

Sylvia Van Kirk: A Feminist Appreciation of Front-line Work in the Academy

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“THE 18 WOMEN AND TWO MEN ATTENDING a course called History of Women in Canada” at the University of Toronto, wrote a *Globe and Mail* reporter in spring 1976, “could hardly wait to comment on their own experiences when instructor Sylvia Van Kirk introduced the subject of women’s rights in Canada.” The journalist, Constance Mungall, went on to describe the course—a new third-year seminar being offered by the (now defunct) interdisciplinary studies department at the University of Toronto—and the class (“After the vote: Did it make any difference?”) she had just observed. Sylvia had promoted discussion in the seminar by noting that “in the 1930s suffragette Nellie McClung had said the place of women in dating is ‘to wait...wait...wait’” and then asking if they thought it was still true today. Various students jumped in with their opinion and “the consensus was that it’s still the same and it’s hypocritical.”

Mungall had attended the class as the course was nearing its end. By then, the seminar had covered a series of topics that would become standard fare for survey courses in Canadian women’s history, including Native women in the fur trade (a topic that, of course, Sylvia’s own research had helped make possible), white settler pioneers, and women in education, medicine, waged work, and moral and political reform movements. But these were also early days for women’s history and Sylvia was drawing on limited resources—still convincing people of the value of the field—and introducing little known historical female

subjects. Clearly, the reporter had thought the idea of teaching women's history novel enough to write an article about Sylvia, then a newly minted PhD who had just joined the faculty at the University of Toronto as an instructor (a tenure-stream job would come later). The photo accompanying the article featured a young Sylvia wearing glasses and sporting a classic seventies hair style—straight shoulder-length hair with long bangs split in the middle. Noting that “there are whole areas in Canadian history where the role of women has not been investigated at all,” Sylvia added that even while she could rely on her own work to teach about Native women in western Canada, “we need more work on women in Indian society in Eastern Canada, in New France, in the Maritimes, in ethnic groups.” Several students told Mungall they had never heard of McClung or ever read the works of critically acclaimed nineteenth-century Canadian women novelists and poets before taking this course. “That reflects the social situation in Canada,” Sylvia explained, adding that “integrating women into our social and economic history has to be part of our attempt to find out who and what we are in Canada.” The journalist cavalierly called this modest “women's lib” talk. But she also went on to emphasize the favourable response of the students, including one of the men who had taken the course purely as an elective and expected to be constantly “put on the spot” by his female “prof” and classmates. Instead, he enjoyed Sylvia's teaching style, including her willingness to share with students her personal stories of being a feminist in the academy (and wider society of 1970s Canada) as a way of encouraging them to reflect on their own circumstances and values. Of his female classmates, he said they were “radical” (by which he appeared to mean they were in favour of women's rights) yet he often found himself agreeing with them. When he didn't, he added, they usually respected his divergent opinion.

Given the opportunity to articulate her teaching objectives and methods, Sylvia stressed in the *Globe and Mail* interview that while she did not want to turn her women's history class into “a consciousness raising group” shaped by a particular feminist agenda, she did wish to encourage students to ponder the ways in which an understanding of women's different priorities and experiences might lead to a new way of thinking about the Canadian past. Of her students, she observed that “I haven't sensed any currents of revolution. Both [seminar] groups seem aware [of women's issues], but [are] a little conservative.” She explained that for her, teaching women's history was not propaganda but rather a process of informing students about the little-explored lives of women. She was satisfied that she had made a difference. “I think a lot of minds were opened to

issues they never thought about before,” she told Mungall. “There’s room for challenge and questioning not only in the contemporary sphere, but about why things were the way they were back when.”¹

This type of feminist position in favour of reasonableness—that is, the view that one can find effective ways of challenging and questioning people’s understandings of the past or a contemporary situation—nicely sums up, I think, the way in which Sylvia led a long and successful, and also very demanding, career at the University of Toronto. The newspaper piece cited above dealt primarily with her teaching and, to a lesser degree, research, but I would suggest that, as I observed it, a desire to challenge and question people’s conventional understandings by reasoned argument also characterized the way in which Sylvia conducted herself as a feminist colleague on the front lines of the academy—how she approached her responsibilities on numerous search committees and carried out her many administrative duties in the university.

