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Recommended Citation
Smith, Heather (2018) "Pawns of Patriarchy?: Rethinking the Early Feminist Movement in Quebec," Liberated Arts: a journal for undergraduate research: Vol. 4 : Iss. 1 , Article 5.
Available at: https://ir.lib.uwo.ca/lajur/vol4/iss1/5

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Pawns of Patriarchy?: Rethinking the Early Feminist Movement in Quebec
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Abstract
How has the image of the early feminist movement in Quebec been biased by modern ideas of feminism, and what ramifications does this have for how Canadian history is viewed and taught? Building upon current research by historian Micheline Dumont, this paper explores publications by several pioneering feminists of late nineteenth- and early twentieth-century Quebec, measuring these primary sources against their portrayal in feminist historiography. Contrary to value judgments espoused by feminist historians who have tended to characterize the early feminist movement as “mild” and “maternal,” this paper argues that these women were in fact bold in their unique brand of feminism. As such, these findings aim to reorient the historiography of feminism in Canada, advocating for a multifaceted approach to feminist history which fully considers the lived experiences and cultural contexts of women of the past.

Keywords: Feminism; Twentieth Century; Quebec; Maternalism; Nationalism

At the turn of the twentieth century, Quebec society witnessed the emergence of the feminist movement against the backdrop of Ultramontane nationalism. Particularly in urban centers, the realities of working-class struggles, steep inequalities in pay between men and women, and the prevalence of child labour had many women broadly questioning the logic of the “separate spheres” in their strictest definition. The limitations of strictly defined domesticity no longer seemed compatible with the realities of daily life.

From this ideological framework emerged the very first journal authored for women by women in Montreal. Le coin du feu (By the Fireside) was pioneered by Joséphine Marchand-Dandurand (1861-1886), who published her articles under the name “Mme. Dandurand”. Marchand-Dandurand was a member of the National Council for Women in Ottawa, an early advocacy organization for women’s rights that would later serve as

2. “Separate spheres” refers to the concept of the private, or domestic, sphere for women, as wives and primary caregivers to children, and the public sphere for men, as the primary “breadwinners” of the household. This rhetoric was in common usage in the late-nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. Susan Mann Trofimenkoff, The Dream of Nation, 111-112.
the model for the Fédération Nationale St-Jean-Baptiste (hereafter referred to as the FNSJB) in Quebec. Dandurand and her contributors did not shy away from pressing issues of the day, including women's rights and the need for feminism. The first article to overtly make the case for the feminist movement in Quebec, entitled “Le mouvement feminist,” was authored by Marie Gérin-Lajoie (1890-1971), who later founded the FNSJB and become a pioneer for women’s rights activism in Quebec.

These early French Canadian feminists spoke openly in the language of feminism, overtly referring to themselves as “feminists.” Yet feminist historiography has tended to question whether they were in fact feminists and in some cases has criticized the perceived “weaknesses” of the early feminist movement. While historians such as Susan Mann and Jennifer Stoddart have made valuable contributions to historical thought surrounding the connections between nationalist ideology and the early feminist movement, they have also characterized the early feminist movement as a mild form of feminism, deliberately designed to carefully navigate around patriarchal nationalism. Similarly, feminist historians such as Karine Hébert have relabeled the early feminist movement as “maternalist” feminism.

In recent years, there has been a move by historians such as Micheline Dumont to correct historiographic mischaracterizations and to emphasize the boldness of the early feminist movement. Building upon the research of Dumont, I argue that the founding of the early feminist movement was a defiant act of empowerment which reflected the unique ideological framework of late nineteenth- and early twentieth-century Quebec, while rebelling against the most conservative interpretations of the “separate spheres.” Additionally, I contend that historiographic value judgments of the early feminists have at times negated their agency, as well as some of the broader complexities of feminism, by

