Women on Campus in British Columbia: Strategies for Survival, Years of War and Peace 1906-1920

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The young women who entered Canadian universities just before the First World War had fewer behavioural constraints and considerably more social and intellectual freedoms than earlier generations. Nevertheless, this independence was tempered with uncertainty because these women ventured into largely uncharted territory. True to the dire predictions of those Victorians who resisted the admission of women to institutions of higher learning, education not only brought women into direct conflict with traditional expectations of womanhood, but also into direct competition with male academics and professionals.[1] These students, then, in the early years of the twentieth century, devised strategies to cope with this period of transition, in which the ever widening sphere of women's activities eclipsed familiar sanctions.

In British Columbia, within a social and economic climate of changing expectations that became intensified by the exigencies of the First World War, women found their position on campus and in society both ambiguous and challenging. The university community, not an island detached from the larger society, served to focus and intensify the relationship between the sexes. An analysis of this interaction at an organizational level demonstrates the ways in which women responded to this intense period of transition.

Prior to the opening of the provincial University of British Columbia (UBC) in 1915, up to three years of undergraduate courses in Arts and Science and Applied Science were administered to students in British Columbia by Montreal's McGill University. Beginning in 1906, classes were held for forty-eight students at Vancouver High School, where matriculation courses were also conducted. In 1907, the McGill University College of British Columbia, as it was called, expanded to occupy the old hospital buildings on Cambie Street. The Fairview campus served also as the initial home for the University

Barbara K. Latham and Roberta J. Pazdro, Eds., *Not Just Pin Money*
Victoria: Camosun College, 1984

of British Columbia before buildings were completed in Point Grey.[2] By 1908, the total enrolment in Arts and Science numbered fifty-six, of which fifty percent were women. In the remaining years of McGill college, women averaged forty percent of all Arts students, and in the first five years of UBC (to 1920), the average number of women registered in all faculties was forty-five percent of the total. The most noteworthy fluctutations in the ratio of male to female students occurred due to the war. In 1917, women in attendance outnumbered men by two percent and in the years immediately following the war returning veterans, chiefly men, caused the most significant disparity in the ratio of males to females since 1908. Female enrolment in 1919-20 was thirty-eight percent of a total student population of 890.[3] This pattern of fluctuating enrolment during these years of war and peace, 1906-1920, in which women initially comprised half the student population, briefly the majority, and finally the minority, coincided with differing stages of feminist consciousness: a strategy devised to cope with the conflicting expectations inherent in the current model of coeducation.

At different times, coeducation has meant education for men and women in coordinate colleges, education of the sexes together in the same colleges (but not necessarily the same education for both), and identical education of the sexes together.[4] In British Columbia, practical and economic considerations combined to ensure that men and women were offered identical instruction within classrooms where only separate seating arrangements informally recognized male and female differences.[5] In the nineteenth century, when education remained oriented to theoretical or metaphysical constructs, feminists fought for the right of women to receive the same instruction, examinations, and degrees as men. They refused to compromise before they had proven their ability to become assimilated in the academic fraternity.[6] In the twentieth century, when education, in many instances, has become vocational training, feminists have been divided on whether women's interests are best served by their assimilation into the status quo.[7] Identical education might be perceived as a lack of accommodation to the presence of women or an insensitivity to their special interests.

In 1920, the young women active in the Ladies' Literary and Debating Society of McGill University College of British Columbia (MUCBC) were not so complacent that they accepted uncritically the conditions of their instruction on campus. Included in their subjects for debate that year was the resolution "that the system of coeducation is satisfactory in every way."[8] The remaining topics scheduled for the women to debate that year indicated some of the tensions that may have existed between their desire to be assimilated and their need to be accommodated. These topics included resolutions: that a Domestic Science course is more useful for a woman than a regular Arts course; that Physical Culture be compulsory for women students in college; that the study of French and German is more worthwhile than Greek and Latin.[9] In fact, the institution adapted slowly to the female presence and their different needs. More frequently, women adjusted their own expectations and accommodated themselves to the predominant conditions.

