

## Book Reviews

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***Women and Slavery in the French Antilles, 1635-1848.*** Bernard Moitt. Bloomington and Indianapolis: Indiana University Press, 2001; xviii + 218 pages; maps, tables; ISBN 0-253-21452-1; \$19.95US.

In the late seventeenth century a young slave known as La Pucelle des Isles, of the French colony of Guadeloupe, refused to marry the male slave her owner had chosen for her because she was "miserable enough as it is without having to bring children into this world to be more miserable" (81). In the early 1840s, the former slave Virginie, also of Guadeloupe, won a protracted court battle to have her children freed as well, but by then her son was dead and her daughter already an adult. These are two of the women whose lives Bernard Moitt reconstructs in *Women and Slavery in the French Antilles, 1635-1848*. Moitt's thoroughly researched study has two purposes. First, it is an attempt to bring gender to bear in the historical investigation of slavery in the French Caribbean and thus "bring slave women out of the shadows of the slave plantation world and into full view, where they belong" (173). Moitt's second purpose is to stress the resilience, agency, and defiance of slave women and the remarkable strategies they devised to survive in dehumanizing conditions. Moitt sees his book as a "lesson" relevant in "a day and age when the young in particular have a tendency to give up rather quickly" (176).

The eight thematic chapters cover the period from the beginning of French colonization in the Caribbean to the abolition of slavery in the French colonies in 1848. Moitt first establishes the early presence of African women in the French Caribbean and their growing numbers as a result of the development of the sugar economy. Despite their low status in the racialized and patriarchal society of the colonies, black women filled a need (created by the lack of white women) and caused great anxiety (demonstrated by the authorities' efforts to curb miscegenation). Moitt argues that slave women's labour represented a crucial contribution to the Caribbean economy. Whereas, in their expectation that black women perform the same hard labour in field gangs and sugar manufacturing as black men, slaveowners apparently disregarded gender, in fact, because most of the specialized (and relatively lighter) tasks were given to slave men, women were disproportionately allocated the most exhausting and dangerous occupations. Domestic slaves (often mixed-race women involved in conjugal relations with their owners) and midwives enjoyed better conditions but

could be punished, sold, or transferred to field gangs nonetheless. Concerned with low birth rates (compounded by high mortality) among slaves, slaveowners suspected that women deliberately controlled their fertility and went as far as to kill their children as a form of resistance. But Moitt contends that most infant deaths were due to overwork, malnutrition, ill health, and lack of sanitation.

Because the French and Caribbean archival sources on slave women are "highly fragmented, spotty, and often in poor condition" (ix), Moitt's first chapters rely heavily on secondary sources and printed reports by plantation owners, government authorities and travellers. The reader is reminded of the inconclusiveness of the data (and the need for inference and extrapolation) by phrases such as "it is likely," "it is not farfetched to suggest," and so forth. The last three chapters, which draw on the richer documentation surviving from the nineteenth century, are the most lively and satisfying. Moitt ably exploits court records to show the physical brutality regularly endured by slave women and their brave attempts to force the authorities to intervene against slaveowners. He explores how women resisted slavery, together with men (armed revolts and *marronage*) and in gender-specific ways (poison and indiscipline), and considers the small number of slave women granted freedom by slaveowners or the state.

Moitt, who was born in Antigua, received a PhD from the University of Toronto, and now teaches at Virginia Commonwealth University, has largely succeeded in his intention to produce a book useful to specialists and accessible to general readers. A valuable addition to the historiography of women and gender in the early modern period, this book should also inspire historians to continue probing the issue of gender and slavery and serve as a point of reference for comparative studies of slave women's experiences in the entire Caribbean region.

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***A Gregarious Culture: Topical Writings of Miles Franklin.*** Jill Roe and Margaret Bettison, editors. St. Lucia: University of Queensland Press, 2001; xxiii +251 pages; ISBN 0-7022-3237-8; \$27.95US (paper).

***A Steady Storm of Correspondence: Selected***

*Letters of Gwen Harwood 1943-1995*. Gregory Kratzmann, editor. St. Lucia: University of Queensland Press, 2001; xxi+507 pages; photographs; ISBN 0-7022-3257-2; \$36.95US (paper).

