

**Patricia Prestwich**

**AWA Woman of the Year – 2002**

**AWA ACCEPTANCE SPEECH: September 23, 2003**

**I: INTRODUCTION**

I am deeply touched to receive this award from friends and colleagues in the Academic Women's Association. I want to thank those who nominated me and the committee that chose me. This award means a great deal to me, as does the AWA. I can still recall the shock and delight that I experienced in the early 1970s, when I walked into a room in Biological Sciences after receiving an invitation from some women whom I did not know who suggested that academic women on campus should get to know each other. The room in Biological Sciences was surprising large--and it was filled with women. This was a new experience for me: in my graduate studies I had often been the only woman in a seminar and I had never been taught by a female professor. It was this meeting, of course, that led to the founding of the AWA, an organization that has given so much support to academic women on this campus.

In honouring me, the AWA is also honouring an important group of academic women (and some men) who joined the staff of the University of Alberta in the late 1960s and early 1970s. These people are responsible for the many early initiatives on behalf of women, such as the first courses to focus on women; the efforts to have women represented on committees (particularly hiring committees) and in the upper administration; and the founding of daycare and the Women's Studies Programme. We were not the first women hired by this university, and some of the earlier women were still here when I arrived, women such as Roberta (Bobbie) McKown in Political Science and Margery Mackenzie, Chair of Classics. Sometimes they were the only women in their department. We were, however, the first group of women to come in large numbers. In our own diverse and often contradictory fashion, we represented the Second Wave of feminism in this university. Fortunately for us, there were already numerous women serving as APOs or in other key administrative positions. (I think particularly of Mary Tottenham, secretary to the Senate and Chancellor.) These women were able to tell us how the university really worked.

As a good historian, I know that individual achievement must be understood within a wider societal context. Part of this larger context for me has been the support and intellectual stimulation of many academic women who are equally worthy of this award. Some of these women are here today; some sent regrets; some have retired or moved elsewhere. One, Susan McDaniel, has sent her partner to represent her. It is always important to speak the names of women, and I want to take a moment to acknowledge just a few of these colleagues and friends, with apologies to those I have omitted:

-Ros Sydie, who established the first course on women in the Faculty of Arts.

- Dallas Cullen, who started the first courses on women in the School of Business.
- Margaret-Ann Armour, who needs no introduction.
- the strong cohort of women from the department of English who, led by Linda Woodbridge, hired only women one year. Did that cause comment, particularly from the “merit only” group!
- Nicole (Bonvalet) Mallet, Lynn Penrod, and Claudine Potvin in the old Romance Languages department who pioneered courses on francophone women writers.
- Ann Hall, who started the first courses on women and sport.
- Lillian McPherson, law librarian, whose work was so important for the development of studies on women and the law and whose picture hangs in the Law Faculty.
- Patricia Rooke who began the first courses on women and education.

If there is a basis for even considering me for this important award, it is because I founded women’s history at the University of Alberta in 1974. I have many passions in my life, but women’s history is one of the passions that I am willing to speak about in public. I am going to use the time allotted to me to make some observations about the importance of the history of women.

## II: ESTABLISHING WOMEN’S HISTORY

I began the first course on women’s history in this university because I was intellectually challenged by the claims of radical feminists who argued that women had always been oppressed, that they had always been victims of the patriarchy. As a trained historian, I suspected that such sweeping and categorical assertions were false, but I had no scholarly studies that could refute them. (In my formal study of history, from my undergraduate courses to the Ph.D., I can recall only one mention of women’s activism, a sniggering reference by a lecturer in an undergraduate course to what he considered to be the hysterical antics British suffragettes.) So, in good academic fashion, I decided to teach a course in order to find what had happened to women in the past.

My motivations were similar to those of other historians who, in the same period, were establishing women’s history courses all over North America. It is important to emphasize both the influence of the popular feminist movements, particularly of radical feminists, and the intellectual foundations of our quest for knowledge.

