*You were*
*the fishes red gill to me*
*the flame tree's spread to me*
*the crab's leg/ the fried plantain*
*smell replenishing replenishing*
*Go to your wide futures, you said*

Read, enjoy and *teach* from this grand anthology — its glossary of unfamiliar words is a splendid aid to teaching — and thereby support the series of literary anthologies which CAFRA plans to follow this one..

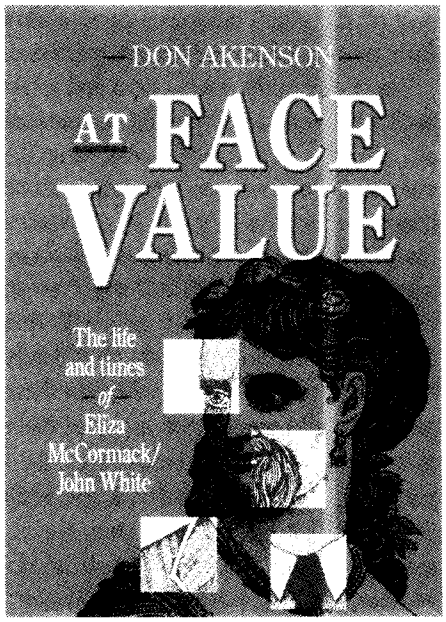
## AT FACE VALUE: The Life and Times of Eliza McCormack/John White

Don Akenson. Kingston and Montreal: McGill-Queen's University Press, 1990

### *By Allison MacDuffee*

*At Face Value* presents an intriguing hypothesis: that Canada's first woman M.P. was Eliza McCormack White, a female transvestite who took the name of John White, served in Parliament from 1871 to 1887, married another woman and raised eight adopted children. The book challenges the conventional view that Agnes Campbell MacPhail became Canada's first woman M.P. in 1921.

The author, Don Akenson, a specialist in Irish history at Queen's University, became interested in John White while researching Irish immigrants in Canada. He found a curious gap between John White's arrival in Canada from County Donegal in 1846, and his re-emergence in the mid-1850s as a prosperous cheese-factory and foundry owner near Belleville, Ontario.




Then Akenson came across an 1847 newspaper account about one Eliza McCormack, a woman who had been arrested in Hamilton for disguising herself as a man. He realized that "the best way to make sense of the career of John White in Canada was to recognize that he was actually a she: that Eliza McCormack had taken on the deceased John White's name and much of his persona."

According to his hypothesis, Eliza McCormack White, John White's sister, assumed her brother's identity after his death from fever in 1846. By adopting male clothing and mannerisms, and sometimes wearing false facial hair, she was able to carry off her deception successfully.

Those who expect *At Face Value* to prove that John White was a woman will be disappointed. In the Preface, Akenson explains that his point in writing the book was not to prove the gender of his protagonist. Rather, he wanted to make the reader question gender stereotypes.

*At Face Value* is written largely in the first person, from Eliza's point of view; there is also much invented dialogue. So it seems fair to judge the book as a historical novel, rather than a conventional biography or history book.

The most successful chapters are those which describe Eliza's childhood in Ireland. Drawing on his knowledge of Irish history, the author creates a vivid picture of a country ravaged by famine and disease. The scene in which young Eliza convinces her father to let her learn the blacksmith's trade is especially moving.

The part of the book describing Eliza's life in Canada is more uneven. The description of her years as a prostitute in a Toronto hotel may seem gratuitously shocking to some readers. On the other hand, the chapters about her political career provide an interesting picture of politics in nineteenth-century Ontario, and the story of her marriage to Esther Johnson is touching and insightful.

By creating a character who is in many ways androgynous, Akenson makes us question our preconceptions about gender. Eliza is presented as a mixture of "masculine" characteristics — business acumen, political shrewdness and sexual adventurousness — and more "feminine" traits, such as modesty and gentleness.

Despite some faults, such as an unfortunate abundance of typographical errors, *At Face Value* is a thought-provoking and often moving book. While Akenson does not prove that John White and Eliza McCormack were the same person, he does demonstrate that taking on a man's identity in the 19th century might have been a very sane and sensible way for a woman to achieve power in a male-dominated society.

## THE OPPOSITIONAL IMAGINATION: Feminism, Critique and Political Theory

Joan Cocks. London: Routledge, 1989

### *By Ian D. Thatcher*

This is a good book in that its aims are clearly stated and its arguments are pursued both cogently and persuasively. Cocks' subject for examination is power, specifically the regime of masculine/feminine:

> *an order of sex and gender inclusive of the established phallocentric discourse on the meaning of the body..., the elaboration of the "masculine" and the "feminine" personality, the sexual division of labour, the social orchestration of biological reproduction, the assignment of public and domestic power and subjection made on the basis of genital type.*

In Part One, Cocks discusses the works of Said, Williams, Gramsci and Foucault. From her exposition and comparison of the ideas of these critical theorists she constructs a series of assumptions about the nature of power. First, power imposes itself through culture. Second, the messages emanating from any power regime will be a selection from descriptions of reality which are infinite. Third, there will be several regimes of power which, although one will be dominant, will coexist and intersect. Fourth, no single system of power determines all others. Fifth, no power regime can incorporate all thoughts