The removal of the more visible barriers to women's participation in higher education failed to clarify the degree of acceptance or recognition that

a woman might expect to receive in a system that historically reflected male-defined values and priorities. In a photograph in the 1910 MUCBC *Annual*, the young women of the "Ladies' Lit" pose for posterity. They appear with huge hair bows worn at the back of the head like fantastic butterflies. Their dresses are detailed with starched white collars at the throat and very formal, very neat neckties. Perhaps these accessories of dress were emblematic of the ambivalent position that women occupied in what remained essentially a man's world. A brief survey of the history of the Ladies' Literary and Debating Society (Ladies' Lit) illustrates the ways in which women accommodated themselves to the conflicting expectations and demands inherent in the university community. These demands required women to compete in a traditionally male sphere while maintaining the outward signs of traditionally feminine decorum and deference.

In 1908, the students at MUCBC organized the Undergraduates' Literary and Debating Society "to develop and promote the art of public speaking."[10] The officers of the new society included a woman as vice-president and as class respresentative. In the first debate only men participated, but in subsequent meetings, which took the form of a mock Dominion Parliament, the "government" introduced a bill to grant the franchise to women who had reached the age of twenty-one. Two women spoke to the issue. After a heated debate, the bill passed its final reading.

The participation of women speaking forcefully and with conviction could not escape even gentle ridicule in the write up of the college annual. It stated: "Miss Harris and Miss Patterson spoke in a very impressive style and, Carry Nation-like, dr[o]ve home their points with a hatchet."[11] The hyperbolic comparison to Carry Nation served as a reminder that the image of women speaking in public remained both uncommon and suggestive of those qualities not generally admired in women.

In 1909, the inter-college debate against the Methodist Columbia College, New Westminster, was represented by the McGill team of two men and one woman, but the following year no women took any active part in any of the college debates. The issue of woman's suffrage was again debated, but apparently women had become reluctant or unable to continue in direct competition with men. There can be no doubt of women's interest in debating if judged by their proposal to establish a separate society "for the ladies only" in 1910. The new Ladies' Literary and Debating Society proclaimed their main object to be "training in debating"[12] which may indicate their own appraisal of their abilities and their attempts to remedy and improve their insufficiencies.

In the absence of any evidence to suggest that the men had overtly excluded the women, it seems apparent that the coed society had been rejected by the women who preferred not to subject themselves to criticism or failure in front of the opposite sex. Their reticence had undoubtedly allowed men to assume the more visible roles in class debates, but the interest of the women sought its own expression in a more supportive body. Acutely aware of their need to participate and not be dominated by the more confident or aggressive among them, the women modified the activity of their club to include

dramatic readings and musical presentations. As stated in the college annual:

> . . . the watchword of the club is that all must be kept active members, so those who will not debate give musical selections . . . [and] some dramatic parts . . . The ladies felt that if the club was to be of real help a critic must be present to point out their faults and to judge the debate.[13]

In 1911, the first woman faculty member who was appointed to McGill College, Isabel MacInnes, MA, consented to be the Honourary President and critic to the Ladies' Lit.

The Ladies' Lit which fostered solidarity among the college women became a focus for the creative expression of social criticism. The women presented a play, "The Ladies Speak at Last", which parodied Shakespeare's female characters who represented their side of the (mostly) unhappy unions with their famous husbands. Part of the performance was recorded in the McGill *Annual*:

> The curtain finds Miss Isabel Bodie, as Juliet, moping because Romeo is where and when he ought not to be. After several centuries of woefully monotonous existence she has decided that married life is not what it is cracked up to be. Poor Portia agrees with her. . . she unburdens her troubles. Her Bassanio has turned out to be a spendthrift, and has with Antonio disposed of his wife's cash . . .Portia is reduced to depend on her rejected suitor Morocco for entertainment . . .[14]

The rivalry between the sexes evident beneath the fun and entertainment was a continuous theme in the presentations staged by the Ladies' Lit. Canadian women have frequently chosen ridicule and satire as an effective means of social criticism. A mock faculty meeting held by the Ladies' Lit in 1916 was modelled after the famous mock parliaments staged by suffragists in western Canada a few years earlier.[15]

