

THE PARACHUTE DRESS: AN ORAL AND SOCIAL HISTORY OF EASTERN TOWNSHIPS ANGLOPHONE WOMEN DURING WORLD WAR II

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Theoretical and Methodological Framework:

Feminist contributions to historical and social scientific theory have underlined the need to do three things: to make women's experience in both public and private realms "visible"; to shift the standpoint on the meaning of that experience (the epistemological grounds of knowing and understanding); and to situate that experience within historically specific events, structures, constraints, and their transformation by real people. Those people differ by gender, region, race, ethnicity or other social characteristics.

A shifting of "standpoint" away from that adopted by traditional history, political economy or sociology, as Dorothy Smith has suggested, is necessary to make visible people's experience as active subjects of history. Previously treated as objects or as marginal players in relation to the "main business," their activities and concerns become the focus of, and must shape the method of, that investigation (Smith, 1989, 37-59). It is from a standpoint of knowledge-for-ruling, and of attending only to the "main business," that women have been marginalized, their work not considered work, their visibility in an economy, their relevancies and part in the shaping of history, obscured. This theoretical dilemma calls for new methods of making "the everyday world" both problematic and visible; its experience also then becomes articulatable and analyzable by those who know it. Otherwise, especially in academic undertakings, "the discourse that prevails is one that 'obliterates' women as active agents" (Smith, 1987, 164). It is, then, in the oral history or "narratives" of these subjects, the work and practical reasoning of actual individuals, that we and they can understand their behaviour, which is both socially constrained

and in which they make choices to lead their lives differently (Smith, 1987, 203).

There are, then, several theoretical and epistemological (how-we-know) propositions that are recognized in and inform the feminist research methods which we have attempted to utilize in this research:

- 1) That knowledge and discourse are “socially constructed.”
- 2) That “dominant” or “official” discourses or ideologies operate primarily in the interests of “ruling.”
- 3) That there is no such thing as “value-free” science, social science, or history.
- 4) That, because people’s perspectives vary systematically with their position in society, the perspectives of men and women may, and probably do, differ.

(Those four propositions are found in Eichler, 1985.)

- 5) Thus, that dealing with gender “reflexively” means recognizing its all-pervasive impact on ways of seeing, “standpoints.”
- 6) That recognition of women’s “marginalization” leads to the need to make their experience both “visible” and “useful” to them as social agents.

This last involves both an ethical and political concern:

- a) not treating them as mere research objects, in terms of the focus of research projects and their roles in these, and
- b) attending to the utility of these accounts for their lives, and not only to those of the researchers or of an overly abstracted or academic audience.

(These concerns are detailed in Cook and Fonow, 1986.)

- 7) That finally, the attempt to recognize the constraints of “official” standpoints means examining how women’s exposure to them in everyday contexts was experienced. In this study it was via radio, film, advertised products, as well as institutionalized networks of activity and governmentally-disseminated propaganda. Such media and organized institutional frameworks for action are important to examine to see how women encountered these and creatively engaged with or went beyond them (Haggis, 1990; and Stanley and Wise, 1990). Within such media, women also find “ideological options” for defining their own “subjectivity,” and hence agency (Weedon, 1989, 30). Speaking out for “herself” works against “official” or “ruling” discourses about what women were, are, or should be (Weedon, 1989, 173).

Method and Sample Selection:

A study, using oral history accounts of the Second World War provided by Eastern Townships Anglophone women, was undertaken as a way to examine the marginalization of women's lives in relation to a "main event" of history. The general goal of this particular study was to record accounts that individual women gave of their lives in regard to that event. A more specific goal was to record women's social history in a specific place, the Eastern Townships, at a specific time, 1939–1945. In longer term analysis of this material, we seek to identify and explore both "common threads" and contradictions in the conceptions of gender roles and everyday life experiences as reported by the women interviewed. Additional material, concerning the life experiences or gender roles of other women during the war years, is being used for comparison, therefore, whenever possible and relevant to those two analytic aims.

