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Crowley, Terry. *Marriage of Minds: Isabel and Oscar Skelton Reinventing Canada*. Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2003. Pp. xiii + 330; illus. CDN$60.00 (cloth). ISBN: 0802009328.

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"Whenever I set to work to write even a report," Elizabeth Shortt confessed to her friend Isabel Skelton in 1925, "I want a place & time I can concentrate on it. That is where the men have the advantage — ie. when they are literary professionals — since they have no thousand humdrum details of sheets & towels & underwear & soup bones & salads to think of" (172). Shortt's comment bluntly exposes the frustration experienced by many of the earliest women to graduate with university degrees at the end of the nineteenth century: having gained the rare advantage of a university education, most wished to pursue meaningful work but increasingly found their efforts submerged by the domestic imperatives of middle-class life, the "underwear & soup bones" that cluttered their minds and stole away their time. One of Canada's first female graduates in medicine, Elizabeth Shortt had spent many years juggling her work as an advocate for women's advancement with her domestic concerns as a wife and mother. Like Isabel Skelton, Shortt was married to a political economist with a prominent public career; a literary professional who never needed to remember to change the sheets on his bed or plan the courses of his evening meal. As Terry Crowley carefully explains in this revealing biography of Isabel and Oscar Skelton, time itself has been a gendered concept, and women's creativity has hinged not only on access to resources, space, or authority, but also on access to uninterrupted time. Shortt's recognition that only the men of her class could claim the right to private time for research and writing echoes Florence Nightingale's bitter words over seventy years earlier: "[T]ime is the most valuable of all things . . . But it is laid down, that our time is of no value."[1]

Marriage of Minds is less of a joint biography than a study of two parallel but separate lives. In spite of their affection for each other, Isabel and Oscar Skelton occupied distinct worlds and inhabited very different versions of one marriage. Unlike other studies of intellectual partnerships, such as Royden Harrison's recent examination of Sidney and Beatrice Webb,[2] Crowley's book does not approach the Skelton's marriage as the source of professional collaboration; the Skeltons were never, to quote a famous description of the Webbs, "two typewriters" beating as one.[3] At many points in

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[1] Florence Nightingale, *Cassandra*, ed. Myra Stark (New York: The Feminist Press, 1979), 35.

[2] Royden J. Harrison, *The Life and Times of Sydney and Beatrice Webb, 1858-1905: The Formative Years* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2000).

[3] Barbara Caine, "Beatrice Webb and her Diary," *Victorian Studies*, 27, 1 (Autumn 1983): 83.

their marriage, in fact, the Skeltons lived apart, and Oscar freely exercised the luxury of gendered time by disappearing from family life for weeks on end. Oscar's world was entirely masculine, initially as a professor of political economy at Queen's University, and then, after 1925, as undersecretary of state for External Affairs and policy advisor to three prime ministers, most enduringly William Lyon Mackenzie King. Isabel's world, by contrast, was private and domestic, and due both to her feelings of duty and to her own conviction of the importance of her role, she became the mainstay of support for her children and extended family. Snatching what time she could from the busyness of home life and following her unwilling move to Ottawa and the demands of entertaining, Isabel Skelton tenaciously pursued intellectual work to satisfy her own sense of self-worth. During their marriage, Oscar's career eclipsed that of his wife and the uneven nature of their relationship is inevitably reflected in the comparative scarcity of sources concerning Isabel's intellectual pursuits. Oscar Skelton was in a key position of power during the Depression and the Second World War, and he left a large paper trail of public sources. Crowley acknowledges this discrepancy, pointing out that "[b]oth Isabel and Oscar Skelton receive equal critical respect in this book but not equal coverage" (x).

As the title suggests, however, *Marriage of Minds* is a book about shared ideas, and it would be misleading to emphasize the intellectual differences between Oscar and Isabel Skelton. Crowley's central argument, which he sustains convincingly, is that in spite of their separate spheres in life, the Skeltons were fundamentally similar in their commitment to liberal ideology. They believed that Canadians would eventually free themselves from colonialism and develop an independent sense of nationalism, and they directed their intellectual work to the task of inspiring that nationalism by educating Canadians about Canada's past. Although both attempted in various ways to integrate French Canada into this new national identity, the Skeltons' conception of Canadian nationalism was intensely Anglophone, rooted in a romanticized attachment to their shared pioneer heritage. During the French-language schooling controversy in 1916, for example, Oscar Skelton wrote harshly that the "alleged persecution" of French Canadians in Ontario was "wildly exaggerated, and hardly pertinent if true" (65).