By 1912-13, the Ladies' Lit became increasingly politicized. The president of the society, Della Currie, was also the Editor-in-Chief of the McGill *Annual* which had featured in the previous year an eloquent argument by Currie for woman's suffrage.[16] Currie was depicted as "a girl of wide interests . . . extremely popular throughout the college--and above all, . . .a born leader."[17] Currie moved the debating activity of the women's club back into competition with the men's society, "the more pretentious body", to decide once again the suffrage question. The focus for the club's meetings became increasingly feminist: featured papers were on "Prominent Canadian Women" by third-year Arts women, "The Inheritance of the Canadian Educated Woman" by Mrs. Evlyn Farris, President of the University Women's Club, "The Advantages of College Life for Girls" by Mrs. Laura Jamieson, University Women's Club, and "Feminism and the Works of Ellen Key", by Mrs. D. McIntosh, Faculty Women's Club.[18]

Over a period of seven years, the women of McGill College had adapted the Literary and Debating Society to their own needs. The Society not only provided a social function, but also a supportive forum in which women could

develop their public-speaking skills. When the new provincial university opened in 1915, two literary societies were established "on equal footing": the Ladies' Lit, renamed the Women's Literary Society, and the Men's Literary Society.[19] The distinction between the men's and women's societies now had become formalized. Social functions, previously the domain of the Ladies' Lit, were strictly relegated to the Undergraduate Society. The following statement in the *UBC Annual* (1916-17) revealed that women became more self-conscious of the expectation to be academically and not socially oriented at the new university: ". . . the Women's Literary Society has overcome any tendency to be a social club and has preserved its identity as a purely literary society."[20] The Women's Lit emphasized more dignity and formality now and their subjects for debates reflected these aspirations. In 1916-17, the Women's Lit had one debate on coeducation, but other topics concerned the reforming of Canada into a social democracy, and fates of Russia and Constantinople.[21]

Women's roles and the attitudes towards their own education took on a special significance during wartime. During the war years, women became the instruments of transmission for patriotic nationalistic, and spiritual values. Images of women as wives and mothers became synonymous with those of home and country. Thus, women at the university, as in the larger community, became imbued with a sense of mission which was both externally prescribed and internally conceded. The Women's Lit became the forum, then, for addresses to confirm women's dedication to noble purposes. Isabel MacInnes, Professor in Modern Languages, in 1917, exhorted the women to uphold the quest for truth, to be dedicated to higher standards, and to maintain a sense of righteousness, truth and honour, as part of her duty to preserve those supreme interests for which the men were facing danger and death.[22] The imperative of war presumed that all men were soldiers and all women were nurses. Thus some women at the university responded to the call of the Red Cross; but as women were increasingly expected to be the standard bearers on the home front, they responded in a variety of ways to the challenge of the qualified and temporary power they were left to wield, as they became the majority of the student population.

In 1916, Evelyn Story, motivated by a "sense of duty", ran for the office of president in the student society elections. Story had been active in the Ladies' Lit and in the preparation of the college annual. She had also worked with two other male students to draft the constitution of the Alma Mater Society to ensure that women had the right to hold office and to vote in student elections.[23] Story's candidacy proved controversial and unsuccessful; she lost by one vote due to a last-minute campaign waged by the men in the Science faculty who were appalled by Story's ambitions as a "self-seeking woman".[24] Story's efforts set the precedent, and the following year, Nora Coy, who had served as the Women's Athletic Association President in 1916, had no trouble winning the office to become the first women president of the Alma Mater Society.[25] As women assumed a greater visibility on campus, the Women's Lit subsided in its importance as an alternate channel for women's cautious and unaccustomed forays into the public eye. By the end of the war, women on campus had greater confidence in their public roles, and the conditions that had precipitated the founding and separating of the men's and

women's literary societies had been forgotten.

