

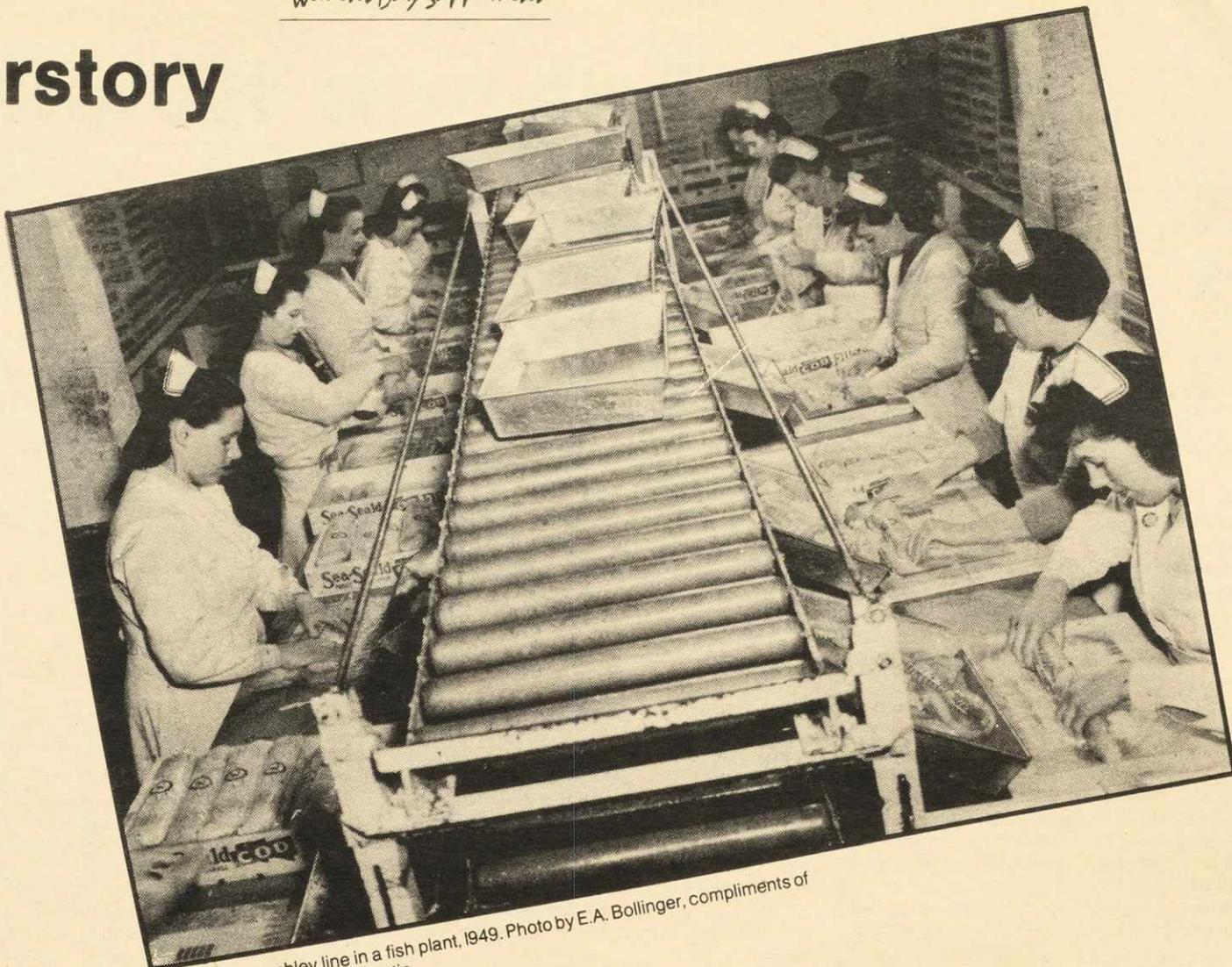
Writing herstory

How do we reclaim our past? Do we use the models of conventional history and study our 'great ones'? Our 'first ones'? Not necessarily, although studying these visible women can focus attention on the problems all women faced when they stepped beyond the boundaries of what was considered acceptable for their sex. Do we examine and elaborate the ways in which women have been oppressed in a male-dominated past? Not necessarily, although women must understand and assimilate the fact of oppression, in the past as well as in the present.

