

Women Religious and their Work of History in Canada, 1639-1978: A Starting Point for Analysis¹

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In her 1994 work, *American Women Writers and the Work of History 1790-1860*, Nina Baym argues that the contributions to the writing of history made by pre-Civil War American women have been largely disregarded. Her study illustrates the ways in which women's work in the writing of history and historically-based literature "testifies powerfully to the inadequacy of current gender-based distinctions between the public and private spheres, of beliefs that cults of true womanhood or ideologies of domesticity confined female literary behaviour to overtly celebrating or subtextually undermining women's domestic incarceration."²

Baym describes her subjects as "Christian republican women." She reports that through their "work for women, for the nation, for God ... [they] participate[d] directly and extensively in the print discourses of the national public life."³ It is apparent that Baym has defined Christian as Protestant for she overlooks the historical writings of Catholic secular women in general, and of women religious in particular. Had she chosen to include these Christian women, especially the latter, within her sample, she would have found herself questioning even further "current gender-based distinctions between the public and private sphere."

¹ This paper is part of a series which analyzes the historical significance of the work women religious in English Canada. The author acknowledges the support of the Social Sciences and Humanities Research Council. The author thanks the Leadership Teams and the Archivists of the Sisters of St. Joseph, Toronto, the Religious of the Precious Blood and the Ursulines of the Chatham Union, as well of the Archivists of the Congrégation de Notre Dame, for providing access to the records analyzed here. Thanks to colleagues in the study of women religious, the members of the Womprof Network, and the anonymous CCHA reviewers, for their comments on earlier versions of this work.

² N. Baym, *American Women Writers and the Work of History 1790-1860* (New Brunswick: Rutgers, 1994), 4.

³ *Ibid.*, 239.

This paper draws attention to the diversity of the historical writings by women religious in Canada, using the arrival of the first women religious in Quebec as a beginning and 1978 as an ending date. The latter date was chosen as representative of the implementation of the reforms of the Second Vatican Council, the changes in the demographic profile of the religious communities and on the eve of the impact of the feminist scholarship on historical writing.

While women religious are recognized among the first women drawn to teaching, nursing, and social work, their role as writers of history, especially the history of women, is not. With the 1639 arrival of the nursing religious of the Augustines de La Miséricorde de Jésus and teaching Ursulines, the historical writings of women religious began in Canada. The Ursuline Mère Marie de L’Incarnation was one of the first social historians of New France. Contemporary historians of French Canada, especially recent feminist historians, and historians of French-speaking religious orders, have taken inspiration from the words of Marie de L’Incarnation, that “writing reveals to us our mysteries.”⁴ Through an analysis of the writings of these women religious, historians have come to learn more about their lives and the wider secular and ecclesiastical communities in which they operated. While there is a large and growing body of scholarship on French-Canada and Quebec-based orders, there has been limited research done on the orders of English Canada. This paper begins to fill this void.

Curiously, the first work of fiction by a Canadian-born author is Judith Hart Beckwith’s *St. Ursula’s Convent or the Nun of Canada*, published in 1824. This work appeared some seventeen years before three members of the Congrégation de Notre Dame began to work with the schools of Kingston, Upper Canada. The following year (1842) saw the arrival of the Irish Presentation Sisters and the Sisters of Mercy in St. John’s, Newfoundland. These were quickly followed by another Irish order, the Institute of the Blessed Virgin Mary, who came to Toronto in 1847 and the Sisters of Charity of New York, who began their work in Halifax in 1849.

Some English-speaking communities grew into North American provinces of international institutes. Others were Canadian-born foundations. Still others, like the Sisters of St. Joseph, established in Toronto in 1851, quickly became autonomous of both their American, and European roots. By 1950, there were 229 institutes and societies of women religious in Canada,⁵

⁴ Marie de L’Incarnation to Claude Martin. Quebec 1670. In J. Marshall (trans. and ed.), *Word From New France* (Toronto: Oxford, 1976), 371.