A sequence of letters in the first two months of 1919, in the *Ubyssey*, the student newspaper, indicated a resurgence of the old issues of coeducation and the "need for more progressive policy" in the two literary societies.[26] A letter signed by "L'Homme Indigne" gave every indication that the sentiments expressed were an attempt at satirizing grievances which were nevertheless begining to surface.

> It was with great pleasure that I learned . . . that women were to be excluded from the meetings of the Men's Lit . . . why, oh why, can't women be excluded from all activities about the college that are primarily for men? . . . we have to put up with coeducation, why should we allow so many of our societies to be diluted with the weaker sex . . . now having lowered the academic standard for their benefit, certain students would prevent us raising the Men's Lit. above the feminine level.[27]

A letter from Hazel E. McConnell, editor of the UBC *Annual*, revealed that women's perceptions and expectations had altered significantly over ten years:

> It is felt by many students in the University that the Men's Lit. Society is making a mistake in excluding women from those meetings devoted to debate and public speaking...such an attitude savors of the last century when the presuming "co-ed" was tolerated at lectures but not expected to interfere in the affairs of the College. In many of the leading universities today, the men and women have one literary society, which is found mutually beneficial.[28]

And a final letter in the series suggested a stronger commitment to the ideal of sexual equality and an enhanced consciousness of women's altered image in society:

> The modern views regarding coeducation are that the healthy association of men and women is the natural and benefical system . . . the old notion of higher education for men only is out of place. The day is now passed when a woman leads her life in ignorance of everything but her home duties . . . the long centuries, during which "the weaker sex" were supposed to be knitting by the fireside, have failed to develop certain qualities which we find in men. But though women are entering fields of work formerly regarded as exclusively masculine, they need not lose any of their fine qualities. Furthermore, a highminded woman is above feeling even the slightest resentment when it is stated that her intellectual standing is inferior to a man's.[29]

The university women were probably not conscious of the ways in which the Women's Lit had evolved in response to the need of the participants for a collective, gender-specific identity. In the period after the war, women felt

that continued segregation of men and women was anachronistic and even discriminatory. It would appear that it was now the men who felt uneasy in mixed company; or, at least, they had become accustomed to the status quo.

The next stage in the evolution of the Literary Societies was an attempt to rejuvenate what had become not only an anachronistic structure, but also an activity of declining student interest. In the efforts to overcome student apathy to debating, the formation of a new Literary Club was proposed--the Literary and Scientific Department--open to both men and women but "limited to students who were willing to take an active interest in the society".[30] A concerted attempt was made to create an elite group of energetic participants in order to fulfill the society's first objective in "a province deficient in public speakers."[31]

The experiences of women at the university as reflected by their activity in the Women's Lit Society indicate a pattern of response not dissimilar to that of women in the larger community. The formation of women's societies was prompted by a complex set of needs and circumstances and not by the exclusion of women from the men's societies. Women chose the solidarity of their own sex in order to develop the skills they needed for a more extensive interaction and responsiblity within an environment where expectations and images of women's roles were rapidly changing. The association of women fostered a consciousness of their shared experience and nourished a feminist vision and appreciation of their own sex. Their extended participation during the war years increased the autonomy of individual women and contributed to their collective self-confidence. However, in the aftermath of political equality, the argument for separate but equal spheres of influence appeared untenable. Moreover, as the male organization clung to the preservation of the status quo, the status of exclusively female activities declined by comparison. Thus, segregated societies which came to be regarded as conservative not discriminatory, seemed also to be fulfilling antiquated functions.

These conclusions can be pushed further. Historians have noted elsewhere that at the end of the war, in coincidence with the suffrage victory, many women relinquished their increased share of the power structures, retreated from public life, and suspended their tradition of feminist activity. While it is clear that women did not press their advantage in a time of social upheaval, it is imperative to understand in retrospect that the apparent strengthened status acquired by individual women was undermined by a concomitant devolution in the status of feminist solidarity. Perhaps this examination of the activity of women on campus lends some insight into the process whereby separatist feminist strategies became dismantled in the belief that they impeded full equality.