It is this aspect of Sylvia’s academic career that I wish to highlight in my contribution to this volume. In contrast to many of the other contributors who knew Sylvia as a contemporary, friend, or student, I came to know her best as a colleague at the University of Toronto, whose history department I joined almost fifteen years after she introduced the History of Women in Canada course described above. While we continue to be very different kinds of personalities with both similar and distinct politics, I came to appreciate and respect Sylvia’s polite but persistent approach to bringing feminist perspectives into the academy—one step at a time, one committee at a time—working with the assumption that most colleagues (like students) are reasonable if not revolutionary minded people who will listen and ponder alternative views if presented in clear and compelling ways. I also chose to highlight this topic because we do not talk enough about all of the time and energy that goes into committee and administrative work or fully appreciate its significance as a mechanism for social change. For feminist scholars in the 1970s and 1980s, this workload was compounded by the challenge of trying to convince colleagues hostile to (or ignorant of) feminist theories and methodologies to expand their horizons and recognize feminist scholarship as a legitimate endeavour (as opposed to “a merely ideological enterprise,” as some critics dismissively declared), and even to entertain the notion that a female candidate could be as “excellent” as a male. I offer a personal and professional appreciation of a senior colleague belonging to that group of feminist scholars who, beginning in the 1970s, took on faculty positions in Canadian universities and carved out an intellectual

and political space for women's history and feminist studies. These are my opinions. When I recently tried to interview Sylvia, she made it clear that she thought it best that I write the piece my way—without her intervention—and without treating her as some kind of feminist authority on university affairs. I have taken that advice to heart.

When I was first hired at the University of Toronto in 1990, I never expected to become a friendly colleague or friend of Sylvia Van Kirk. For one thing, she was a feminist historian icon—the author of one of the foundational books in Canadian women's history, *Many Tender Ties*.² By my time, anyone who had ever taken a Canadian history course—be it an introductory survey, a social history, or women's history course—had been exposed to Sylvia's work, especially on Native women in fur trade society in lectures and in tutorial or seminar readings. For many of us across the country, our first introduction to women in Canadian history was through Sylvia's scholarship. In international circles, feminist historians often cite the U.S.-based European historian Joan Kelly and her pioneering piece, "Did Women Have a Renaissance?" as a critical starting point in the field of women's history—and rightly so.³ Feminists in labour and left history also cite Alice Kessler-Harris' now "seminal" article "Where Are the Organized Women Workers?" for similarly compelling reasons.⁴ In seeking to research such deceptively simple questions, these and other pioneering feminist historians not only discovered women in history but gained a better understanding of how women's lives differed from men's as well as how gendered power dynamics had often imposed limitations on women. It is equally important that, as Canadianists, we recognize (or remember) that at roughly the same time, Sylvia was asking her own deceptively simple question: where were the women in the fur trade society of the early Canadian west? As a PhD student, she went off to England and the Hudson's Bay Company (HBC) Archives armed with little more than this research question—to see whether one could find women in the fur trade—and, as she later explained, she more or less stumbled along, reading the archival records, poring over fur traders' diaries and HBC records looking for women. She had not committed to any particular theoretical paradigm other than a feminist understanding that women had to be there, somewhere. And the rest, as they say, is history. Along with Jennifer Brown, she brought Native women from the margins to the centre of Canadian history, even though they came to us largely through white male records. If undergraduate students of Canadian history could not remember anything else about women in the Canadian past, they could remember that Aboriginal women mattered to fur trade economics,

politics, and society because Sylvia Van Kirk had demonstrated this to be so. For all of my chutzpah—and I had plenty in those days—I was shy about meeting such a major name in Canadian history.