⁵ M. Theriault, *The Institutes of the Consecrated Life in Canada* (Ottawa: Supply and Services, 1980), 194.

working in a variety of fields. Some, like the Ursulines and the Institute of the Blessed Virgin Mary, were established primarily as congregations dedicated to education in general and the education of girls and young women specifically. Others, like the Sisters of St. Joseph of Toronto, engaged in education, social service and health care. Still others like the Sister Adorers of the Precious Blood, established in Toronto from a Quebec foundation in 1869, were to be engaged in continuous prayer. In examining the work of their members, one finds a representative picture of the diversity and complexity of the historical writings of the women religious of English Canada.

Prior to the implementation of the reforms of the Second Vatican Council, the lives of women religious were highly regulated. The horarium was characterized by early rising, common prayer, and meals taken almost exclusively with members of their community. The calendar was governed by the liturgical seasons, retreats, and community assemblies. In short, there was little time for individually identified personal or professional pursuits. In addition, women religious vowed obedience and in the practice of the day, this meant that decisions, including those concerning education and professional training, were made by the community leadership and not the individual members. It is within this context that the lives of the women religious, who did the work of history were lived. Their vocation – responding to the call to serve God through serving their neighbours – integrated their lives as religious with their professional lives and framed their historical work.

The historical writings of women religious in English Canada can be divided into three categories: first, were historical writings which recounted community life and which were written specifically for their community; second, were publicly oriented historical accounts of their work, written for an audience which included seculars and those teaching and writing history within educational settings; third, were those works targeted for a professional historical organization: The Canadian Catholic Historical Association.

The first type, historical writings for religious communities, took various forms. They followed the evolutionary cycle described by Gerda Lerner, “the making of lists of notables and heroines ... individual lives and exploits ... the histories of communities ... from a particular point of view,”⁶ which was often cast within the framework of providential history. This cohort of women have distinct advantages which facilitate historical inquiry. Unlike the historical writings of many other groups of women, the writings of

⁶ G. Lerner, *The Creation of Feminist Consciousness* (New York: Oxford, 1993), 249.

women religious have long been preserved because of the regulated nature of community life. Three key elements have assisted in the preservation of this historical tradition. First, oral tradition and community memory were and are facilitated by the presence of a continuum of age and experience among the members of a community. Second, community motherhouses serve as permanent central residences – a fact which is in contrast to typical residency patterns of many women. Third, the *Code of Canon Law* gives some focus to women religious as historical beings. The *Code*, the ecclesiastical rules which govern the foundation and regulation of religious life, prescribed that religious keep community records.⁷ This was one way in which communities of religious are stimulated to consider themselves and their activities in an historical context, through the keeping of journals, often called chronicles or annals. These were to be kept in an archive “properly equipped and carefully arranged.”⁸

The annals were and are the permanent records of community events. They are examples of the private historical writings of women. They function as a means of gaining insight into the daily lives of a women’s culture in which personal writing and personal records had little focus. For their author, the community secretary, the keeping of annals could be merely an additional task in a long list of other duties. Although their contents may vary from one-line descriptions of visitors to the community to lengthy reflections on international events, the information they contain is most valuable. Annals have served as significant sources for communities of religious who have generated their own community histories or who have commissioned professionally trained historians to undertake this task. Some annals, like those of the Sisters of St. Joseph of Toronto, have been published and are available to researchers in library settings. Selections from other annals have been integrated into community histories, such as those of the Ursulines of the Chatham Union. In the case of the Sisters of Charity of

⁷ Before the 1917 codification of the Code of Canon Law, the requirements were somewhat more flexible than they became subsequently. Canon 282 of the 1917 Codification required bishops to ensure that “two copies of documents” related to diocesan enterprises and residing “confraternities” be made and that “one copy shall be kept in the respective archives and the other in the episcopal archives.” (S. Woywood. *A Practical Commentary on the Code of Canon Law*. 2 vol. (New York: J.F. Wagner, 1926), 1: 138. Canon 88 requires Pontifical Institutes to generate quinquennial reports and submit them to Rome. Among the questions which institutes are required to answer is “Are the Archives of the Institute and of the individual houses properly equipped and carefully arranged?”(J. Creusen. *Religious Men and Women in the Code*. 5th. English Edition. Milwaukee: Bruce, 1951 – First edition published in 1931), 286.

