
REFLECTING ON THE PAST, SHAPING THE FUTURE

Tenille E. Brown,^{*} Natasha Latina,^{**} Hailey Hayes^{***}

For many decades, the legal profession was categorized as a “gentleman’s profession.”¹ In fact, the year 2025 marks 150 years since the first woman in Canada received a university degree, 128 years since the first woman in Canada was called to the bar, 108 years since women in Manitoba received the right to vote, 96 years since women were considered under the legal definition of the word “persons,” and only 65 years since all women in Canada received the right to vote.² These statistics are provided by Mary Jane Mossman as she sets the foundation for her milestone book, *Quiet Rebels: A History of Ontario Women Lawyers*.³ In *Quiet Rebels*, Mossman carries out a historical deep dive into the lives of 187 early women lawyers in Ontario, Canada. *Quiet Rebels* is impactful because it reflects on the work of Ontario’s first individual women lawyers, charting them within the broader context of the Ontario legal profession starting in the late nineteenth century. Beginning in 1897 with the story of Clara Brett Martin, the first woman admitted to the Law Society of Upper Canada (now the Law Society of Ontario), the stories of early women lawyers demonstrate the tense negotiations such pioneer women made as they navigated barriers, sometimes making compromises, and often finding alternative paths on their way to being called to the bar.

Quiet Rebels inspired us, the guest editors, to put together this special issue on the topic of women and the law. It is not lost on us that the author of *Quiet Rebels*, Mary Jane Mossman, is herself a trailblazer in the advancement of women’s rights. This can be seen in her book *Quiet Rebels*, her earlier work on *First Women Lawyers*,⁴ and in the many papers and articles she has written on gender, equality, and feminism. It is also apparent through her engagement with initiatives aimed at addressing inequality in the profession, such as by contributing to the

^{*} LLB (Honours), LLM, PhD, Assistant Professor, Bora Laskin Faculty of Law. We are grateful for the work of the *Lakehead Law Journal* on this special issue. Thank you to Professor Robin Whitehead, editor-in-chief, for her work on this issue. Special thanks to Justice Helen Pierce and Richard Bee, librarian for the Thunder Bay Law Association, for their help tracking down a picture of Eva Maude Powley.

^{**} JD, BA (Hons). Natasha Latina clerked at the Ontario Superior Court of Justice in 2025-2026 and currently works as an Assistant Crown Attorney in Thunder Bay. Note: this introduction is written in my personal capacity and does not in any way reflect the views of the Ontario Superior Court of Justice or the Ministry of the Attorney General.

^{***} JD, BA (Hons). Hailey Hayes works for the non-profit organization Women in Crisis (Algoma) Inc. in Sault Ste. Marie, practising primarily family law.

^{1.} Mary Jane Mossman, *Quiet Rebels: A History of Ontario Women Lawyers* (Waterloo: Wilfrid Laurier Press, 2023) at 2 [Mossman, *Quiet Rebels*].

^{2.} Canada, “Women in Canadian History: A Timeline” (last modified 23 October 2024), online: <<https://www.canada.ca/en/women-gender-equality/commemorations-celebrations/womens-history-month/women-history-canada-timeline.html>> [perma.cc/3NRA-T26Y].

^{3.} Mossman, *Quiet Rebels*, *supra* note 1.

^{4.} Mary Jane Mossman, *The First Women Lawyers: A Comparative Study of Gender, Law and the Legal Professions* (Oxford: Hart Publishing, 2006).

Canadian Bar Association's landmark 1993 *Touchstones* report,⁵ a study on gender equality in the profession chaired by Madam Justice Bertha Wilson and for which Mossman provided the thematic paper on work and family in the legal profession.⁶

This special issue is our call to consider the current experiences of women in the profession and of those served by the profession, and to look outward to consider the centuries of inequality, marginalization, and abuse that has been and continues to be experienced on a gendered basis. Inspired by woman legal scholars and professionals, this special issue weaves the lived experiences of women in the profession with the hope of creating meaningful future change in this space.

