criminating ignorance that you make your professor’s assignment openly shabby and suspect. If Helwig had scaled down her ambitions and used a map of developments in feminist and psychoanalytic theory, she might have produced a very good critical article about an awful group of Jello-cultural feminist poems by Jan Conn, Susan Glickman and Rosemary Sullivan in the 1984 Mary di Michele edited collection Anything is Possible. However, Helwig quotes from these poems and others to try to convince that all feminist poetry is “weak” (ideological), and that feminist poets are afraid of “strong” sexual imagery. Given the essay’s endnote references to the work of poets Daphne Marlatt and Lola Lemire Tostevin, and critic Barbara Godard, Helwig cannot be innocent of jouissance or l’écriture féminine. Rather, she chooses to ignore brilliant explorations of subjective sexualization and women’s bodies for the conservative ideological category “sexuality” (panting, de-panted Irving Layton).

Marco LoVerso’s antidotal Bakhtin/formalist reading of the intelligent, powerfully public works of Margaret Atwood also suffers palpably from his editor’s weirdly sensitive/insensitive blindspot to feminism. LoVerso’s inclusion of The Handmaid’s Tale in his discussion of Atwood’s art is quite problematic given the novel’s serious jab at the masculinist genre of science fiction from a conscious, ironic place beside a small tradition of feminist utopias. The Handmaid’s Tale is obviously the least serious of Atwood’s creations and the edgiest, most despairing of her works, predicated as it is on a huge nuclear-ecological disaster that not only stops but weirdly mocks essential liberal change in patriarchal power relations. Here, LoVerso’s precious reminder that Atwood has not created a “living evil character” is misdirected given the horribly bent complacency in the discourses within this strangely formulative tale.

How did ECW come to publish this weird, usual selection of contemporary academic essays? Some roundabout comments.

I think there is a “nice,” orderly, superficially political notion of progress in ECW Press editor Robert Lecker’s post modern criticism. I cannot link this feeling to anything more concrete than Professor Lecker’s silent ease in On the Line, with the slovenly sense of fun found in so many of John Metcalf’s otherwise conventional short stories, next to his delicate, abstract admiration of the tragic troping fun of a “nice” extensive Robert Kroetsch. Too, Professor Lecker and John Metcalf might agree that fiction and its criticism are primarily safe from very useful, less textual, factual connections that strongly appropriate or deviate.

But just consider The Literary History of Canada or What is a Canadian Literature? It would contain the writers who are read and were read in this country — the women. And it would use the tools of sociology, anthropology, philosophy and history, sometimes in a feminist Foucaultish way, together with feminist literary and psychoanalytic theory, autobiographical writing, biography and emotionally considered Derridean strategies. Such a book would be plainly ruptured at times and dotted with brilliant canny insights. (What riches Canada has for late twentieth-century cultural criticism in its women writers!)

Canadian literary neo-conservatives cannot seem to feel how amazingly forward such a modest intellectual territory is. We are supposed to find Carry on Bumping a very interesting or a very useful game and for everyone. Golly.

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NOTES


The Stairway is a reprint of an important Canadian feminist classic. It was published originally in Boston as the diary of Alice Chown, covering the years from 1906 to 1919. Although many of the entries were written for the publication, several years after the events happened, this does not detract from the piece. Alice Chown published her diary not so much for its merits as an autobiography, but in the hope that it “might give individuals faith in themselves” (p. 4). If her thoughts on feminism, pacifism and socialism were as challenging for her contemporaries as they are for the modern-day reader, she was truly successful in her goals. This edition includes a lengthy essay written by her great-great niece, Diana Chown, chronicling Alice’s life right up to her death in 1949. Throughout the book and the introductory essay, Alice’s implicit belief in the goodness of humankind comes through and Diana’s essay places Alice’s thought and activities in the context of Canadian reform history.
At another level, *The Stairway* is important as the historical account of one woman’s coming of age, for Alice might as aptly have called her book “Life Begins at Forty.” When the story opens, Alice’s mother has just died. Alice, now forty, has spent the past twenty years of her life caring for her semi-invalid mother, but life is far from over for Alice. That day, she wrote: “Today I am free. My first day of freedom! It is my new birth!” (p. 5) New birth for Alice meant testing her radical ideas and, as she did so, she found herself estranged from the established Kingston and Toronto societies to which her family belonged. Thus it seems particularly appropriate that her great-great niece found herself estranged from the established Kingston and Toronto societies to which her family belonged. 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