(Atwood is obviously one of Palmer's favoured feminist writers.) An English-Canadian novel which does not fare as well in Palmer's estimation is Joan Barfoot's *Gaining Ground* (1980), first published by Ryerson/McGraw-Hill in 1978 as *Abra.* Although Palmer uses deconstruction theorists sparingly, she does refer to Luce Irigaray to explicate this particular venue, though the reader can sense her disapproval of its premises. Palmer is interested in punishment and reward, and the authors most often rewarded exhibit radical feminist prejudices or intuitions, or, more importantly, treat hitherto closeted feminist themes in fiction — themes such as bisexuality, lesbian motherhood or, especially, ideas about collective feminist action.

The important question to ask here is: can literary criticism adequately service the feminist activist whose intellectual or reading quest is to find corroboration and affirmation for political ideas? My own sense is that although there is some overlap, women's literature is still just women's literature, and feminist politics is just feminist politics. Each has its own rubric and its own reason for being, and therefore can have only a limited influence on the other — a thematic and objective use. In Palmer's book there is the danger that a text is only as good as the feminist position it exhibits, or at least only gets included in the survey if it has the theme at all. I don't find this kind of criticism very satisfying, although I can understand why one would.

What is less satisfying is how judgments are made about groups of literature. For example, Palmer claims to use Canadian feminist literature in her survey, but does not qualify that it is English-Canadian, nor does she seem aware of the militant literature in Quebec — French, English or translated. This allows her to valorize Margaret Atwood — and there are many good reasons to do so — because she says she bridges the two opposing traditions (as above) in feminist writing, but this she says without having read Gail Scott. Moreover, Palmer is hard on authors who treat "Images of femininity and the dominance of the male gaze," such as Fay Weldon (in *The Life and Loves of a She Devil,* 1983), and Doris Lessing (in *The Summer Before the Dark,* 1973). She finds Weldon's solutions too "personal," and that Lessing and Weldon are devoid of erotic female relations or motifs of woman-identification. This may be where the author finds what she has already decided she is looking for; in this instance, at least, Palmer has not used the less mainstream literatures of, say, Canada or the United States to illustrate that radical-feminist motifs do exist. I'm thinking of, for the moment, the lesbian fiction published by Women's Press in Toronto in the last decade, though other examples do exist both in Canada and the United States.

But we cannot go too far with the reviewer's celebrated bugaboo, the sin of omission, because we all omit, we must omit in order to include, and there is no doubt that Palmer has included much, perhaps too much. But we need to be vigilant about conclusions made on the basis of included primary texts because they speak to us about the interest vested in the project by the author, and literary decisions made accordingly. My own vested interest is that I want literature to guide us in establishing our critical apparatus on the basis of literature, and I want the women's movement to guide us into applying guidelines and acting on them, and not necessarily with only one feminist voice.

I am more persuaded, therefore, by a literary study (whose author I may not agree with on the true nature of feminism) which explores genres — something already essentially literary — in light of women writers or feminist political ideas, such as the new feminist interpretation of utopian narratives, Nan Bowman Albinski's *Women's Utopias in British and American Fiction* (London and New York, Routledge, 1988). Albinski identifies trends in American and British utopian visions (and "nightmares"), which include the nineteenth-century proclivity for community. Albinski on the post-1960s feminist "dystopies" is highly theoretical and comparative, but, interestingly, Albinski confesses in her Introduction that she has exempted one "small, but important, group of works" — "lesbian separatist utopias." This she says as smoothly as Palmer says that she did not cover the literature of pregnancy and childbirth (neither word appears in an otherwise complete Index of Themes), although issues of class and race are revealed in both the primary texts and interpretive models of both authors. Is this feminist poetic justice? Or do we need the astute interpretive model of Albinski as much as we need the acute mimetic or representational of Palmer?

FIRST PERSON: A Biography of Cairine Wilson, Canada's First Woman Senator

Valerie Knowles. Dundurn Press, Toronto, 1988

Franca Iacovetta

When five Alberta feminists won the celebrated "person's case" in 1929 permitting the appointment of women to the Senate, few could have predicted that one year later prime minister Mackenzie King would choose Cairine McKay Wilson as the first female senator. A shy mother of eight and a devoted Liberal, Wilson came from a wealthy Scots-Canadian family with strong Liberal party connections. Among the family's friends were Wilfrid Laurier, a frequent visitor to the McKay home in Cairine's youth. In 1930 Wilson was no match for such high-profile feminists as Emily Murphy, who led the person's case and whom many expected to get the Senate nod. But Wilson proved to be an able reformer in her own right; her long career as a senator is a testimony to her dogged determination to help create a more humane world.

Until recently, little was known about Wilson, and scholars dismissed her appointment as an example of party patronage. Certainly, there was truth in this. Wilson had not actively participated in the suffrage campaign, and she was indeed King's friend. However, the neglect of Wilson also reflects the preoccupation of a generation of women's historians with detailing the rise of feminism in late nineteenth- and early twentieth-century Canada and its culmination (at least in English Canada) in the suffrage victory. For years the conventional wisdom had it that once the vote was won feminism went into decline. Such arguments were based in part on the disillusionment of first-wave feminists over women's failure to accomplish more in the electoral arena. Efforts to correct this view have charted the activism of radical women in the 1920s and 1930s, but this created the equally erroneous impression that the only form of feminism to emerge "after the vote" was of a left-wing variety. What both perspectives ignored were the strong continuities between the maternal femi-

nists of an earlier era and the middle-class women who engaged in "good causes" from the 1920s until the 1960s. One woman who provides a link between the two waves — if indeed it is still appropriate to talk about it in this way — is Wilson, whose own career spanned the lengthy period of 1921-1961.

