

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**