5. Ibid.
10. “Maternal feminism” is a term that has been applied by feminist historians to describe the ideology of first wave feminism (19th and early 20th centuries). This form of feminism employed language that centered upon domesticity and women’s role as mothers and wives. Prominent maternal feminists of English Canada, such as Nellie McClung, viewed women’s perceived innate nurturing abilities as essential to the public sphere, particularly in terms of performing charitable work. Because of this conceptualization of feminism in terms of motherhood and gender roles, contemporary feminist scholars have debated whether maternal feminism can indeed be considered feminism. The Manitoba Historical society gives a brief but effective definition of maternal feminism. See “TimeLinks: Maternal Feminism”, Manitoba Historical Society, http://www.mhs.mb.ca/docs/features/timelinks/reference/db0015.shtml. Foundational works include the volume of essays A Not Unreasonable Claim: Women and Reform in Canada 1880s-1920s, ed. Linda Kealey Toronto: The Women’s Press, 1979. For Nellie McClung’s views on feminism, see her published work In Times Like These (Toronto: McLeod and Allen, 1915), http://digital.library.upenn.edu/women/mcclung/times/times.html.
defining their identities primarily in relation to patriarchal nationalism. As the plethora of feminist theories demonstrates, feminism has many interpretations. Yet paradoxically the oppositional nature of these theoretical approaches has often limited the development of a multidimensional and inclusive approach to feminism. I will explore articles from *Le coin du feu* by Joséphine Marchand-Dandurand and Marie Gérin-Lajoie, as well as the constitution and charter of the Fédération Nationale St-Jean-Baptiste, as a means of examining the ideological framework which the early pioneers of the French Canadian feminist movement both adhered to and rebelled against, and how they constructed their unique collective identity. My overarching aim is to emphasize the impact of ideology upon cultural interpretations of feminism as a means of advocating for a multifaceted approach to the study of feminism on a broader level.

The boldness of the early feminist movement as well as how it reflected aspects of nationalist ideology can be seen through the early writings of Marie Gérin-Lajoie. In her article “Le mouvement feministe” (The Feminist Movement) published in 1896 Marie Gérin-Lajoie first outlines the parameters for the feminist movement in Quebec as well as why, in her view, it has become a necessity. Gérin-Lajoie argues that the model of the separate sphere in its strictest form is no longer functional in the diverse urban environment of late nineteenth-century Montreal. Thus, from the outset of this first article, the feminist movement in Quebec is set in nationalistic terms. Gérin-Lajoie rhetorically asks: “La femme pour agrandir son rôle dans la famille et dans la Société, doit-elle nécessairement en sortir?” (In order for women to expand their role in the family and in society, is it necessary that they venture out [of the home]?). Thus, she does not question that men and women have separate roles in society but rather, whether the greater good of society is truly served by women’s roles being confined to the domestic sphere. Gérin-Lajoie disagreed with this conservative interpretation of the separate spheres. However, her logic was still firmly rooted in nationalist ideology. This demonstrates that the early feminist movement in Quebec was both grounded in the ideology of the separate spheres and simultaneously defied conservative interpretations of this ideology by advocating for a place for women outside of the domestic sphere.

Gérin-Lajoie would have been free to write in a journal aimed at women of a comparable social class to herself and to espouse her fears and views of women’s roles. Yet, rather than speak of the feminist movement as an initial step toward the “true liberation” of women or of the impetus for the nationalistic undertone of the movement as an appeasement to men of society, she addresses women directly and formulates the roots of the feminist movement around questions about the rhetoric of the separate spheres in practice. As one of the first official documents published, such statements would most likely have been in their most idealistic form as the feminist movement was as yet untested through practical activism. Gérin-Lajoie had not yet formed the FNSJB and had plenty of leeway to express her opinions to a female audience. Her personal diary reflects the sincerity of the beliefs she espoused in these early speeches and articles. When reflecting upon facing early opposition, she wrote, “Women’s social welfare

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14. Note: Square bracket interpretation is my own. Ibid., 165.
activities were mistakenly seen as manifestations of feminist extremism and individualism, rather than concerned exclusively with the family and society.” This demonstrates that for Gérin-Lajoie, the conception of feminism as an extension of the mother’s role into society was sincere, rather than contrived out of a need to circumvent patriarchal nationalism.

Susan Mann has been credited with first highlighting the linkages between nationalism and feminism, with other feminist historians echoing this view. Indeed Mann’s work is important and captures many of the intricacies of the French Canadian cultural landscape at the outset of the twentieth century. Yet the subsequent analysis of the connections between nationalism and feminism has brought with it certain value judgments. Mann asserts that the early feminists ‘trod warily’ and deliberately adopted the rhetoric of the separate spheres to justify the advancement of women’s rights in a time of patriarchal nationalism. Jennifer Stoddart similarly characterizes Gérin-Lajoie’s feminism as “a very mild brand of feminism” in her article “Québec’s Legal Elite Looks at Women’s Rights: The Dorion Commission of 1929–31”. While Stoddart commends the efforts of Marie Gérin-Lajoie, she is somewhat dismissive of the beginnings of the feminist movement in Quebec and largely focuses upon how the legal progress of feminists in Quebec lagged behind that of their counterparts in English Canada due to patriarchal systems of governance. This comparison leads her to mischaracterize the nature of the feminism in Quebec. For instance, rather than viewing the feminist movement as a product of its cultural context, she describes the confluence of religious nationalism and feminism as “ironic,” implying that the two were contradictory in nature. Still more feminist historians have contended that the early feminists did not have an educated understanding of the roots of female oppression and have consequently characterized the early feminist movement as “contradictory” due to the perceived dichotomy between nationalism and feminism. All of these interpretations are grounded in the idea that there is a stronger, more correct or cohesive form of feminism which was missing in the early feminist movement in Quebec.

