

SHE CAME TO THE RESCUE;
THE LIFE AND WRITINGS OF NELLIE L. McCLUNG, FEMINIST

Elsa Schieder

A Thesis
in
The Department
of
English

Presented in Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements
for the Degree of Master of Arts in English at
Concordia University
Montreal, Quebec, Canada

August 1982

©

Elsa Schieder, 1982

ABSTRACT

SHE CAME TO THE RESCUE:

THE LIFE AND WRITINGS OF NELLIE L. McCLUNG, FEMINIST

Elsa Schieder

Nellie L. McClung is best remembered as a turn-of-the-century feminist who fought for women's enfranchisement. She was also, however, an immensely popular author who cared about the quality and content of her writings, and their impact.

She wrote from within the community, confirming many of its values. Her fiction was acclaimed for its portrayals of prairie reality. The pioneer environment encouraged self-reliance; McClung's central character is often a shero, not a female hero but a strong, capable, nurturing woman.

McClung was also a first-rate humorist, who relied on logic to demolish her opponents' arguments. The essays collected in In Times like These are among the most witty and incisive in Canadian literature.

When present-day critics do not overlook her writings altogether, they usually present her as a priggish and dishonestly cheerful purveyor of tractarian melodrama.

I contend that the dishonesty is more often theirs. On her own terms, as well as by the standards of most present-day feminist literary critics, Nellie McClung was a significant author. Casual dismissals of her work are unjust.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENT

I wish to thank Professor Patricia Morley for her patience, guidance and encouragement during the preparation of this thesis.

CONTENTS

INTRODUCTION	1
PART I. Within the Community: The Life and Writings of Nellie L. McClung	
I. Hard Work, Compassion and Good Humor	8
II. Tears, Sighs and "Cliff-hangers"	18
III. The Self-reliant <u>Shero</u>	27
IV. Lifters and Leaners	45
V. Simplifications, Evasions and Distortions	56
VI. A Qualified Tolerance	77
VII. The Power of Words	89
VIII. Difficult Harvests	103
PART II. Toward a Positive Appraisal of the Writings of Nellie L. McClung	
I. Several Critical Appraisals	130
II. From "Objective" Literary Criticism to Feminist Critical Methodologies	146
III. A Positive Appraisal	184
<hr/>	
BIBLIOGRAPHY	201

Introduction

The Woman, the Writings

Nellie Letitia Mooney McClung was a visionary and an activist, a suffragette, prohibitionist, politicizer, politician--as well as a prolific writer.

Her dates, 1873 to 1951, place her in and beyond the time of the first Anglo-European large-scale feminist movement, which occurred between approximately 1848 and 1925. During the course of this movement, the first woman's rights convention was held, suffragettes chained themselves to the railings of the British House of Commons, and three women set up the first American birth control clinic.

In Canada, Nellie McClung was one of the chief popularizers of the prairie Votes for Women Movement. She headed the triumphant Mock Parliament drama that was instrumental to women's enfranchisement in Manitoba. She also crusaded for wider rights for women: the right to homestead; to keep the children when a marriage broke up; to be part-owners of family property; to get equal pay for equal work.¹ She wrote best-sellers, campaigned for and won a seat on the Alberta legislature, and chalked up many firsts: first and only woman

¹The two women magistrates in Alberta received one-third the salary of the men magistrates: see Candace Savage, Our Nell (Saskatoon: Western Producer Prairie Books, 1979), p. 153.

delegate at the Canadian War Conference of 1918; first woman delegate to represent Canadian Methodism at a World Ecumenical Conference; first woman on the C.B.C. (Canadian Broadcasting Corporation) board of directors.

She managed to do all this with less fuss than old-time heroes made chopping up dragons. And they usually tackled only one dragon each. Not McClung. To the best of her ability, she came to the rescue, not of one fair maiden, but of all women: of women who were forced to work in sweatshops because few better jobs were open to them; of women who were abused, not by the wicked stepmothers of fairy tales, but by their husbands and fathers.

