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# OWHN NEWSLETTER

FEBRUARY 2010

<http://arts.uwaterloo.ca/~owhn/>

## Ten Years of Feminism: 1960-1970

OWHN Spring Conference Friday, April 30 & Saturday, May 1  
Ontario Institute for Studies in Education, University of Toronto

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## Celebrating Persons Day: Dr. Constance Backhouse

At the OWHN Fall 2009 Conference, OWHN joined with LEAF Ottawa and University of Ottawa Law Union to co-sponsor a keynote address by Dr. Constance Backhouse at the annual Persons Day breakfast. Beginning with an overview of the Persons Case and a reflection about the rediscovery of the case in the 1970s, Dr. Backhouse highlighted the importance of women's history in keeping the memory of events like the Persons Case alive.

One such story is that of "an African-Canadian woman named Viola Desmond. This case began in New Glasgow, Nova Scotia in 1946, where Viola Desmond was passing through ... when her automobile broke down and

she had to stop for repairs. While waiting, she chose to take in a movie at the town's local theatre. Viola Desmond



**Rose Fine-Meyer, Wendy Mitchinson, Gail Cuthbert Brandt, Andrea Brandt and Paula Bourne**

did not know that the New Glasgow movie theatre separated patrons on the basis of race, with whites allowed to sit

in the best seats on the main floor and African-Canadians required to sit in the balcony. She purchased her ticket and sat down on the main floor. When the theatre staff told her she could not sit there, she went back to the ticket office to ask for the more expensive main floor ticket. The staff insisted she sit upstairs in the balcony. Making a spontaneous decision, she refused, walked back to the main floor, and quietly, but resolutely, took her seat. Many people know Rosa Parks, the African-American woman whose insistence on sitting in the front of the bus in Alabama set off a civil rights revolution that changed the face of America. Fewer know Viola Desmond,

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## Cairine Wilson: First Lady of the Red Chamber

At the Fall 2009 conference, Valerie Knowles examined the path of the first woman Senator, Cairine Wilson. Appointed in 1930, Wilson followed a fairly traditional path for women until, at the age of 30, her doctor commented that she was no longer the stimulating intelligent woman she had once been. As a child in a well-to-do but strict family, she attended private schools, but gained most of her political edu-

cation by accompanying her senator father to Ottawa. On one trip, she met her future husband, Liberal MP Norman Wilson. After their marriage, Wilson moved to Rockland, Ontario, where she led a life typical of a woman of her position: raising 8 children and managing a large house. Her doctor's comment spurred Wilson to look for new and stimulating activities outside of the home. She quickly became

a conscientious worker for many groups such as the YWCA and the Victorian Order of Nursing and a volunteer for a number of groups within the Liberal Party. In spite of her leading role in women's organizations, she was not well-known prior to her appointment to the Senate. Once in the Senate, Wilson continued her diligent work habits as a member of 13 committees over

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# Celebrating Persons Day



Dining together.

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whose action in Canada occurred **9 years earlier.**"

"The theatre staff was incensed at her behaviour and summoned the police. A burly white police officer arrived, violently seized Viola Desmond, and carted her off to jail. She stood only 4 foot 11 inches high, and weighed less than 100 lbs, but this well-mannered, refined, tiny woman was physically manhandled by rude and forcibly

violent white men. In Canada, there were no laws that separated theatre seats on the basis of race, but there was a law that required theatre-goers to pay tax on their tickets. Since the theatre staff would only sell Viola Desmond a cheap ticket for the balcony, and she chose to sit in a more expensive main floor seat, she was one cent short on tax. The petite, 32-year-old woman, bruised and battered from her police encounter, was charged with tax evasion and

held overnight in the town lock-up. Adding further insult, she was jailed in a cell alongside male prisoners. Mustering every ounce of dignity, Viola Desmond deliberately put on her white gloves and steeled herself to sit bolt upright all night long.