Historiographic value judgments of early feminism are somewhat understandable in light of the patriarchal nature of the nationalist movement in Quebec. However, nationalist ideology in French Canada affected both men and women on multiple levels of society, particularly as it became a much more active part of the public sphere in the early twentieth century. Therefore, it is logical to posit that perhaps feminism meant something different to French Canadian women than it did to women elsewhere in Canada, and North America on a broader level. Moreover, to assume that feminists like Marie Gérin-Lajoie were navigating timidly around conservative men of society negates

17. Susan Mann Trofimenkoff, The Dream of Nation, 188.
19. Ibid., 328, 329.
their agency in determining what being a feminist meant for them as French Canadian women. As Micheline Dumont has eloquently illustrated, it is difficult now to grasp how courageous these women were in persevering through the widespread opposition that feminism generated when it first appeared. Therefore, historiographical value judgments of the early feminist movement in Quebec have at times reflected a false dichotomy between feminism and nationalism. In other cases, feminist historians, such as Mann and Stoddart, have mischaracterized this linkage as “contrived” due to patriarchal domination. These value judgments have detracted from accurately conveying the boldness of the early feminist movement, which was both reflective of nationalist ideology and in opposition to conservative interpretations of gender roles.

With the founding of the Fédération Nationale St-Jean-Baptiste in 1907, Marie Gérin-Lajoie officially solidified the movement she had set out to form. The constitution (published in 1906) and charter (published in 1914) of the FNSJB exemplify nationalistic ideals by outlining that members of the Federation must be French Canadian and Catholic. Due to the anti-feminist attitudes of Quebec nationalists such as Henri Bourassa, the question of whether a woman could be both Catholic and a feminist was extremely contentious at this time. Thus, to state on official documents that Catholicism was a requirement for membership demonstrates that the early feminists in French Canada were not delicately navigating around male nationalists of the time. Additionally, the assertion that women should expand their roles into the public sphere through community initiatives was a bold statement, particularly as a central mandate of the FNSJB, and especially alongside other the conservative nationalistic ideals of language and religion.

The inclusion of religion and language in the constitution and charter of the FNSJB demonstrates that nationalist ideologies permeated the framework of the early feminist movement not only in the rhetoric of the separate spheres, which itself defied conservative interpretations, but in all aspects of officially-stated collective identity. In her PhD thesis Taking the Veil: An Alternative to Marriage, Motherhood, and Spinsterhood in Quebec, 1840-1920, Marta Danylewycz observes that over half of all groups associated with the FNSJB were convent women. Thus, women’s religious institutions and feminist associations were in fact deeply connected. This exemplifies that the early feminist movement was both bold and nationalistic and contradicts feminist historiography which

22. Micheline Dumont-Johnson, Feminism à la québécoise, 23.
has characterized the early feminist movement as a “mild” form of feminism. Additionally, the overt statement of nationalist parameters for membership illustrates the application of nationalist ideology as a framework for collective identity. Thus, the constitution and charter of the FNSJB are once again reflective of the boldness of the early feminist movement, as well as the interaction of nationalist ideology with the collective values of the FNSJB.

Eleanor Hubbard has compellingly argued for a more complete study of women’s lived experiences in history. Hubbard argues that there is a tendency within the discipline of history to define women’s identities in relation to patriarchy and that this theoretical lens negates a large portion of women’s lived experiences, agency, and identity. The interpretation of early French Canadian feminists as victims of patriarchal nationalism has the similar effect of negating women’s lived experiences and agency. Whether intentional or not, the theoretical preoccupation with patriarchy tacitly assumes that women—in this case highly educated women—were unable to define their values for themselves. Yet, as the charter and constitution of the FNSJB demonstrate, this intelligent group of women knew their own values and sincerely believed in their mandate. This approach has been applied by Hubbard in her study of women in early modern England. However, these same theoretical principles could have useful applications to the study of early feminism in French Canada and to feminist historiography, more broadly.

