

Women in Canadian Literature

by Carrie MacMillan

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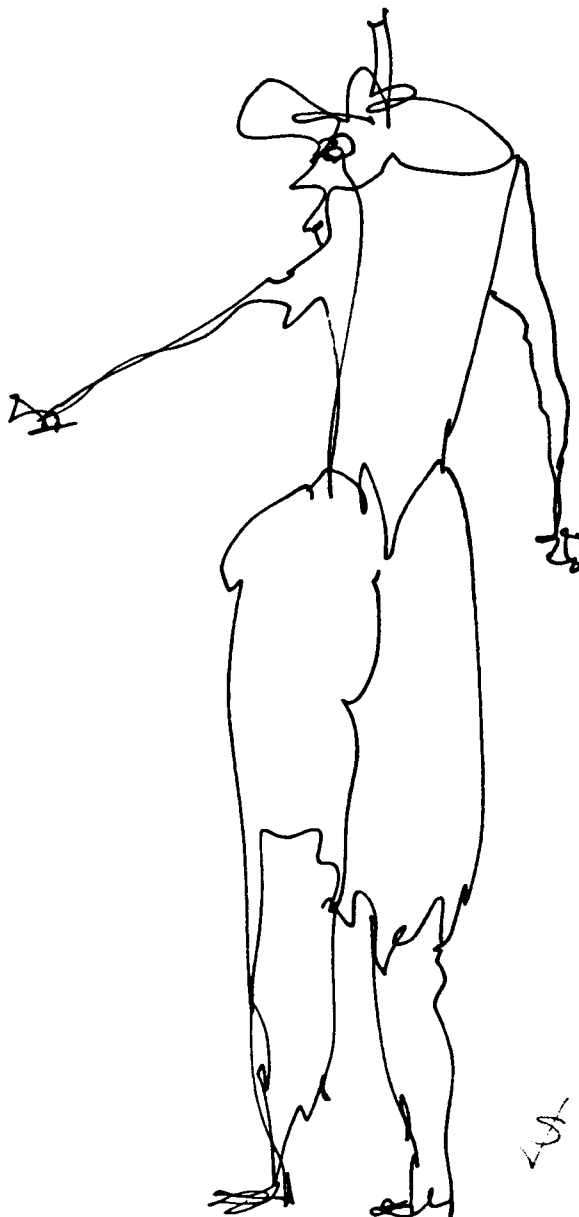
M. G. McCLUNG. Toronto: Fitzhenry and Whiteside, 1977. Pp. 96

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M. G. HESSE. Ottawa: Borealis Press, 1976. Pp. 287

The development of the serious study of women in Canadian literature in our schools and universities has brought with it a need for anthologies and texts in this area and is fulfilled partially by two books of the same title which have appeared recently, M. G. McClung's Women in Canadian Literature in the Women in Canadian Life series and M.G. Hesse's Women in Canadian Literature. The first is a chronologically arranged series of studies of important Canadian women writers and the second is a collection of selections from twentieth-century Canadian literature in which the subject is women.

McClung's book is divided into nine chapters which reflect their content



and the chronological structure of the book: "Beginnings," "Towards a Canadian Literature," "The Tradition of Fiction," "New Waves in Poetry," "Three French-Canadian Writers," "Developments in Fiction," "Aspects of Contemporary Poetry," "Margaret Laurence," and "Margaret Atwood." Each chapter, with the exception of the last two, begins with a brief and general but very helpful historical and literary description of the period, then presents short but tight analyses of the lives, writings and significance of its women writers. The selection is satisfactory generally in that it includes the important figures in our literary tradition and provides a strong picture of the contribution women have made to Canadian literature. The one weakness in the selection (and this applies to almost all contemporary studies of Canadian literature) is that it shows a bias toward certain regions, particularly the central and western ones, reflecting the general historical, economic and cultural condition of this country. Those who have made a point of studying the long tradition of literature in the Maritimes might ask why Mrs. Frederick Beavan, who wrote Sketches and Tales Illustrative of Life in the Backwoods of New Brunswick (1845, seven years before Susanna Moodie's Roughing It in the Bush was published) and Mary Eliza Herbert who wrote several novels of domestic realism in which the central characters are women and edited The

Mayflower (1851-52), a woman's magazine, all out of Halifax, (1) do not deserve recognition and treatment akin to that given that much overdone Upper Canadian trio, Catharine Parr Traill, Susanna Moodie and Anna Jameson. However, it is for the larger discipline of Canadian literature, not Molly McClung, to rectify these oversights.