I also assumed that there would be a personality divide—both generational and political—between Sylvia and me, an assumption that had much to do with my own self-perception, biases, and positioning. I belonged to a later group of feminist historians trained in the 1980s whose careers had been made easier because of senior colleagues like Sylvia. If this sometimes made us appear more brash than those colleagues, it was largely because the presence of these feminists in the academy—and their success as scholars whose work had helped define an entire field of history—gave us a sense of entitlement to be in the university and to carve out our own careers while also continuing to challenge the academy's traditionally elitist conventions. I was also working class, the daughter of immigrant parents of peasant background who had culled together a third-grade education in one of southern Italy's deeply impoverished rural regions. I belonged to the first generation in my family to go to university. Earning a PhD and landing a job as a professor was unheard of in my very large extended family. Although proud of my accomplishments, I was also a socialist and feminist with a political critique of the academy and what I saw as Anglo-elitism at work. I was a scrappy feminist, quick to loudly voice opinions and to dismiss—and on occasion even denounce—male colleagues as hopelessly conservative or anti-feminist. Having gotten a position in the job-starved early 1990s, I had joined a department dominated by senior men with degrees from Ivy League and other prestigious universities. The departmental meetings held to make decisions of any sort invariably involved debates among colleagues who reported on how “we did things” at Harvard, Princeton, Yale—and, on occasion, Oxford, Cambridge, and Chicago. At times, I couldn't resist invoking my alma mater, York University, which prompted strange stares or bemused smiles. My naive assumption, based on my class, ethnicity, and training outside elite schools (apart from one disastrous year at Queen's University), was that Sylvia easily “fit” into the department. After all, to me she was “WASP” (an assumption that denied Sylvia her Dutch immigrant background), middle-class, and seemed to possess the same professional confidences and cultural polish as did the senior men. I also knew she was married to a colleague whose primary appointment was at the Scarborough campus, where I had also been hired. It was only later that I learned from others (never from Sylvia) about the difficulties she had faced as one of the few women and feminists in the department. Having given up a tenure-stream

job at Dalhousie University to join her then-husband in Toronto, she had struggled for a number of years on insecure contracts as a sessional instructor before landing a tenure-stream job at the University of Toronto. And in those years, her research had been ridiculed, I learned from others, sometimes in especially nasty terms. “She studies beavers” was one particularly crude double entendre I was told about, suggesting how even well-educated men can behave like immature louts. Little did I know that men in my department felt similarly about the shameful behaviour of other male colleagues. In his recently published autobiography, Michael Bliss offered the following blistering comments:

With the heady days of expansion long passed, we had few appointments to make in the department. The positions that did come open were hotly contested. Edward “Ned” Shorter, a prolific Europeanist, and Bill Eccles, probably a misogynist, did not think much of the scholarship of Sylvia Van Kirk, whose thesis on the role of women in the fur trade would soon be published to great acclaim. At the crucial meeting of our search committee to consider Sylvia’s candidacy for a job, Ned, a free spirit, sauntered in dressed in his working professor’s garb—jeans and a denim shirt opened to the middle of his chest. “Hiya, Motherfuckers,” he announced, and then launched into his objections to Sylvia, mostly to the effect that her approach to history was antiquarian. We eventually hired Sylvia, and she served the department long and well despite being shabbily treated by the remnants of patriarchy.⁵

The other thing I had not really realized, though I should have done so, was that by the time I met Sylvia, she was not only a veteran teacher whose history and women’s studies courses attracted a steady stream of students, but a veteran administrator and committee member. I might have presented myself as the serious socialist feminist with working-class credentials, but Sylvia knew a thing or two about strategy and how to effectively challenge and educate a university committee on gender and equity issues. For almost half of her nearly twenty-five-year career at Toronto, Sylvia held some sort of administrative position. From 1977 to 2000, she was cross-appointed to history and women’s studies—and, as we know, cross-listed appointments can be especially burdensome to the person trying to meet the demands and expectations of both departments. Although history was her home base, she was teaching courses, supervising students and serving on committees in both constituencies. Between 1981 and 1984, she directed the women’s studies program, a chronically under-funded program staffed with cross-appointments and contract faculty. For most of the

1990s, she served as one of the senior administrators in the history department, completing a five-year term as graduate co-ordinator and a four-year term as associate chair (in charge of the undergraduate program). In addition, she served on innumerable committees—a point to which I return below.

