A Female Economy represents a discovery both personal and professional. I arrived in Manitoba in 1965 and work became the dominant feature of my life. For years I did not know what spare time was. Although my understanding was not particularly sophisticated, it was plain that my experience of work was not the same as a man's. Absorbed by raising a family, establishing a career as a historian, and making new friends, I wanted to know how other women had moved through these same stages of life. How had previous generations of women coped? How had they combined productive and reproductive, paid and unpaid work? What had they thought about their working lives?

I looked at the history books to satisfy my curiosity, but they revealed little. When a woman was mentioned, it was as an occasional leading lady, usually judged to be noteworthy because of her relationship with a man. One remarkable exception was The Woman Suffrage Movement in Canada by Catherine Cleverdon, a book which included a vivid section on suffragists in Manitoba. Then in the 1970s there was a sea change in the recording of history. Along with the resurgence of women's politics in the fullest meaning of that word came a renaissance in women's history. Encouraged by male colleagues at the University of Manitoba — until the mid-1970s I had no female colleague in the History Department — I prepared a history course which examined the women of Western civilization. Urged to use local archival sources, my students began to recreate the lives of ordinary women from the diaries and memories of the women in their communities.

Their achievements led me to change professional direction — to abandon the far-away archival resources of eighteenth-century politics and instead to explore material closer to hand. The more I delved, the more complicated historical research became. I found I was not, after
all, a pioneer. Others had been there before me, but their work had largely been overlooked in major historical publications. Moreover, I soon found that “women” was not a simple word. The women of Manitoba were far too diverse to be lumped together in a single category. Race distinguished First Nations women politically as well as economically; ethnicity loomed large, and class was significant; poor women had fewer resources than rich women and this materially affected how they spent their days. Religion too was important – many immigrants had come to Manitoba precisely because of persecution in Europe and had created settlements or settled in neighbourhoods in which religion was the central organizing principle of life. A comprehensive social history of women in Manitoba, to include all ethnic groups, all religions, and all economic classes of women – a truly multicultural history – has yet to be written. A Female Economy begins to chart this vast territory by focusing on women’s work.

This project has been long in the making, partly because of diversions into other historical research whose appeal was irresistible. My biography, Margaret McWilliams: An Interwar Feminist, was written after I found McWilliams was an early historian not only of the province but of women in Manitoba as well. My study of professional women, In Subordination, was born when I could find few descriptions, and still fewer assessments, of these women even though they comprised a steady 10 to 20 per cent of the paid labour force from the 1880s on.

My first preparations for a study of women’s work arose from a desire to use existing archival and statistical data. In 1982 Greg Mason of the University of Manitoba’s Institute for Economic and Social Research, Beverley Tangri of the Department of Economics, and I collaborated in organizing a conference on the general topic of women and work. Sponsored by the Social Sciences and Humanities Research Council of Canada (SSHRC), its agenda was to consider what resources would be necessary to support research into women and the Canadian economy. I was later awarded SSHRC grants to support the historical investigation of women and work in Manitoba: in 1983 a strategic grant to generate historical statistics, and in 1984 a Canadian Studies Research Tools grant. Vera Fast and I published a collaborative annotated archival bibliography, Planting the Garden. A 1986 conference on the subject of women in history in Manitoba considered different aspects of women’s work, and two publications resulted: an anthology in book form, First Days, Fighting Days, and a theme issue of the journal Manitoba History. I thank all who collaborated on these projects, including Kerry Abel, Marilyn Barber, Marie Bonin, Jennifer Brown, Carol Budnick, Sarah Carter, Angela Davis, Vera Fast, Sheila
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Grover, Nancy Hall, Anne Hicks, Mary Horodyski, Susan Jackel, Brigitte Joyal, Linda Kealey, Annalee Lepp, David Millar, James Mocho-ruk, Donna Norell, Michèle Pujol, Sharon Reilly, Barbara Roberts, Sylvia Van Kirk, and Donna Webber. In the late 1980s I made more use of oral history. At first I worked with the large number of tapes deposited in various collections around the province. Then, for In Subordi-
nation I interviewed over two hundred women who had been involved in professional work, and this material substantially augmented the historical resources available. Another SSHRCC grant in 1991 sup-
ported the development of this book. I am very grateful to SSHRCC and its anonymous assessors for recognition and for the assistance, time, and material resources provided by grants.

Many of the debts I owe are to colleagues and students whose support and stimulation have encouraged me through frustrating as well as more productive times. It is a pleasure to thank the many people who have assisted me with help, advice, and research assistance. I thank colleagues in the Canadian Committee on Women’s History, especially Margaret Conrad and Alison Prentice, for their friendly support over the years. In Manitoba I thank those who agreed to be interviewed, and I thank the many assistants who helped me shape the raw experience of other people into history: Daphne Andrews, Michael Bell, Cathy Carlson, Barbara Chatterly, Cathy Chatterly, Bonita Eastwood, Brigitte Joyal, Tamara Miller, Wendy Parker, Sherry Peters, Marcia Stenz, and Beverley Suderman. I thank Hrund Skulason for her translations from Icelandic, Marilyn Baker for her advice about paintings, and Patricia Dowdall for her editorial advice and encouragement. Sarah Carter and Laura Peers helped me with bibliographic advice on First Nations history. Thora Cook from the Western Canadian Pictorial Index and Elizabeth Blight and Lynn Champagne of the Provincial Archives of Manitoba were very helpful regarding photographs. Prabir Mitra and Heather Warkentin produced the map of Manitoba. I thank Patrick Wright and Carol Goodlow of St. John’s College Library. Colleagues from non-historical disciplines as well as my own department have guided my forays into literature, economics, political studies, native studies, and art but must not be held to account for my interpretations. I would like to thank especially Barbara Angel, Jack Bumsted, the late Angela Davis, Vera Fast, Barry Ferguson, Gerald Friesen, Jean Friesen, John Kendle, Michael Kinnear, Debra Lindsay, Ken McVicar, Morris Mott, Ed Moulton, Karen Ogden, Kathryn Young, and Anthony Waterman. Editors from McGill-Queen’s University Press, especially Joan Harcourt, Marion Magee, and Don Akenson, more than once provided just the right words for the occasion. It was a pleasure to work on this project while I was a visiting fellow in other universities.
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Always I have paid attention to "ordinary" women. Such a commonsense concept founders in definitional quicksand. Despite the difficulties, I have tried to recapture the salient features of a mainstream majority whilst never losing sight of broader, inclusive visions. This type of study can only be pursued when there are time-series of comparable statistics and the extensive data generated by government agencies are an excellent resource. They provide the objective, quantitative bare bones of the female figures in *A Female Economy*. Painting in the details of flesh, clothing, and relations requires the use of more subjective, qualitative data. We must apply our imaginations to tap into women’s consciousness, to understand their mentalities, to perceive their pains and pleasures as human beings, to comprehend their breathing, working lives. This necessarily involves risk, and a historian’s surmise may turn out to be incomplete, or mistaken. Nevertheless our trade requires us to do more than describe; we must try to understand the past and explain it to the present.

Like so many women before me, I have reaped greater benefits from my unpaid work than from my paid job. I thank Michael, and David, Andrew, Sara, and Lucy for making my work so very rewarding, and I dedicate *A Female Economy* to my family: past, present, and future.

MK

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