⁸ J. Creusen, *Religious Men and Women in the Code*, 286.

Halifax, whose archives were destroyed in the fire that leveled the Mt. St. Vincent motherhouse in 1951, the archives and annals of other community houses were used to reconstruct the lost records.

From the annals, one learns much about the personality of the annalist as well as the regularities of daily life both within and beyond the convent walls. They are sometimes business journals, recording correspondence with builders, lawyers, and storekeepers. They are personnel records, reporting elections of new superiors, councils, transfer of sisters, and admission to the community of new members. They document requests from bishops or priests to undertake missions, to establish schools, hospitals, and orphanages. Sometimes they record community traditions: origins of convent practices, tales of lay people associated with the community, and reminiscences of senior members. Often, the annals were complimented by scrapbooks which contain printed reports drawn from both the religious and secular press on events concerning the community and its enterprises.

While the death of members was listed and briefly commented upon in the annals, a separate volume, the necrology, recorded the details and achievements of the deceased's life. Necrologies follow a long established tradition. As Lerner commented, for centuries women religious chronicled the lives of their key members in a category of writing labeled sister-books. She concluded that these "writings, while they may have been initially inspired by the desire to spread a religious message ... should also be seen as efforts of historical documentation."⁹ Gertrud Jaron Lewis' study, *By Women, for Women, about Women*, analyzed the content of fourteenth-century convent manuscripts, and described them as containing "a number of socio-cultural insights into the lives of women both in the world and in the cloister ... the issues raised do not differ much from those common to contemporary intellectual and theological questions and values."¹⁰ One type of sister-books could be the necrologies or books of the dead which give insight into the lives of women religious.

Necrologies were compiled by generations of annalists. They provide an historical record of women who lived apart from secular society and who, with a few notable exceptions, rarely left personal diaries or other pieces of personal writing. As well as being a record of the temporal and spiritual journey of the deceased member, collectively, necrologies illustrate the evolution of the community.

⁹ G. Lerner, *The Creation of Feminist Consciousness*, 268.

¹⁰ G. Jaron Lewis, *By Women, for Women, about Women: The Sister-Books of Fourteenth Century Germany* (Toronto: Pontifical Institute of Medieval Studies, 1996), xii.

The necrologies of the cloistered order Sisters Adorers of the Precious Blood,¹¹ established in Toronto in 1869, served as the focus for this analysis. The personal and instructive writings contained in the necrologies served many purposes. Their audience was their own community. Building a sense of community over time and across distance was one of their overt aims. Secondly, the writings were deliberately inspirational and instructive, and described the characteristics of a “good nun” in daily domestic and spiritual duties.

Typically, a necrology contained demographic data: the dates of birth, significant dates in religious life (entry to the community, taking of first vows, final profession) and death. The narrative began by contextualizing the life of the religious in God’s plans for humanity and then proceeds into a family history. Background on the family (including in some cases description of socioeconomic status, religious and educational background of the parents, number and names of children including details of those who entered religious life) was given before the details of the late nun’s life were shared. Many background details concerning the early life of the religious and those forces which influenced her decision to enter a religious community and especially a cloistered community were given. Names and roles of friends, detailed examples of both the spiritual piety and the fun-loving elements of personality were narrated. The revenue-generating works in which these cloistered women participated were described. Details of the roles they played in community governance were given. Not surprisingly, much focus is placed on the rituals surrounding illness and death. What one takes away from these readings is a sense of a supportive loving community who rally around each other especially in times of crisis, illness, and death.

Like many other necrologies, this collection began with the lives of the first superior and four founders of the Toronto community. Biographies such as these have been traditionally dismissed as hagiographic,¹² yet, they serve as sources for the historian to analyze and from which to draw conclusions. As Natalie Zemon Davis has demonstrated, women’s writings can reveal much concerning “centres and hierarchies” and how women carved out a life for themselves as they lived “on the margins.”¹³

¹¹ This cloistered community dedicated to perpetual adoration and prayer was founded in St Hyacinthe, Quebec in 1861. As a revenue generator, they produced altar breads.

¹² J.S.Moir, “Coming of Age, but Slowly: aspects of Canadian religious historiography since Confederation” *CCHA Study Sessions*, 50 (1983), 90.