She also served her profession outside the university. An interest in documentary publishing led to her serving as general editor of the Champlain Society for five years in the mid-1980s. This was a time-consuming task involving the supervision and editing of five major volumes of documents in Canadian history. She continued to be active in the society as a council member and vice-president, and served professional societies in history and women's studies. In the mid-1980s, she held a three-year term as an elected council member of the Canadian Historical Association. She helped to found the Canadian Women's Studies Association in 1982 and was a board member of the Canadian Research Institute for the Advancement of Women (CRIAOW) for several years. In the 1990s, she sat on the international editorial board of the *Journal of Women's History* and on the executive of the International Federation for Research in Women's History. In Canada, she served on doctoral scholarship committees for the Ontario Graduate Fellowship Program, the Queen Elizabeth Scholarship Program, and the Imperial Order Daughters of the Empire Scholarship, and was on the advisory council for the Centre of Rupert's Land Studies at the University of Winnipeg.

But I want to return to all of those committees on which Sylvia served at the University of Toronto because I have come to understand their significance for effecting important—if not revolutionary—change within the university. Always time-consuming and often under-appreciated, committee service can be politically and intellectually important work if what you want to do is challenge the university and your colleagues to recognize women's talents and credentials and their legitimate—indeed critical—contributions to scholarship and the academy. As far as I can tell, over the course of her career at Toronto, Sylvia sat on close to 100 committees at the departmental (history and women's studies), college (especially New College, which became the administrative home of women's studies), and university-wide level, in some cases serving several terms. She served on dozens of merit and promotion committees, departmental policy committees, undergraduate and graduate program committees, hiring and tenure committees, search committees for chairs and deans, gender equity committees, and committees running endowed guest lecture series and special events.

Of course, a list of committees cannot capture the amount of time and energy that goes into this kind of work. Perhaps it is particularly appropriate that

I acknowledge this fact since I was once a brash young feminist too caught up in her publishing commitments to understand the importance of committee work. I found every reason not to serve on a committee—when I did serve on a committee I treated it as a monumental inconvenience. This was hypocritical. It is one thing to demand changes in the university, and quite another to work persistently at the committee level, changing people's minds and opening up opportunities for bright and educated women who deserve it. While I ranted about political change but stuck to my teaching and publishing, Sylvia was doing a great deal of this critical front-line work, with some significant results.

I want to share a few examples of how I learned about the importance of committees for effecting specific but important change through observing Sylvia at this work. The first example concerns the graduate history program. Not long after I had been appointed to the graduate history faculty in the early 1990s, a group of female faculty members with specialties in women's and gender history (including myself) became interested in creating a new graduate field area in comparative gender history. A comparative field in women's history already existed thanks in large part to Sylvia's work several years before. This was also the time when feminists of various types and working in different national contexts had become involved in the controversy surrounding gender history and the debate, whether it represented the logical conclusion of women's history (as Gisela Bock put it) or its demise—or at least its less politically edgy sibling. Our group of feminist historians felt that the growing field of gender history and its attendant debates ought to become a recognizable field within the graduate program, especially as more and more of our graduate students, male and female, wished to pursue gender questions in their research. In our department, creating a new graduate comprehensive area required presenting a proposal to the department, which then voted on it. All we needed was a simple majority. Immediately, however, we assumed we would encounter hostility to the proposal. Thus, our preparatory meetings, set up to decide on a common international literature that would be central to the field, were characterized by much tension and anxiety. Having assumed a hostile department, we became preoccupied with the need to strategize. Should we start lobbying the male colleagues one by one, beginning with the ones we knew were friendly to us and/or women's history? Should we do the work of putting together a massive bibliography in women and gender history to wave before our opponents when they declared that the field lacked a legitimate body of scholarship? We even considered a contingency plan for after the department had rejected our proposal.

