BOOK REVIEWS

The Eugélionne

Louky Bersianik, translated from the French by Gerry Denis, Alison Hewitt, Martha O'Brien, and Donna Murray, press porcepic, 1981, pp. 345, paperback, $9.95.

Jeanette Urbas

"What is a writer if he is not someone who scatters ink on the earth?" says the Eugélionne in the epilogue. Louky Bersianik scatters ink on the earth, on the sky, and between the stars (as she puts it) to light up the vast darkness of male-female relationships in our so-called civilization. She juxtaposes myth and realities about the nature of women and female sexuality; she ridicules male pretensions and pomposity; she incites rebellion against outworn concepts and the codes of behaviour they have generated, proclaiming that "transgression is progression." Her weapons are relentless logic and fact, a deft command of language, and an irrepressible sense of humour that leavens even the dreariest mass of misconceptions and distortions.

The Eugélionne is not a woman of this earth. She has come from outer space in search of what she calls "the male of my species." She does not find him here because we inhabit a "negative planet" still struggling to free itself from the mire of our "prehistory." Her quest constitutes the structure of the book, which the author calls "a triptych novel." The first panel consists of the arrival of the Eugélionne, when she is greeted by journalists and recounts her journeys in the past through a series of flashbacks. In the second she travels on earth with her friends, including the journalist Exile. In the third panel she sifts through the knowledge of the universe stored in the "Great National Warehouse of Canned Words" and passes judgment on humanity's ideological development. It is the most theoretical and most interesting section of the novel.

The technique Louky Bersianik uses is one of accumulation. In approximately two hundred sections or chapters, each with its own title, she presents an analysis of commonly accepted ideas, first expounding them, then toppling them over by reducing them to absurdities. Each paragraph is numbered throughout the text (1,386 in all) as if to suggest chapter and verse in the Bible. She attacks ideas about the inferiority of women propagated by religion and by St. Siegfried (Freud), the apostle of the new religion.

An improvement in male-female relationships means an improvement in human relationships.

A considerable portion of the third panel deals with the importance of language in perpetuating ideas about women that justify and maintain their subordinate position in society. The Eugélionne perceives, however, that culture forms the language in the first place. In "The Generic" she addresses a group of women who propose to present a manifesto to the members of the French Academy demanding changes in the "sexist" French language: "In any case, it is the people's mentality which must be changed, for a language has a mind before it has an alphabet." Characteristically, she asks them not to be humble but to assert their claims aggressively; they are dealing with an august body of men who have a vested interest in maintaining the *status quo* that they have themselves established. Though a number of the examples selected do not have equivalents in English (because the language is not based on gender, as French is), the underlying principles of protest apply to both languages. The Eugélionne's method of attack and demolition makes her delightful reading as she illustrates how words can become effective weapons against other words.

St. Siegfried preaches a Sermon on the Mount and presents his own Tablets of the Law to prove that women are incomplete, secondary beings. Women's bodies are characterized by a lack, a missing portion that determines their destiny. Consumed by envy of the penis which will never be theirs, they are the bottomless hole into which man casts himself to his perdition. The Eugélionne's critique of Freud's theories culminates in an amusing section in praise of holes. "The hole . . . that's the human condition." Since all matter is porous, even rock, "we are bodies riddled with holes that welcome love and pour out love." Even the sacrosanct penis has a hole!

The defence of holes is made by Ancyl, who, in her journals, enunciates another tenet of the Eugélionne's philosophy: "Feminism is humanism." Male-female relationships are part of the totality of human relationships; an improvement in one presumes an improvement in the other. The Eugélionne rejects not men but the injustice of a society built on male ego and female submission. She condemns the violence and domination typifying men's actions in every sphere, especially in war, and demands a respect for life rather than a lust for power and destruction. She mocks men's opposition to abortion, accusing them of suffering from "acute embryonitis." In their laws they respect Embryonic life at the expense of the Accomplished life. Why do they not legislate adequate housing, education, and care for the children who already exist instead of concentrating all their concern on the unborn? The Eugélionne calls for a new society that would be subversive because it would exclude no one and would replace all domination by reciprocity: reciprocity between men and women, between men and men, between adults and children.

Louky Bersianik is a well-known Quebecoise filmmaker, CBC-radio producer, and script writer. *L'Eugélionne,* published in 1976 in Quebec, sold over 15,000 copies, an achievement for any Canadian novel, let alone one in French. The translation is the work of four translators who accepted the challenge of grappling with the stylistic and linguistic difficulties in order to make the work available to another culture in another language. *The Eugélionne* is a compendium of preconceived ideas about women that circulate freely in our society, often without question. The content is admirable but so also are the wit, grace, and good humour with which the author punctures the inflated bubble of male presumption. "Women of the Earth, be entomologists of men. . . . Men are no more stupid than you are, they are simply more pretentious."