In addition to writings by Marie Gérin-Lajoie and official documents of the FNSJB, the boldness of the early feminist movement in Quebec can be seen through the early articles of Joséphine Marchand-Dandurand. In her article Les Professions Feminines (The Feminine Professions), published in Le coin du feu in 1896, Marchand-Dandurand sets out concrete parameters for occupations which would extend women’s roles as mothers into society. Marchand-Dandurand matter-of-factly lists several occupations which she considers “feminine” and believes that women should pursue, such as piano teacher, voice teacher, diction coach, and exercise instructor. This once again reinforces that feminists were heavily influenced by the nationalist ideology of the separate spheres yet simultaneously defied conservative interpretations of this rhetoric by advocating for women’s involvement in the public sphere.

The delineation of “feminine” professions has led some historians to relabel the early feminist movement as “maternalism” or “maternal feminism.” This term was first applied to the early feminist movement in Quebec by Karine Hébert and has been echoed by historians. Thus, it is important to bear in mind that it is an anachronistically constructed term. That the early feminists placed motherhood at the center of their feminist movement is indisputable. As previously discussed, Gérin-Lajoie overtly framed

30. Ibid., 225.
the feminist movement in terms of extending the role of motherhood outward to society.\textsuperscript{33} However, while the term “maternalism” is partially accurate in the sense that it highlights the importance placed upon motherhood by the pioneers of early feminism in Quebec, this terminology does not correspond with how these early feminists defined themselves, nor with their emphasis upon language and religion as equally important aspects of feminist ideology. Yolande Cohen and Hubert Villeneuve have argued for a reframing of the term “maternalism,” noting the historiographical tendency to view the early feminist movement in Quebec as “maternalism,” with the implication that it was somehow not “true” feminism.\textsuperscript{34} They contend that maternalism was in fact a key strength of the early feminist movement that enabled women to lobby for their voting rights.\textsuperscript{35} Thus, this term negates the broader ideological factors which influenced the nationalist message of the FNSJB. As previously discussed, motherhood was but one aspect of their mandate which also stressed the exclusive membership of French Catholic women. Therefore, to reframe the feminist movement through hindsight historiographic terminology does not do justice to the boldness of the early feminists, nor does it capture the full ideological complexity of their nationalist agenda.

The founding of the early feminist movement was a defiant act of empowerment which reflected the unique ideological framework of late nineteenth- and early twentieth-century Quebec. Early documents demonstrate the inextricable and complex connections between nationalist and feminist ideology. Moreover, these writings exemplify how nationalist ideologies affected Canadian women and how they constructed their identities. The early feminists interpreted their place in society as well as their endeavours to advance their rights through this unique ideological lens rather than in spite of it. Yet this relationship is multifaceted, and they rebelled against conservative interpretations of the separate spheres by advocating for women’s involvement in the public sphere. The analysis of the connections between nationalism and feminism is an important contribution to Canadian history. Yet, in analyzing these connections, the exaggerated focus upon patriarchy within French Canada has in some cases diminished what early feminists such as Joséphine Marchand-Dandurand and Marie Gérin-Lajoie have accomplished. As a result, the ideological lens of Marchand-Dandurand and Gérin-Lajoie’s time may have led them to different interpretations of feminism. Therefore, while the work of feminist historians has been extremely significant in forming a more complete image of the early feminist movement in Quebec, historiographic interpretations of early feminism have at times carried hindsight biases of what feminism should be, and tacitly, should not be.

When value judgments are ascribed to feminist movements, such assessments run the risk of reproducing patriarchal dynamics and policing women’s life choices in the very manner which feminism is intended to counter. Thus, it is imperative not only to consider the cultural context of a social movement, but also to be cognizant of applying modern biases and frameworks when assessing contexts of the past. While such historiographic assessments are arguably valid in some cases as a means of moving contemporary ideas and agendas forward, there is a degree of historical injustice imposed

\textsuperscript{33} Marie Gérin-Lajoie, “Le Mouvement Feministe,” \textit{Le coin du feu}, 165.
\textsuperscript{34} Yolande Cohen and Hubert Villeneuve, “La Fédération Nationale Saint-Jean Baptiste, le droit de vote et l’avancement du statut civique et politique des femmes au Québec,” 124.
\textsuperscript{35} See Cohen and Villeneuve 127, 128, 130.
upon women of the past by interpreting their motives through a modern lens and defining their identities in relation to patriarchal institutions. The cultural contextualization of first wave feminism has the potential to inform contemporary discourses. In a world where the term “feminism” is often being challenged as outmoded, understanding how the meaning of feminism varied culturally, even in early contexts, could do much to open minds and invite inclusive perspectives. Ultimately the imposition of modern biases upon cultural contexts of the past boils down to the fundamental question of whether the moral advancement of the future is worth some anachronistic views of the past. However, this seems a very steep price to pay when it besmirches the historical memory of these first French Canadian feminists, for whom any mention of the word “feminism” was nothing short of bold.
Bibliography


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