The rationale for the focus of the study was based on a working hypothesis that, if women's social history is different from men's, then this difference will be most apparent during periods of social upheaval, such as wartime. Specifically, this difference relates to a change in what are taken-for-granted patterns of gender behaviour that are altered by both out-of-the-ordinary choices and stresses. Therefore, we were concerned with:

- 1) How the war affected the life choices that were made by these women.
- 2) What stresses these women faced because of the war and how they adapted to these.

While this sample of women is specific to time, place, and ethnic/linguistic background, it was hoped that the material gathered would serve as an example of the type of history that women can provide when given a voice. At the very least, it was evident that the oral history format could best provide "eyewitness" accounts of past experiences which might otherwise be lost forever.

Prior to beginning the interview process, research was undertaken that focussed on women during this period in the Eastern Townships, in the rest of Canada and abroad. This research provided informal ways to connect the individual accounts. In other words, the "conversations" could be directed more easily to certain specifically shared events, local, national and international, which, during the fifty-year period, had been forgotten by the women. The need for the interviewers to situate the women in the

time period under consideration appeared to be based not only on a need to “jog the memory,” but also on a need to clarify for the women that they were, in fact, “active agents” during the war years. In order to facilitate both the remembrance and the validation of the experiences of the women, visual cues of the Second World War were incorporated into the interview process. These cues (especially advertisements) were taken from various issues of *The Sherbrooke Record* (1939–1945) and reflected the impact of the war on the homefront. That is, the images chosen served as visual examples, at both the individual and collective levels, of wartime influence on the everyday lives of local women. Such visual cues, used at the beginning of an interview, often provided stimuli enabling those being interviewed to go beyond what they have accepted to be the important war events as seen in official historical documentation, written and filmic.

Thirty-one formal interviews (which included signed consent for public use of the material) were recorded, using an open-ended question format. The women were also encouraged to provide their own special recollections on matters not specified in the usual set of questions. One interview was also done with a male, who was a commander of the local forces that went to Hong Kong, an arena with significant local import and that was prominent in the recollections of a number of the women interviewed.

Several women were also spoken to “off the record.” This part of the study included visits by the research assistants to three Women’s Groups: the Women’s Institute in Sawyerville and chapters of the UCW (United Church Women) and the ACW (Anglican Church Women) in Lennoxville. A presentation and a discussion took place at each of these sessions. These “off the record” conversations were generated to gain further insight into women’s lives in the region during the war. They were helpful in recruiting participants and including as many women in the experience of remembering as possible. It was evident from the beginning of the project that the women needed to overcome a reluctance to seeing themselves as part of the “main business” of the war years. Finally, “off the record” conversation provided additional “memory jogging” material for the formal interviews. Additional means of recruiting women to be interviewed included: word-of-mouth referrals, advertising in various media, sending letters to women’s groups throughout the Eastern Townships, and so on.

The goal was to make the relatively small sample as diverse a population as possible by age, Township locale and life

situation/status. These criteria were used, whenever possible, to select women who would provide the formal accounts. A general breakdown of the diversity evident in the final sample is as follows:

- 1) Age of participants ranges from the early 60s to 103 years of age. (The oldest woman was a mother of a woman being interviewed and was included in the interview process.)
- 2) Eastern Townships locales of participants include: Sherbrooke, Lennoxville, Sawyerville, Stanstead and surrounds, North Hatley, Mansonville, Richmond and surrounds, Beebe and Melbourne.
- 3) Defined categories of life situation/status during the war of these participants include: students (elementary, high school, nursing and university), non-civilians (army and airforce personnel) and civilians. This latter category represents an extensive variation including marital status, occupation, rural and urban environment, and so on. The life-situation/status also changed for many of the women during the war. However, the coding of the interviews was done so as to reflect the most significant variable(s), usually status-related, of each participant in terms of the overall goals of the study.