¹³ N.Z. Davis, *Women on the Margins: Three Seventeenth-Century Lives* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1995), 211. Davis selects the Ursuline Marie de L’Incarnation as one of her three subjects.

There are many other forms of community-based historical writings found within archives. Women religious wrote historical fiction: poetry and short stories which were contributed to community newsletters and other circulated materials. Sometimes, these pieces did find their way into more public venues such as the annuals of the convent schools frequently attached to the motherhouses of those orders which included teaching sisters.

Women religious also wrote historical drama which were performed by and for members of their community. *In the Footsteps of the Martyrs*, a play written in 1921 by a Sister of St. Joseph in Toronto is one such work. Its plot examined the experiences of Mother St. John Fontbonne, the “second founder” of the order, during the French Revolution. Mother St. John was characterized as a defiant faith filled woman, who challenged the Civil Constitution of the Clergy. Her captors deemed her action as “mad./ Call the other nuns and we shall see /If we can find some sense among them all.” Mother St John’s response re-enforced the vows of her community: “Tis clear you know /Nothing at all about our Convent ways./ Else you would know that every Sister here /Is of one mind with me.”¹⁴

Similar plays are found in many community archives. Written for an audience of women religious, they were structured to reveal qualities of character and behaviours which the audience should imitate. The dialogue was often taken from primary archival sources. Fictional characters were created with the purpose of interpreting events. Authorship was frequently attributed anonymously to a member of the community.

The historical and historically-based writings described above were written by women religious for women religious. Inspirational stories of admirable women motivated by faith to overcome formidable odds are among their themes. These works need to be examined and explored for what they are: venues for community development and instruction intended for an exclusive audience.

In addition to their work as annalists, and as community historians, women religious contributed historical work in the larger public sphere. Within teaching orders, the work of history took on a different, more public face. An examination of the Ursulines of the Chatham Union serves as an example of this type of work. A French branch of this order, which was founded by Angela Merici in Brescia, Italy, in 1535, sent a group of sisters from Tours to New France in 1639, initially to teach aboriginal girls and subsequently to serve the educational needs of all women. Over the next 300

¹⁴ A Sister of St. Joseph, *In the Footsteps of Martyrs*. Archives of the Sisters of St. Joseph Morrow Park [hereafter ASSJ].

years, members of Ursuline communities from throughout Europe came to Canada as teachers with the result that at present, Canadian Ursulines can claim roots in one of eight independent federations, all dedicated to education.

The Ursulines view teaching as “the assured means of fulfilling their holy vocation” to which they applied “all, their strength and attention.”¹⁵ To assist them in their classroom activities, the Ursulines, like many teaching communities, produced instructional manuals. History was identified as a subject of special focus.

History should be made a particularly interesting subject to the pupils and should be presented in as vivid and entertaining a manner as possible. The teachers should make a thorough study of the subject beforehand and read many authorities on it, particularly Catholic one ... to train the hearts and judgements of their pupils, to lead them to God and to point out to them the workings of Divine Providence in all the events that have happened in the history of the world.¹⁶

The Ursulines taught history in their primary, secondary, and tertiary schools. It is this latter category which deserves special attention. In 1919, The Ursuline College, later called Brescia Hall and Brescia College, affiliated with the Arts Faculty of the University of Western Ontario. The agreement read that Brescia “shall enjoy the rights and assume the obligations common to all such affiliated colleges ... its staff of teachers shall have equal standing and rights with the officers of instruction of the University College of Arts.” Significantly, Western agreed to “accept affiliated college substitutions and requirements for its degrees as it does philosophy, history and religious knowledge.”¹⁷

For the first thirty-seven years of the College’s existence, history was taught exclusively by the Ursuline sisters.¹⁸ Mother St. Michael Major (1883-1926) was Brescia’s first instructor of History. Educated by the Ursulines in England and one of the first female graduates of the University of Liverpool, her brief career as an Ursuline (1914-26) was characterized by brilliance and ill health. She had been trained as a teacher in England and had taught school in Ontario. Once Brescia was established, she was sent to Western to

¹⁵ *Rule of St. Augustine and Constitutions of the Ursuline religious of the diocese of London and their foundations* (np: 1929), 13. Ursuline Archives “The Pines” [hereafter Ursuline Archives].

