



BOOK REVIEWS

IN THE COMPANY OF STRANGERS

Mary Meigs. Vancouver: Talonbooks, 1991.

By Janice Andreae

If the National Film Board's 1990 production *The Company of Strangers* presents a story rarely told in contemporary society, even by feminists, then Mary Meigs' portrayal of the making of this movie and its vibrant participants casts an even rarer view on the lives of these senior female actors and the interaction which occurs in their company. From the outset, Meigs states that the landscape backdrop for this "semi-documentary" is significant because it is both site and metaphor for the lived experience these women portray — old age, memory, life and death. Whereas the film focusses upon a "magic space where old women have room to exist," as Meigs states in her preface, her story is about how this space occurs in reality.

Meigs creates intimate portrayals of each woman involved in making the film, including Gloria Demers whose dream provides its original concept and Cynthia Scott who carries on Gloria's dream (after her death in 1989 due to cancer) and brings it to life. Meigs' portrayal of *In the Company of Strangers* attempts more than the film's presentation of a magical possibility of room to exist — room that exists in Nature, but not in the context of these women's daily lives, their culture. Meigs explores the effect this freedom has on the way these women perceive themselves. Just as the movie first engages viewers with the idea of such a space, then "pulls" viewers into it, Meigs shows the magical transformation it brings to each woman's

life off camera. For Beth, it presents the possibility of realizing what seemed an impossible dream — becoming an actress. For Cissy, it documents a vital time before another debilitating stroke. For Alice, who infrequently leaves her Mohawk reservation home in Quebec, the film site is a place of sharing skills, traditions, language, family life, music and dancing. Given this space of her own, each makes lasting friends and discovers another meaningful aspect of her existence.

Meigs portrays each individual impressionistically, catching private moments of revelation, instances of interaction which make the lives of these "old" women immediate and meaningful in the context of the reader's own experience. Her clear, simply expressed portraits bring the magic of the film into concrete reality — intimate and individual, rather than abstract and reduced: Meigs draws atten-

tion to the most visible (and visually accessible) incidents; for example, the interaction which occurs at mealtime at the Chateau Borghese, their filming residence

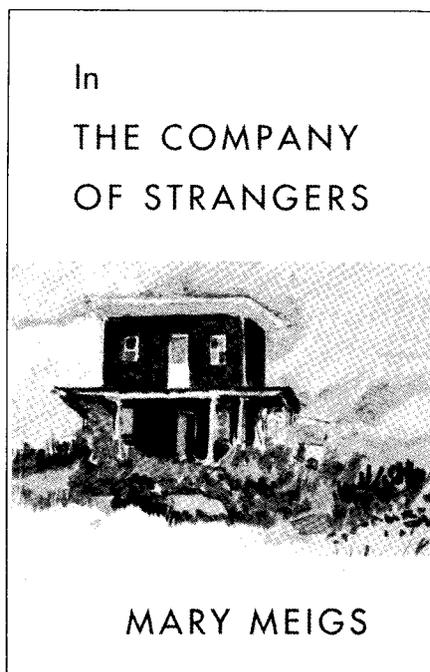
(Constance) got to her feet, having left her plate untouched, and wandered over to contemplate the chocolate layer cake and pastries on a side table, and came back looking like a silly schoolgirl.

and afterwards

...the most exciting escapade imaginable after a hard day's work would be to cross the highway, peer into shop windows and sit at a table with a pink tablecloth.

In many ways, Meigs' written portrayals are similar to the watercolours she makes on site during filming, while waiting for her next scene. She articulates what is essential to plainly identify the moment, its sensations and its experience. She works minimally, carefully selecting hues and drawing contours that make her representations concise records of an instant. For whatever reason, this instance contributes to her overall experience and the difference it makes to her daily awareness of life. In this way, Meigs' portrayal of the strangers in her company who become her friends are full and expressive, yet succinct. With equal brevity, these sketches catch the reader's attention and present a momentary essence which makes a lasting mark in our memory.

With few words, Meigs says much about the changes these women experience while participating in the making of this film. This summer experience resonates with an excitement and an intensity which is very private and special to the women who share in its making. The richness of



this feeling is passed on to her readers. However, Meigs indicates how very different is the free space the film provides each woman from the lives they have known. For it is the pain of losing loved ones, restricted choices, poverty and sickness that most often accompanies these women through their lives. This contradiction stands out against the magical space of their summertime together. Perhaps what is most fearful about old age is the overwhelming struggle it takes to get there. (Meigs sketches this subtly but with substance in these portrayals). What gives these "old" women wisdom is also what ages them — distinguishing marks which separate one day from the next, one phase of life from the next. Throughout this text, Meigs makes these marks visible and she allows each woman to speak through her own distinctive voice. As the story unwinds, she resists drawing conclusions. She also resists closing her narrative. For her, life is open-ended.

