

ety of birds not of their species, they choose "the notes and cadences that, combined with their own attempts, completed their species song."

### **ALL MY SISTERS: ESSAYS ON THE WORK OF CANADIAN WOMEN WRITERS**

Clara Thomas. Ottawa: The Tecumseh Press Limited, 1994.

*by Sylvia M. Priestley-Brown*

Just under half of the essays in this collection first appeared when Canadian cultural nationalism was at its height; there is something anomalous about their publication in book form in the mid-1990s when, regrettably, nationalism is waning and when, in the name of greater inclusiveness, critics often reject the culture of one of the dominant founding nations and feel compelled to write criticism in keeping with convoluted, nearly impenetrable, European-derived elite discourse. Schools of critical thought have changed greatly since Clara Thomas's literary thinking was first formed; this book returns us to the optimism and excitement of a burgeoning female-centered and nationalist critical perspective in Canada.

Her adherence to earlier critical methods made Thomas a particularly sensitive critic to the seventies' focus on female characters whose "opportunities and...future...are circumscribed." Thomas concentrates on themes, motifs, and on types of fictional women, on evolving female figures from Canadian romantic fiction of the nineteenth century to realism up to the end of the modern

period. The pattern of Thomas's criticism is descriptive and chronological—a reminder of the text under scrutiny, then an assessment and appreciation, making these essays accessible in the positive sense by contextualizing with her strong sense of cultural history. Hers is a literary-historical approach, sometimes even a sociological one (apt because some writers, like Sara Jeannette Duncan, are so keenly interested in social types themselves), and a biographical one, as befits a biographer of Anna Jameson and William Arthur Deacon; the subtitle might have reflected the fact that most essays are equally on the lives as well as the work of the Canadian women writers under discussion.

As this collection is meant to crown Thomas's considerable scholarly achievement, its value is multifarious: to those who know Thomas as an inspiring teacher, it records her survey of Canadian literature from pioneer writers to the brink of the post-modern era. It is particularly valuable for her autobiographical introduction on teaching and research during an intense rediscovery period in our culture. The unabashed thread of nationalism and sense of difference from Americans, which Thomas signals in writers such as Sara Jeannette Duncan, Margaret Laurence and Northrop Frye, makes these essays significant for students of interdisciplinary Canadian Studies. The book can also be recommended to newcomers to Canadian literature as a more intensive reference work on a more specific group of writers than John Moss's *A Reader's Guide*.

Thomas is one of the earliest critics to focus on women writers as unique, thus her essays are those of a groundbreaker, appreciated by ensuing feminist critics, that can be read from the vantage point of cross-cultural women's studies (namely, comparative studies between L.M. Montgomery and Gene Stratton Porter, Margaret Laurence and Willa Cather, and Laurence and Gabrielle Roy). Thomas's reclaiming, through archaeological work on buried authors such as Evelyn Eaton, makes

her a model to emerging feminist scholars. Most of all, when Thomas is writing as an archivist, we glimpse her friendship with Margaret Laurence in quotations shared from their letters, and learn much about the writing process Laurence developed towards the end of her oeuvre.

Readers accustomed to a diet of critical theory readings may be impatient with linear commentaries, with notes on a book's publishing history and an author's popularity in her day, or with the moral undertaking which Thomas elucidates in the religious and spiritual convictions of Laurence, Frye and others. But Thomas is a senior scholar who can continue writing what she wants to write without being constrained by current fashions. As in the dark ages before the sixties' boom of nationalist and feminist sentiment, Canadians still tend to forget, devalue or be indifferent to their own literary history. Clara Thomas's example as a friend to Canadian writers, their literature and our culture is a corrective to such amnesia and neglect.

### **PIONEERING WOMEN: SHORT STORIES BY CANADIAN WOMEN. BEGINNINGS TO 1880**

Lorraine McMullen and Sandra Campbell, Eds. Ottawa: University of Ottawa Press, 1993.

### **ASPIRING WOMEN: SHORT STORIES BY CANADIAN WOMEN 1880-1900**

Lorraine McMullen and Sandra Campbell, Eds. Ottawa: University of Ottawa Press, 1993.

### **NEW WOMEN: SHORT STORIES BY CANADIAN WOMEN 1900-1920**

Sandra Campbell and Lorraine McMullen, Eds. Ottawa: University of Ottawa Press, 1991.

by *Miriam Jones*

"But events do not constitute the whole of history; it is also written in the lives of those who make it."

Annie Fowler Rothwell,  
"How It Looked At Home: A story of '85" (1893).

