

# Women and Writing in Canada<sup>1</sup>

by Anne Innis Dagg

Anyone new to the literary scene in Canada should be impressed with what individual women writers have achieved. Our top fiction writers tend to be women — Margaret Laurence, Alice Munro, Margaret Atwood, Mavis Gallant — and these authors are famous outside Canada as well as within our borders. A few women such as these can make a living from their earnings as writers. These facts would certainly seem positive, and a tribute to the Canada Council which, by its grants, has allowed far more Canadians to be creative than in any other time in our history. A close look at the writing scene in Canada, however, indicates that despite the success of a few exceptional individuals, women in general fare far worse than men as authors. Not only that, but compared to men they fare worse than they did a century ago.

In earlier days of Canada, women as a whole were more successful as writers than they are today. The sisters Susanna Moodie and Catharine Parr Traill both wrote books about Canada (1836, 1852) which sold well enough to immigrants and potential immigrants to make their authors famous. Margaret Marshall Saunders wrote best-selling fiction, including *Beautiful Joe* (1894) which was translated into fourteen languages and sold over one million copies, the first Canadian book to do so. Sara Jeannette Duncan (1861-1922) was well known as a journalist and later, as the author of twenty-two novels. Lucy Maud Montgomery wrote the internationally acclaimed *Anne of Green Gables* (1908) plus twenty-one other novels. And Mazo de la Roche was celebrated around the world as creator of the family chronicle, the *Jalna* series (1927-60).

In early Canada women could make considerable money from writing fiction, even though much of it was not of high quality and is no longer remembered

today. Women's novels were so in demand that, of all the fiction books published by Canadians up until 1950, 40 percent were by women. Of books of poetry, 37 percent were by women.<sup>2</sup> Even so, some women apparently still felt that to be known as an author was not quite proper, because they wrote under men's names or pseudonyms.

Women who wrote non-fiction were no less successful, with at least 750 publishing nearly 1,100 books by 1945.<sup>3</sup> My current research indicates that up to 1885, the most common topics were travel and description (15 books), and autobiography (17 books). No women authors in this period had obtained a university education, so many may have felt less confident than men of being able to tackle more academic subjects. By 1915, however, this diffidence had disappeared. Between 1886 and 1915, the most popular topic for women writers was history (58 books), social issues (36 books), biography (31 books) and religion (23 books). These topics, except for religion, remained the most popular in the period 1916 to 1945. As the figures indicate, the number of books published in Canada or about Canada increased steadily over the years, from 17 between 1841-1855 to nearly 500 between 1931-1945.

In 1957, the Canada Council was set up which, since then, has funnelled many millions of dollars into the pockets of Canadian writers. Presumably unwittingly, however, the Canada Council has given far more money to men than women writers, and far more money to publishers and other institutions which favour men's over women's literature. The result has been a decrease in women's compared with men's writing.

The most significant difference between the sexes is the publication each year in Canada of more than two-thirds of books by men, and less than one-third by

women. Whereas before 1950, 40 percent of fiction books were by women, in 1984-85 only 26 percent were by women; the percentage of poetry books has similarly decreased, from 37 percent to 29 percent.<sup>4</sup> In only two categories, food and drink, and juvenile and young adult books, which are thought of stereotypically as feminine, were there more books published by women than by men. In the three fields of nature and ecology, music, and science, only one-tenth or less of books published were by women. The chance of encountering a woman's perspective on these subjects is very small.