Making Visible the Invisible Waging of War:

The upheaval of the Second World War changed people's everyday lives, experiences and memories. They and we are still trying to come to grips with its impact on modern life. The war, through "mobilization" (military and productive), state policies and ideological impetus, demanded and achieved engagement of men and women on an unprecedented scale. For women, this meant an influx into new or traditionally "male" paid work, but also, an expansion of traditionally "female" unpaid work roles, including public (volunteerism) and private (familial) work. It provided not only new individual opportunities, burdens and choices, but also national and international networks for organizing, through which individualized and familial efforts by women could be effectively coordinated.

These material, political and organizational requisites of mobilization for war restructured people's productive and consumption activities and involved their own creative reshaping of these under the constraints of direct war production, training, rationing and recycling. War became an occasion for them to transform their

lives, work, the products they consumed or produced, both at home and in the public realm. Few of these transformations are made visible in traditional or “official” accounts — biographical, historical, filmic or documentary.

Now You See Them, Now You Don’t:

Documentary films (NFB, 1977) on Canadian, American and British women in war did provide new “official” versions and clear messages about how women could or should participate in the armed services and volunteer efforts of the war. A common sub-text of such films, however (Canadian or American more than British), often prepared women to conceive of these new roles as temporary and disposable in favour of women’s return to primary familial ones. Such “official” filmic accounts, and the advertisements used in this study, share these two ideological messages about women’s roles:

1. “You are crucial to the war effort.” “Show this by undertaking ‘men’s’ as well ‘women’s’ work.”
2. “Only men can fight on the warfront. There and on the homefront your service is to them.” “We serve that men may fly” (Ziegler, 1973).

“Homefront” is, thus, either hidden from view, or made reactive, a “backdrop” to the “main events/actors” in the war. The home is also reinforced as the legitimate “place” for women. Women portrayed in these media are usually undifferentiated by class or regional/national experience, and certainly by ideology or alternative views of their future roles. Though shown to be active, they are subtly disinvested of creative subjectivity and agency, especially in shaping new, postwar women’s roles. (Further, future analysis of the data within the oral histories may shed light upon whether and how these women adopted or struggled with such conceptions of gender roles.)

Their Experience:

The war efforts undertaken by many anglophone women in the Townships were, for the most part, slightly altered versions of activities they were already doing or expected to be doing. The relevance of these activities to “main event” activities is easy to ignore, even for participants, because they were connected with traditional female service, work and volunteer roles. The best example of this is volunteer work, a “common thread” in all the

interviews of women who remained in the Townships during the war years.

Volunteerism, fostered by extensive family ties and a strong anglophone group network, was already an important part of women's lives in the Townships when the war began. War merely generated different needs to which these women readily responded. Collective and individual activities, directed toward the needs of the men overseas, such as knitting, writing letters, mailing packages, sending cigarettes and rolling bandages, were mentioned frequently. Dances and parties for troops stationed locally, as well as fund-raising card parties, were common recollections. The ingenuity of Townships women in these endeavours is frequently attested to. One teenager produced a local newsletter, *The Weekly Wash*, to be sent to the "boys" overseas. Another woman remembered her family's canning butter to be shipped abroad. Once Britain was under siege, energies were also directed toward helping the people in the "Homeland." Many women's groups, such as the IODE (Imperial Order of the Daughters of the Empire) and the Women's Institute, already had direct connections with Britain which were further strengthened at this time. Women remember sending food packages, holding clothing drives, canning jam, and offering to take in British children. One woman sadly recounted the deaths of four British students whose Canada-bound ship was torpedoed.