Feminist movements and a search by women for their past have, historically, been intertwined. When, in the 15th century, Christine de Pizan made a plea for rights for women, she also constructed a literary *City Of Women*, inhabited by the great women of history. During the French Revolution and the early nineteenth century, a period that marked the birth of modern feminism in Europe and North America, women who were demanding the right to vote and to be paid fairly for their work also began to rediscover the great women of the Renaissance and of Ancient Rome. As recent studies of American academic women of 1920s and 1930s have clearly demonstrated, when feminist movements decline, as First Wave feminism did after World War One, scholarship on women also wanes or becomes more cautious. Feminist movements need a solid history

of women, and, conversely, scholarship on women needs the challenge of strong and diverse feminist movements.

It may seem strange to you that I also insist on the intellectual or disciplinary curiosity that played an important role in the founding of early women's history courses. To you this is probably obvious, but such courses were, and continue to be, dismissed as "not real history" or "just politics." For nearly 30 years, I have heard this charge, often from Honours and Graduate students in my department, and all of us who teach women's history have listened to complaints from our own students that they feel marginalized within history programmes.

I certainly hope that no history student today believes that any type of history is objective, so there must be other explanations. In part, these continued attempts to dismiss women's history reflect the dichotomous modes of thought that have characterized western society since the ancient Greeks: men are rational but women are emotional, or men represent the universal while women, the majority of the population, are a "special interest group."

These dismissals of women's history also represent a fear of the challenges that women's history presents to the discipline. Once you start looking at history from the perspective of women (and, I would add, minorities), you are questioning the foundations of historical interpretation. For example, are the Enlightenment and the French Revolution such great turning points for the history of democracy in western societies when, in the 18th and 19th centuries, the concept of the public sphere was specifically based on the exclusion of women? How can you limit political history to the history of governments in which, historically, women have been unrepresented? Historians of women have argued that political history must be more largely defined to encompass a wide variety of public actions, such as women's rights movements, welfare organizations, trade unions, and charities. When this perspective is adopted, it is possible to argue that by the time women received the vote in western societies (i.e. from 1918 to 1944), they were politically savvy. Therefore their continued exclusion from official politics cannot be attributed to their inexperience.

Similarly, paid work cannot be the subject of economic history when unpaid labour--particularly in the home--has historically been a key component of economic development and of the welfare state. Or, to be even more radical, perhaps we should measure progress in a society by the standard that Charles Fourier, a 19th century French social philosopher and reformer, proposed, namely, "[t]he extension of privilege to women is the general principle of all social progress"

Given such profound challenges to the discipline, it is not surprising that women's history still tends to be limited to a chapter in a history text or to a lecture in a course.

In establishing courses in women's history, I was also fortunate to be in a department with a liberal attitude toward history and toward women. When I arrived in 1970, the department of History had recently made an effort to hire women: I was the 6th woman

hired in a department of thirty, and I thought I had died and gone to heaven. The department had recently established courses on native history, and the Chair and another colleague had pioneered the teaching of Asian history and languages. A number of male “young Turks” had campaigned to make the procedures of the department more democratic and open. So when, as an untenured assistant professor, I informed the Chair that I wanted to start a course on women, he offered me a half-course teaching release to prepare this new area. When I began to teach the course, two senior professors asked to audit it. Of course, I also had to endure the usual jokes--such as “What are you going to do after the first lecture?”--and later the atmosphere was not so supportive.

The most important factor in the success of women’s history, however, has been the demand from students. The late 1960s and early 1970s marked the beginning of the dramatic influx of women students into higher education. Between 1960 and 1970 the percentage of women undergraduates at the University of Alberta increased from about 32 to over 40 percent and, as recent reports indicate, women not only form the majority of students in Canadian universities, they are more successful than men in their studies. (I anticipate concerns about the “feminization” of post-secondary education.) Because of this demand, it was possible to expand offerings and to argue for more appointments: in the early 1990s Susan Smith and Frances Swyripa were hired to teach American and Canadian women’s history respectively.

