

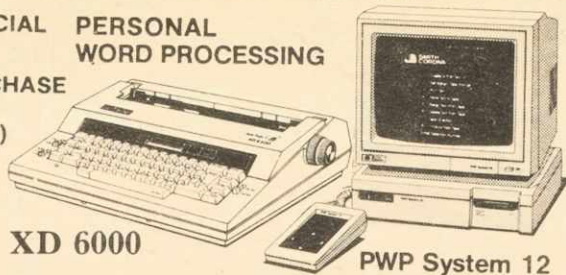
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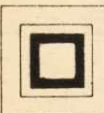
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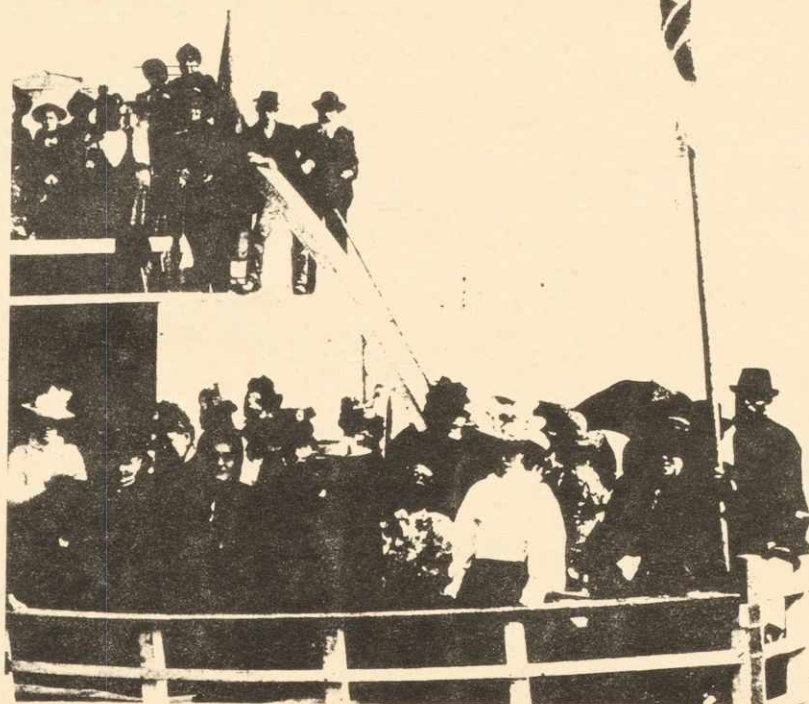
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# WOMEN create



## White women whisper

*Whispers from the Past: Selection from the Writings of New Brunswick Women*

By Elizabeth McGahen

Review by Lois Corbett

Whether it is recipes labouriously copied down and shared with family and friends or intimate details recored in diaries, women have always written. But their writings are seldom heralded or published — they are "private" recording of events or emotion, stuck between the pages of family bibles or lost over time. Elizabeth McGahen has tried to uncover the hidden voices of women in New Brunswick with *Whispers from the Past*, but unfortunately her latest book is little more than a collection of articles, excerpts and minutes of meetings from middle-class, white, and English speaking women of the province's past.

While McGahen admits her collection "Merely skims the surface of what awaits further archival research," she says these writings are "whispers from everwomen." With little analysis about class background or the social status of the women she includes in *Whispers from the Past*, McGahen makes the mistake of letting a few women speak on behalf of all in the province.

A woman from a rural, poor, non-white and non-English background would have a difficult time seeing her life, or her mother's life, reflected in the pages of *Whispers from the Past*. She would not understand Clara Winifred Fritz's letters, which she wrote while sailing from Saint John to New York and Vietnam with her father in 1903. She would not direct a letter to a bishop, like one of the women in the book, who wrote to Bishop T.L. Connelly of Saint John in 1858. In fact, she probably would not save her own words, or have much opportunity to read other women's writings.

McGahen's collection, however limited, does provide a glimpse into some women's lives in Saint John in the past, and if she had presented *Whispers from the Past* as that, instead of as the

voices of "everywoman," she would have succeeded in providing the reader with a new understanding of what it meant to be a middle-class female living in a growing industrial center at the turn of the century. The author says the writings in her collection contain comments on the "routine of women's lives," and through her selection, she has shown the importance of family, religion and friends for some women. While the writers in *Whispers from the Past* are privileged women, some do see class inequities in their society, and many worked for the good of "the poor," "the inebriate," and "unwed mothers."

*Whispers from the Past* has many helpful hints for women of all ages and times. Elizabeth Innes, a mid-wife in Saint John in the mid-1800, suggests this cure for sore nipples: "Bees wax, honey, sweet oil and rosin. Inness says she "nursed in my time 168 women in their Confinement and 157 in Labour." Anne Elliot offers what seems a surefire cure for "worms of the face...take 1 oz of Borax dissolved in 1 quart of soft water, wash the skin clean with it, then rub with a sweet oil."

The book is at once joyful and sad, religious and playful, philosophical and practical. Emma Forrester's letter to her son's employer expresses her anger and frustration at the province's indenture system, where young boys and girls were sent to an employer for living quarters in exchange for job training. "...he was scarcely allowed food sufficient to sustain nature (and) compelled to sleep on a bundle of rags in a corner of your garret." Forrester chastises the employer for her son's treatment, calling him "a disgraceful member of society," a man with a "malignant spleen."

Mary Morre, an elderly woman writing her daughter from her sickbed, tells of the time her husband wanted to invest four hundred dollars in the railroad. A neighbour friend, Mrs. Lindsay, told Moore to insist her husband

put the money in the bank instead, so his wife could have the interest it could earn. Mr. Moore refused, of course, saying his wife didn't need the twenty four dollars in interest: "I told him what the wise old woman said," writes Moore. "She also said railroads were an expensive luxury and should not be built by men of small means or who stood at the bench to earn their money as your father did. His reply was, you do not require money. Well dear, the result has been not one cent was ever received for it..."

At times, the writings in *Whispers From the Past* reflects the inequities of living in a sexist society that even privileged women faced. In 1890(c) the members of the Ladies Association of the Natural History Society applied to become members in the main organization. Mrs. Fiske, "a very dignified lady — a teacher of language, principally French," was chosen to present their application and the men's reaction to her request is recorded in the minutes: "She had hardly finished when a man from the back of the hall jumped to his feet in great indignation and said, 'When the Women come in, the Men go out! — I cannot recall the result of that meeting; I expect we retired gracefully and left it to the male members to digest.'"

*Whispers From the Past* does, in part, include reflections of women's contributions to their communities and society. Collections such as this are one step in the process of finding, and valuing women's writings. McGahen has succeeded in displaying some women's contributions to the development of New Brunswick, and her book demonstrates the need for more work in women's history if we are to have a more complete understanding of our own past.

Elizabeth McGahen is a history professor at the University of New Brunswick, Saint John. She has also published *The Port of Saint John, volume one*, and is currently working on the second volume.