

# Book Reviews

Mary Kinnear, *In Subordination: Professional Women 1870-1970* (Montreal & Kingston: McGill-Queens University Press 1995).

Mary Kinnear's title is one of those clever constructions that resonates with double meaning. On the one hand, the reader's eye sees the phrase "in subordination" to mean that professional women between 1870 and 1970 experienced a century of discrimination and oppression in their workplaces. Indeed, Kinnear argues forcefully that they did. At the same time though, one's ear hears a very different meaning in that title, as though it were just one word — insubordination. That second sense would suggest a history of active change, filled with acts of resistance and challenges to the status quo. From the outset then, one is hooked by that conundrum. The author plays with this apparent contradiction throughout the book and remarks upon it in her conclusion. "Listening to the voices of the professional women allowed me to understand their surface conformity to the male model professional," she states, underlining again the apparent subordination. "Yet I also heard dissonant tones beneath the tentative melody line," the author continues, "notes which declared that all was not in harmony." (167) Tracing change over time, Kinnear is convinced (and argues convincingly) that women did begin to analyze their oppression and move toward more active insubordination.

However, that position, resting on “foundations of both acceptance and resistance had been a century in the making.”(167) Women were at once both “in subordination” and “insubordinate.” The dilemma remains unresolved, and that, in part is what makes *Professional Women* so compelling to read.

Using case studies of Manitoba women working in different professions, the author explores how women responded to their subordinate positions in that occupational category, “professional.” The author acknowledges that the term “professional” is a contested one. She works with a definition based on four criteria. For her purposes, professionals are those who are educated through post-secondary education or other training “in scientific or esoteric skill and knowledge;” are required a certification test; practice self-regulation; and provide service to the public.(7) She looks at five professions altogether: doctors, lawyers, university professors, teachers and nurses. While doctors, lawyers, and university professors are surely among the most privileged class of workers in this country, Kinnear is careful to draw the reader’s attention to the fact that this was not a homogenous group. Stratification clearly existed among professionals themselves, and Kinnear’s thesis is that gender made all the difference.

Using statistical information from census data, university records and professional schools, Kinnear reconstructs the numerical record of Manitoba women’s participation rates in each of these fields. Teaching and nursing were clearly dominated by women, (literally thousands of them), and by comparison, only a handful were trained in law, taught university or practiced medicine. Comparing the two female-dominated professions to the others is an important part of Kinnear’s analytical task. Relying on survey respondents, either by mail or in person, Kinnear collected the voices of approximately fifty women for each of the five categories. Two observations about that methodology are important to make. First, as the author herself points out, that rate of return is somewhat problematic. While the voices of twenty four lawyers represent half

of the total of forty seven who practiced in the period 1911-1971, Kinnear could only use the stories of approximately fifty of the thirty thousand women who taught. It is difficult to know for certain that the women she heard from are really representative of the larger group. Second, the book claims to deal with a whole century of experiences, but because the respondents' experiences are at the heart of the analysis, the emphasis is very definitely on the second half of that period.

One important contribution of Kinnear's work is in the comparative exercise which contrasts the experiences of professional women to those of men, and the experiences of professional women in male-dominated occupations to those in female-dominated ones. Contrasts are only part of it, however. Kinnear concludes, that of course the search for "a single representative figure, [or] type, of professional woman before 1970," is in vain. "Such a woman does not exist." (152) However, she does look for "broad common context" shared by all the women. Her discussion about issues of control, pay equity and the juggling act of combining marriage and career are familiar and engaging, both for their historical and contemporary relevance. Concluding that "a woman professional, by definition, was a person in conflict," because of the sexually segregated economy and the social prescriptions of adult women as dependents, this book is far more than a celebration of female heroes who pioneered as women entering the professions. It is a book about the strategies that women used to keep themselves in those fields. While some professional women claimed that they were simply "delighted to be accepted" by their male colleagues, it seems clear that very often their experiences were hard to accept, and far from delightful. This book promises to help "explain why professional women continue to fight for equality today," and as a study of the history of gender-based discrimination, it delivers.

Linda M. Ambrose,  
Laurentian University, Sudbury