

this feeling is passed on to her readers. However, Meigs indicates how very different is the free space the film provides each woman from the lives they have known. For it is the pain of losing loved ones, restricted choices, poverty and sickness that most often accompanies these women through their lives. This contradiction stands out against the magical space of their summertime together. Perhaps what is most fearful about old age is the overwhelming struggle it takes to get there. (Meigs sketches this subtly but with substance in these portrayals). What gives these "old" women wisdom is also what ages them — distinguishing marks which separate one day from the next, one phase of life from the next. Throughout this text, Meigs makes these marks visible and she allows each woman to speak through her own distinctive voice. As the story unwinds, she resists drawing conclusions. She also resists closing her narrative. For her, life is open-ended.

At the beginning of the film, as she and Cissy watch birds in a field near the house (a temporary home to the women), Meigs notes it is only since she turned sixty that she has spoken about herself as a lesbian. (She is now seventy-four). Here the significance of the moment for speaking is made emphatic, for Meigs not only speaks for herself in this film, but also for generations of lesbian women who remain silent. In *the Company of Strangers*, in Meigs' own words, is "my story of how it happened" — that seven very different "old" women come together and through their interaction create an energy which enters women's lives and propels them forward like the faith which "propels Catherine in the film (to) set out on her arthritic feet (real) for a thirty-kilometre walk"... greeting "us the next day from the pontoon of a seaplane" — a closing which opens with Meigs' own telling of this story.

RE(DIS)COVERING OUR FOREMOTHERS: Nineteenth-Century Canadian Women Writers

Edited by Lorraine McMullen. Ottawa: University of Ottawa Press, 1990.

By *Laura McLaughlan*

"Canadian literary history will be reread very differently when women are re-

scribed in its rolls," writes editor Lorraine McMullen in *Re(dis)covering Our Foremothers*. The book is the fifteenth in the University of Ottawa's "Reappraisals: Canadian Writers" series. As a woman who studies and teaches Canadian literature, I find this volume particularly exciting both because of the merit of individual essays and the feminist intent of the text. It is, as McMullen states, organized in a linear way with a common subtext: that women writers from the nineteenth century have been "dropped, lost, and must now be recovered...."

Re(dis)covering Our Foremothers opens a Pandora's steamer trunk of writing in English by nineteenth-century Canadian women. In one of the three introductory essays — Clara Thomas and Carol Shield each write others — Donna E. Smyth reflects on her eight-year involvement with a collection of Nova Scotia women's letters and diaries published as *No Place Like Home* (1988): "These women are our mothers too. The conflicts and contradictions of their lives live on in us, their daughters. By attempting to decode their lives, we learn how to read our own traditions. So much that is hidden within us, that is silent in us, still awaits discovery, uncovering."

The issue of canon and genre is a central one to the essays in *Re(dis)covering Our Foremothers*. As Elizabeth Waterston notes at the end of this volume, the "underprivileged genres" merit further attention. Three or four male poets are currently esteemed, as James Doyle notes, for having written "all the work of enduring value..." during this period. This new work challenges its reader with the premise that diaries and letters by nineteenth-century women belong in Canadian literature courses along with the Confederation group of canonized male poets.

Carole Gerson's "Anthologies and the Canon of Early Canadian Women Writers" gives a probing analysis of the manner in which twentieth-century survey anthologies of Canadian literature have dropped women writers of prose and poetry, silently colluding in the "marginalization of women writers in the Canadian canon." Marjory Lang and Helen M. Buss each contribute essays which comment on canon and genre. Lang recovers a once much-read "first generation of Canadian women journalists," most notably "the greatest of all nineteenth-century Canadian women journalists,

Kathleen Blake Watkins, later Coleman." Buss suggests that the writings of women from Anna Jameson to Martha Ostenso have not fit in with Northrop Frye's "garrison mentality" — a concept which for at least two decades after its publication in *Literary History of Canada* (1965) wielded "biblical authority" in Canadian literary criticism. She argues that much poetry and prose by female authors has been neglected because of a "radical difference in the way women encounter the land."

The volume contains essays on the prose of individual writers with a rather heavy emphasis on Susanna Moodie, an essay on Catherine Parr Traill, and an essay on Sara Jeanette Duncan. But where, one might ask, are the poets? Poetry by nineteenth-century women is given significant attention in Gerson's essay and mentioned at various points in *Re(dis)covering Our Foremothers* but nineteenth-century poetry by women is never the focus of an essay. An earlier volume in the Reappraisals series, edited by Frank Tierney, dealt exclusively with the best known nineteenth-century Canadian woman poet in English, Isabella Valancy Crawford. If we are to work toward a fair assessment of the contribution of female poets of this period we need more research on them and a more thoughtful analysis of their work.

It is impossible to mention all the essays which merit attention. I would, however, make particular note of Bina Freiwald's feminist re-vision of Moodie in "'The tongue of a woman': The Language of the Self in Moodie's *Roughing It in the Bush*." Another provocative essay is D.M.R. Bentley's essay on the impact of Atlantic crossing in which the writer theorizes that women such as Traill, Moodie and the less well-known Anne Langton, were "forced to rethink" all their old world suppositions. Bentley convincingly argues that the voyage and arrival precipitated a period of initiation described in the journals, sketches, and letters these literary foremothers produced.

Sara Jeanette Duncan's novel *The Imperialist* opens — as Misao Dean's essays reminds us — in Elgin, Ontario with Mother Beggarlegs, a woman who has no known "antecedents." *Re(dis)covering Our Foremothers* gives us a rich and varied record of our literary antecedents. As such this work constitutes a major contribution to the study of nineteenth-century Canadian literature in English.