In addition to her heroic efforts in the public domain, McClung was a first-rate wife and mother--and a second-rate businessperson.²

There is more. No matter how serious her message, McClung's favorite means of delivering it included humor. When he was three, her youngest son was taught to introduce himself by saying, "I am the son of a suffragette and I have never known a mother's love." She deflated the opposition by making fun of its arguments.

McClung did have major failings. For one, she believed in relatively simplistic solutions. She did not, until long after the vote was won, understand that getting women the vote would not necessarily lead to equal rights for women. This

²Her foray into sheep-farming, for example, while the inspiration for a story, was not a financial success.

lack of insight was, for a time, a strength. She was able to press for Votes for Women as the cure for what was wrong with society.

Another weakness was her inability to grasp the basis of the opposition to many of her demands. She tended to hold that human beings were reasonable; if only they could be convinced of the error of their ways, they would change. Her incomprehension of the extent of human irrationality stemmed from her misconception about human nature; she had largely swallowed the Aristotelian dictum that men are reasonable.

Once more, her unawareness long worked to her advantage. Because she believed in the possibility of accomplishing radical changes in society through debate, she had nothing to stop her from trying to use this method--and from occasionally succeeding.

Nellie McClung's life was one of achievement. She was a woman of great warmth, ability, perseverance and courage, who attained many of her goals in her lifetime. She is still remembered as a turn-of-the-century feminist who fought for Votes for Women. Almost every account of the Canadian prairie suffrage movement acknowledges her political contributions.

Far fewer appraisals of the development of Canadian literature, however, portray her positively. In fact, McClung the writer, unlike McClung the political activist, is currently disparaged.

Still, Nellie L. McClung³ was an author who cared about

³This is her authorial signature. McClung had no patience with editors who left out the L.

the quality and content of her writings, and their impact:

I wanted to write; to do for the people around me what Dickens had done for his people. I wanted to be a voice for the voiceless as he had been a defender of the weak.⁴

I remembered the lines from Milton about fame being the spur that makes people scorn delights and live laborious days. Yet it was not fame that I craved but something infinitely greater. I wanted to reveal humanity; to make people understand each other; to make the commonplace divine. (CW 282)

In order to achieve these ends, between 1908 and 1951 McClung wrote five novels, two novellas, two volumes of autobiography, and hundreds of poems, short stories and essays. For over twenty years, her output averaged one published short work a week. Many of her short works, after coming out in newspapers and magazines, were issued in collections.

Her first novel, Sowing Seeds in Danny (1908), sold over 100,000 copies--no mean feat in a country with a population of six million--making it the biggest Canadian best-seller to that date.⁵ Subsequent works also reached a wide audience. For example, Painted Fires, her last novel (1925), was a huge international success: it was translated into several languages within a year of its publication, and serialized from the United States to Finland.

⁴Nellie L. McClung, Clearing in the West (Toronto: Thomas Allen, 1964), p. 281. Further references to this work will be noted in the text by CW followed by the page number.

⁵Sowing Seeds in Danny holds this record, despite the fact that L.M. Montgomery's more durable and eventually more successful Anne of Green Gables came out in the same year.

Despite their initial popularity, most of McClung's works are out of print. In 1970, they all were. Due largely to the resurgence of feminism, as well as to an upsurge of Canadian nationalism, two books--out of sixteen--have been reissued.⁶ Neither contains any of her fiction.

Most present-day literary critics are not disturbed by her current lack of reputation as a writer. In fact, when they do not overlook her altogether, they usually present her as a priggish and dishonestly cheerful purveyor of tractarian melodrama. The dishonesty is more often theirs.

I will begin by describing the influences that molded the woman who sought to make Canada "the land of the fair deal" (TLT 95). The biographical material will be used to demonstrate the connections between McClung's ideology, political and social, and her writings. Clearly, her work cannot be understood except in the context of her life and times. As well, McClung's writings, opinions and life are so consonant that a denigration of her writings includes at least a partial denigration of her life and opinions.