Gwen Harwood (1920-1995) was one of Australia's most distinguished women poets as well as an accomplished librettist. A poem such as "Suburban Sonnet," written in both the contrapuntal fugue and poetic sonnet form, reflects her musical background and a woman's dilemma of choosing between domesticity and career. Her biographer, Gregory Kratzmann's, edition of her correspondence with friends, fellow poets and writers demonstrates that Harwood was also an avid letter-writer. This edition contains about four hundred of Harwood's letters, which represent only one-tenth of the letters Kratzmann transcribed. Nearly half of the selection consists of letters she wrote to Tony Riddel, to whom she dedicated all but the last of her volumes of poetry. Arranged chronologically, most of the correspondence is "full of sharply observed detail of family life, of her involvement in the parish routine of All Saints' church, and of working life in the War damage Commission" (xi). A distinctive voice emerges from these correspondences.

In his general introduction, Kratzmann explicates the importance of letter-writing and friendship to Harwood. Aside from geographical distance (Harwood moved from Brisbane to Hobart, Tasmania, after her marriage in 1945) and technological inconveniences (there was no telephone in the house until 1961), letter-writing was for Harwood "an essential part of living" (xiv). It not only provided a necessary escape from her various roles as wife, mother, working woman, and public figure, it also served the dual roles of a diary, recording the "ordinary pleasures of life" and became an alternative form of her poetry: "So I write lots of letters and some of them even spell poems" (xvi).

The title of the volume comes from one of Harwood's letters, in which she describes her delight in Wallace Stevens's metaphor of life as "a steady storm of correspondences" (xv). As Kratzmann explains, the pattern of Harwood's letters follows the contours of her personal relationships with friends such as Tony Riddel and Edwin Tanner and writers such as James McAuley, Vincent Buckley, and Vivian Smith. These correspondences provide not only "illuminating commentary on the people, events, and politics of the literary world," but more importantly they reveal for readers of Harwood's poetry "the lived experience from which her poems were shaped" (xviii). For example, her mother Agnes Foster's death is commemorated in "Mother Who Gave Me Life" (353-4), the last poem in

the collection *The Lion's Bride; Oyster Cove Pastorals* comes from the experience of building a house with a garden and flocks of poultry in Oyster Cove, about half an hour's drive from Hobart (307, 315). The subject of her letters is wide-ranging, from quotidian life to the delights of music, literature, art, and philosophy. Many include moving reminiscences of her early life in Brisbane and the curious "dream narratives" (xix), in which Harwood frequently mentions an almost unnameable "nocturnal terror which she experienced all her life" (5), a fear of solitude, darkness, and death reflected in nightmares (211, 220, 223, 441).

Miles Franklin (1879-1954) is best known for her novel *My Brilliant Career* (1901). *A Gregarious Culture* contains Franklin's topical writings as part of a larger biographical project and situates Franklin, writer, feminist, and cultural nationalist, and her occasional writings within the context of a growing interest in the area of gender and journalism. The editors trace the locations of Franklin's topical writings in over sixty Australian, American, and British publications and include extensive commentaries and detailed textual notes on historical content. As little of the material here is available through indexing services, and many of the journals are rare and in poor physical condition, this book is an important contribution to an overlooked aspect of Franklin's writings. There is also a full listing compiled as a base for the book in the journal *Australian Literary Studies*, May 2001.

The collection encompasses a wide range of Franklin's "writings from Australia, the United States, and England, in the form of articles, reviews and letters to the editor, texts of addresses, broadcasts and interviews, and the occasional sketch and serial" (xvi). Divided into six sections, it chronicles Franklin's life from "an Australian bush girl," when at age sixteen she wrote her first piece, an account of a school picnic, in the *Goulburn Evening Penny Post*; through her experiences in the US (1906-1915), where she was the secretary of the national Women's Trade Union League of America and wrote for the League's journal *Life and Labour*, and in England, from where she wrote a series of articles for the *Sydney Morning Herald* on the work of the Babies Kits for Allies' Babies during and after WWI; and finally to her return to Sydney and to the Australian literary scene in 1932.