Students have come with an ardent desire to know about their past and with an ability to understand how the history of women is relevant to their own lives. When I talk about seventeenth-century anatomy texts and ideas about women’s bodies, there are immediate comments about doctors today--particularly gynecologists. When I describe the dilemmas of working-class women in the nineteenth century who tried to juggle paid work and their domestic responsibilities, older and younger women in the class share their strategies for combining work and motherhood. The immediacy of women’s history and its importance as an agent of change were brought home most dramatically to me once when the novelist Helen Forrester came to my class to speak about the lives of the working-class women she had known as a social worker in Liverpool during World War Two. She gave a riveting account of dire female poverty in the very recent past, and she was listened to with a concentrated silence that I have rarely encountered in a classroom. When she finished, one student rose and asked:” What can we do to help?”

### III: CHALLENGES

If I rejoice in the successes of women’s history--a rich and theoretically challenging field--I am also acutely aware that the material to construct histories of women is often not preserved. When I began my course, I had to rely on original source material or on books written in the early 1900s by a first generation of women historians. The history that these First Wave of feminist scholars constructed was not passed on to later generations, and, in the 1970s, we had to rediscover this history. What a loss and what a waste of time!

Today, we are very fortunate. For the first time in the history of the university, we have a second generation of women scholars to carry on this research. But, while we can celebrate this, we all know that the history of women is not characterized by inexorable progress; rather progress is accompanied by backlashes. I was very interested in the views of Jill Kerr Conway, an historian of American women's education and president of Smith College in the 1980s. In the third volume of her autobiography, *A Woman's Education*, she recounts that in the mid-1980s she began to prepare for the hostility to women's issues and rights that she saw coming. She believes that women's accumulated knowledge about themselves is best preserved in women's institutions, so, as president, she resisted the pressure to integrate her college with a men's institution. She raised funds to put Smith on a sound financial basis, and she established a centre for women's studies.

At the University of Alberta, in the late 1980s we were fortunate to have leaders (such as president Myer Horowitz and vice-president Peter Meekison) who believed that women's issues were important, and they helped us to establish the Women's Studies Programme. But now, in harder times, both politically and economically, we need to think about how to preserve our knowledge.

As a historian of France, I am particularly aware of the importance of institutionalized memory and of commemoration, including physical sites of memory such as plaques, statues, or photographs. Is there a plaque in Biological Sciences to commemorate the founding meeting of the Academic Women's Association? Is there a plaque in Chemistry to commemorate WISEST? Has Margaret Ann Armour been declared a national treasure? Where are our statues of women on Parliament hill? There is only one statue, of the famous Alberta Five who launched the Person's case, and that statue was funded privately by women. We also need to protect the specific physical sites that we have, such as the Women's Studies Programme, a university programme housed in the Faculty of Arts. we have already lost the Women's Programme in the Extension Faculty, a programme that was so important for links to the wider women's community. We need to ensure that there is no attempt to dismantle our remaining Women's Studies Programme on the grounds of financial exigency. As we know, this Programme is the best bargain on campus: it was built with the unpaid work of women.

It is also important to preserve the archives and artefacts of women. I am part of a Women's Memory Project to collect primary sources on the history of women in Alberta, and I know how easily material on women gets destroyed. Even a close friend of mine destroyed a collection of love letters from the 1960s, to my horror, although she has since repented and has donated her grandmother's daily journals to a women's archive. Women's history belongs to everyone, women and men, and we all have a personal responsibility to preserve and transmit it.

When we examine our past and our current situation, as women we are necessarily ambivalent. There are so many challenges and yet so many reasons to celebrate. Today is a day for celebration. I thank the Academic Women's Association and all my friends and colleagues for this honour and for their continued support.