The writings will be examined with special emphasis on their adherence to and yet subversion of the most prevalent literary conventions and ideology of her time. Their current

⁶The two are Clearing in the West, the first volume of her autobiography, and In Times like These (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1980), a collection of her essays. Further references to In Times like These will be noted in the text by TLT followed by the page number.

unpopularity and general lack of availability will be linked to changing literary fashions and anti-feminist biases, styles and slants usually disguised as objective standards of literary excellence.

Finally, I will demonstrate the positive qualities of these writings which have undergone almost half a century of critical disparagement. A feminist methodology of literary criticism will be used to suggest a reappraisal of the value of her writings.

PART I

Within the Community:

The Life and Writings of Nellie L. McClung

I. Hard Work, Compassion and Good Humor¹

Some lives are best understood by examining the breaks in continuity, the rebellions against instilled values. McClung's is not one of these. Instead, her life is a positive reflection of many of the influences that molded her, and her works are an expression of the values she lived by. For example, Nellie Letitia, the sixth and last child of Letitia McCurdy Mooney and John Mooney,² was a loved child who grew up to be a warm and compassionate woman whose central characters are almost invariably caring people.

Nellie was born in 1873. Her parents owned a farm in Grey County, Ontario. The area was beautiful, the soil poor and rocky. The work ethic was trained into Nellie early; her family managed through continuous hard work. Her mother made soap and shoe polish, spun, dyed, wove and sewed, in addition to doing her daily chores. She could never stand to see anyone idle; Nellie evaded her: "I often wished we could all slow down a bit. I wanted to hear more talk. I wanted to do

¹The sources for the biographical information on McClung in this and the following chapters are her two volumes of autobiography, Clearing in the West and The Stream Runs Fast (Toronto: Thomas Allen, 1945), and Candace Savage's Our Nell. Further references to The Stream Runs Fast will be noted in the text by SRF followed by the page number.

²As was customary, Nellie took her husband's surname, McClung, upon marriage.

some of it myself. It seemed too "bad to be always rushing. Early to bed and early to rise. Tomorrow always crashing on the heels of today" (CW 27). Nellie spent as much time as possible out of her mother's sight.

Still, Nellie was soon taught to help. She became a lifelong hard worker, as are her most positively presented characters.

Nellie rebelled against the unceasing round of work, not at work. She did not slow down until her last decade, and then only because of ill health. Her priorities were not those of her parents: subsistence was never an issue for the middle-class adult. But she was active in community affairs, in local reform groups, then in provincial and federal political campaigns, in public lecturing. She also read widely and wrote volumes. Further, like her parents, she had no interest in time-killers, in bridge parties and thés-dansants. In fact, it is apparent, when reading her fiction, that McClung could not understand laziness: she does not attempt more than superficial descriptions of people who have no desire to accomplish.

She needed to be a "superwoman." She was the mother of four young children, and an active member of the Women's Christian Temperance Union (W.C.T.U.), at the time she wrote her first novel. She was helped by her mother-in-law's encouragement, and by the assistance of a housekeeper; she had also learned to get things done.

Fortunately for both McClung and her readers, she did not learn only the importance of keeping her nose to the

grindstone. One of her earliest memories is of being out in the barn with her father, imitating two visiting aunts for his benefit. She recalled that:

I loved to listen to them and get their stories just as they told them, which was not always easy, for the aunts to save time both talked at once. It was not only their words, but their peculiar accent that gave my recital merit. They had a queer droning way of speaking. (CW 21-22)

As far as the aunts were concerned, Nellie was a remarkably nice and quiet child. Her mother, though, objected to her mocking the two elderly women. Her father contended it did the aunts no harm, and that a little fun was as good as a meal.

Her mother's disapproval did not stop Nellie. It did make her careful never to use humor cruelly.

Like her father, she always held that good humor and fun were vital ingredients to a life worth living. She saw how grim, drab and dreary people became when they lived only for work. In "Poison," a man is described as

dour-faced, gloomy and cynical, believing the worst of everyone, not only believing, but hoping. [He] had wrapped himself in a mantle of his own good deeds, believing that any man who pays his debts and works his farm well and supports his family has earned the right to be disagreeable. So he went about with a perpetual frown, and seldom spoke except to find fault.³

This was not for Nellie. She believed in picnics and parties and pleasure, as long as these did not lead to the neglect of work. Balance was needed. Just as it was in humor.

