

Reflecting on violence against women

Well, it's that time of year again — time for a week of reflection. For an entire week, we are supposed to reflect on violence against women. Perhaps I speak for only a very few, but I can say that I abhor violence towards women; it should be neither countenanced nor tolerated. However, I find I can make this claim with very little reflection. In fact, in order to come to this conclusion, I need only the time it takes to frame

the question, "What do I think about violence against women?" Therefore, in keeping with the spirit of the week, let me suggest a few items upon which to reflect (for those of you who, like me, might otherwise find themselves idle).

Christina Hoffe Sommers has recently written a book, *Who Stole Feminism*, in which she points out that a number of the reported statistics about violence towards women have

been grossly exaggerated. Her book is interesting because it is credible. She chronicles her sources and her research and, as a feminist and a professor of philosophy, her points are well-conceived and convincing. She opines that misleading the public with inflated statistics and scare tactics is not the way to build a lasting change for anyone — women included. I quite agree.

Continuing in this vein, let us

consider the writings of a former board member of the National Organization for Women (NOW), Warren Farrell. He was elected to the board of this organization three times, so one finds oneself willing to allow that — perhaps — his views on women's issues are worthy of reflection. In a recently published book, *The Myth of Male Power*, he makes the following points (these are just a few that seemed particularly relevant to the week's atmosphere):

- Men account for 94% of occupational fatalities each year.
- Men aged 20 to 24 commit suicide almost six times as often as women in the same age group. Men over 85 commit suicide more than 14 times as often as women.
- Men lived on average one year less than women in 1920. Today they live seven years less. Female longevity has increased almost 50% since 1920.
- Men are more likely to die sooner from every one of the 15 leading causes of death.

• Men and their health are the subject of just one medical journal article for every 23 written about women.

• Men are only slightly less likely to die from prostate cancer than women are from breast cancer. But breast cancer research gets 660% more money.

• Men and women, according to 14 separate studies comparing the sexes, are equally likely to initiate domestic violence — at every level of severity.

• Men are twice as likely as women to be the victims of violent crime (even counting rape). Men are three times as likely to be murdered.

(This synopsis is taken from an article by Peter Brimelow in *Forbes Magazine*: March 14, 1994.)

Now, what are we to make of this? It seems that at least some of the information we have been given about the plight of women in society is exaggerated. In fact, it seems that

CONTINUED ON PAGE 8

BLACKS ON BLACK

Who was that guy?

James Robinson Johnston was born in Halifax in 1876, and by the time he was 22, Johnston had earned a Bachelor of Letters and a Bachelor of Law from Dalhousie University. At the turn of the century Johnston was practicing criminal law and military law; in doing so he became the first African Nova Scotian member of the Nova Scotian Bar.

Though not long on this planet, Johnston did live a busy life. He was a member of the African Baptist Association and a number of other social organizations. Before his death on March 3, 1915, Johnston helped to organize the Baptist Youth Provincial Union and assisted in the creation of the Nova Scotia Home For Coloured Children.

It is in his honour that the James Robinson Johnston Chair in Black Canadian Studies has been founded at Dalhousie University. The Chair is a combination of community, business, government and university efforts to address the racism that exist at Canadian universities and in Canadian society. Though the Chair has the potential to be more than a glorified affirmative action program, the objective is to attract scholars of African (Black) decent and to examine aspects of the African experience in Canada.

As I understand it, the Chair itself does not constitute a Studies Program or an academic department. The successful applicant can



come from a variety of disciplines and may become a member of one of a number of departments at Dalhousie. In this sense the direction of the Chair can be defined by the Chair holder.

Though I understand the argument that limiting applicants on the basis of race may be racist, I do not believe that in this case the Chair will perpetuate racism. Racism is the relationship between power and prejudice, and the ability to enforce and maintain prejudicial attitudes.

While it is true that the organizers of the Chair possess power, I feel the power is sufficiently divided to prevent the domination of one group over another. So long as people remain actively involved, domination can be checked, if not reported to the general public.

It has been argued that the racial qualification may create the equivalent of a segregated academic toilet, with all of the analogous implica-

tions of incompetence, stupidity, inferiority and vice. Those who present these arguments are usually non-African and do not understand what it is like to grow up in a racist society. People who mourn the loss of Martin Luther King Jr.'s dream would do well to step into reality.

Academics who fear the loss of their academic freedom should understand that Africans have not been free to examine our own history in this country. I am not saying that non-Africans cannot teach or write about the African experience. However, when primary documents about Africans by Africans refer to themselves as Africans, there is something wrong when many of the secondary sources use terms such as negro or coloured (I have not capitalized them because they are not proper names).

The James Robinson Johnston Chair presents a challenge to all who are interested in reaching a higher level of humanity. As long as Africans are defined by non-Africans there can be no real growth. If and when concepts presented through the Chair create controversy, it will be time for academics to do what they profess to be so good at — go to the archives and the libraries, gather your information, and intelligently debate the issue. After all is this not what we have gathered to do?

Sean Flynn Foyn



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Friday, November 25

*Last day of
Week of Reflection*

12:30 pm

Movies: "Without Fear" and "Still Killing Us Softly"

7:00 pm

A Time to Gather

Join us for our vigil to remember and reflect on violence against women.

8:00 pm

Coffeehouse and Open Mike

Bring your words, thoughts, music and yummy baked goods to this annual event.

Week of Reflection would like to thank all those who organized, participated and reflected.