"The next morning, she was brought into the court, to face the charge of one cent tax evasion. No one mentioned that the trial was about race. No one admitted there was a policy

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## Cairine Wilson

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the years. Her position during these years tended to be left-of-centre, supporting causes such as more liberal divorce laws and universal family allowance. While most famous as the first woman Senator, she was also an outspoken advocate for refugees starting with Jews fleeing Nazi Germany in the 1930s. Her fight to liberalize Canada's immigration laws and to bring in as many Jewish refugees as possible gave her the name of "Mother of Refugees."

"The Mother of  
Refugees"

## More Information

Knowles, Valerie. *First Person: A Biography of Cairine Wilson, Canada's First Woman Senator*. Toronto: Dundurn Press, 1988.

<http://valerieknowles.ca/firstperson.html>

Kealey, Linda and Joan Sangster, ed. *Beyond the vote: Canadian Women and Politics*. Toronto: University of Toronto Press, c. 1989.

Celebrating Women in Government: Cairine Reay Mackay Wilson. <http://www.collectionscanada.gc.ca/women/002026-825-e.html>

## Did you know ...?

**Doris Anderson** was appointed to the Senate by Jean Chrétien and served from 1995 to 1997.

**Ann Elizabeth Haddon Bell** (Heath) was appointed by Pierre Trudeau in 1970 and served for 19 years until her death in 1989.

**Joyce Fairbairn** was appointed in 1984 by Pierre Trudeau—and she is still serving today.

**Florence Elsie Inman**, appointed by Louis St. Laurent, served from 1955 until her death in 1986.

**REMINDER:**  
Renew your  
membership for  
2010!

# Dr. Lorna Marsden: 21st Woman Senator



**Lorna Marsden and Valerie Knowles in conversation.**

Dr. Marsden's address focused on her own experiences as a Senator over an eight and a half year period. Invited by Prime Minister Trudeau to join the Senate in 1984, Marsden called the experience "a graduate seminar about Parliamentary tradition, rules, working practices and possibilities." The Senate is an important part of Canada's democratic process; it is here that "many pieces of legislation directly affecting the lives of women have been initiated, improved or stopped." Indeed, Marsden was involved in some significant events during her tenure.

In her daily activities, Marsden "asked hundreds of questions of the Leader of the Government in the Senate mostly about women's interests or scholarly research funding – many questions about the cuts of the Mulroney government to

women's centres that were moved from core to project funding, the workings of Employment Equity, amendments to the Canada Labour Code having to do with maternity leave, people with disabilities, benefits and many other amendments." One important piece of legislation was the Abortion Bill introduced by Kim Campbell in 1989 that would have led to the effective "re-criminalization" of abortion. It was finally defeated by the Senate at its Third Reading in 1992.

The Meech Lake Accord was another contentious, but important event. Marsden reports that her "particular interest was spurred by representatives of LEAF who immediately raised questions about the implication for equality rights of this amendment with its 'distinct society' wording. The fear was that the 'distinct society constitutionalized' would take precedence over Charter equality rights creating a 'hierarchy of rights.' Despite the never-ending assurances that equality

rights would not be compromised, the Senate Leader refused to tell us which 'constitutional experts' were consulted on this issue, whether any was knowledgeable about equality rights or what they had said." The Senate created a task force which heard from witnesses from across Canada about the potential impact of the proposed constitutional changes. Although it passed through Parliament, the Accord failed in Manitoba and Newfoundland as a result of the amending formula requirements. Marsden was present for many more significant events in Canadian history and remembers her time as exciting and stimulating.

**"... a graduate seminar about Parliamentary tradition, rules, working practices and possibilities."**

## TEN YEARS OF FEMINISM: 1960-1970

Spring OWHN Conference  
Friday, April 30 & Saturday, May 1  
Ontario Institute for Studies in Education,  
University of Toronto