Volunteer activities were not leisure pursuits, although the camaraderie is fondly remembered. Evenings became times for women of all ages to be together and produce collectively, much like quilting and barn-raising bees of the past. New chapters of women's groups sprang up throughout the Townships: some focussed directly toward wartime needs. Many women's lives were regulated by their commitment to volunteering. Overlaid upon such grassroots initiatives and pre-industrial styles of work organization, was a heightened rationalizing, centralizing and regimenting structure of volunteer activities at local and national levels. This centred on increasing output, regulating product quality and ensuring rapid and worldwide distribution (Pierson, 1986, 33–41). Knitting patterns were standardized for war items (e.g. the women all remembered the Lux Knitting Book), and official khaki-coloured wool was distributed by the Red Cross. According to one woman, "you were not asked 'do you knit,' you were asked 'where is your knitting?'" Thus, a craft or charitable pastime became a sign of patriotism, an industrialized, if unpaid, cottage industry.

There was a concerted mobilization of women of all ages into such homefront-production teams, to which full credit has yet to be given in official circles.

This homefront production also transformed the ordinary work and service of women in the home. "Women as homemakers helped the war effort by respecting the limitations that rationing imposed, by preventing waste, and by saving and collecting materials that could be recycled for use in war production" (Pierson, 1986, 33). All of the women, especially those who were children during the war, remember wartime recycling which included collecting newspapers and old tires and making big silver paper balls. This "waste not" attitude associated with recycling was not new to the Townships since the area had still not fully recovered from the Depression when the War broke out. There is, however, a lack of after-the-fact acknowledgement of the import of this activity. The material connection of women with the "main business" through this activity is obvious, in that rags, metal, fat and bones were materials vital to the war industries and even paper was needed for ammunition to "Defeat Hitlerism" and to make "Bullets for Britain." This demand is quite visible in the advertisements and propagandistic messages and images in local newspapers of the time (Department of National War Service, in *The Sherbrooke Record*, 1942).

For those women who stayed in the Townships during the war, rationing is not remembered as causing any great hardships, since, at least in the rural areas, "you could always find someone to trade with," "there was lots of maple syrup" and "you could always make do." There were occasions, however, when "everyone wanted more rationing tickets than were allowed," as one woman remembered, who worked in a grocery store. There was also some acknowledgement of black market activity and the trading of ration stamps. That shortages did occur and were responded to creatively is evidenced by recollections of having had recipes for "doubling" butter, making eggless cakes, and the like, though no one could remember the actual recipes. Since it is taken for granted that part of women's work is to manage and cook the food, it is not surprising that such efforts were considered insignificant until the interviewers showed interest.

For the most part, the women who stayed in the Townships remember daily life during the war as not being significantly different from life before or after. Those who worked outside of the home were usually engaged in traditional female work: teaching,

nursing, office work, cleaning and caring for others. Those who were mothers and housewives continued to attend to family and community needs. Certainly the women remember sacrifices and upheavals, especially if their husbands were in the service. The war was an ever-present reality that changed the focus or structure, if not the type of work, in which they engaged.

Some of the women interviewed did leave the Townships during the war. The accounts of these women provide a varied range of experiences. Some left to go to school. Some joined the Army or the Air Force. One was a volunteer overseas for the Red Cross, and one went to a military base with her husband in the Maritimes. In a few cases, the women admitted they probably would have left anyway, but, for others, the war offered such new opportunities. Certainly those who entered the military had unique experiences in terms of how the war changed their life expectations. These women feel the greatest connection to the “main business” of war and (like men) some still celebrate this part of their lives through Legion activities, attending reunions and writing about their experiences. As was expected, these women were the least surprised that we would want to interview them, but were not necessarily the easiest to interview. Their individual perspectives on military life range from positive to negative and very much support the discussion of this topic in Ruth Roach Pierson’s (1990) book, *“They’re Still Women After All”: The Second World War and Canadian Womanhood*.

Community Outreach:

The need to remember and celebrate the contributions of Eastern Townships Anglophone women during the war, as a kind of collective women’s history, is evidenced by the women’s own initial and individual reluctance to consider that their experiences could possibly be part of what we would want to document about the war years.

“You want to know about the war? You should talk to my husband.”

“I don’t know what I can tell you. I didn’t do anything special during the war.”