Although a member of our group, Sylvia was too busy with administrative duties and committee work to attend our meetings, though she had given us her support. Feeling increasingly frustrated by all the time spent at these preparatory meetings, I decided to approach Sylvia for advice. I had never done this before. I had hesitated doing so earlier because my understanding was that although generally supportive of our plans, Sylvia herself had not yet reached a decision on the value of gender history. But she was polite and firm in her advice, telling me that all this hand-wringing was entirely misplaced because we did not understand the department. Sylvia, with her years of experience in the department, said this was not the way the history faculty worked; rather, whatever individuals might think of gender history, women's history, or any other comparative or thematic history, there was a basic shared understanding that colleagues had the right to pursue their different interests provided they offered a reasonable rationale and program. She told me to tell the others to stop wasting valuable energy obsessing over the issue and simply complete the terms of the proposal—which involved producing a statement of our objectives and presenting a core list of books and articles. She offered to present the proposal and told us not to assume there would be a major backlash. She was confident the department would approve it regardless of whether certain individual faculty members disapproved of the field. She also noted a certain irony: we were largely creating more work for ourselves by introducing a new field that would need to be taught and supervised, and even the odd cynic would respect our right to increase our workload. The proposal was passed, without any negative comment, within minutes.

In retrospect, I wonder whether we had not first approached Sylvia because, despite her expressed support, we weren't sure that a colleague so closely associated with women's history would support our gender history proposal. In fact, Sylvia's position on the women-versus-gender history question (to use a shorthand) had changed from an initial suspicion of gender history (and specifically, the history of masculinity) to a support for feminist-informed gender history. As she explained to me, she had reflected on how a gender history approach might challenge her research on women in fur trade society and had decided it would complicate matters in interesting ways. At the time, she was working on her Five Founding Families project, which involved tracing the Native and Métis wives of Victoria's colonial elite and their daughters. As she was completing the article on the two generations of women that would later appear in *BC Studies*,⁶ she began to reflect on how a gender perspective that, for instance,

would require her to pay closer attention to the differing fortunes of the sons and daughters of these elite families would raise new and challenging questions sure to complicate the story. For example, it raised a question that still needs answering: why did the daughters of these mixed-race families go on to lead far more comfortable or successful (albeit conventional) lives than their brothers? She chose not to enter the debate in any public way despite the fact that Canadian feminist scholars of different persuasions invoked "*Many Tender Ties*", and despite the fact that she was somewhat troubled by the way in which scholars attributed motives to her that she did not hold at the time she was researching the thesis and writing the book. Equally worrying was a tendency to treat the presence of a few early texts on Native women's history as tantamount to a historiography. When we submitted our formal proposal for a comparative gender field in our department, Sylvia was our spokesperson. As someone with plenty of committee and administrative experience in the department, she mentioned our group's wishes, briefly noted how we as a department tended to handle such matters, and presented our case. The proposal was passed without comment—we were all relieved. But I also learned the value of that old but valuable adage: save your energy for the real battles.

Sylvia's work on committees also opened my eyes to how this front-line work can make a difference, if a modest one, for a larger feminist presence in the university, while at the same time dramatically affecting individual women's professional lives. In my view, one of Sylvia's triumphs for feminist scholarship and equity hiring in the university—though she never boasted about it—concerns the impact she made as a member of the search committee for the School of Theology. By the time she served on this committee, we had become friendly colleagues and occasionally had dinner together at the end of a work day, usually at one of the restaurants in the vicinity of the St. George campus. As women without children, we were free to make on-the-spot decisions to go for dinner. Without betraying any confidences, she noted during these meals that she was trying to sort out how best to challenge the committee to take the application of women candidates who studied female spirituality and female healing as seriously as that of the male candidates studying more traditional religious subjects. In telling me this, she was entirely discreet; at no time did she name any names, nor did she disparage any committee member. She understood the situation in the same way she understood how best to get students to appreciate women's roles and lives in the past. She would have to make a case to the committee and it could not simply amount to lecturing them on the need to hire women. She