¹⁶ *Regulations – Part III*, 58. Ursuline Archives.

¹⁷ As reprinted in Mother M. Toohey, “The History of the Ursulines of Ontario,” M.A. thesis, The University of Western Ontario, 1937, 214-5.

¹⁸ P.G.Skidmore, *Brescia College 1919-1979* (London: Brescia College, 1980), 92-98.

acquire a Master of Arts. Subsequently the superior arranged for her to commence her doctoral studies, extramurally, at Fordham University.¹⁹ By 1926, she was dead.

Mother St. Michael Major's short academic career and life serves as an example of the complexities inherent in studying this cohort of women. Her obituary is telling: "Naturally endowed with a brilliancy of intellect given to few, a student of rare ability, a teacher of exceptional talents, yet modest and retiring, she was loved by all with whom she came in contact as an ideal religious teacher, whose salutary influence will long remain a happy memory to those who were so fortunate as to have been placed under her guidance."²⁰ Humility and obedience were cardinal virtues, and obedience drove much of Mother St. Michael's career. She came back from a sick leave to undertake course work to prepare her for a teaching position at Brescia. She was assigned a triple role of Registrar, English Professor, and History Professor. When she was faced with death at a Quebec hospital where she had been sent to recover her health, she plaintively wrote for permission to return to the Chatham motherhouse to die.

The histories of other Ursulines who taught and wrote history are equally telling. Mother Mercedes Toohey's (1886-1961) career was typical of many women religious. She was first trained as an elementary school teacher and received her undergraduate and graduate degrees as a mature student, simultaneously holding teaching positions and community administrative positions. She taught at Brescia from 1928 to her retirement 1960. Up to her death, she continued to work on her history of the Ursulines of the Chatham Union, a topic which she had first addressed in her 1937 Master of Arts thesis.

A contemporary of Mothers St. Michael Major and Mercedes Toohey, engaged in writing a commissioned history. Mother St. Paul Covey, a teacher at the convent academy in Chatham, wrote *From Desenzano to 'The Pines': A sketch of the Ursulines of Ontario, with a brief history of the Order compiled from various sources* – a work commissioned by the Alumnae Association of the Ursuline College. When the book was published, the historian of the Sisters of St. Ann, Sister Mary Theodore, wrote to Mother St. Paul. Sister Theodore's history of the Sisters of St. Ann *Herald of Christ the King* was compared to Mother St. Paul's history in one review which commented about the "two eighty-year old authors, you dear Mother St. Paul and myself." The author continued "I really wrote under obedience – not

¹⁹ *Annals of Brescia College*, London, Ontario, 2-3. Ursuline Archives.

²⁰ Obituary. Mother St Michael Major file. Ursuline Archives.

prompt, cheerful obedience – either – but once I had begun I found the work most absorbing.”²¹

The experiences of the Ursulines of the Chatham Union as teachers and writers of history is repeated in communities of women religious throughout both English and French Canada. Decisions were made by governing councils of communities as to who should write the community’s history and what that history should contain. Similarly, executive decisions were made as to whom should be sent to study, what they should study, and where they should be assigned to teach. The questions surrounding higher education of women religious and the earning of doctoral degrees arise when religious communities elect to sponsor tertiary institutions. For the Ursulines of the Chatham Union, these questions directly related to the study of history.

The teaching of history at the university level brings into this analysis broader questions concerning the participation of women religious in the intellectual life of English Canada. These questions beg further study. As one member of the Brookland Commission, a 1988 committee of women religious established “to study the relationship of the intellectual life to the spiritual life, particular as this question bears on Roman Catholic religious life for United States women at the turn of the century,” concluded:

The significance of the liberal arts college phenomenon for the intellectual life of US women religious can scarcely be exaggerated. It propelled nuns [sic] into study for advanced degrees. Dependent to some degree upon individual ability, interest and postgraduate opportunity, it incorporated them into the intellectual circles of academe and enabled them to establish the most extensive and accessible system of higher education in the world.²²

While Canada did not experience the proliferation of congregationally established colleges, women religious came to staff many departments of both denominational colleges which were affiliated with secular universities and secular university departments themselves. As women religious began to actively participate at the tertiary level, they began to associate themselves with professional organizations, such as the Canadian Catholic Historical Association.