The number of books published by men and women would only be discriminatory if women wrote or were commissioned to write more than one-third of books which could be published. There is no way of knowing how many books by men and women are submitted to publishers, or how many by either sex are commissioned by publishers, but the available information indicates that there are more women than men authors in Canada. About half the members of the Writers' Union in Canada, in which the yearly dues are \$160, are women, as are about two-thirds of the members of the Canadian Authors Association (yearly dues \$75 plus a \$25 one-time initiation fee). The League of Canadian Poets has about 38 percent of members who are women, but unlike in the other groups, its full members must be voted in and women have claimed there has been discrimination against women in the selection process.<sup>5</sup> Any poet can become an associate member, of which about 55 percent are women. With so many serious women writers, it seems very unlikely that women produce many fewer unsolicited book manuscripts than men. It does seem likely that publishers commission men more often than women to write books on such stereotypically male subjects as his-

tory, sport, politics, business, computers, and philosophy.

Once a book has been published, its chances of selling well or of being read are slim if it is not reviewed in a number of newspapers, magazines, and journals. A survey of the *Globe and Mail*, the *Kitchener-Waterloo Record*, the *Toronto Sunday Star*, and *Saturday Night* reveals, however, that these publications review proportionately fewer of the books by women than the nearly one-third published. Fewer than one-third of the reviewers are also women, so that compared to men, women as reviewers have far less chance of gaining a forum for their ideas, of earning money by doing reviews, and of becoming well-known. Often publications ask the few women reviewers to review women's books; this could be a good thing because women may be more sensitive to women's work, or it could be that book page editors think women's books unimportant and therefore suitable for women reviewers.

Up to 40 percent of book sales in Canada are made to public sector libraries, so they form a major market. Unfortunately, some public libraries choose to buy fewer books by women, relatively, than are published. This means not only that relatively fewer women writers sell their books to libraries, but that relatively fewer patrons have a chance to read them. This is so even though one Canadian survey showed that 64 percent of women but only 52 percent of men read books,<sup>6</sup> that more women than men visit public libraries in Canada,<sup>7</sup> and that many women prefer to read books by women.<sup>8</sup> There is no dearth of books that librarians *could* buy, because 70,000 in English are published every year. By having many fewer books by women than men in public libraries, women also earn less money from the new federal government's Public Lending Rights program.

It is perhaps not surprising that librarians choose to buy far more books by men than by women because the schools and universities at which they studied also undervalue books by women. Although most English students at university are women, there are far more male than female English professors and most of the books studied are by men, with heroes who are also male. Canadian literature courses described in university calendars always mention more male than female authors, and sometimes omit women entirely. For example, the University of Victoria in its 1986-87, calendar mentioned authors who were fewer than one-third women who would be studied in

Canadian literature courses, while the University of Waterloo mentioned no women for its similar courses. Professors justify their choice of books to be studied by saying that they are the best and the best known. Because the professors are men, or women who have been trained to see things with male-biased eyes, books by and about women often seem unimportant, despite their possibly great interest to women. Feminists argue that books by women are equally good but have few academics to stand up for them; because of this they are not well-known.

The male domination of university English departments has far-reaching effects. When universities decide what archival material to collect, they favour the papers of male far more often than female writers, so that most female authors will be as little known in the future as they are at present. Since professors tend to value writing by men over that by women, they will be likely to write better letters of reference for their male students who apply for Canada Council grants and other awards, fellowships, and scholarships.

The present literature of Canada is made possible largely by the finances supplied by the Canada Council. This money works to the greatest extent against women when it is given in large chunks to publishers who then use it to produce mostly books by men.

Canada Council money also goes directly in grants to more men than women, in part because more men than women apply. In 1985-86 less than a third of the most prestigious "A" Grants (up to \$20,000 in value) went to women, while 44 percent of the more numerous "B" Grants (up to \$14,000 or \$15,000 in value) went to women. (Why fewer women apply is a point of conjecture: some have husbands who support them and feel they are not needy enough; some have been turned down for a grant once and give up hope after realizing that most grants go to men; some believe society when it tells them that women's creativity is unimportant).

The people who decide which writers will be funded by grants are appointed by the staff of the Canada Council. These jurors are writers, but they are usually men; they tend to be members of the literary establishment, and thus less attuned to new ideas than younger people might be. Jurors are virtually never feminists, so that the chances of a radical lesbian receiving money, for example, are slim.