In their literary work, Isabel and Oscar turned to history as the ideal means of conveying a national outlook. Isabel dedicated her efforts to furthering a unique Canadian identity through cultural and women's history while Skelton, more conspicuously, was given the opportunity to directly apply his academic study of political history to the creation of an independent Canadian foreign policy. Yet, here Crowley suggests that in reality Skelton was less powerful than historians have usually assumed, claiming that as a civil servant, Skelton was forced to learn how to work within the boundaries of the political process, particularly during the Conservative leadership of R.B. Bennett. Crowley shows how Skelton's faith in Canadian independence remained unshaken throughout the crisis years of the 1930s, leading, not to calls for isolationism, but rather to the articulation of a limited liability role for Canada in the Second World War. Crowley draws a neat parallel between Isabel's situation within her marriage and Oscar's position in the federal government: "Just as Isabel had grown accustomed to a relationship in which she exercised a measure of influence but not control, so her husband navigated the corridors of power in Ottawa providing input for decisions reached by others" (178).

Neither of the Skeltons involved themselves much in social service or other forms of volunteerism but both had faith in human progress and in the influence of their writings to shape a better nation. Trained in political economy in the late-nineteenth century, Oscar Skelton perceived of his discipline as a dynamic, active field of inquiry, rejecting, as did many of his generation, the idea that the academic's role was simply to identify the fixed, immutable laws of economic activity. In common with Progressives in the United States and New Liberals in Britain in the early twentieth century,

Oscar believed in the importance of government intervention to moderate — where necessary — actions of individuals working within a competitive economic system. Crowley notes how early in his career as a political economist, Oscar Skelton "forecast a role for the state to play in creating a nation-wide system of employment offices, providing comprehensive technical education and compulsory school attendance, and instituting contributory insurance against unemployment, sickness, disability, and possibly old age" (50-51). For Isabel Skelton at this time, women's suffrage was the most pressing impediment to the advancement of democracy. In one of her earliest publications in *Canadian Magazine*, she urged that if women had the vote they might be able to bring about further improvements in their status including property rights, the reform of marriage and divorce laws, and custody rights over their children.

Oscar's Skelton's intellectual life was defined by the two main stages of his professional career: first as an academic and then as a civil servant. Isabel's writing career, as Crowley demonstrates, followed no such orderly pattern. Always subject to the interruption and delay of gendered time, her literary work spanned nearly forty years from her articles written during early motherhood to her final book published in 1947, six years after the death of her husband. Although marginalized as an outsider by the male-dominated discipline of history, Isabel Skelton shared the new standards of historical inquiry, maintaining that the historian's role was to examine the primary sources in an unbiased and objective manner. In her choice of subject matter, however, Isabel exploited her independence from the academy by choosing topics that male historians deemed to be irrelevant. When the publisher Robert Glasgow approached her to write a history of Canadian heroines, Isabel instead chose to write about ordinary women in the Canadian settlement process. The result in 1924 was her most popular book, *The Backwoodswoman*.[4] "Few women are enroled among the Makers of Canada," Isabel argued in her introductory pages. "Yet in all save the earliest years they have formed nearly half the population and done almost half the work. But historians, absorbed in the annals of war and politics and business, tell us little of the part they played. The women's stage was not set in the limelight, but in the firelight" (as cited in Crowley, 93). Isabel Skelton's book was quickly forgotten and now seems overly celebratory of the contributions of white pioneer women, but Crowley makes the claim that she produced the first history of Canadian women that went beyond their treatment as a generalized category. He concludes: "As a woman historian in a field dominated by men, she criticized male historiography and thought profoundly about the nature of historical writing" (269).

It is a tribute to the depth of Crowley's scholarship that Isabel does not simply disappear into the background of Oscar's prominent public life. Throughout *Marriage of Minds*, Isabel's voice comes through clearly and although Oscar dominates the narrative of events, it is the husband not the wife who ultimately emerges as the more shadowy and enigmatic figure. *Marriage of Minds* is satisfying to read — a rich, multi-layered study that weaves together the personal and political significance of two unequal intellectual lives.

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[4] Isabel Skelton, *The Backwoodswoman: A Chronicle of Pioneer Home Life in Upper and Lower Canada* (Toronto: Ryerson Press, 1924).