At the beginning of the film, as she and Cissy watch birds in a field near the house (a temporary home to the women), Meigs notes it is only since she turned sixty that she has spoken about herself as a lesbian. (She is now seventy-four). Here the significance of the moment for speaking is made emphatic, for Meigs not only speaks for herself in this film, but also for generations of lesbian women who remain silent. In *the Company of Strangers*, in Meigs' own words, is "my story of how it happened" — that seven very different "old" women come together and through their interaction create an energy which enters women's lives and propels them forward like the faith which "propels Catherine in the film (to) set out on her arthritic feet (real) for a thirty-kilometre walk"... greeting "us the next day from the pontoon of a seaplane" — a closing which opens with Meigs' own telling of this story.

RE(DIS)COVERING OUR FOREMOTHERS: Nineteenth-Century Canadian Women Writers

Edited by Lorraine McMullen. Ottawa: University of Ottawa Press, 1990.

By *Laura McLaughlan*

"Canadian literary history will be reread very differently when women are re-

scribed in its rolls," writes editor Lorraine McMullen in *Re(dis)covering Our Foremothers*. The book is the fifteenth in the University of Ottawa's "Reappraisals: Canadian Writers" series. As a woman who studies and teaches Canadian literature, I find this volume particularly exciting both because of the merit of individual essays and the feminist intent of the text. It is, as McMullen states, organized in a linear way with a common subtext: that women writers from the nineteenth century have been "dropped, lost, and must now be recovered...."

Re(dis)covering Our Foremothers opens a Pandora's steamer trunk of writing in English by nineteenth-century Canadian women. In one of the three introductory essays — Clara Thomas and Carol Shield each write others — Donna E. Smyth reflects on her eight-year involvement with a collection of Nova Scotia women's letters and diaries published as *No Place Like Home* (1988): "These women are our mothers too. The conflicts and contradictions of their lives live on in us, their daughters. By attempting to decode their lives, we learn how to read our own traditions. So much that is hidden within us, that is silent in us, still awaits discovery, uncovering."

The issue of canon and genre is a central one to the essays in *Re(dis)covering Our Foremothers*. As Elizabeth Waterston notes at the end of this volume, the "underprivileged genres" merit further attention. Three or four male poets are currently esteemed, as James Doyle notes, for having written "all the work of enduring value..." during this period. This new work challenges its reader with the premise that diaries and letters by nineteenth-century women belong in Canadian literature courses along with the Confederation group of canonized male poets.

Carole Gerson's "Anthologies and the Canon of Early Canadian Women Writers" gives a probing analysis of the manner in which twentieth-century survey anthologies of Canadian literature have dropped women writers of prose and poetry, silently colluding in the "marginalization of women writers in the Canadian canon." Marjory Lang and Helen M. Buss each contribute essays which comment on canon and genre. Lang recovers a once much-read "first generation of Canadian women journalists," most notably "the greatest of all nineteenth-century Canadian women journalists,

Kathleen Blake Watkins, later Coleman." Buss suggests that the writings of women from Anna Jameson to Martha Ostenso have not fit in with Northrop Frye's "garrison mentality" — a concept which for at least two decades after its publication in *Literary History of Canada* (1965) wielded "biblical authority" in Canadian literary criticism. She argues that much poetry and prose by female authors has been neglected because of a "radical difference in the way women encounter the land."

The volume contains essays on the prose of individual writers with a rather heavy emphasis on Susanna Moodie, an essay on Catherine Parr Traill, and an essay on Sara Jeanette Duncan. But where, one might ask, are the poets? Poetry by nineteenth-century women is given significant attention in Gerson's essay and mentioned at various points in *Re(dis)covering Our Foremothers* but nineteenth-century poetry by women is never the focus of an essay. An earlier volume in the Reappraisals series, edited by Frank Tierney, dealt exclusively with the best known nineteenth-century Canadian woman poet in English, Isabella Valancy Crawford. If we are to work toward a fair assessment of the contribution of female poets of this period we need more research on them and a more thoughtful analysis of their work.

It is impossible to mention all the essays which merit attention. I would, however, make particular note of Bina Freiwald's feminist re-vision of Moodie in "'The tongue of a woman': The Language of the Self in Moodie's *Roughing It in the Bush*." Another provocative essay is D.M.R. Bentley's essay on the impact of Atlantic crossing in which the writer theorizes that women such as Traill, Moodie and the less well-known Anne Langton, were "forced to rethink" all their old world suppositions. Bentley convincingly argues that the voyage and arrival precipitated a period of initiation described in the journals, sketches, and letters these literary foremothers produced.

Sara Jeanette Duncan's novel *The Imperialist* opens — as Misao Dean's essays reminds us — in Elgin, Ontario with Mother Beggarlegs, a woman who has no known "antecedents." *Re(dis)covering Our Foremothers* gives us a rich and varied record of our literary antecedents. As such this work constitutes a major contribution to the study of nineteenth-century Canadian literature in English.