

Whaling Station 1910', Stephanie Judy's 'Narrative No.12', and Myra MacFarlane's 'Women Weaving Colours into White' carry an inescapable sense of the world of perception slipping, abruptly, daz- zlingly, into art — the intimate moment when the world makes poetry and the poet is allowed as privileged observer. MacFarlane's poem, for instance, can be read almost as a photographic image, or, better, a painting super-realistic full of stark stripped detail of the scene as observed — the women, the weaving, the sun, butterflies, or- chids. But then, dramatically, the scene reported becomes scene animate: 'Fingers are birds/flying through screens/and leaving fine trails of themselves:/ sudden as humming birds/sucking ideas for nectar/they hover and plunge/while patterns form and hum.'

The world, the poet, the poem become one entity; art happens.

In summary, then, this anthology is a tour that I can recommend. While I don't feel any single poet is adequately represented (this may be impossible in anthology form), each single poem deserves and rewards study. There is little chaff here. For some, the anthology's chief value will be the introduction to new voices. For others, the inclusion of better-known poets may make this a useful book for teaching purposes. For those intrigued by the process of art, there may be clues here. ☉

A Pioneer Gentle- woman in British Columbia: The Recollections of Susan Allison

Edited by Margaret Grimsby, University of British Columbia Press, 1976, pp.144, paperback

\$7.95

Rainer Baehre

Susan Allison was a gentlewoman in the tradition of Catharine Parr Traill, Anne Langton, the Strickland sisters, and others. As a teenager in the mid-19th century, she left the effete confines of English upper-class society, and shortly after became one of the very earliest non-Indian settlers of the remote backwoods of British Columbia in the Okanagan and Simalkameen valleys. Margaret Ormsby, the noted Canadian historian, has edited and written an introduction to Allison's recollections — the latter put on paper during the 1920s when their 80-year-old author had to stop writing periodically because her pen shook in her hand. Ormsby's introduction and Allison's recollections (despite some limitations) provide a highly readable account of, and a penetrating glimpse into, the social landscape of frontier British Columbia. Moreover, their publication helps to commemorate the contributions of a remarkable human being to Canadian 'nation building' (that over- worked, misleading, but still useful phrase).

This edition is barely four years old. Yet, one cannot help but remark that Ormsby's introduction, detailed and well-written as it is, is already somewhat dated in its approach. Compare it with another documentary collection just published, *Pioneer and Gentlewomen of British North America, 1713-1867*, and one observes that Ormsby almost wholly emphasizes what Allison saw of early British Columbia, of noted local figures, and of the province's growth. A much greater emphasis should undoubtedly, and rightly, have been placed

on Allison herself, her expectations, her status, her perceptions of marriage, and so forth.

One item only touched upon by Ormsby is the transformation of Allison from a gentlewoman to a pioneer. Interestingly, the book cover is a portrait painted of Allison before she departed from England. One sees a prim and proper young miss, barely 15. The fetters of the Victorian female 'proper sphere' are very much in evidence here. In the portrait, she is sitting passively on a stuffed, carved chair gazing at the artist, dressed in a green satin gown with lace collar and cuffs, bedecked in jewelry and holding a fan.

Her later life was a virtual antithesis to this picture of her. After arriving in British Columbia Allison was forced to find a job partly because her stepfather deserted the family and partly because she was un- married. She worked in some of the few respectable occupations open to a woman of her class, namely, being a governess, seamstress, and teacher. Her marriage to a cattle rancher, the son of an English surgeon, subsequently changed both her lifestyle and at- titudes. While remaining largely subservient to her husband, Allison's pioneering did liberate her somewhat — at least in her own mind.

During this stage of her life, she did become responsible for the so- called womanly tasks of the household. She engaged in housekeeping and cooking helped by servants; and, she raised 14 children who came into the world without formal medical assistance except for their father and an In- dian woman being present at birth. But, Allison also became indispensable to the

operation of the pioneer household in other less traditional ways. She participated in fur trading, bookkeeping, running the ranch, a trading post and a post office alone during her husband's frequent absences. Although the work was onerous, she described this period in her life as her 'camping days.' It was 'the wild, free life I ever loved till age and infirmity put an end to it,' she wrote. What can this possibly tell us? Some gen- tlewomen such as Susanna Moodie, dutifully, but reluc- tantly, followed their husbands into the backwoods of Canada. Is it possible, however, that some of these women might have chosen to marry pioneers, whether consciously or un- consciously, in their effort to escape the suffocating and alienating constraints of the Victorian female role? Does Allison fit this mould? If so, how atypical was she? If not, might such a motivation be present in others?