Valerie Knowles' biography of Cairine Wilson is a welcome addition to the literature on prominent women. Written in a popular style by a descendant of Wilson's, the book is delightful. Although Knowles fails to place Wilson's career into any larger context concerning the history of Canadian feminism — indeed, few scholarly works, including my lengthy article on Wilson, are consulted — she offers us an engaging "insider's" view of Wilson. Apart from mining the usual sources, such as newspapers, Knowles consulted private letters and other restricted materials not available to other researchers. She also interviewed family members as well as former colleagues and friends of the senator. All of this makes for compelling reading.

The book alternates between Wilson's private and public life. Early chapters detail the privileged life of a young woman growing up in a large and prominent Montreal family. Of particular interest, however, is Knowles' observation that while Cairine enjoyed the luxury of private schools and European vacations, she was not happy. Though she never rebelled against her strict Scots-Calvinist upbringing, she felt estranged from an intimidating father and a mother prone to bouts of melancholia. Life became happier after her marriage to Norman Wilson, a lumber mill manager in Rockland, Ontario and, later, a Liberal MP. The figure of Norman Wilson (who evidently shifted from politics to real estate) remains fuzzy, though he appears to have been a supportive husband. Ironically, Wilson's hectic schedule and her reserved personality left her own children feeling estranged from their famous mother. Yet her colleagues and adversaries alike, writes Knowles, found her modest and gracious in character and a tireless crusader.

In the middle chapters, Knowles tackles two questions: Why did Wilson become a feminist? And why did she receive the Senate appointment? The author is more successful in answering the latter. According to Knowles, Wilson won the job largely for her work among Liberal women and youths, and especially for her role during the mid-1920s in initiating the National Federation of Liberal Women, a nation-wide organization designed to increase female participation in the party and encourage women to run for electoral office. Readers will particularly enjoy Knowles' depiction of the events surrounding Wilson's appointment — her surprise at being picked, the debate over the proper dress-code for a female senator, and Wilson's tribute to her feminist predecessors. But they will wonder why Knowles did not explore other factors, such as King's friendship with Wilson and his distrust of Murphy, who was not only more fiesty, but also a Tory.

Less satisfying is Knowles' attempt to explain Wilson's "conversion" to feminism. As Knowles observes, it is not difficult to discover the origins of Wilson's liberalism and reformism — her family. She was a devout Presbyterian for whom Christian doctrine and social action were inseparable. She believed deeply in personal responsibility and the concept of stewardship, and she held to the conviction that individuals should use their talents and money to benefit others. Wilson's commitment to improving women's legal and political rights, raising the standards of public health, and assisting Jewish refugees were all aspects of her maternal feminism. What remains largely unanswered, however, is what prompted Wilson's late entry into public life. (She had given birth to all of her children by the time she entered the public arena.) Knowles relies on a magazine story in which Wilson recounts how her doctor convinced her to "get involved." It is disappointing to find that despite her family connections, Knowles cannot provide a fuller explanation.

The rest of the book chronicles Wilson's public career. In addition to supporting many familiar women's organizations, such as the Y.W.C.A., the Victorian Order of Nurses, and Quebec suffrage groups, Wilson was an active member of the League of Nations. Among her most important feminist campaigns was her fight within the Senate for more liberal divorce laws. The cause that brought her the most widespread publicity — and disappointment — was her campaign to provide a Canadian haven for Jewish refugees fleeing Hitler's Europe. After the war, she continued to lobby on behalf of refugees and displaced persons, and she joined the rising chorus of voices favouring an open-door immigration policy. Knowles devotes two chapters to Wilson's refugee work. These are the book's highlights; here we see how Wilson operated, how she viewed the world, and how she was perceived by others.

That Knowles does not engage in historical debate is understandable. Less so is her failure to provide a conclusion that weaves together the various strains of Wilson's life. While Knowles exposes Wilson's personal faults, she fails to consider the limitations of Wilson's perspective. There is no discussion, for example, of Wilson's "paternalism" towards working-class and poor women. Wilson's friendship with Liberal cabinet ministers also begs the question: why was she not more successful in her various lobbying efforts? And how could she maintain friendships with men whose political actions she abhorred? Her friends included Ernest Lapointe, a firm opponent of the Jews, and Ian Mackenzie, chief architect of the Japanese-Canadian evacuation. Finally, the book still needs an editor; it is cluttered with too many tedious asides and repetitions.

This book offers material on Wilson not available anywhere else. As more women's historians move beyond the intensely-studied 1880-1921 period, we can look forward to further works documenting the varieties of feminist activity in Canada during the long period paralleling Wilson's career.

SCANDINAVIAN WOMEN WRITERS: An Anthology From the 1880s to the 1980s

Ingrid Claréus, ed. Westport: Greenwood Press, 1989

Mari Peepre-Bordessa

Handsomely bound and printed, *Scandanavian Women Writers* is a welcome addition to our existing collections of writings by women from other cultures and languages. Scandinavian women are well-known for their history of independent thinking and excellent writing, so I