# Laurentian University's Women's History Week

In celebration of Women's History Week in October 2009 at Laurentian University in Sudbury, feminist faculty opened their classrooms to the public. Over a dozen public lectures, performances and films took up the theme of women's history. From the era of 'les filles du roi' in New France to 1950s Canadian lesbian history, to gender in Ancient Egypt, Laurentian scholars provided a massive array of entry points to the critical study of gender and women's history. Musical performances of compositions by women anchored the week's celebrations and in addition, two guest speakers visited campus as the result of a combined effort between many departments. Dr. Karen Pearlston, Faculty of Law, University of New Brunswick, spoke on "The Law and Patriarchy" and Dr. Susan Dion, an aboriginal scholar of gender, education and colonialism, gave several public lectures on the depiction of aboriginal people in today's elementary and highschool textbooks. Dr. Dion (Lenape/Potawatami) hails from York University's Department of Education and has worked extensively in the areas of aboriginal girls and violence, pedagogy and decolonization. The community response to these lectures was overwhelming with two packed rooms and audience made up of young and old alike. (Thanks to Jennifer Johnson, *Women's Studies at Thorneloe University*)

# Minutes of the AGM, October 2009



Send items for  
the next

Newsletter to:

Alyson King

([aking@uoit.ca](mailto:aking@uoit.ca))

*(Excerpts)* **Call to Order.** Gail Cuthbert Brandt, Chair, called the meeting to order and thanked the participants for attending the 2009 conference and annual meeting. She remarked briefly on the decision made by OWHN in December 2007 to move to a new "home" at the University of Waterloo and on subsequent efforts to rejuvenate the organization, including the holding of the annual conference and AGM at UW in May 2008. She thanked a number of individuals, including Jane Errington (past Chair) and Pat Staton (past Treasurer) for keeping OWHN functioning prior to the transfer to Waterloo. She also expressed gratitude to Tracy Penny Light for creating the new OWHN web site, <http://arts.uwaterloo.ca/~owhn/>, which is hosted on the UW History Department's web site.

**4. Report of the Chair.** Gail Cuthbert Brandt reported that the Executive met in May 2008 and referred to the minutes of that meeting circulated at the beginning of the current AGM. She invited those present to reflect on a number of questions regarding how OWHN should function in the future. Is an annual meeting that includes both a conference and the AGM sufficient, or should we try to re-instate the former practice of two meetings a year? Our constitution provides for the creation of committees of members who share a common interest. Is there a need for committees, for example, that might bring together public historians, or teachers, or non-Canadian specialists? She added that we need to continue our efforts to expand our membership, and suggested that each current member work to bring in a new member.

Gail also asked the members for feedback other items including re-establishing a newsletter, the Women's History Month poster, and the conferences. She indicated that Alyson King has offered to co-ordinate the newsletter. There was discussion about the pros and cons of online/hard copies of the newsletter and it was decided that hard copies will be provided for those who request them; otherwise, the newsletter will be delivered electronically. There was unanimous approval to continue financial support for the annual Women's History Month poster.

Gail thanked the members of the Executive, Sharon Cook, Tina Bates and other staff from the Canadian Museum of Civilization, Constance Backhouse, Valerie Knowles, and Lorna Marsden for their contributions in organizing and delivering the 2009 conference.

**5. Treasurer's Report.** The Treasurer, Julia Roberts, being unable to attend, the Chair presented the Treasurer's Report for 2008 which was handed out to the members. The balance on hand as of 31 December 2008 was \$1466.13.

Gail thanked Beth Atcheson for her assistance in securing a grant for the 2009 conference from Senator Nancy Ruth's foundation and Tina Bates for arranging for a grant from the History and Archaeology Division of the CMC. These funds were vital for the success of the conference. Pat Staton moved that members accept the Treasurer's report, seconded by Paula Bourne. The motion was carried.

**6. Constitutional Amendments.** Copies of the existing constitution with proposed amendments, as circulated to OWHN members by e-mail in September 2009, were distributed. Pat Staton asked for clarification about the proposed new two-year terms for Executive members and Directors-at-Large. She expressed concern that this change would effectively mean a 4-year commitment for individuals who agree to be vice-chair, since they would normally assume the role of chair following their term as vice-chair. Gail explained that the members of the Executive had discussed this matter at their meeting in May 2008 and decided that a two year commitment would allow for greater continuity. A number of similar volunteer organizations use two-year terms since it usually takes more than a year for officers to set and then act on priorities.