In another vein, Ormsby gives much credit to Allison for her views on 'the degradation of the Indians.' Allison's at- titudes, however, are even more surprising when placed into a larger context. First of all, she had genuine respect for B.C. Indians at a time when many other white settlers, including government officials, were overtly racist in both rhetoric and policy. Though Allison shows certain cultural biases, she also interacted at a social level with Indian women in a manner very much opposite, for in- stance, to those European women in the fur-trade who openly disassociated themselves from their Indian and half-breed counterparts, even when they hap- pened to live within the same trading post. And, perhaps most im- portantly, Allison

realized how destructive whites had been to the aboriginal population, whether because of selling alcohol or mere land greed. She kept the company of Indians; they worked for her; they helped her in the time of need and vice versa; they taught her folk medicine; and, they confided their legends to her. Allison reveals more than sympathy. She often empathized with their plight as is indicated by such comments as, 'My husband always laughed at Indian yarns but I did not for I thought there must be some foundation'; 'Penextitza (a local chief) was a perfect gentleman . . . that man was considered uncivilized by our civilized people'; and, 'I knew them . . . while they were still people . . . a passing people . . . The White man has much to be ashamed of in his treatment of the rightful owners of the land.' Such feelings, as Ormsby points out, made Allison decide to record their lives, manners, and customs. In this era, she was the only person in British Columbia to do so.

A final aspect of Allison's recollections which I found noteworthy, and which I will comment upon here as it is not dealt with in any depth in the introduction, was Allison's transcendence of her class origins to some degree. She was the product of an upper class English household and had been educated in Greek, Latin, and French at a private girls' school. In sharp contrast to the vast majority of 19th century emigrants, Allison and her family travelled first class by ship from England to British Columbia. Also indicative of her privileged beginnings were the family's possessions. They brought with them a little rosewood piano, a silver candelabra,

Chinese swords, porcelain figurines, her college books, painted portraits, and a new wardrobe including a riding habit. Indeed, when she began her honeymoon, Allison wore the riding habit and rode sidesaddle into the Hope Mountains. But, by this time, as a newcomer, she had been forced to live in a shack where a blanket served as a door and sheets were used as window blinds. She had also learned to wash clothes, something she had never done before — 'we bent over the bath and rubbed with our hands till they bled and our backs felt broken'.

While Allison and her husband remained middle-class by Canadian standards — hiring workers, owning a considerable tract of property, and mixing with the local elite — she did endure continual hardships and some crises including losing her home and possessions on two separate occasions, once by fire and another time by flood. In the end, most of her property was sold to pay debts, and Allison ended up living quite modestly at the end of her life, especially after the death of her husband. She had never, at any time after coming to the province, sought to reestablish her former genteel existence. She expressed no obvious bitterness. Rather she looked back at her pioneer experiences philosophically and with satisfaction. For example, on reflecting when her cabin burnt to the ground and a local Indian brought provisions and clothes from the neighbours, she comments: 'It was a great experience, and I learned the real value of things by it.' Do the changes in attitude as manifested by Allison tell us something about the creation of a distinctly Canadian identity? This new

attitude is a rejection of British upper class society and its aspirations in many respects (although it appears to reflect the paternal sense of social responsibility towards the lower classes evident among the pre-industrial gentry of English society.) It also represents an implicit refusal of the materialistic/individualistic/republican values attributed to American society in this period. Is this combination of attitudes and values peculiarly Canadian? If so, what role did women have in fostering and perpetuating these attitudes. Women were, after all, the main instruments of socialization as mothers and teachers.

In sum, Margaret Ormsby, with her introduction, has brought a significant work to public attention. My own comments are meant less as criticisms than as remarks on the richness of these recollections. This document reaffirms the relevance of such material not only to our understanding of women's history, but to Canadian history in general. ©

The Majority Finds Its Past: Placing Women in History

Gerda Lerner. *New York and Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1979, pp.217, \$17.25*

Elizabeth Fox-Genovese

It is fitting that Gerda Lerner should introduce this collection of her essays in women's history, *The Majority Finds Its Past*, with 'autobiographical notes.' She has played a unique role in establishing women's history as the thriving field it has become; in delineating its appropriate contours; in searching for a method and a theory appropriate to its practice; in unearthing the sources necessary to its writing; and in insisting

not merely upon its autonomy and integrity, but upon its inescapable centrality to any worthy history of humankind. In this respect, Lerner's career encompasses the first phase — what she herself would call the prehistory — of contemporary women's history. Beginning graduate school, as a mature woman — established writer, mother of two grown children — in 1963, the year of *The Feminine Mystique*, Lerner developed as a professional historian apace with the new feminist movement. The essays assembled here reflect the feminist commitment that inspired her quest for professional training, informed the course of her graduate studies, and continues to motivate her writing and teaching.

These 11 essays, written during the past decade, offer a splendid introduction to women's history in the United States. Of the 11, five exemplify Lerner's scholarly contributions: *The Lady and the Mill Girl: Changes in the Status of Women in the Age of Jackson*; *'Black Women in the United States: A Problem in Historiography and Interpretation*'; *'Community Work of Black Club Women*'; *'Black and White Women in Interaction and Confrontation*'; and *'The Political Activities of Antislavery Women*.' The remaining six include four on theory and method, two on feminism (contemporary and historical), and one on the changing status and experience of the housewife. The historical and topical/theoretical pieces complement each other beautifully. Lerner writes movingly of the relationship between women's history and feminist practice in her personal experience and maintains that feminist scholars have 'become a community of scholars, vitally interested and involved in each other's work, trying to combat