



The First Women Lawyers: A Comparative Study of Gender, Law and the Legal Professions

Mary Jane Mossman

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This comparative study explores the lives of some of the women who first initiated challenges to male exclusivity in the legal professions in the late-nineteenth and early-twentieth centuries. Their challenges took place at a time of considerable optimism about progressive societal change, including new and expanding opportunities for women, as well as a variety of proposals for reforming law, legal education, and standards of legal professionalism. By situating women's claims for admission to the bar within this reformist context in different jurisdictions, the study examines the intersection of historical ideas about gender and about legal professionalism at the turn of the twentieth century. In exploring these systemic issues, the study also provides detailed examinations of the lives of some of the first women lawyers in six jurisdictions: the United States, Canada, Britain, New Zealand and Australia, India, and western Europe. In exploring how individual women adopted different legal arguments in litigated cases, or devised particular strategies to overcome barriers to professional work, the study assesses how shifting and contested ideas about gender and about legal professionalism shaped women's opportunities and choices, as well as both support for and opposition to their claims.

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