

# Book's claims are not unreasonable

Book review by Julie Green

Unfortunately, persons casually interested in women's drive for social reform would be intimidated by the book *A Not Unreasonable Claim*. Its overbearing female orientation would dampen the enthusiasm of any but the serious student of progressive women's reform. It is a shame that the book comes across like this, because it is definitely worthy of a close reading.

*A Not Unreasonable Claim* is a collection of essays by various Canadian historians. It deals with the social reform activities of Canadian women around the turn of the century. Published by the Women's Press, the book was released in October of this year to coincide with the fiftieth anniversary of the "Persons Case".

The collection, edited by Linda Kealey, a PhD candidate in history at the University of Toronto, is excellent for the range of opinions and perspectives presented on the choices made by the women's rights movement.

Feminism, a term which became popular in the 1890s, is defined by the contributors as a perspective which recognizes the right of a woman not only to adopt an increased public role, but more importantly, her right to define herself autonomously. The ideology of feminism arose from a middle-class setting in which women wanted to become more active with societal concerns. Upper-class women sought professional careers in an attempt to escape from the frivolity of their social life.

Feminism branched off in several directions. Some women wanted to bring religion in the guise of social reform to immigrants and workers. However, church reform was inherently racist, supporting British superiority and institutionalization of the 'feeble-



minded', for example.

Other women, as historian Wendy Mitchinson demonstrates in her essay, used the Women's Christian Temperance Union as a vehicle for their newly perceived public role. At the same time, they made it clear that support for suffrage did not in any way

contradict their domestic values.

A few women, however, took a more 'radical' view toward suffrage and reform. One such woman was Flora MacDonald Denison. Denison, noted for her rejection of orthodox Christianity in favor of mysticism, and for her lower-class occupation as a dressmaker, is the subject of a superlative study by Deborah Gorham. Gorham traces the formation of Denison's unusual beliefs. For Denison, the vote was not a vote for purity as it was to most women, but it was instead a vote for personhood. She saw the new woman's role not merely as that of social housekeeper, but as having broader social consequences.

Her influence on the entire suffrage movement in Canada, especially as president of the Canadian Suffrage Association between 1910 and 1914, is a factor usually given little consideration in feminist literature.

Other essays deal with the evolution of women in professions. In particular, Veronica Strong-Boag gives a lucid account of the necessity and development of women's medical colleges and their first graduates. The reasons and consequences of female immigration are the subject of two other essays.

*A Not Unreasonable Claim* takes a pan-Canadian perspective with its inclusion of regional responses to feminism. French-Canadian feminism, manifested in the Federation Nationale Saint-Jean Baptiste, is studied as well as the response of farm and labor women in the West to suffrage.

The contributors seem to despair at the unfulfilled potential for the 'new' woman campaign. The lack of participation of working women combined with the weakness of the socialist and labor movements are cited as causes for this unfulfilled promise.

The book, despite its overwhelming feminist orientation, is informative and well-written. It sheds new light on the little-studied and, consequently, little-understood history of women's drive for social reform at the turn of the century.

## Charles likes his wives merry

Opera review by John Charles

All Alberta musical premieres aren't thorny as the Music Department demonstrated on Thursday and Saturday with Otto Nicolai's 1849 opera, *The Merry Wives of Windsor*.

This delectable work has been overshadowed in North America by Verdi's incomparable masterpiece *Falstaff*, which is based on the same Shakespeare comedy. But it's never been out of the repertory in Germany since its first performance, and for good reason.

*Merry Wives* is a deftly constructed entertainment with warm, imaginative orchestral writing, a positively indestructible libretto, and a splendid series of melodies. It has a natural charm which makes it, *pace* Verdi, one of the top dozen operatic comedies around.

The Music Dept. was wise to choose such an appealing and nearly foolproof opera, and in spite of many little problems which might have sunk a more subtle or serious opera, the result was an enjoyable evening.

Elsie Achuff, as Alice Ford, just about stole the show. Although her voice has less sweetness and velvet than formerly, her technical skills have grown. Her high notes were excellently placed, her every phrase was polished and musical, and she has unusual poise and charm as a singing actress.

Kathy Megli as Meg Page was delightful, with a lustrous voice and a sharp sense of comedy. I wish she had more to do.

Mardene Francis made an attractive, firm-voiced Ann Page, though her big Act Three suffered because Acts Two and Three were shoved together. Such an extended piece seemed too long for an audience that had been sitting for 45

minutes. Her big duet with Fenton was a high point.

The men were more uneven. James Raycroft, as Mr. Ford, tended to croon and his acting was often too nonchalant. Tim Mallandaine's Fenton did too much bellowing, even when at stage front, and even when singing with Ann. His second act "Romance" is perhaps the loveliest moment in the score, but while full of ardor was short on tenderness. This is unfortunate as his rich, warm tenor voice is improving each year.

The other men - Robert Mast, Don McMann and Dan Bagan - did well, acting with vigor, though none has a notable voice. This proved problematic in some ensembles, especially with Nicolai's strong orchestral writing. The "Send Me to My Grave" ensemble went quite well, as did the work's finale.

Alan Ord's Falstaff was robustly sung, save for thin top notes. Perhaps because he seemed self-conscious, his acting was often low-keyed, and he never really assumed the character of Sir John. His little Act Two ballad, which is one of Falstaff's few opportunities to convey charm or wistfulness, conveyed nothing in particular.

The sum of these performances was much greater, however, as the cast sang and acted well together and Ord's direction kept the work going at a good clip.

Alfred Strombergs conducted well, though the orchestra tended to rush ahead of him, especially at the Act One finale. There was some scrappy playing, and the dynamic level alternated between loud and louder, but the playing was worlds above last season's Bizet-Menotti double bill.

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