Of particular note is the section titled "A Writer Returns," which selects Franklin's work between 1932-1938, an extensive collection of over forty articles and reviews and almost entirely about Australian literature. In these pieces, Franklin expresses her enthusiasm and optimism about Australian literature, claiming that the prospects for literature in Australia were never better: "Australia is the sole remaining frontier of fiction in the English tongue unexploited,

momentous, unique, electric with ancient mystery and ageless magic enchanting as the lorelei. Go to!" ("The Prospects of Australian Literature" 117). She champions the local and indigenous, the "novels of the bush," as the essence of the national literature and claims that novels such as Tom Collins's *Such Is Life* as Australian classics: "It is our *Don Quixote*, our *Les Miserables*, our *Moby Dick*, our *Vanity Fair*" ("Such Is Colonialism" 139). In "Australians Do Not Exist," she mounts a vigorous response to Melbourne's Professor Cowling's assertion that there was no such thing as Australian literature. The section also contains appreciative reviews of William Hatfield's novel *Desert Saga*, a sympathetic and humane portrait of the disappearing aboriginal Aruntas, and Xavier Herbert's *Capricornia*, a symbolic indictment of the treatment of Aboriginal people and women.

Miles Franklin's writings are exuberant and passionate, and Gwen Harwood's letters witty and delightful. These two volumes reflect the social and personal lives of two important Australian women writers. They not only possess wider historical significance for the times they lived through, but also reveal and illuminate the personal characters of both writers.

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***Paddling Her Own Canoe: Times and Texts of E. Pauline Johnson, Tekahionwake.*** Veronica Strong-Boag and Carole Gerson. Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2000; 330 pages; ISBN 0802080243; \$25.95 (paper).

***How Should I Read These? Native Women Writers in Canada.*** Helen Hoy. Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2001; ISBN 080208401x; 264 pages; \$24.95 (paper).

"White Race and Red are one if they are but Canadian born." (Emily Pauline Johnson)

"But you're not exactly Indians are you? What is the proper word for people like you?' one asked. 'Women,' Cheryl replied instantly. 'No, no, I mean nationality?' 'Oh, I'm sorry. We're Canadians.'"

(Beatrice Culleton-Mosionier)

This review will comment on two thoroughly researched scholarly publications on Aboriginal women writers in Canada. The title of each work indicates a multiple approach toward the respective subject matter: Strong-Boag's and Gerson's study promises the discussion of an individual author as well as of her times; this double perspective is further emphasized by the collaborative authorship of a literary scholar and an historian. Another duality is added through the mentioning of Johnson's Mohawk name *Tekahionwake* also functioning as the heading for the cover picture of the performer/poet in her Native costume. Hoy, on the other hand, emphasizes in her title methodology and epistemology as much as the objective of her study. Her self-reflexive question - "How Should I Read These?" - de-emphasizes the conventional hierarchical relationship between "expert" and study objects alluding to an exchange on more equal terms. The cover image with a painting of several Native women illustrates the multiple voices of her texts but also resonates her own multiple locations outlined in her autobiographical style of criticism.

In the introduction Hoy explains that her intention is not so much "to provide normative readings" but "to explore the problematics of reading and teaching a variety of prose works by Native women writers in Canada from one particular perspective, my own, that of a specific cultural outsider" (11). Recognizing the limitations of an outsider she attempts "[m]ethodological - or epistemological - humility and caution" (18). In her dialogic approach she builds on antiracist and "decolonial" (a word she coined in order to replace the ambiguous "postcolonial") as well as on feminist theory. Strong-Boag and Gerson, on the other hand, while positioning themselves also as "Euro-Canadian feminist academics" (5), legitimize their First Nations topic not only by acknowledging co-implication in colonization processes but also by presuming "to be no more than occasional visitors" (6). Although they downplay their role as researchers, they still produced an authoritative study rarely questioning their expert position.

Both books succeed in drawing attention to the complexities of the topics through the non-linear organization of their material. Strong-Boag and Gerson created thematically organized chapters instead of a chronological narrative of Johnson's life and work. The multiple and shifting identity of the female performer, poet and author of fiction and journalistic prose is elucidated in chapters exploring socio-political, cultural, biographical, literary/artistic and gender contexts. As a guide for the reader the two scholars add a time line of Johnson's life and work and "an unprecedented listing of her publications"(15). Similarly, Hoy, in tune with her self-reflexive methodology, does not organize the discussion of late twentieth century prose texts by