The first paper in this special issue is a reflection on her book *Quiet Rebels* from Mary Jane Mossman herself.⁷ In this piece, Mossman reflects on how women's stories are pieced together, about the availability of historical material, and the importance of documenting the growth, challenges, and successes of early women lawyers from 1897 to 1957. Mossman brings attention to the second woman lawyer called to the bar in Ontario, Eva Maude Powley, a woman from Port Arthur, Ontario, which is now Thunder Bay, the location of the Bora Laskin Law School where the guest editors went to law school, teach, and from which we now write. Eva Powley's work getting called to the bar—and that she likely studied in Port Arthur and went to Osgoode Hall in Toronto to write her law exam—is strikingly familiar for our current student body and local practising bar, who navigate their work in the northern region of Ontario, with often deep connections elsewhere. That the second woman lawyer in Ontario was from present-day Thunder Bay is also no surprise to us, the guest editors, and we are proud to be writing from this space.



Figure 1: Eva Maude Powley.
Undated. Credit Archives of the
Law Society of Ontario

⁵ Canadian Bar Association, *Touchstones for Change: Equality, Diversity and Accountability. The Report on Gender Equality in the Legal Profession* (Ottawa: Canadian Bar Association, 1993), online: <cbc.org/CBA/media/PDFs/Sections/touchstonesForChange.pdf>.

⁶ Mary Jane Mossman, "Work and Family in the Legal Profession: Re-Thinking the Questions" (Paper delivered at the CBA National Conference of the Task Force on Gender Equality in the Legal Profession, 1992).

⁷ Mary Jane Mossman, "Gender, Law and the Legal Profession: A Reflection about "Quiet Rebels," (2026) 7:2 Lakehead LJ 93.

The second paper is a book review written by then-law student Melis Guzel.⁸ The placement of this book review at the centre of this special issue is a reflection of the importance of the voices and perspectives of the most junior members of our legal profession—law students, articling students, and later junior lawyers. Guzel’s deep engagement with Mossman’s book also highlights the importance of *Quiet Rebels* and the need to reflect on women’s stories. Guzel details the methodology in *Quiet Rebels* and highlights key insights provided by the book, such as the quiet tone of rebellion among early women lawyers. This book review asks the audience to think critically about Mossman’s book, on today’s current legal profession, and how disparities between men and women lawyers currently manifest.

The third paper, “Fifty Years of Substantive Equality for Women: Chronicling the Legacy of the National Association of Women and the Law (NAWL),” is written by Meghan Tibbits-Lamirande and Suzanne Zaccour.⁹ This article begins with a reflection on the first-ever National Conference on Women and the Law, organized by women from the University of Windsor Faculty of Law in March 1974, which led to the formation of NAWL by University of Ottawa law students Shirley Greenberg, Lynn Kaye, and Peggy Mason. The piece emphasizes the interconnected legal and political landscapes, from the 1960s to the present, and analyzes NAWL’s interventions to support the feminist development of law in areas such as rights to marital property, economic fairness through equal pay, ongoing stereotypes of women that are used against them in incidents of sexual violence, rights of equality under the *Indian Act*,¹⁰ and more. These interventions directly supported women’s substantive equality before the law and are a realization of NAWL’s ongoing work of bringing systemic feminist change.

The fourth paper, “Creating Reflective Spaces for Change: Building a More Inclusive Legal Culture by Centring Women Lawyers’ Voices through Storytelling and Reflective Practice,”¹¹ provides a unique perspective on understanding women lawyers’ voices through storytelling and reflective practices. The article reflects on the work that developed from a forum on “Diversity and Inclusion in the Legal Profession” hosted at the University of Saskatchewan College of Law that led to several initiatives, including a podcast and further reflections focused on women. This article highlights that amplifying the experiences of women and of other equity-seeking groups is a powerful tool for systemic transformation, and this process might well require adoption of new metrics for success in the legal profession.