What we need from our past is a sense that our lives, and those of women who lived before us, mattered in the way that society was made. We want to reclaim, not just the political arenas and the great events, but all of the past. If they want to understand their place in the past in any complete way, women must take back that part of the past which has been not only discredited but ignored — the history of women in their workplaces, and in the organizations which involved themselves in everyday life.

This kind of re-evaluation of our past has begun. In academic institutions and in private projects across North America, women have started the difficult task of reconstructing women's lives out of fragmentary source material. In their recently-published second volume of *The Neglected Majority*, Alison Prentice and Susan Mann Trofimenkoff present several different approaches to accessing women's lives in the past. The essays in this collection examine women in the context of their family, their paid and unpaid labour, their physical and mental health, and their political consciousness both in terms of organized politics and in terms of gender relations.

Happily, the literature on women's history is too extensive to review here. Trofimenkoff and Prentice, themselves excellent scholars, have presented a group of articles which suggest some directions for research in the Maritimes. This region is not well represented in published studies of women in the past. *Acadiensis*, our regional journal of history, has included



Women in assembly line in a fish plant, 1949. Photo by E.A. Bollinger, compliments of Public Archives of Nova Scotia

one article on women in its 15-volume run. *Atlantis*, which publishes material relevant to women, has published some documents and review articles, but most research on women's topics is available only in the form of unpublished students' theses.

The lives of women are not often well-documented, nor is the available evidence easily interpreted. In examining such sources as newspapers, advice literature and diaries, it is as important to read between the lines as it is to read the text itself. For example, patent

medicine advertisements, published regularly in nineteenth century Halifax papers, offered not only cures for every imaginable disease, but for unwanted pregnancies as well. Even statistical sources such as the Canada census, which might be seen to offer "the truth" about the past, can reveal the extent of women's work, as well as show it was valued. The production of butter, the carding, spinning and weaving of cloth and, of course, the bearing of children are reflected in census data. But absent in any sort of clear way are tasks such as milking and the raising of livestock, poultry and eggs, often the source of personal income for farm women.

What other sources offer us avenues into women's lives? Diaries and personal correspondence are invaluable sources of women's perceptions of their own lives, although, as with men, women who kept diaries were a small minority. Newspapers are revealing sources, not just of events relating to women, but to the broader context in which their lives were placed. Organizations such as the Women's Christian Temperance Union and the Women's Institute offer suggestions as to how women took positive action to improve their own lives through improving the communities in which they lived. It is

important to remember that women have always valued collective organization — the church suppers we remember from our childhoods did not operate under any hierarchical structure.

The world of paid labour offers other kinds of understanding of women in society. We need to know who worked, why, where and when, in terms both of the larger society and of women's own life cycles. We need to know what women's paid work meant to society. Teachers, for example, came from many parts of Nova Scotia society: they were, for the most part, young, single women who had been given specific ideas about what children should be. These ideas entered the families of the children they taught: they also entered the lives of the children they bore. Again, women teachers were used to independence and exerting their authority. What happened to these women when they left the teaching profession? One would expect that they would take positions of leadership in their communities: indeed, some of the women who were involved in the women's suffrage movement in Nova Scotia had been teachers before their marriage.

Examining women's lives in the past requires imaginative research. Few archives in this region have had their consciousness raised: if a collection does not explicitly involve women, it will not be catalogued as having to do with women's lives. If we are to fully reconstruct women's place in the past, we must examine all kinds of written sources.

We must also listen to what women have to tell us in the form of oral testimony. Famous women are not the only ones with stories to tell. Recent issues of *Cape Breton's Magazine*, for example, have published transcripts of interviews with Cape Breton women. Many women have stories to tell — in fact, if we are going to reclaim women's pasts, we might well start with the women we know.

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"Lovely day. Had a real hard day at school. Kiddies possessed with ten devils. At night fed and I went to the strand to see *Four Horsemen of the Apocalypse*. It was GRAND. Arrived home at 11:20 PM.

Monday, May 1, 1882



Woman changing pillows in Sherbrooke. Photo from Public Archives of Nova Scotia.