²¹ Sister M. Theodore, SSA, to Mother St. Paul, 26 September 1941. Mother St. Paul Covey file. Ursuline Archives.

²² K.M. Kennelly, “Women Religious, the Intellectual Life and Anti-Intellectualism: History and Present Situation,” in B. Puzon (ed), *Women Religious and the Intellectual Life* (San Francisco: International Scholars Publications, 1996), 51.

While exploring the historical work of women religious, one area which needs to be examined is their relationship with the Canadian Catholic Historical Association (CCHA), the professional organization for the presentation and promotion of Catholic and religious history. The CCHA conference programs and its journal reveal much about women religious and the writing of history. The following table presents an overview of the Association's first 45 years.

TABLE 1: An Analysis of Historical Studies 1933-1978

years	#	English	French	# male	Religious	lay	# female	Religious	lay
1933-39	60	34	26	56	39	17	4	0	4
1940-49	152	76	76	137	85	52	15	6	9
1950-59	139	68	71	132	83	49	7	5	3
1960-69	117	37	80	102	55	47	15	11	4
1970-78	116	52	64	93	49	44	23	14	9
TOTAL	584	267	317	520	311	209	64	35	29

Initially, in 1933, the CCHA's annual meeting had a bilingual program, with papers being presented alternatively in English and French. In 1934, the English and French sections met in tandem: with papers presented in different parts of the same building and the membership assembling as a whole for dinner and other events. Since 1961, the English section has met in conjunction with the Learned Societies and this resulted in a split of the organization along linguistic lines. The Association has occasionally met as a unit, in 1983 and 1993, but has always published the proceedings of both sections, English and French, in one volume.

As detailed in Table 1, 89.1% of the papers were presented by males, with some 53.3% of those males being religious. Of the 10.9% of the papers delivered by females, the bare majority, 5.9% were delivered by women religious.

The first paper delivered by a woman religious was by Mother M. St. James Hickey, an Ursulines of the Chatham Union, who was both Professor of English and Dean of Brescia College.²³ Her paper, "Three Hundred Years in Quebec," was a reflection upon the contributions and significance of the Ursuline experience to Canadian history. In it, Mother St. James challenged the "great men" of New France scheme of history and argued for a history

²³ Mother St. James Hickey taught at Brescia College from 1924-1955, with the years 1945-7 being spent on Ph.D. work. Skidmore, *Brescia College*, 44.

beyond the achievement of Laval, Talon and Frontenac. She called for the inclusion of Marie de L'Incarnation who "left a woman's mighty impress on the young colony, an impress of perpetuity which comes to a nation only through the quality of its homes."²⁴ She saw Marie de L'Incarnation continuing the work of the Ursuline founder Angela Merici, whom she described as "a modern feminist in many ways, a shock to her times by her fearless Christianity, a social service worker at Brescia [Italy]."²⁵ To Mother St. James, Marie de L'Incarnation was a hero of Canadian history. Tracing her footsteps, Mother St. James "understood more about Canada than I have ever been taught from textbooks ... I found ... a woman's will projected across three hundred Canadian years."²⁶

Mother Margarita O'Connor, a member of the Institute of the Blessed Virgin Mary (IBVM) (the Loretto Sisters) was the second woman religious to present before the CCHA. Like Mother St. James, Mother Margarita was both Dean of her community's college, Loretto College, the University of Toronto, and a teacher of a number of subjects including English. Her paper "The Institute of the Blessed Virgin" traced the history of the Canadian foundation. Mary Ward the founder of the community was described as a "valiant woman [who] had survived the machinations of the powers of darkness."²⁷ This paper served as a prelude to her 1962 biography of Mary Ward, *That Incomparable Woman*.

