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*Quiet Rebels: A History of Ontario Women Lawyers*

By Mary Jane Mossman

Waterloo: Wilfrid Laurier University Press, 2024. 540 pages. \$95.00 hardcover, PDF, e-pub. ISBN 978-1-77112-592-5 (wlupress.wlu.ca)

This collective biography of 187 early women lawyers in Ontario called to the bar between 1897 and 1957 is the product of meticulous research over many years. Making the most of the Law Society of Ontario archives, newspapers, oral histories, and other primary sources written about and sometimes by these women, *Quiet Rebels* documents and contextualizes their professional and personal lives, struggles, and achievements. It is a herculean task that Mary Jane Mossman accomplishes successfully and will provide readers with a nuanced understanding of professionalism, feminism, and gendered expectations.

Organized chronologically, each section begins with the political, social, and economic context of the period and its impact on the legal profession and women's lives. This is followed by individual biographies for each woman called to the Ontario bar. Mossman then puts the pieces together to reveal patterns in women's experiences, strategies, and choices as they navigated their way in the legal profession, from admission to law school to practicing law.

Through two world wars, the Great Depression, the return of veterans, the women's movement, the expansion of new areas of law, and changing rules governing law school admission and articling, women who became lawyers in Ontario over these sixty years were often firsts and onlies. Clara Brett Martin's admission to the practice of law in 1897 did not open the floodgates as it was feared at the time. In terms of numbers and attitudes towards women, progress was slow and nonlinear well into the 1980s. Furthermore, admission to law school did not automatically lead to graduation, and being called to the bar did not necessarily result in practicing law. Societal norms and differential treatment based on gender (among other characteristics) continued to create barriers for women at various stages of their careers. While some tried to overcome these obstacles with their own associations or even engaged in activism around women's equality, many made their way into the legal profession by attracting as little attention as possible to their gender, some even denying all instances of exclusion or discrimination. Indeed, few referred to themselves as "women lawyers" and even fewer would have considered themselves feminists. While some established their own practice, went into politics or received judicial appointments, many remained on the margins of the legal profession, relegated to areas of law considered more appropriate for women or working in government, far from the courtroom.

Mossman notes that like their male counterparts, most women called to the bar before 1957 (when the Law Society ceased exercising exclusive jurisdiction over legal education in Ontario), were "white, Protestant, and middle-class; only a few were Jewish, Catholic, or recent immigrants" (424). While they shared similar backgrounds, women had to negotiate the constant tension between what they could bring to the profession as women and being one of the boys by not attracting attention to their gender. As their numbers grew, so did resistance to their presence in law school and legal practice. One woman was a curiosity, but a group of women became a threat to the long-held notions of masculine privilege in the legal profession.

Mossman demonstrates that there is much more continuity than transformation in the biographies of early women lawyers in Ontario, and this is why applying a collective lens to these individual stories of negotiating gender in the legal profession is significant. While the number of women lawyers has increased, has this change been accompanied by a transformation in status? Not entirely since women are still more likely than men to leave the profession. These “quiet rebels” did bring about some change, but as Mossman suggests, “there is a need to ensure that women who wish to succeed in the legal profession can do so without adopting the gendered practices of the gentleman’s profession” (451). In a profession notoriously resistant to change, the experiences of early women lawyers are still relevant today.

While Mossman’s work is a substantial contribution to the history of the legal profession, it is structured in a way that can feel a bit repetitive as each woman’s story is presented in succession. In addition, two editorial choices warrant further explanation. The absence of photographs in this collective biography is not addressed. Was this out of fairness for the individuals for whom a photo was not available? Or was it for practical reasons around securing permissions for such a large number of images? Also, throughout the book, *Outsiders* is used to designate individuals absent from or on the margins of the legal profession other than women because of race, class, country of origin, disability, or sexual orientation. With the variety of terms used in the literature to label individuals and groups in these situations, it would be worth clarifying why this particular word was adopted.

Overall, Mossman offers a thoroughly researched collective account of Ontario’s early women lawyers’ lives, some 60 years of history that has received limited attention in the past, and weaves it skillfully with wider social and political developments affecting access to higher education and the legal profession. Of note is the 13-page index of names allowing readers to focus on individual women and adding to the book’s usefulness as a reference work. *Quiet Rebels* is invaluable for anyone with an interest in the patterns of professional women’s lives, gender dynamics, and Canadian legal history.

Mélanie Brunet  
University of Ottawa