I read these collections in the order that they were published, that is to say, backwards; first I read the stories of the "new women" at the turn of the century, then the group from the *fin-de-siècle*, and finally the earlier Victorian pieces. This double-process of regression, editorial and readerly, could be said to reproduce the dynamics of unearthing—or recreating—the history of women's writing, both in this country and more generally. The project of historical reclamation is foregrounded by editors Lorraine McMullen and Sandra Campbell, and exemplified by the narrative of continuity created by the titles of the three volumes. The above quotation from Rothwell's story about the Northwest Rebellion exemplifies a dynamic consistent throughout these texts: that women writers have long taken the combined limitations of literary genre, the marketplace, and gender, and used them to validate a multiplicity of feminine interests and perspectives. Often normative and heavily inflected by literary convention, these texts frequently display ambiguity about women's roles.

Between them the collections present fifty-three stories by forty-five writers, arranged chronologically from 1839 to 1919. Each of the volumes has a general introduction, as well as shorter introductions and bibliographic references for the individual writers. The introductory material gives a concise history of women's publishing in English in Canada, and links the texts to feminist issues, such as temperance, and

to more general historical themes. There is little critical apparatus; the stated purpose of the project is to recover and contextualize short stories by women, many of which until now had not been republished since their initial appearance in various ephemeral literary magazines, long out of print. There are the expected figures in Canadian letters, though some may not be known for short-story writing, such as Sara Jeannette Duncan, E. Pauline Johnson, Isabella Valancy Crawford, and Susanna Moodie, but there are also writers who many readers will be encountering for the first time.

Most of these are commercial stories, originally published in magazines and periodicals. The two largest groupings appeared in the *Literary Garland* (1838-1851) and the *Canadian Magazine* at the turn of the century, both important venues for women writers. The earlier writers, particularly, published broadly in British and American periodicals as Canadian journals did not pay well, if they paid at all, but most of the texts reproduced here were first published in Canada. Collectively, these texts can tell us a lot about what women were writing and reading, and about who had access to publishing, even literacy. They evoke the movement of settlers across the country: the first volume presents writers based in Upper and Lower Canada, and in the second and third volumes, there are voices from across the country, though Ontario remains the best represented region. Less well represented is the diversity of Canadian settlers, though given the parameters of their project, this is not because of any oversight on the part of the editors: upon reading these volumes it becomes clear that until very recently access to commercial publishing in Canada was strictly limited by class and ethnicity. Almost all the writers whose backgrounds are indicated were either born in Britain or descended from British immigrants. Adeline M. Teskey (c.1855-1924), of Irish, English and German descent, is the only writer even partially descended from any of the other

European immigrant groups. Sisters Edith Eaton (Sui Sin Far) (1867-1914) and Winnifred Reeve (Onoto Watanna) (1877-1954), whose mother was Chinese and whose father was English, are notable exceptions in a singularly homogeneous group. Pauline Johnson is the only Native Canadian represented in the collection. That these latter three women were successful is indicative of the shift that McMullen and Campbell see at the turn of the century, from the idea of two cultures to that of multiculturalism. Race is represented with considerable ambiguity throughout the collections, ranging from paternalism to displacement to activism. The European Canadian writers frequently depict Native Canadians with sympathy, yet their language is peppered perversely with terms like "squaw" and "dusky maid." Edith Eaton writes explicitly about the injustices faced by Chinese immigrants, yet her sister Winnifred Reeve felt obliged to adopt a Japanese pseudonym in order to shield herself from the racism directed at Chinese-Canadians at the turn of the century.

Women writers in 19th-century Canada seem also for the most part to have shared similar class backgrounds. Though many of them wrote professionally due to economic pressures, especially in the earlier period when women felt obliged to justify their incursions into the public realm by evoking necessity, all but a few came from relatively privileged backgrounds, at least in terms of their class positions and education if not their financial situations. If working women were publishing, it does not seem to have been in the literary periodicals. Despite the ostensible privilege of most of the writers represented here, however, economic hardship is a constant theme in the biographical notes, especially those of the Victorian writers whose career options were more strictly limited. For example Isabella Valancy Crawford, whose literary reputation is established today, never achieved financial stability or much recognition in her own lifetime.