Sister St. Miriam of the Temple Scott CND, the author of the 1953 paper "The Congregation of Notre Dame [CND] in Early Nova Scotia" was the first woman religious listed in the CCHA programmes with the title Ph.D., a degree she attained in English from Fordham University in 1947. Her paper identified the challenges which were inherent in researching the history of pioneering women religious. Dr. St. Miriam wrote, "At no period, however, was documentation held so cheap as at this time of reorganization after apparent chaos. Numbers and names mattered little to these pioneer women; records were difficult to keep." She questioned the surviving sources, especially "the reliability of Monseigneur de Saint-Vallier as a chronicler ... Objectivity, moreover does not seem to have been his outstanding characteristic."²⁸

²⁴ Ibid., 11.

²⁵ Ibid., 16.

²⁶ Ibid., 11.

²⁷ Rev. M. Margarita, IBVM, "The Institute of the Blessed Virgin," *CCHA Report*, 12 (1945), 81.

²⁸ Sister St Miriam of the Temple, CND, Ph.D., "The Congregation of Notre Dame in Early Nova Scotia," *CCHA Report*, 20 (1953), 8.

Dr. St. Miriam Scott's lifelong work focused on Marguerite Bourgeoys. Scott wrote a three act play about Bourgeoys, *The Constant Heart*, and an analysis of the writings of Bourgeoys' *A Spirituality of Compassion*.

The contributions of members of the Sisters of Charity of Halifax to the CCHA represent a unique and significant collection of work. An analysis of the academic careers of the Sisters of Charity of Halifax would make a fascinating study and one which cries out to be done, but it is much beyond the scope of this paper. Suffice to say that this community was actively interested in promoting historical scholarship among both its members and its students. The five papers presented before the CCHA by members of the community between 1953 and 1976 focused on an array of topics related to the history of the Maritimes, with one on social service among Irish immigrants in Quebec. Unlike papers presented by members of other religious communities, the role of the Sisters of Charity of Halifax is not the sole focus of any of them. Their contributions serve to re-enforce that not all the historical work undertaken and presented by women religious was self-reflective community history.

The tradition of women religious presenting their work before the CCHA is an important one. Sometimes, the papers candidly, and at other times not so candidly, were critical of the institutional church, especially in its treatment of the leadership of religious communities and in its lack of focus on the historically significant role of women. Like Mother St. James, the presenters were, for the most part, archivists or faculty at the colleges administered by their communities, though, it should be noted, not necessarily those who taught history, charged by their community or invited by the CCHA, to prepare research on topics which honoured community anniversaries. Table 2, which classifies papers about women religious presented at CCHA annual meetings between 1933 and 1978, includes papers delivered by sisters belonging to the Congrégation de Notre Dame, Sisters of St. Joseph, the Ursulines, the Sisters of Service, the Sisters of Charity of Halifax, the Grey Sisters, and the Institute of the Blessed Virgin Mary.

TABLE 2: PAPERS ABOUT WOMEN RELIGIOUS

	#	E	F	ERF	ERM	FRF	FRM	ELF	ELM	FLF	FLM
1933-39	3	0	3				2				1
1940-49	6	3	3	3		2				1	
1950-59	5	3	2	2	1		1				1
1960-69	9	2	7	2		7					
1970-78	13	6	7	6		7					
TOTAL	36	14	22	13	1	16	3			1	2

Codes: E=English; F=French; ERF = English Religious Female; ERM= English Religious Male; FRF=French Religious Female; FMR=French Religious Male; ELF=English Lay Female; ELM=English Lay Male; FLF=French Lay Female; FLM=French Lay Male

As Table 2 illustrates, between 1933 and 1978, 80.5% of the papers presented on women religious were delivered by women religious. These papers could be described as “in-house projects” – members of religious communities reporting their own history.

It should be noted, however, that members of communities did report before other professional historical bodies which would be a more appropriate venue for historians working in fields other than those defined by the CCHA.

