

Book Reviews

FEMININE INGENUITY: HOW WOMEN INVENTORS CHANGED AMERICA

Anne L. Macdonald. Mississauga, Ontario: Random House of Canada, 1994.

by Laura Cameron

Female Ingenuity: How Women Inventors Changed America has a sure historical mandate; to give recognition to the dozens of women who patented in the United States in the last 200 years. It fulfills its mandate meticulously and painstakingly, acknowledging the names and inventions of women as diverse as Mary Kies, the first American woman to succeed in gaining a patent in her own name in 1809 for a straw-weaving process, to Dr. Gertrude Elion, a Nobel Prize Winner in 1988 for her work in developing drugs crucial to the treatment of cancer and viruses. The hours of research and the detailed documentation are apparent. That this is a work of love is obvious—the author is herself a patented inventor, and her indignation at the short shrift female inventors have received at the hands of a gender-biased society is evident on every page. And it does bare some interesting points about the relationship between women and their inventions, between the suffragettes and women inventors, and occasionally about the context these ingenious women lived in—but it moves on too quickly without letting the strong and vibrant personalities of the women develop.

One of my great delights in history is coming across an historian that takes a question and turns it upside down looking for possible interpretations. One of the best things about a good provocative question is that it

can open the door to speculation, further questions, eureka! moments of sudden comprehension. They can help us understand our motives and give us some context that we can apply to present situations. Then history becomes a dynamic influence—a yard-stick or Dear Abby that we can turn to for advice and wise counsel—our conscience.

While Macdonald's text does fill a gap in women's history, there is little analysis, and the information, while comprehensive in its limited sphere, does not allow for provocative questions. Over-extension and drift is an occupational hazard for the historian. However sticking too closely to a self-imposed thesis is also a hazard; lack of context does not allow for original analysis. Barbara Tuchman, U.S. historian and author of *The March of Folly: From Troy to Vietnam* combats this hazard by laying wide her parameters, but imposing a structure in the form of original questions that allow her to roam through her material. Macdonald fails to provide this solid organized structure that would allow for similar exploration. While the text is arranged somewhat chronologically, the chapters are also arranged around particular subject areas—similar types of inventions or Fairs and Expositions; the result is erratic, and has the reader leaping back and forth in time, between inventions and inventors. There is little psychological space for analysis and an uneasy structure to ground it on.

This is a scholarly text packing in close to 500 pages, with an extensive bibliography and appendix that includes a detailed list of the patentees Macdonald cites in the text. Two-thirds of the book is devoted to women patentees from 1809 to the turn of the century. It is meant, as Macdonald says, to fill a gap in the history literature. It is meant to right a wrong. Approaching a subject from a bot-

tom-up angle can have the unfortunate effect of insinuating a tone of self-righteous fury to the pages, like gasps of air drawn between clenched teeth after each word. At times this tone so overwhelms the subject that I found myself scribbling furious sarcastic notes about author pretensions in the margins.

But *Feminine Ingenuity* is also fundamentally about women acting in the best entrepreneurial spirit possible. Women who bucked tradition, who had an idea and who fought for that idea, many as ferociously as they would have fought for the life of one of their children. Because their ideas and their inventions were as their children. They struggled, often against poverty, always against a male-dominated culture that scoffed, and even found slightly scurrilous, the idea that women might problem-solve and see those solutions through to completion, even to the point of waging a pitched and constant battle to market and reap financial rewards for their product. This last was beyond the pale.

The women who invented and patented were primarily entrepreneurial free-market thinkers, who frequently invented out of financial need—the correspondence between the inventor and the patent office is often stark, the inventor pleading for a patent that will enable her to market her invention, as it is the only thing standing between her and destitution—and they were strong and resolute, driven by curiosity, the need to create and to problem-solve. These women did create, in spite of the obstacles. One of those deterrents frequently came from other women, suffragettes who were beginning to exert influence, under Elizabeth Cady Stanton, Lucy Stone and other reformers—some marching under the banner of dress reform, others of temperance. Reformers wanted the in-

ventors on side; they were marketable commodities, proof of female wit and wisdom, and they were after all sisters united in a common front. Generally though the inventors simply wanted to invent, and resented what they often felt was exploitation by the "sisterhood" for their own gains. The women who invented defined themselves less by their gender and more by their individualistic inner drive to create.