In *Pioneering Women*, the editors trace the beginnings of the short story form. They discuss the sketch, which blurs the line between fiction and non-fiction and was used by writers to "imaginatively occupy the new country." Even the more conventional fictive narratives, however, such as those that use inherited themes and tropes from popular British fiction such as the country-house romance, indicate a desire to negotiate a subject position in what for many of the writers was a new country, even as these same texts were simultaneously presenting the Canadian wilderness, and Native Peoples, as exotica for a readership that was frequently British. The pieces present a vast divergence of experience, from sophisticated urban life in Montreal to harsh tales of the lives of immigrants, and although they are generally restricted to the domestic realm, within that space they frequently play with the conventions of the romance plot or critique gender relations. In Susanna Moodie's "A Walk to Dummer" (1847), an alcoholic Captain abandons his family to starvation. The narrator explicitly concludes that women should not put up with such ill-treatment, and thus flies in the face of conventional messages of feminine fortitude. Mary Agnes Fleming's "My Folly" (1863) rewrites the conventional romance: her heroine is pragmatically engaged to one man, in love with another, and marries neither. Alternately, other stories present a more normative feminine ideal, as in Eliza Lanesford Cushing's "Grace Morley: A sketch from life" (1839) when the childlike heroine is compared suggestively to a rosebud while her vain and impatient rival is identified with "a half blown rose." In Crawford's "A Rose in his Grace" (c.1880), published here for the first time, the purity of the long-suffering heroine redeems the hero by inspiring him to abstain from drinking.

*Aspiring Women* also contains stories on the traditional theme of women bringing out the best in men, such as Ethelwyn Wetherald's "How the Modern Eve Entered Eden"

(1882) and Agnes Maule Machar's highly religious "Parted Ways" (1891). However, a paradigm shift could be said to have occurred by the end of the century. Many of these later texts indicate that women were aspiring beyond the domestic sphere: Crawford's "Extradited" (1886), for example, presents a chilling portrait of an angel of the hearth, "hedged in by the prim fence of routine knowledge." Ella S. Atkinson's comic "The Widowed Stranger" (1897) subverts the stereotype of the devout widow by characterising her as a con-artist who embezzles church funds. Other texts are less satiric and more sympathetic to women trapped in impossible lives. In Lily Dougall's "Thrift" (1895), the wife of an alcoholic maintains "I knew I'd be strong if it wasn't for the babies, and I knew, too, that I'd do a kinder thing for each child I had, to strangle it at its birth than to bring it on to know nothing and be nothing but a poor wretched thing like [her husband]." The writers of these texts were themselves participants in the explosion of publishing at the turn of the century, and unlike their predecessors they were frequently journalists or combined other careers with their fiction writing. By rewriting the literary heroine, they simultaneously rewrote their own social role within Canadian culture.

The editors characterize the first decades of the 20th century as a period of transition, both in terms of literary form as well as in women's lives. Until now it has been an under-represented period in anthologies of Canadian writing, and *New Women* seeks to address this absence. The modern short story emerges in these texts. More than by technical innovation, however, the stories in this last volume are characterised by their engagement with new roles for women, domestically and in the workplace. The final text, for example, J.G. Simes's "Munitions!" (1919), is an engaging story about a former domestic worker who experiences the heady freedom of working in a factory during wartime. This embrace of expanding possibilities is by no means

uniform, however; as in the preceding volumes, a number of the texts engage with "the woman question" by affirming traditional gender roles. There are mixed messages about career women in Alice Jones's "At the Harbour's Mouth" (1905): Julia, the heroine, has owned her own successful business in cosmopolitan Boston, but she returns to her native Nova Scotia "thin and peaked" from the strain and is only too happy to resume an earlier romance. In Kathleen "Kit" Coleman's "A Pair of Grey Gloves" (1903), the heroine cannot combine a career as a successful journalist with a love affair. A number of the texts more explicitly play out the contrast, sometimes the rivalry, between a domestic woman and a "new" woman. In Ethelwyn Wetherald's claustrophobic "Jealousy" (1912) the wife of a university professor is made miserable by her husband's friendship with an intellectual young woman. In Jean Blewett's comic "The Experiences of a Woman Bachelor" (1905) the traditional and the career woman are close friends, but the latter is gently domesticated by the end of the tale.

McMullen and Campbell have given us three valuable collections of short stories that are, for the most part, unavailable elsewhere. The texts are usefully contextualized within the history of women's commercial publishing in English in Canada, and the project marks a significant contribution to the ongoing historical project of reconstructing a tradition of women's writing. The stories themselves complement and contradict each other, tangible markers of the complexities of seeking, and finding, a voice.

#### Correction:

A film review of *Speaking Out Against Violence*, which appeared in *CWS/cf's* issue "Women's Rights are Human Rights," was incorrectly attributed to Susan Nosov. The author of the review is Nora Currie.