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Obasan

Joy Kogawa, Lester and Orpen Dennys, 1981, pp. 250, $7.95.

Michiko Lambertson

Obasan affected me in an extraordinary way; like a summer-evening lightning bolt, it struck and shook my soul, yet calmed me like the cool touch of snowflakes. Perhaps the shock was a result of my Japanese upbringing and my empathy for all minority groups, but the soothing effect came solely from the author's style: understated, poetic prose.

The novel sings a universal song about humanity, equality, and peace in its portrayal of the experiences of Japanese-Canadians who were interned as "enemy aliens" during World War II. It is a memoir of Naomi, a young Japanese-Canadian, who recounts the agony of evacuation and relocation, which in British Columbia involved the loss of homes and property and the forcible breakup of family units. Her memories, letters from relatives, and documents from that era are combined to create a powerful indictment of Canadian wartime excesses and of war itself.

Before one pursues social justice, one must come to terms with oneself.

Obasan means "aunt" in Japanese. In this novel Obasan is the aunt who cares for Naomi during the years of internment, since Naomi's mother is in Japan and unable to return because of the war. Although Obasan is the main character in the small girl's uprooted universe, there is also another aunt, Emily.

This book is Naomi's quest for a self — which may be Obasan or Aunt Emily or a combination of the two. The search takes the form of a mystery story: the question asked is what has happened to Naomi's mother. In the absence of her mother, Naomi uses Obasan and Aunt Emily as her windows on the female adult world. While Naomi grows up, wondering about her mother's absence, she asks questions about the appropriate responses to injustice. The alternative replies are characterized by Obasan's language of silence, with which Western readers may not easily empathize, and Aunt Emily's political activism.

There are two poles in the Japanese way of thinking. One is a fatalistic attitude of acceptance, endurance, and stoicism and the other is a sense of justice, honour, and fair play. The former is manifested in the attitudes of uncle and Obasan and the latter is presented by Aunt Emily. The difference is clear in the concept of acceptance: to the former, acceptance is "accepting what has happened to you"; to the latter, acceptance means "letting those accept what they have done to you."

The mystery of Naomi's mother remains an adult secret because of *Kodomo no tame,* which means "for the sake of the children." The adults are dedicated to promoting the well-being of the children as far as circumstances permit and to protecting them as much as possible from any threats to the harmony of their universe. Obasan and Emily disagree about when to provide Naomi with the information, a battle that Obasan wins.

Central to the impact of the narrative is the remarkable prose. Suffering is poignantly portrayed in an understated manner so that the reader is not overwhelmed with the weight of the content. As in haiku and waka, the subtle nuances and symbols of poetry take the reader into the delicate world of imagination and feelings. The poetic form continually casts a light on Naomi's path as she solves the mystery of her mother's absence. Her journey ends in a fleeting state of tranquility, an epiphany: the undulating prairie grass becomes the rocking waves of the sea, symbolic both of the hardships of the compulsory life and the earlier happy life on the west coast. In this state of serenity, above the quiet coulee under the vast sky, comes the fragrance of wild roses sweet and faint, an allusion perhaps to *yasa-shii* mother, about whom Naomi has dreamt since their separation thirty years before.

Because the book is partly an anti-war novel, Kogawa does not leave the reader in a state of outrage, since that would have been inconsistent with her intent. Rather, the reader is saddened and angry. Naomi's journey implies that before one walks the path to social justice, one must come to terms with oneself. From this position comes the tolerance that may subvert the racist appeals of war propaganda.

A Flannel Shirt and Liberty: British Emigrant Gentlewomen in the Canadian West, 1880-1914

Susan Jackel, University of British Columbia Press, 1982, pp. 229, hardcover, $21.95.

Jacqueline Gresko

Today's students, the T-shirt-and-jeans generation, will find that *A Flannel Shirt and Liberty: British Emigrant Gentlewomen in the Canadian West, 1880–1914* explains and enhances much history. They will discover in Susan Jackel's edition of British women's accounts of the turn-of-the-century west important but neglected features of the pioneer years on the prairies. Then immigrants of British descent were a statistical majority. Educated middle-class women made up a significant proportion of female British emigrants. Surplus or redundant at "home," they had been encouraged and sometimes even trained to go colonize the Canadian West. There many emigrant gentlewomen quickly married. Some became martyrs of frontier domestic life. Others liked "both the work and the play . . . the summer and the winter, . . . a flannel shirt and liberty."

Susan Jackel's selection of private and published accounts of British lady settlers gives insight into the context and variety of their immigration experience. They viewed it in British imperial terms as a "religious duty" owed by their "dominating race" to the colonies and to the world. Emigration to the Canadian West also gave Britons the opportunity for material advancement, though advancement meant hard work. For that sort of work English life, especially female middle-class life, gave little preparation. Women settlers had to face not only the rigours of laundry, cooking, and cleaning but also a frightening biological destiny as wives and mothers in lonely frontier situations.