There was also discussion of a number of other issues. The definition of member in "good standing" was raised and it was agreed that it meant a member who has paid their annual dues. Regarding Section 7, "Meetings", the question was posed about whether members unable to attend the AGM should be allowed to vote. There was discussion for and against

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# AGM Minutes

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electronic voting options. Some felt that members need to be present to understand issues and be part of the dialogue in order to vote knowledgeably. It was decided that for now, the electronic vote would not be pursued, but that we should review this decision at a future meeting. Pat Staton moved to adopt the proposed changes to the constitution, seconded by Jan Haskings-Winner. The motion passed.

**7. Election of the 2009-10 Directors.** The following slate of officers was proposed:

Chair: Gail Cuthbert Brandt, Vice-Chair: Jan Haskings-Winner, Secretary: Rose Fine-Meyer, Treasurer: Julia Roberts, Directors-at-Large: Linda Ambrose and Alyson King

Jan Haskings-Winner indicated that other commitments would prevent her from continuing in the role of vice-chair and from assuming the role of Chair in 2010. However, she offered to take on the role of director-at-large. With that amendment, the proposed slate was approved. Moved by Pat Staton and seconded by Rose Fine-Meyer

The Chair indicated that under the terms of the revised constitution, the Directors would work together to appoint a vice-chair and to have this appointment ratified at the next AGM.

**8. 2010 Conference.** Gail suggested that perhaps the theme for the 2010 conference might be Canadian feminism in the 1960s, and that we celebrate in particular the establishment of the Voice of Women in 1960 and the publication of the Report of the Royal Commission on the Status of Women in 1970. It was agreed that the conference would be held conference in Toronto and perhaps include costuming.

There was a wide-ranging discussion about the timing of the annual conference. Some individuals supported a mid-October date since it is historically tied to the Persons Case and Women's History Month. Others felt that it was time to make a change, with the hope that choosing another time might increase attendance. A number of possible dates were discussed and it was decided that the beginning of May might be the most convenient time for most members. It was also agreed that we need to find ways to involve more franco-phone members. Wendy Mitchinson suggested that university faculty members sponsor graduate students to become members. There were suggestions about possible links to other provincial women's history groups, to the Canadian Committee on Women's History, and to the History Educa-

tion Network (THEN/HIER).

**8. Life-long membership.** Pat Staton and Rose Fine-Meyer nominated Jane Errington for life-long membership to OWHN. Pat Staton spoke of Jane's long involvement in OWHN and her outstanding commitment. Jane served as Chair a number of times, organized conferences and has supported the organization in numerous ways. All members agreed it was an honour well deserved. The motion, which had previously been unanimously approved by the Executive, was enthusiastically endorsed by those present.

**9. Other Business.** Constance Backhouse made an announcement about a feminist history project she and her collaborators plan to launch in 2010 to mark the 50th anniversary of the start of 2nd wave feminism in Canada. She invited OWHN members to get involved in the project by contributing volumes and/or providing financial support.

*Rose Fine-Meyer, Secretary.*

*Jane Errington,  
awarded life  
membership in  
OWHN*

## OWHN Fall 2009 Conference, Ottawa, Ontario

*Introduction to the Canadian Women's Movement Archives:*

Véronique Paris and Debra Ann Begg, Canadian Women's Movement Archives

*Persons Day Breakfast co-sponsored with LEAF Ottawa and*

*The Law Union, University of Ottawa with funding from the Shirley E. Greenberg Chair: The Historical Context of the Persons Case, Dr. Constance Backhouse, University Research Chair, Faculty of Law, University of Ottawa*

*Bringing the Persons Case Alive in the Classroom:* Rose Fine-Meyer, author and winner of the Governor General's Award for Excellence in the Teaching of Canadian History, and Jane Haskings-Winner, author, teacher, and instructor, OISE/UT

*The Role of Women in the Canadian Senate: "Cairine Wilson: Canada's First Woman Senator," Valerie Knowles, author, and "The Senate Years: My Eight and a Half," Dr. Lorna Marsden, former Senator, and President Emerita and Professor, York University*

*Activating Activism: Presenting Women's Political History at the Canadian Museum of Civilization: "Proactively Collecting Women's Political History," Jennifer Anderson, Assistant Curator, CMC; "Bringing Women Back Into the Winnipeg General Strike," Rhonda Hinthier, Curator of Western Canadian History, CMC*

# Celebrating Persons Day

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for racially segregated seating in the theatre. Viola Desmond was not told she had the right to a lawyer. She did not understand that she was entitled to cross-examine the witnesses. She was sentenced without any opportunity to make submissions to the court. The judge convicted her, and fined her \$20 & costs.