In one case the dress reformers, who regarded themselves, Macdonald writes, as "missionaries to women in need," suggested to Susan Taylor Converse, the designer of three "reform garments" that she make her designs freely available to all women. Ms. Converse refused, writing, "With all their zeal for woman, did they [the dress reform committee] ever ask why one woman like myself should give of her head and hand labor, without fair compensation?" In response a committee member writes, "In our zeal for woman we did not ask 'why one woman should give head and hand and heart,' for we were all giving it and expected others to do so." It is a fascinating conflict, and though Macdonald reports on it, she shies away from further discussion. In the light of current dissension over the definition and direction of feminism today, by such various and self-defined feminists as Katie Rolphe, Camille Paglia, Naomi Wolf and Gloria Steinem, it could provide an interesting and valuable reference for women leery of cookie-cutter feminism.

A recurring theme throughout *Feminine Ingenuity* is the debate about the validity of so-called "household" inventions, primarily developed by women, versus the more "serious" or technology-driven inventing dominated by men. From the day in 1809 that Mary Kies received her patent the argument raged. Women have dominated the areas of domestic invention because women have traditionally had more experience in these fields and recognize and demand innovation. But it was a question that split early feminists,

who often lamented that "women's" inventions, like clothing, household appliances or children's articles guaranteed that women would remain shackled to their traditional arenas of family and home.

The question of what constitutes good inventing is fundamental and interesting and can encompass not only gender bias but also cultural and class bias. For example, in relating the story of the invention of the "Snugli," the pouch-like infant carrier popular today, Macdonald tells us that the "inventor," Ann Moore, copied the idea from the Togolese of West Africa where she worked as a member of the Peace Corps in the early 1960s. Later, after the U.S.-made "Snugli" had become the cornerstone of a hugely successful company, foreign marketing sold "Snuglis" back to the more wealthy people of Africa. While Macdonald finds this an "interesting twist" to the invention, she drops the information quickly.

In another example, the women Macdonald includes all hold patents in the U.S. patent office; she notes that while many women undoubtedly contributed to many inventions that do not bear their name or acknowledge their effort, it would be impossible to record their contributions accurately because of the lack of hard evidence. It is a necessary note because in spite of the seemingly endless list of names Macdonald records, it is in fact not endless. In the final chapter Macdonald writes that only 5.6 per cent of all patent holders are women. It is useful to be reminded that official record does not constitute ingenuity. However, these are both points where a discussion about the ownership of ideas, cultural influences and the power of free-market access would be a fascinating adjunct to the story.

The strength behind Macdonald's text is the enormous amount of legwork that a comprehensive presentation of data represents, and in an area of women's history that has until now largely been ignored. Women have long had a thriving and active entrepreneurial spirit, and if *Feminine In-*

genuity can serve as a foundation for further exploration and discussion, then it is well worth the effort. However, we are now at the point that we have recognized that traditional historians have reneged on women, revising, revamping and refitting actual events to suit a gender bias. We need to move beyond the indignation. I know that my gender has received short shift in the traditional history books. I know that few male-centric historians ever asked provocative questions about women in history, about the role of women or about how the two genders worked together in creating history. I get angry, I get frustrated. But tell me something different. Give me questions that I can sink my teeth into, that I can analyze to help with the present and future. Give us women's history that is history-telling at its best, that pokes and prods and brings personalities and events to life, that reveals that "special talent that lies in the ability to wade through mountains of documentation and come out with a clean storyline, that invites the reader to follow the author through the maze of events and data into the life of a period."¹ Into life. Don't just tell me it happened.

¹Journalist and historian Frances Fitzgerald, commenting on Tuchman's *March of Folly*.

MAID IN THE MARKET: WOMEN'S PAID DOMESTIC LABOUR

Wenona Giles and Sedef Arat-Koc,
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by Ann Duffy

Since the 1960s, a sizeable literature has been created which examines women's paid labour force experience. Despite the progressive devel-