

Editorial

THIS issue of the *Journal* is a special issue containing articles which focus on women and the past that women have experienced. The *Journal* has, from its very beginning, published research into the historical experience of women, but such material has made up only a small percentage of the articles and they have been well spaced. A special issue recognizes that there is now an active group of researchers working in the area of the history of women and that they have important things to say.

It has become almost obligatory in editorials and essays on the state of the art to comment on the lack of attention paid to women by the historical profession. To state that the profession in New Zealand shared the general view of history which led to such a situation is to note the fact rather than to marvel at it. However, professional historians must realize that there was always an interest in women's past and that non-academic historians were, and still are, active in researching, collating, and recording this history. Their work, although often seen as lacking structure, a theoretical framework, and scholarship, continues to be the form in which most New Zealanders confront the history of women.

I would like to think that scholarly history is at a point where it might provide a new window on women's past. A generation of historians has been exposed to the international developments in women's history. An increasing number of students have taken courses in women's history, although few of those teaching in the area who trained as undergraduates within New Zealand had the opportunity to study it before embarking on a research degree. A good start has been made in some areas — immigration, social welfare, suffrage, for instance. It is interesting that these are areas which New Zealand historians had always identified as important in our European history. Immigration was the beginning of the whole story; social welfare and a commitment to democracy gave New Zealand a claim to international significance. Researchers investigating women's relationship to these processes have shifted our focus and expanded our knowledge of the past within an existing historical framework. Other areas are now being opened up: some of these are addressed in the articles in this issue. The lives of Maori women, for instance, have been the subject of more anthropological than historical research. Adoption has been, until very recently, a subject for legislators and social workers rather than historians. Crime and work have been the subject of some research, but not a great deal of it has been published. On dress we have very little material; on women during the war an increasing amount of reminiscence and analysis.

Overseas the debates on women's history are, if anything, intensifying. In the

United States the court case Equal Employment Opportunity Commission v. Sears, Roebuck and Company has created something of a crisis for those working in the area. It divided women's historians and forced them to confront the political implications of their work in ways they had not anticipated. History may be called upon to support or to refute the claims of women to equality and fair dealing. There is currently a good deal of energy going into asking what all the work of the last two decades has amounted to, and discussing, among other things, the role of feminist historians as critics and as activists.¹ In Australia, too, women's historians are in an introspective mood as they face the emergence of 'men's history' and an attempt to convert women's history into 'gender history'.²

We have not, in New Zealand, engaged in any such debates on the theory of women's history; to some extent we have used the theories formulated elsewhere. Any debate has been conducted on an unsophisticated level. There has been a noticeable trend to identify writing that has ignored women and to demand an explanation and reform in the future. Charlotte Macdonald suggests that this is not necessarily the way to approach the problem of 'missing women'. We need to develop our understanding of why women are missing from areas of historical analysis and interpretation. The answer may lie in the nature of past experience, in the way gender shaped experience; or it may lie in the way historians approach and treat the past. But the first task is to examine that past experience. That such an examination can lead to vital re-constructions and powerful re-interpretations is clear from the work of Judith Binney, who has listened *and heard* the words of Maori women telling their own story. It is that openness to hearing what women of the past can tell us, directly or indirectly, that will lead us to construct our own theories and enable us to contribute both to the national and the international historical debates.

It is our hope that this issue of the *Journal* will stimulate discussion, research, writing, and publication in the many areas that remain to be explored.

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1 See Alice Kessler-Harris, 'Equal Employment Opportunity Commission v. Sears, Roebuck and Company: a Personal Account', *Radical History Review*, 35 (1986), pp.57-79; Ruth Milkman, 'Women's History and the Sears Case', *Feminist Studies*, 12, 2 (1986), pp.375-400; Natalie Zemon Davis et al., 'Feminist Book Reviewing (a Symposium)', *Feminist Studies*, 14, 3 (1988), pp.601-22.

2 See debate in *Historical Studies* over 1986 and 1987; Marilyn Lake, 'Women, Gender and History', *Australian Feminist Studies*, 7 & 8 (1988), pp.1-9.