Since far more books by men than

women are published each year in Canada, it is not surprising that further Canada Council funds ear-marked for promotion tours by authors of new books, for public readings by authors, and for translations of their books benefit men far more than women. All of these activities foster male more than female authors, which means that the men become better known than the women and are more likely to have books published because they are well-known. The effects are circular, driven by tax-payers' money supplied by the Canada Council.

Needless to say, all of the factors discussed so far affect the earnings of Canadian authors. A survey carried out in 1978 by Statistics Canada<sup>9</sup> found that full-time women writers earn about half of what full-time men writers earn. The women's lower earnings were not because they were mostly poets (who are notoriously underpaid), or because they had less education or experience, or because they had less work accepted. For example, a full-time woman writer with ten or more years of experience earned five times less than a comparable man earned; a woman with a second university degree earned three and a half times less than a comparable man earned; and a woman who had more than 50 percent of her work accepted earned two and a half times less than a comparable man. A full-time woman writer earned only \$8,595 a year on average, or a median of \$3,755 a year, which means most women earned far less than the average. Of all the women surveyed, 58 percent had no other salaried employment.

At present, society does not much value women's writing the way it did in the past. Women writers earn so little that they must wonder if they are wasting their time. Feminists, however, believe that women's writing is incredibly important; without it there is little chance of making the world a better place for women and children. Men and women, from the minute they are born, begin to experience life differently. Society hears mostly about the experience of being male, so it is important that women correct this bias as far as possible with their writing.

Canada needs far more women's books on topics that affect women especially, such as lesbianism, abortion, incest, mothering, child- and wife-battering, and powerlessness. Men in the past and often today, too, have not only been uninterested in these subjects, but have sometimes worked actively to prevent women learning about them. In addition, we need women's books on subjects that

are usually written about by men. Women are likely to write about war, reproductive technology, social history, and psychology from different perspectives.

Finally, some argue that women have a different style of writing, and are more likely than men to be innovative and imaginative in their work. This may well be true, and if so, we should value such diversity.

In Canadian literature as a whole, a few women are currently successful and well known. This is wonderful. But women should work to ensure that the thousands of other women writers can also have their work published and read so that all Canadians will be enriched.

<sup>1</sup> This material comes from my book *The Fifty Per Cent Solution: Why Should Women Pay for Men's Culture?* (Otter Press, Box 747, Waterloo, Ontario N2J 4C2; \$8.00 plus 50¢ postage) and from my current research on non-fiction writers. It does not include information on

journalists who work on salary for newspapers and magazines.

<sup>2</sup> Prof. Reginald Watters published in 1959 *A Check List of Canadian Literature and Background Materials 1628-1950* (University of Toronto Press) which includes the full names of authors of fiction and poetry from which one can make a list of male and female writers.

<sup>3</sup> For my current research I have a file of 750 names of women non-fiction writers who were either Canadian or who wrote about Canada before 1946 in nearly 1,100 books.

<sup>4</sup> The figures quoted in this article are from *The Fifty Per Cent Solution* unless otherwise specified.

<sup>5</sup> See Sharon H. Nelson's "The Sexual Politics of Poetry" in the *League of Canadian Poets' Newsletter* for the summer of 1981.

<sup>6</sup> These figures are from James

Lorimer's *Book Reading in Canada* published by the Association of Canadian Publishers (1983).

<sup>7</sup> Also from James Lorimer's (1983) report.

<sup>8</sup> Many feminists, and other women too, have told me they read mostly men's books during their childhood education and that now they read only women's books.

<sup>9</sup> These data are from Survey of Writers, 1979, Arts and Culture Branch, Department of Communications, Ottawa.

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Tom, the Cat from Zanzibar 4/12

Claire Pratt 1960

*Claire Pratt drawing that Margaret Laurence enjoyed*