The community-based research on women religious presented before the CCHA is very important. Given the fact that the sources from which research emerges reside in community archives, and given the fact these archives are private sources, women religious were among the few individuals admitted by community archivists to undertake research. As with any private archive (be it corporate or that of an association), permission for admission was not freely given – even to its own members. The plea made in 1983, the first year that the CCHA had a woman president in the person of Marianna O’Gallagher, by J.S.Moir to the members of the CCHA for admission of scholars to records bears repeating: “Finally, openness must include accessibility to records on a scale not previously practised. Without historical records there will be no historical research ... The churches [and communities] fear that the researcher may be unsympathetic to their particular positions (and in a minority of cases they are probably right) but in fact they are doing no more than denying their own creatureliness. Mistakes will be made by historians, but the road to truth is surely paved with mistakes and with their rectifications.”²⁹

Women religious supported the CCHA in other ways. They have always formed a large portion of the membership of this organization. Reviewing the membership and mailing lists, one quickly sees that schools, mother-houses, archives, and individual women religious themselves have long been among its major supporters. Within the time period scanned, it is also noteworthy that women, lay or religious, did not play a prominent public role in the organization. As was the case with other professional organizations of historians which are documented elsewhere, women were significantly under represented at the executive table and both as subjects and generators of historical research. When women did appear on the program, either as

²⁹ J.S. Moir, “Coming of Age,” 97.

researchers or subjects of scholarly investigation, the majority of them were women religious.

The historical writing of women religious represents a virtually unexplored aspect of the history of the Catholic Church in English Canada. Their work as historians, as writers of community history, as researchers, and as teachers was to them a part of their larger vocation. For most of the period under study, the women religious who wrote history tended to write for a highly specialized audience: their community, their graduates, and interested Catholics. In some instances, they wrote under obedience and their works were anonymously listed as written by a member of the community. When or if they engaged in a more public forum, it was not for the most part within the secular world. It tended to be within the environment of targeted denominational groups such as the Canadian Catholic Historical Association.

For many women religious, their work of history was shaped by their vows and the structures of the Pre-Vatican II Church. They wrote within an era of Canadian history which itself was highly regulated, structured, and not generally reflective of the experience of women – especially of women engaged in the professions of education, social service, and health care.

The thirty years since Vatican II have brought great changes to the lives of women religious who write history and the context within which they live and work. First, with more personal input into careers and professions, those women who wished to pursue further study in history and its related fields were able to do so. Second, and perhaps more significantly, history as a field changed. The tools of scientific analysis were applied to historical events at a time when women religious were encouraged to seek their roots. Feminist scholarship provides a useful framework for communities beginning to explore their development. Communities of religious, such as the Monroe, Michigan, based Sister Servants of the Immaculate Heart of Mary (The Monroe IHM) have labeled their historical project as *Claiming Our Roots: IHM Interdisciplinary Feminist History Project*. Their seventeen Working Assumptions include “in practice, a range of feminist ideologies exist, but feminist approaches to history accept as a starting point that patriarchy exists in society and in its institutions, including churches.”³⁰ The influence which this project will have especially through international organizations such as the History of Women Religious Conference (HWR) and its Internet discussion group Sister-L remains to be seen.

³⁰ Sisters, Servants of the Immaculate Heart of Mary, Monroe Michigan. “Claiming our Roots (COR) Project.” Working Assumptions. Adopted April, 1992.

Although the history of women religious has not yet captured the interest of secular feminist historians to any great degree, it is apparent that for key feminist scholars, the experience of women religious is one of the great neglected pieces of the history of women. In her 1993 work, *The Creation of Feminist Consciousness*, Gerda Lerner devoted several chapters to the work of women religious. She argued that “if tradition, religion and daily practice inculcated in women a deep sense of mental inferiority, which they were to regard as both natural and God-given, one must wonder how some of them managed to overcome this sense and give themselves authority and warrant to think, to speak and even to write.”³¹ Yes, as this paper illustrates, women religious contribute to the work of history in many ways, and this work needs to be more fully explored. Questions of comparative experience between the communities of English and French Canada, between diocesan and international communities, within the same community over generations, all beg for analysis. Work in this area represents a unique opportunity for historians from a variety of disciplines (social history, religious history, history of education, women’s studies) to explore, as Lerner suggested “that gender is a social construction and that woman, like man, makes and defines history.”³²

³¹ G.Lerner, *The Creation of Feminist Consciousness*, 65.

³² *Ibid.*, 283.