“But Viola Desmond was a very special person. A successful businesswoman, who owned and operated a beauty salon in the city of her birth, Halifax, NS, she was also an early feminist who championed the equality of African-Canadian women. She had opened a school to train them as beauticians, to create equal opportunities for women whose race and gender left them severely marginalized. Back home in Halifax, the Black community rallied to support Viola Desmond. Funds were raised. A lawyer was hired. Appeals were launched. And again the courts failed the cause of justice. The white male judges of the Nova Scotia Supreme Court denied her appeal and refused to reverse the conviction. This time there was no option to appeal this case to the British Privy Council! No one mentioned that the case was about race and racism. It has gone down in history as a case of tax evasion.

“Reviewing this years later, we must all be tempted to rank this as a huge defeat. For those of us who seek to challenge injustice, it sometimes seems that we lose more often than we win. Yet the loss galvanized the forces for change within the Black community, where there was a dramatic upsurge in race consciousness. Speaking years later, Nova Scotia’s most prominent Black Baptist minister, Dr. William Pearly Oliver, tried to explain the enormous symbolic significance of the case: ‘This meant something to our people. Neither before or since has there been such an aggressive effort to obtain rights. The people arose as one and with one voice. Much of the positive action that has since taken place stemmed from this.’”

With 2010 marking the 50th anniversary of the second wave of femi-

nism, Dr. Backhouse concluded with an appeal to all feminists to support a new initiative, a Feminist History Society. The objectives of the society are two-fold: “1) to publish a new series of books chronicling Canadian feminism over the past 50 yrs; and 2) to sign up 1000 members who will finance this work by purchasing at least a “book of the year” from this series every year for the next 10 — “members who will give these books pride of place in their bookshelves because they share our dreams and exhilaration over the campaigns for change. We need you to write for the series, to sign up as FHS book club members, and to donate generously to help get this hugely important project going.” Watch for more information to come.

*Excerpted from “The Historical Context of the Persons Case,” by Dr. Constance Backhouse, University Research Chair, Faculty of Law, University of Ottawa.*

## Women's Worlds 2011 in Ottawa-Gatineau

Women’s Worlds, an international conference held every three years that brings together scholars, activists, and community members, is coming to the Ottawa-Gatineau region in 2011. Co-organizers are Carleton University and the University of Ottawa, together with l’Université du Québec en Outaouais and Saint Paul University. Sponsors include Status of Women Canada. Visit [www.womensworlds.ca](http://www.womensworlds.ca) for more information.

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# Conferences

**Edging Forward, Acting Up:** Gender and Women’s History at the Cutting Edge of Scholarship and Social Activism, **First Annual CCWH-CCHF Conference**, Vancouver, August 12-15, 2010, [http://www.chashcacommittees-comitesa.ca/ccwh-cchf/english/site-news-blog\\_files/58534e1b71f202443aaa36de6f1e309c-5.html](http://www.chashcacommittees-comitesa.ca/ccwh-cchf/english/site-news-blog_files/58534e1b71f202443aaa36de6f1e309c-5.html)

2010 Annual Meeting, Winnipeg, June 18-20

**Canadian Association for the History of Nursing/Association Canadienne pour l'histoire du Nursing**

<http://www.umanitoba.ca/nursing/CAHNconference2010>

The Canadian Association for **Women’s Public History**, CFP: poster session at its symposium **Going Public: Cross-disciplinary perspectives on presenting women’s history** being held in **Edmonton, Alberta, October 22-24, 2009.**

Presenters may submit posters on any aspect of women’s public history, including research, conservation or exhibition projects in process

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