The book is illustrated with a variety of pictures of the writers, their work and their period which add to its visual quality and interest. Each chapter concludes with a bibliography of primary and secondary material on the writers discussed therein which, while by no means complete, shows sound critical selection. There are also topics for discussion and research. A general bibliography of books and articles on Canadian literature is included at the end of the book along with a listing of records, tapes, videotapes and films on or by Canadian women writers. (2) It is most appropriate that the last two chapters are devoted to two Canadian writers who have become household names: Margaret Laurence and Margaret Atwood. They provide strong examples of contemporary Canadian women writers with which to conclude the study.

Overall McClung's book would be, in my opinion, a very useful basic reference work for the study of women in Canadian literature at the high school and university levels. I concur with George

Woodcock in his "Preface" in which he observes that "What is important in having a survey of this kind is that for the first time one becomes really aware of the vital and growing contribution the women of our society have made to Canadian writing."

There are aspects of Hesse's Women in Canadian Literature that are immediately irritating. One is the cover of the book which portrays DaVinci's Mona Lisa. What kind of an image or prototype is this for an anthology of literature on Canadian women? Are we being exhorted to subscribe to the famous qualities of coyness and mystery art critics have discovered in this painting, or, are there no suitable examples of Canadian women that might have served the purpose? The second problem is the title which promises more than it delivers; it should indicate that the book covers twentieth-century literature only, rather than imply a larger breadth as it does.

The anthology presents a selection of Canadian literature drawn from short stories, novels, autobiographies and interviews in which women are the subject; these are arranged in sections according to images and roles of women, for example, "Family Life," "Wives," "Mothers," "Opposing Conventions," "Social and Public Life" and "Growing Old." Each section contains from two to twelve examples from the literature. The book does not give a sense of the contribution of women to

Canadian literature over the years, as McClung's does, partly because of its restricted historical focus and partly because it includes examples of men's as well as women's writing. I find the lack of historical sweep is a limitation because the presentation of women in our modern literature is seen in much clearer focus when we have the nineteenth-century perspective as well. Hesse's arrangement of the material sometimes appears arbitrary, some of the chapters overlapping, like "Family Life," "Wives" and "Mothers." On the other hand, there are categories that merit attention but do not receive it, such as women as artists. It is disappointing, for example, that there is no mention of Emily Carr in the anthology. Critical proportion is lacking in a selection of this kind that includes three short stories by Hugh Garner and nothing by this seminal woman painter and writer. Another weakness is the small quantity of poetry included. Brewster, Livesay and Page are under-represented by one short poem each while Waddington, MacEwan, Lowther and Macpherson and, perhaps the best living Canadian poet, Avison, are not represented at all. Atwood is only represented by her prose. Presumably Hesse would argue that she is not necessarily interested in comprehensively representing women writers in this anthology, but surely those writers excluded have had something to say about women and an anthology that excludes them on the basis of design and purpose should

have these criteria questioned.

The most serious criticism of Hesse's anthology is that except for its brief introduction and equally brief bibliographical notes it provides no real critical or analytical framework for a study of the presentation of women in Canadian literature. Surely we are beyond the point where a sampling of excerpts and short pieces from the literature that focuses on women is adequate. Sound critical analysis and evaluation are needed. Hesse excuses herself by saying she does not want to impose conclusions on her reader. It is time to come to sound conclusions and to insist that anthologies like Hesse's provide them.

NOTES

1. See Gwendolyn Davies, "Belles and the Backwoods: A Study of Fiction in Nineteenth-Century Maritime Periodicals" in the Atlantic Provinces Literature Colloquium Papers, published by the Atlantic Canada Institute (Saint John, 1977).
2. One inadequacy in the bibliography is that it does not make reference to the articles on women in Canadian literature to be found in Atlantis. Indeed, one would have thought that Canada's first journal of women's studies might have deserved a special place in a reference work of this kind.

