What is known to a much lesser degree is how such a progressive step was taken at a time when “other institutions were halting and hesitating and putting the door ajar [to women];” and Mount Allison “boldly opened its doors to all irrespective of sex.”

Paradoxically, at a time when ‘separate spheres’ gender ideologies dictated that women and men were both temperamentally and intellectually different, Methodist and evangelical Protestants aspired to an ‘educated and moral motherhood’ which gave a significant impetus to these developments at the Ladies College. However, Atlantic Canadian historian John G. Reid has

2 James Robert Inch (Principal, Mount Allison Ladies Academy, 1869-78) stated in the Chignecto Post and Borderer 3 June 1880, as cited in John G. Reid, “The Education of Women at Mount Allison,” Acadiensis, 12, 2 (Spring 1983): 19.

3 Historians of Canadian women have analyzed the pervasive influence of these gender ideologies along with the role of religion. For example see: Alison Prentice et al. Canadian Women: A History, second edition (Toronto: Harcourt Brace and Company, 1996); Johanna M. Selles, Methodists and Women’s
argued that Mount Allison largely owes this important legacy to the pioneering influence of Mary Electa Adams (1823-1898), first Chief Preceptress of the Ladies Academy when it first opened in 1854.4 Her short tenure was to yield a profound impact on the direction of all three levels (primary, intermediate and collegiate) of female education at Mount Allison between 1854-1857. Trained in classical education and advanced mathematics,5 Adams challenged women’s allocation to ‘ornamental’ training in what was considered appropriate feminine ‘drawing room’ subjects (eg. music, art, needlework) within the gendered curricular divide. Instead, she insisted on rigorous academic instruction for female students in literary and scientific subjects, as equal as possible to that of their male colleagues.

Not too long after her arrival in 1854, an anonymous editorial appeared in the Mount Allison Academic Gazette, which according to John Reid, Mary Electa Adams is likely to have authored:

Attacking “the ordinary modes of female education” as tending to produce “that impatience of thought, that tendency to the desultory and the superficial, which are the proverbial failings of young ladies,” the editorial promised that Mount Allison would offer a systematic programme of study aimed at producing women of intellectual vigour.6

Although a death in the family brought an abrupt end to Adam’s career at Mount Allison forcing her return to Ontario in 1857, her impact as a pioneering educator continued to be felt across Canada.7

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4 The “Ladies Academy” (1854) later became the “Mount Allison Ladies College” in 1886 and remained so until the late 1930s. Please see John G. Reid’s two volume history of Mount Allison and his other works on the Ladies College for further information: John G. Reid, Mount Allison University: A History to 1963. (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1984); and John Reid, The Mount Allison Ladies College: A Short History, 1984.

5 Selles, Methodists and Women’s Education in Ontario 1836-1925, 82.


7 For over almost 50 years, Mary Electa Adams had both founded and presided over a number of notable women’s colleges For further information on Adam’s career please see John Reid’s works on Mount
Public awareness of the critical role played by Mary Electa Adams in shaping Mount Allison’s legacy as a progressive liberal institution has been brought to the foreground by historians of Canadian women over the last couple of decades. I believe this illustrates the vital importance of training students not only to appreciate but also to actively investigate local women’s history at Mount Allison and in the town of Sackville.

This collection of undergraduate student essays reflects a culmination of efforts to furnish students with: 1) the experience of conducting original research - using both archival and oral history methods - thereby contributing towards the creation of historical knowledge; and 2) the opportunity to employ critical feminist approaches to historical research – especially in relation to the theories and methodologies guiding their research process within a Canadian women’s history context.

There are now two parts to this collection. The first part consists of five essays produced by students from the HIST 4951 class of 2005, and the second part consists of seven essays produced from the HIST 4951 class of 2007.

PART I

Emily Beeston’s essay on the Once-In-A-While-Club aptly uncovered how a small group of Sackville women carefully carved out a space for their own intellectual pursuits during WWI.

Allison as well as the following sources: Elsie Pomeroy: ‘Mary Electa Adams: A Pioneer Educator,’ Ontario History, 41, 3 (1949); John Reid, ‘Mary Electa Adams’ Dictionary of Canadian Biography, 12 (Toronto: University of Toronto, 1990); and Selles, 1996.
Frances Ross’s essay highlighted the significant contributions made by the Local Women’s Civic Council, Sackville Branch - in particular how they were shaped by gender influences of the domestic sphere. Victoria Lamb’s essay on the shift from gender-segregated to ‘co-ed’ university residences at Mount Allison University skillfully reveals the ways in which gender cultures of ‘femininity’ and ‘masculinity’ are cultivated within a campus environment. Sarah LeBlanc’s essay on Ella Lauchner Smith unearths the fascinating story of a highly capable teacher and scholar of history at Mount Allison in the 1940s, whose ‘eccentricities’ are interrogated within a feminist historical context. Finally, Dusty Johnstone’s essay provides an important glimpse of ‘second-wave’ consciousness-raising in the activities of the Canadian Federation of University Women (CFUW) Sackville Branch throughout the late 1960s and early 1970s.

PART II

Clayton Burrill’s essay on the Sackville Women’s Christian Temperance Union in the mid-1890s unearthed significant evidence that the WCTU was about more than temperance; indeed, it was potentially an agent for broader positive social change within the community. Set within a national context of liberalizing popular trends in the 1920s, Sarah Craig’s essay explored how gendered disciplinary regulations in the residence of the Mount Allison Ladies College loosened and liberalized in ways that often gave women more opportunity to interact in a public ‘male-defined’ sphere. Although Fine Art had been traditionally associated with the feminized or so called ‘ornamental’ subjects of study, Angela Hersey has provided a careful investigation about the critical role played by Elizabeth McLeod in establishing Fine Art as a legitimate profession for women at Mount Allison during the early 20th century. By highlighting the often over-looked
and under-valued voluntary war efforts of women from Sackville and beyond, Maria Beltz has furnished an interesting glimpse of the extensive contribution made from small communities within the Atlantic region in the 1940s. Kenichiro Abe’s essay raised some excellent questions and insights on the closing of the Lillian Massey Treble School of Home Economics at Mount Allison in 1974 – in particular how this event might be best understood in the context of how gender shapes and privileges masculinized educational programmes. As Lauren Sheffield’s original essay discovered the very advent of International Women’s Year raised local awareness of the national and international feminist movement in 1975 - significantly shaping media discourse as well as events both on the Mount Allison campus and within the town of Sackville. To conclude this section, Moorea Hum’s thought-provoking oral history and archival research on Eldon Hay’s leadership in local PFLAG – Parents and Friends of Lesbians and Gays - foregrounds the serious challenges that rural communities such as Sackville faced as contemporary understandings of gender and sexuality shifted in the 1980s and 1990s.

Now, with considerable delight in the achievements of Mount Allison students in their senior seminar on Canadian women’s history, I leave you to enjoy this exciting collection of exploratory research.