³Nellie L. McClung, "Poison," Flowers for the Living (Toronto: Thomas Allen, 1931), p. 154.

She continued to seem the perfect audience. In her fifties, she wrote that when she wondered where her life had gone, she came to the conclusion that she had talked it away--or not talked, listened. What she heard continued to be used: much of her fiction conveys her amused observations of the people around her.

But she made fun of human weaknesses and idiosyncracies, not of people. In When Christmas Crossed "the Peace," two men complain about the new R.C.M.P. officer's knack for finding the liquor smuggled into the area:

"The undertaker shipped in a few coffins last week, gettin' ready for the winter trade, and he [the officer] went through them! . . . That's what I call insulting the dead!"

"Did he find anythin' in the coffins? . . ."

"Sure, he found it--ain't I tellin' you-- there's nothin' safe or sacred anymore--."4

In Sowing Seeds in Danny, Pearlie Watson is based on Nellie's childhood self. Throughout the book, McClung gently pokes fun at her own characteristics.

In the novels of Jane Austen, for example, it soon becomes evident that, intellectually, emotionally and morally, most people are incorrigibly below the author's standards. In McClung's fiction and non-fiction, people's differences do not put them beyond the pale.

Even when her targets were identifiable opponents, she saw and portrayed them as misguided, not evil. The success of the Mock Parliament, in which roles were reversed and men

⁴Nellie L. McClung, When Christmas Crossed "The Peace" (Toronto: Thomas Allen, 1923), pp. 15-16.

begged women for the vote, relied largely on her ability to ridicule the opposition's arguments and, with McClung playing the Premier, on her mimicry of him. Yet after women had gained the vote, she was able to be friends with the man whose mannerisms she had imitated and whose position she had derided. As a niece remembered: "Some of people's actions, she hated and deplored, but never the people themselves. She did not despise anyone. She understood the conflicts and conditions which induced such behavior. Her sparkling wit and ready tongue, she never employed cruelly or vindictively."⁵

Still, humor was ever one of her best weapons. While consideration for others stopped her from making personal attacks, involvement in causes gave her wit an outlet. She was frequently able to convert her audience by making the opposition's stances ludicrous:

'I will not have my wife sit in Parliament,' [a] man cried in alarm, when he was asked to sign a petition giving women full right of franchise. . . . We delicately and tactfully declared that his wife . . . would not be asked to go to Parliament by any of us-- . . . But he would not sign. He saw his 'Minnie' climbing the slippery ladder of political fame. . . . he felt it coming, the sacrifice would fall on his one little ewe lamb. (TLT 57)

A New Zealander [women had the vote in New Zealand] once wrote home to a friend in England advising him to fight hard against woman suffrage. 'Don't ever let the wimmin vote, Bill,' he wrote. 'They are good servants, but bad masters. Over there you can knock your wife about for five shillings, but here we does jail for it.' (TLT 93)

It is quite noticeable that each of the church dignitaries who have opposed women's entry into the 'church courts has' . . . called the world to witness

⁵Ruth Scott, "My Aunt Nellie," Nellie L. McClung, ed. M.J.G. McMullen (Winnipeg: Manitoba Travel and Convention Centre, 1965), p.6.

the fact that he loves his mother and is not ashamed to say so--which declaration is all the more remarkable because no person was asking or particularly interested in his personal affairs. (TLT 72)

Time after time McClung's humor relied on logic to expose the absurdity of the beliefs of others. Further, through humor, she communicated that the opposition's position was not merely wrong, but--much worse--laughable.

While the serious intent behind much of her adult humor did not form part of Nellie's mockery of her aunts, she was even then serious about many things--especially the sufferings of others. For example, Lizzie, an older sister, assured her that the god they believed in had made pigs to be eaten; yet Nellie could not bear to hear their death squeals. Her concern was not ridiculed. Instead, Lizzie told her their father hated to see any animal suffer: he had learned to kill the pigs as efficiently as possible to minimize their pain.