had to demonstrate the value of her argument. As I saw it, she was working from the perspective that her colleagues were bright and reasonable people who could be persuaded by sound argument; she wanted to be both respectful and compelling. In the end, the committee was persuaded enough to include a young feminist who studied birthing rituals among a particular ethno-religious group on the short list. She performed extremely well, impressed them all, and got the nod. Sylvia was delighted with both the outcome and the process. To this day, I do not know if the woman who was hired is even aware of the intellectual and political feminist work Sylvia carried out on that committee. I'm not sure that she needs to be, and Sylvia would probably be embarrassed by the prospect of anyone thinking they were somehow beholden to her. But I hope she does know.

A few years later, I saw Sylvia carry out a similar campaign in my own department; once again, it was clear that she had worked diligently to convince our mostly male department to hire a female candidate not for any personal or ideological gain, but because she believed this candidate brought new strengths to the department. It was one of those difficult hiring situations which had come down to two candidates—one a woman, the other a man. In this case, Sylvia was a member of the hiring committee who in the end decided to produce a minority report that disagreed with the decision of the majority, who supported the male candidate. To be fair, the majority (which included several progressive men who had consistently supported gender equity initiatives in the department) concluded that they would be pleased to accept either excellent candidate but considered the male candidate to have superior credentials. It was impressive to watch Sylvia in action. True to form, she had produced a carefully written report in which she laid out all of her reasons for recommending the female candidate. Throughout, she took pains to not insult anyone, and her report included no disparaging comments about the male candidate. Instead, she focused on the talents and credentials of the female candidate and on the new possibilities which this candidate's field—material history—would open up for the department at the graduate and undergraduate level. Sylvia's report prompted a fascinating discussion—perhaps the most interesting departmental meeting I have ever witnessed in my twenty years at the University of Toronto—and, in the end, the majority of the department agreed with her. It was a modest triumph in the sense that it was only one candidate and one job, but it did open us up to a field never before taught in the department. Again, I stress here less the actual outcome than the process—that is, Sylvia's premise that we can challenge reasonable people to think outside traditional categories.

Sylvia Van Kirk

When former colleagues and students produce festschrifts, much is said about them as a scholar or PhD supervisor and mentor. I wanted to highlight the less glamorous but equally important legacy—the committee work—because sometimes, real change happens behind the scenes, one candidate or one program at a time. It might not be revolutionary, but it is feminist and equity sensitive. As I become a senior member of my history and humanities departments on the St. George and Scarborough campuses respectively, I still rant about political change but also do a lot more front-line committee work. I have come to understand its importance; Sylvia Van Kirk helped me to appreciate the value of this work.

Notes

- 1 Constance Mungall, *Globe and Mail*, March 1976, clipping, Promotion File, Sylvia Van Kirk, Department of History, University of Toronto. I thank Sylvia for sharing this item with me.
- 2 Sylvia Van Kirk, *Many Tender Ties: Women in Fur Trade Society in Western Canada, 1670–1870* (Winnipeg: Watson and Dwyer, 1980).
- 3 Joan Kelly, “Did Women Have a Renaissance?” in *Becoming Visible: Women in European History*, eds. Renate Bridenthal and Claudia Koonz (London: Houghton Mifflin, 1977).
- 4 Alice Kessler-Harris, “Where are the Organized Women Workers?” *Feminist Studies* 3, 1 (Autumn 1975): 92–110.
- 5 Michael Bliss, *Writing History: A Professor’s Life* (Toronto: Dundurn Press, 2011), 172.
- 6 Sylvia Van Kirk, “Tracing the Fortunes of Five Founding Families of Victoria,” *BC Studies* 115/116 (Autumn/Winter 1997): 148–79.