The next paper is written by Professor Emerita of Law, Jonnette Watson Hamilton, titled “Still a Signpost of Inequality: An Update on Hysteria in the Courts.”¹² This article is a rare opportunity to revisit scholarship written over 20 years ago, as Watson Hamilton reflects on her 2002 article “The Use of Metaphor and Narrative to Construct Gendered Hysteria in the

⁸ Melis Guzel, Book Review “Paving the Way: A Book Review of Mary Jane Mossman’s *Quiet Rebels: A History of Ontario Women Lawyers*,” (2026) 7:2 Lakehead LJ 100.

⁹ Meghan Tibbits-Lamirande and Suzanne Zaccour, “Fifty Years of Substantive Equality for Women: Chronicling the Legacy of the National Association of Women and the Law (NAWL),” (2026) 7:2 Lakehead LJ 109.

¹⁰ *Indian Act*, RSC 1985, c I-5.

¹¹ Brea Lowenberger, Leah Howie, Judy Jaunzems-Fernuk, and Lawren Trotchie, “Creating Reflective Spaces for Change: Building a More Inclusive Legal Culture by Centring Women Lawyers’ Voices through Storytelling and Reflective Practice” (2026) 7:2 Lakehead LJ 130.

¹² Jonnette Watson Hamilton, “Still a Signpost of Inequality: An Update on Hysteria in the Courts” (2026) 7:2 Lakehead LJ 152.

Courts.”¹³ Watson Hamilton assesses the reliance on “hysteria” in judicial decisions since 2002, providing an examination of the ongoing instances of parties, witnesses, and others being labelled as “hysterical” in Canadian courtrooms and showing that this labelling process has expanded to include children in custody cases. This article reminds readers that inequality is entrenched in Canadian law, as demonstrated through the continued reliance on the trope of “hysteria” and all that it has come to mean both within law and Canadian society at large.

The final paper brings us full circle on the themes underlying this special issue to reflect on the experience of women judges. We, Natasha Latina and Hailey Hayes, then 3L students at Bora Laskin Faculty of Law and the student managing editors of the *Lakehead Law Journal*, were honoured to host a roundtable discussion with five female justices of both the Ontario Court of Justice and the Superior Court of Justice in Thunder Bay, Ontario, in January 2025. We were fortunate to be in conversation with Justice Claudia Belda (OCJ), Justice Elaine Burton (OCJ), Justice Chantel Brochu (SCJ), Justice Tracey Nieckarz (SCJ), and Justice Helen Pierce (SCJ). This final paper is an edited copy of our conversation. During this discussion, the Honourable Justices spoke to us about their experiences as female lawyers in the profession and provided unique insights on their careers as they were called to serve as judges. From commenting on experiences during their respective calls to the Ontario bar, to observations of new trends within the courtroom, we are grateful for the Honourable Justices’ candour, time, and advice for the next generation of female legal professionals.

At its core, this special issue highlights the meaningful contributions women have made to the legal profession, and it looks to the future to predict remaining gaps. As the Canadian legal landscape continues to grow and adapt to change, it is necessary to remember the countless battles women lawyers have fought just to be able to contribute to the legal profession. These battles continue. As Mossman so well highlights in *Quiet Rebels*, attention to women’s stories requires that we acknowledge that women lawyers exist with their own histories, perspectives, and agency.¹⁴ Being a “quiet rebel” is an individual experience, and for many this has meant navigating life as a working lawyer for oneself within one’s own agency. Importantly, trailblazing women lawyers might have held views that do not meet the current standards of non-discrimination.¹⁵ Still, these women *did* pave a path for future women lawyers.

As the papers in this special issue demonstrate, the achievements of women lawyers are many, but there is still much to be done for women working in the profession and for the women the profession serves. The authors of articles in this special issue are members of the bench, academics, community workers, legal professionals, and junior members of the bar, and together they ask us to reflect on the past so that we may better understand the future. By reflecting on these issues and listening to the experiences of women legal professionals, these works provide an opportunity to think about our own steps to address inequalities embedded in the legal profession.

¹³ Jonnette Watson Hamilton, “The Use of Metaphor and Narrative to Construct Gendered Hysteria in the Courts” (2002) 1:2 JL & Equality 155.

¹⁴ See, Mossman, *Quiet Rebels*, *supra* 1, “epilogue.”

¹⁵ *Ibid* at 448.