It is the understanding that “relevant” war events include combat, and are “special” which allows these women to place their contributions outside of the historical context and record. A major commitment of those doing this study has been to help both

them and us to recognize how their experiences during the war were "special." This has involved making these experiences more easily articulatable and making "visible" their links to the community.

While the original study was financed by the Eastern Township Research Centre, additional support has been provided by the Lennoxville and District Women's Centre. Recognizing the value of a study of this type for women of all ages, the Women's Centre has been involved from the beginning, fostering contacts and serving as a work-place for the research assistants. The Women's Centre is also financing a limited edition book based on material gathered in the study which is due to be published in the near future. Because of this involvement within the community, various other activities and requests related to the study have taken place recently including the following:

- 1) A display was mounted at the Women's Centre Open House (September 1991) of material related to the study: photos of participants, archival material provided by participants and research material used for the study.
- 2) The NFB video package *How They Saw Us* was shown twice at the Women's Centre in February 1992. Women who participated in the study attended the screenings and contributed to the discussions that followed the viewings. This event was also covered by students from the Bishop's University newspaper, *The Campus*.
- 3) The three research assistants told stories related to the study at The International Women's Day Celebration (March 1992) sponsored by the Women's Centre.
- 4) A Professor in the Drama Department at Bishop's has expressed interest in having students use transcripts of the interviews as monologues in her acting classes in the way that the students now use Studs Terkel's remarkable accounts of ordinary, American, working people's lives.

These women are, indeed, wonderful storytellers. The stories, however, provide more than just souvenir and anecdote. Each anecdote serves as a link to traditional history and is part of an alternative version of the "main business" of war locally, nationally and internationally. One anecdote in particular serves as an example of the inherent social and material interface between men's and women's actions and experiences during the war. At the end of the war, a Melbourne woman married a man who had

been a prisoner of war in Hong Kong. Her future husband brought home a piece of a parachute which had been dropped by the Americans during the liberation of these prisoners. This parachute piece was then painstakingly turned into a wedding dress by her mother, becoming both a souvenir of war and a family heirloom (see cover and p. 2). The parachute dress is a startling, even paradoxical, reminder of the interwoven character of men's and women's lives and work during the war.

Conclusions:

Both the experiences of these women and the form of their expression show them to be active "survivors" of "marginalization," which occurs at three levels and is felt in the everyday emotive, social and organizational life of individuals in the Eastern Townships. These recollections imply a sense of tentativeness, isolation, humility, but also nascent pride and collective strength in becoming actors in history as well as in contemporary community life.

- 1) They survived and "made do" in a war whose glamour and "valor-ization" often focussed elsewhere, but whose material and ideological roots, sustenance and meanings are firmly entrenched in the homefront of everyday material life. Through the articulation and valorization of this realm, they could come to see themselves as creators. In this, they are exemplary of Margaret Atwood's literarily depicted Canadian theme of "survival/dependency."
- 2) They survived social and regional marginalization which has made of anglophones within this region of Quebec a threatened and often taken-for-granted "minority." They have bridged, too, the marginalizing effects of age and gender, all of which often situated them at a distance from the "main business," isolated, objectified, secondary.
- 3) And, they survived and combatted another, intellectual form of marginalization. Academics often see themselves and their institutions as the owners or creators, the "doers" of knowledge, value, and official accounts. Where, instead, the standpoint, sources, shaping and dissemination of such knowledge becomes re-situated, the process of research can become less extractive, invasive, colonizing. The relationship between university and community can be "put right" such that the community is seen to sustain, rather than be co-opted by, the university.

Renewal of human resources makes research meaningful as a small influence in transforming and empowering the subjects of historic events and processes, as inhabitants of real regions. It is hoped such research makes possible, in limited fashion, a transformation of subjectivity and intellectual endeavour, by which there can be new "subjects" of research and history. As contemporary people, new "subjects" of oral history can, themselves, both recollect and regenerate the fabric of their everyday lives and communities, based on a new understanding of, and an identification with, a collective past.

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