For British and other women settlers a major problem was the lack of domestic help in the Canadian West. That scarcity continued despite the arrival of labour-saving devices on Canadian homesteads and the willingness of English visitors to sink the lady "and become sort of maids-of-all-work." Native or Doukhobor women, Chinese men, and wayfaring lads might sometimes be engaged by British settlers. But at what cost? For how long? Would such help don the frilly parlour-maid's apron? Could such an employee serve tea?

Women settlers faced not only housekeeping drudgery but also frightening biological destinies. . .

The woman in the book's dust-jacket photograph managed such a feat. One wonders how. For there was also the problem of "the 'old-Country' girl, brought up amongst the servant keeping . . . class," come to Canada to act as "home help," with her own understanding of the employer's assurance that she would be "treated like one of the family." The help's expectations of that phrase might include tea service but definitely not charwoman's labours.

Selections in *A Flannel Shirt and Liberty* point out other difficult aspects of the British gentlewoman's emigration to the Canadian West. The host communities resented the English, evidenced by the signs "No English Need Apply." The laws denied single-women immigrants homestead grants. Those were shocks to the British lady newcomers and for students today.

Susan Jackel's editorial comments in her introduction and on individual selections provide solid academic discussion of these phenomena of Western Canadian women's history. They also raise questions for future research. Was there a British women's "network" in unions or political groups in turn-of-the-century Western Canada? Were not British emigrant gentlewomen crucial in shaping prairie politics and culture? Why the "surprising" number of women in the photograph of the Canadian Women's Press Club in Calgary in 1913 (plate 27)? Where did they come from? Where did they go?

Women and World Change: Equity Issues in Development

edited by Naomi Black and Ann Baker Cottrell, Sage, 1981, paperback, $14.95.

Louise Mahood

What first becomes apparent when one reads *Women and World Change* is that although the book consists solely of the writings of feminist scholars, not one attempt is made to blame men for world development. Rather than point accusing fingers, Naomi Black, Ann Baker Cottrell, and the other contributors set out to analyse where women have been and are today as a result of world development, in the hope that equity will emerge from an understanding of the current situation.

This book is divided into parts, or, more precisely, themes. Thelma McCormick, the author of the first part, extrapolates on different theories of world development. Since her writing is very dense, it could easily discourage readers from completing the rest of the book; however, I discovered that it is worthwhile to persist. The second section deals with the impact of change on women. In Rae Lesser Blumberg's discussion of the necessary presence of women in a poor, rural, third-world community, she suggests that the Marxist doctrine of distributing produce equally among producers would better the situation for women. Janet Salaff investigates the need and desire of Singapore women to work outside of the home in order to survive. A. Lynn Bolles discusses formal and informal work that women do in Kingston, Jamaica. Unfortunately, Bolles never develops her theme beyond suggesting that external forces are the only factors that cause changes in the way women manage to survive. Nanciellen Davis examines the way in which women lose power in the home, particularly as a result of a decline in the fishing industry.

Social policies and their effect on women are examined in the book's fourth part by Katharine Newman, Barbara Jancer, and Mary Ruggie, who write of the Communist sphere, Africa, and Britain and Sweden respectively. All the writers in this section successfully develop the idea that no matter where women are situated in the world today, they suffer to some degree from inequality.

The last major section deals with women as agents of social change: women helping women. Bourque and Warren note that women are present in the Belude government, but that affirmative action also exists. I found Barbara N. Ramusack's chapter intriguing because she describes Eleanor Rathbone's involvement in helping improve the status of Indian women, the very women who rejected Rathbone herself because she was English. This rejection was due to the fact that Rathbone's ideas were ahead of those of her Indian female counterparts. Naomi Black outlines the way in which early feminism seemed to reinforce the Christianity needed for everyday living in 1920s France. Possibly this was the only way in which a group like the early feminists could survive in the face of patriarchy of the period. Cottrell sums up American endeavours. Her study has more meaning when one realizes that in American politics a two-thirds majority is required to pass legislation. It is pleasing to note that Betty Friedan was the person who really opened up many women's minds to the concept of equality.

Despite the weaknesses to which I have alluded, the studies in *Women and World Change* manage to convey the need for women, whether in a third-world country or developed nation, to realize that women are being deprived of equality as the world is developing. This book is a good resource for women's studies and one that feminists can be proud of because it evidences a positive change in feminist scholarship. Feminist scholars have learned that it is better to analyse women rather than to blame men.

> The more we understand of women's position in all cultures and periods, the more we are aware that 'Development' has not significantly altered women's subordination.

This realization enables us to work toward equality with a new awareness.

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