

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 feisty, 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 Eu-

rope. 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, *Scandinavian 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

opened this anthology of short stories in pleased anticipation of an interesting literary journey into the lives of Nordic women. Nor was I disappointed.

The opening piece, a strongly written excerpt from a novel by Victoria Benedictsson, describes a scene which has become familiar to many of us in the past few decades: that painful moment of truth when an artistic woman faces the futility of her marriage and tries to come to terms with her soul-destroying existence as her husband's jealously-guarded possession. The protagonist's courageous decision to cut her bonds and seek fulfillment in her own independent life may be a familiar one today, but the year of publication, 1885, is a surprise to the North American readers. This excerpt from *Money* is an interesting and early exploration of an important feminist theme and must have influenced many Swedish women of that era. Then, a few stories later, there is Amalie Skram's chilling exposé (1895) of the unbearably painful loneliness and humiliation experienced in a mental hospital by a sensitive, creative young woman who has been broken by life under the domination of her husband and the doctors with whom he has incarcerated her.

The reader, wishing to understand the situation better, flips to the short introduction and then around the rest of the volume, searching for background information, and this is where the disappointing aspect of *Scandinavian Women Writers* becomes evident: there is no further information to help us form a coherent understanding of these stories. The brief preface doesn't give any details about the women's movement which developed early in the Scandinavian countries and which has flourished in the literary expression of many talented women there for, as the examples demonstrate, at least a century. Just ten pages of introductory text would have transformed this book into a useful textbook for those of us wishing to learn more about Scandinavian women and their lives, to say nothing of their writings.

Some of the stories are wonderful. They paint memorable portraits of women — many of whom are vibrantly alive and strong while others are lost and bewildered or broken by the pressures of a harsh, uncomprehending world.

Among my favourites I include Moa

Martinson's delightful "Mother's Baths" (1933), an earthy story of two ageing women, one of whom has mothered 15 children, who discover the joys of regular bathing and, much to the consternation of the village, make a ritual of devoting Friday nights to themselves and their baths. The rage I felt when Mother Sofi was broken by village zealots was that of any daughter whose mother has ever been broken.

Anne Charlotte Leffler's "Aunt Malvina" (1889) will please those who enjoy an excursion into another culture and era. This story catches the ambience of 19th-century Swedish middle-class life to perfection. The only other truly successful portrait of a cultural milieu comes in Solveig von Schoultz's "A Little Consideration" (1967), written almost a century later. This taut and sophisticated portrait of the Swedo-Finnish middle class today, with its cynical world-weariness and its descriptions of the personal betrayals which make life a hell on earth for the protagonists, is an excellent translation of a brilliant writer.

Perhaps the best example of modern Scandinavian writing about the conflicts and hardships of a woman's life can be found in Bjørg Vik's "Emilie" (1972). Burdened by her work, children and husband, Emilie can finally cope no longer and leaves her home. Vik's unsentimental, matter-of-fact writing avoids clichés and mawkish sentiment and thus allows the reader a rare understanding of the reality of life for millions of women. Ulla Ryum's "Lunch Break" (1969) is also memorable — it continues to chill long after the other stories have faded from memory. It is an unusual depiction of a moment which trembles between dark and light, evil and good, when a woman's intuition helps her to perceive the barest shift of stance by a group of men — from hostile menace to dependent friendliness.

It is clear that when the editor was collecting this anthology, she was constrained by the availability of readily accessible (translated) texts. Claréus obviously drew heavily on the work of graduate students and teachers in Scandinavian Literature courses taught in the U.S.A., which explains some of the gaps and less obvious choices in this collection.

Also, a very wide range of ability is displayed by the translators in these sto-

ries. The quality of the translations varies from the delicately subtle transposition from Norwegian to English in Vik's or Nedreaas' stories, through the solidly good translations of the stories by Seaberg and Bjørnsson, to the clumsy mishandling of the (originally excellent) work of Söderholm and Olsson. The basic spelling and grammar mistakes in these last two (where was the editor?) make these embarrassingly stiff amateur translations painful to read.

And one final question that still puzzles me. Where are the Finnish-speaking women? What made the editor decide that Finns who speak Swedish are Scandinavian while their compatriots who speak Finnish are not? Wonderful writers such as Eeva Kilpiö or Eeva Joenpelto should most definitely have been included in this anthology.

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