

M. G. McClung.

WOMEN IN CANADIAN LITERATURE.

Toronto: Fitzhenry & Whiteside Limited, 1977.

96 pp. \$4.95.

Women in Canadian Literature offers a summary of Canadian women writers from the 18th century to the present. Most of M.G. McClung's attention is devoted to 20th century writers, indeed contemporary writers, for it is in the 20th century that our literature has flourished. Her introduction to the subject concludes with a brief essay on Margaret Laurence and Margaret Atwood, while for each section of the book McClung provides a short bibliography and a few topics for further study. The illustrations, especially the photographs of the artists and the reproductions of title pages, are interesting.

There are, however, some serious limitations to a study of this sort. The discussion of French-Canadian women — Gabrielle Roy, Anne Hébert, Marie-Claire Blais — is cursory and superficial; there are no French critical works cited in the bibliography, although many fine studies have been written in French. Because the discussion of individuals, English as well as French, is so brief, there are some pernicious generalizations: "In 'Progressive Insanities of a Pioneer', Margaret Atwood begins her use of a recurring theme, escape through madness." "Escape" is an inappropriate term. In the poem, the pioneer is not escaping but succumbing, while the "madness" or vision in *Surfacing* is the entrance to truth.

McClung's assessment of the Canadian novel is equally misleading:

In the last generation, Canadian fiction has finally grown up. The day of the sentimental and moral tale, with its closed ending, seems to be over. The realistic open-ended novel, more concerned with individual problems than with love duets, is here to stay. (p. 62).

Few writers would claim that realism, however defined, is "here to stay," and few of our women writers are proving their literary maturity with such novels — are *The Double Hook*, *Surfacing*, *The Diviners*, *Bear*, or *Tête Blanche* realistic?

There is little fresh information offered on Canadian women writers in this study, although the discussions of Livesay, Laurence, and Atwood are adequate, and details such as Phyllis Gotlieb's popularity as a Science Fiction writer in the United States are welcome. The brevity of the book combined with the historical breadth of the study caused M. G. McClung to miss a chance to say something of critical importance about our women writers. Indeed, *Women in Canadian Literature* will be of use only to these who are unfamiliar with our literature.

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