Footnotes

1. For an account of the controversies surrounding the higher education of women in Great Britain, see Joan N. Burstyn, *Victorian Education and the Ideal of Womanhood* (London: Croom Helm, 1980). And for some Canadian views, see Ramsay Cook and Wendy Mitchinson, eds., "Education", in *The Proper Sphere* (Toronto: Oxford, 1976).
2. The University remained in Fairview for ten years. For the early history of UBC and also McGill University College of British Columbia, see Frederic H. Soward, *Early History of the University of British Columbia* (Vancouver: UBC, 1930), Special Collections Division, the Library, University of British Columbia.
3. Registration figures established by McGill College Calendars and University of British Columbia Calendars for the years mentioned, UBC Archives. Before 1916, no women registered in the Faculty of Applied Sciences. By 1920, Nursing was included and attracted increasing numbers of female students.
4. Thomas Woody, *A History of Women's Education in the United States* Vol. II (New York: Octagon, 1974): 244.
5. Arts courses were chosen from English, History, Latin, French, German, Physics, Chemistry, Psychology, Logic, and Maths, with few options.
6. See Sara Delamont, "The Contradictions in Ladies' Education", *The Nineteenth Century Woman: Her Cultural and Physical World*, eds., Sara Delamont and Lorna Duffin (London: Croom Helm, 1978).
7. In British Columbia, maternal feminists in the Local Council of Women advocated the teaching of Domestic Science at the university. This position was initially supported by Dr. Frank Wesbrook, newly appointed President of the University of British Columbia in 1913. However, Evlyn Farris, equal rights feminist, founder of the University Women's Club and member of the UBC Senate, argued that women's education could be devalued if the emphasis lay in the preparation of women for their socially defined roles and she opposed Household Science in the curriculum.
8. *McGill Annual*, 1910-11: 54-55.
9. *Ibid.*
10. *McGill Annual*, 1908: 39.
11. *Ibid.* Carry Nation (1846-1911) was a militant temperance advocate who achieved notoriety with her dramatic saloon smashing raids that took her (and her hatchet) throughout Kansas.
12. *McGill Annual*, 1909-10: 86.
13. *Ibid.*
14. *McGill Annual*, 1910-11: 56-57.
15. These were staged by the University Women's Club of Vancouver and later by Nellie McClung in Winnipeg, 1914.
16. "The Woman's Cause" in *McGill Annual*, 1911-12: 50-52.
17. *McGill Annual*, 1913: 21.
18. *McGill Annuals*, 1913-16. Ellen Key was a Swedish feminist whose *Love and Marriage* foreshadowed bachelor motherhood.
19. *UBC Annual*, 1915-16: 71. The change of name from "Ladies'" to the "Women's" indicates that a kind of democratization had taken place in the self-image of femininity. Or, perhaps, this change reflected an academic, formal orientation to university activities. In any event, it reflected a move away from Victorian connotations of womanhood.
20. *UBC Annual*, 1916-17: 62.
21. *Ibid.*

22. *UBICEE*, January, 1917: 8-10.
23. UBC women took pride in their equality which put them a step ahead of the country. At the time women at UBC were being elected to office in the AMS, women at McGill, Montreal, were trying to win the right to membership in the AMS. See Margaret Gillett, *We Walked Very Warily: A History of Women at McGill* (Montreal: Eden Press, 1981): 86.
24. Mrs Sherwood Lett (Evelyn Story). History of Women at UBC, Taped Interview by E.R. Green, August 9, 1975. UBC Archives.
25. Nora Coy was the only woman to be elected to the presidency of the AMS until 1950 when President John L. Haar did not return to UBC and Noreen Donaldson succeeded him. Coy died in 1921 after illness forced her to discontinue graduate work.
26. *Ubyssey*, January 30, 1919: 4.
27. *Ubyssey*, January 9, 1919: 5.
28. *Ubyssey*, January 30, 1919: 5.
29. *Ubyssey*, February 6, 1919: 4. Letter from "L'observateur Intelligent".
30. *Ubyssey*, February 13, 1919: 4.

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