Nellie's compassion for pigs, like her father's, did not make either of them vegetarian. Her sympathy for people made relieving the unhappiness of others a lifelong goal.

In fact, for her, writing was not primarily a means of expressing her creativity. "No one should put pen to paper unless he or she had something to say that would amuse, entertain, instruct, inform, comfort or guide the reader" (SRF 69)--this was her Writer's Creed. Her writings, though not written solely to uplift and educate, were a major means of communicating her ideas. Be Good to Yourself is the title of one of her collections of short stories and essays; Flowers for the Living is the title of another. McClung learned to satisfy, simultaneously, her father's values without offending her mother's: she used her

talent for humor in ways which were morally upright.

It was not only compassion, however, that made Nellie reach outside her family by her work in the W.C.T.U., by her writings and other political activities. Though no member of her family had reached as far outside, her mother had "a sense of duty that would drive her through fire and water" (GW 173); she was always ready to lend neighbors a helping hand. Nellie's father was one of the leading citizens of Grey County, intent on establishing a church and a school. Later on, when the family had moved to homestead in Manitoba, her parents, older than most of the other settlers, were often turned to for assistance and advice. McClung was over seventy when she wrote: "I could never believe that minding one's own business was much of a virtue; but it's a fine excuse for doing nothing" (SRF 212). No member of her family would have disagreed. Throughout her life, McClung expressed, and lived by, her family's belief in the importance of involvement.

This may help account for McClung's optimism, and for her difference in outlook from Jane Austen. Austen wrote from the position of a powerless observer, someone who even hid the fact that she wrote. Nellie had a positive alternative to looking down at people: she worked to change them.

Nellie's involvement in social action was linked to her religious beliefs. Her mother was a devout Presbyterian, her father a Methodist. Nellie's first churchgoing was to a revival meeting, where she agreed to be "saved" (and where she almost made the minister laugh by staring at him with one eye closed and one open).

But personal salvation was not the only aim of Methodism: it held that society needed to be reformed--and therefore reinforced Nellie's at-home training on the importance of working to make the world a better place.

Her religion remained important to her throughout her life. The Sunday School library was where she found the few classics she read as a child. Her mother-in-law, a minister's wife, admired Nellie's writings and supported her many political activities. The suffrage movement was endorsed by many ministers.

Her own life was, for the most part, happy. Her version of Christianity "confirmed" her right to be optimistic and encouraged her involvement in the community. As well, it promised a potential happy-ever-after for all: unhappy endings in life could be cancelled out by eternal joy in an afterlife.

Her faith was not shaken until World War I, when she was over forty. During the war years, instead of remaining complacently secure in her belief in the goodness of her omnipotent god, she prayed to be allowed to run blindfolded past places too dark and frightening to bear otherwise (SRF 144). Later she wrote that, could she go back, she would instead ask for light. In the last few decades of her life, McClung frequently mentioned that when she met her god (after death, according to her religion), she would have a lot of questions for him. But nothing made her reject the religion of her parents, as nothing caused her to denigrate most of their other values.

And the beliefs of her parents were the beliefs of the community. Hard work, familial values, concern for others and

the Protestant faith were widely lauded. A sense of humor, while not generally considered essential, was appreciated by most. By being a well-adjusted family member, Nellie was automatically a member in good standing of most North American communities.

Nellie L. McClung's first novel was Canada's biggest best-seller to that date. Her popularity is easy to understand: she wrote from within the group, voiced the hopes and concerns of many. Yet she wrote from a privileged position, from the viewpoint of one who has tried the most widely approved recipe for well-being and found it works. In her books, she deals with alcoholism, miserliness, untimely death, unjust laws. But the central characters--like Nellie in her own life--are sure that with sufficient effort, humor and faith, all will turn out well; they also exemplify the effectiveness of their creed. Until the Depression, McClung's writings captured the dominant mood of her time.

When she was over sixty, she described her reaction to discovering, at sixteen, both Dickens and her own calling to be a writer: "The depth of my ignorance appalled me. I was bound, fettered, gagged in ignorance. What did I know of the world's great literature? My words were but the ordinary workworn words of everyday happenings, and I knew nothing of life." (CW 282) Or at any rate of that life described in most literature widely considered great. She did not know Russia, unlike Chekhov, Tolstoy, Dostoyevski. She did not know England, unlike Dickens, Austen, Eliot. She did know the Canadian prairies; and in her

trilogy about Pearlie Watson, recreated much of what she knew.

Chekhov's The Three Sisters is about the deepening despair of three sisters stranded in a small town far from Moscow. His audience loved the play, was able to empathize with the sisters' dilemma. McClung's Sowing Seeds in Danny, The Second Chance and Purple Springs recount the small events that lead to the growing prosperity of the Watsons, and to the political involvement of Pearlie. McClung was the favorite author of many of her readers, for she succeeded in setting down many of their aspirations and realities.

Dickens recorded what he knew. McClung's aim was similar: "I wanted to put into words what I knew of those women who had been too busy making history to write it" (SRF 8). In the opinions of most of her readers, she reached her goal.

II. Tears, Sighs and "Cliff-hangers"

The popularity of McClung's writings cannot be accounted for solely on the basis of her realistic portrayals of everyday life. While she may not, as an adolescent, have known much of "great literature," she did know and love the offerings of the pulp press. Like most literate members of her generation, she did not avoid being influenced by the serial melodramas with their incredible plot twists, their fainting heroines and strong heroic heroes:

The continued story was really the high point of interest for we had a whole week to speculate on the development of the plot. There was one story that shook our neighborhood to its foundation. It was called Saved, or the Bride's Sacrifice, and concerned two beautiful girls,--Jessie as fair as a lily, and Helen with blue black hair and lustrous eyes as deep as night. They each loved Herbert, and Herbert, being an obliging young fellow, not wishing to hurt anyone's feelings, married one secretly and hurriedly by the light of a guttering candle, in a peasant's hut (Jessie), and one openly with peal of organ and general high jinks, at her father's baronial castle (Helen).

This naturally brought on complications. There were storms and shipwrecks, and secret meetings in caves, with the tide rising over the rocks and cuflews screaming in the blast, there were plottings and whisperings; a woman with second sight and one with the evil eye. And did we love it?

I can remember staggering along through the snow, behind the sleigh reading the story as I walked and when I drew near home, members of the family would come out to shout at me to hurry (CW 182).

As is apparent, Nellie did not have to sneak off to read such fiction. Yet even if her family had banned all popular

literature and somehow managed to stop her from reading any, Nellie would have still been repeatedly exposed to similarly implausible plots and characters. Melodrama's black and white morality, its sudden dooms and instant redemptions accorded with the version of Christianity most accepted at the time. School primers, as well as Sunday School stories and poems, used five-hanky "cliff-hangers" to convince children of the dire consequences of straying from the straight and narrow. In her sixties McClung still remembered "The Faithful Dog" and especially

its heart-breaking climax, where the traveller, having shot his dog thinking he had gone mad, rides on and then suddenly remembers the saddle bags left behind in haste, and gallops back to find them safe with the dog, who had crawled back, leaving blood drops all the way, and now lies beside them, dead (CW 99).

If that story isn't enough to teach the reader that dogs are faithful, nothing will!

Novelist Susanna Moodie observed in 1851: "Every good work of fiction is a step towards the mental improvement of mankind."¹ J.M.S. Tompkins, writing in 1931, was more caustic: "The church-going, sermon-reading middle classes liked a good plain moral at the end of a book . . . feeling that the performance was incomplete without it."² The middle classes made up the vast majority of the reading public; and melodrama was the most emotionally affecting way to transmit a message.

¹Susannah Moodie, "A Word for the Novel Writers," Literary Garland, Vol. IX (new series), 1851, p. 351; as quoted by Marian Fowler, The Embroidered Tent (Toronto: House of Anansi Press, 1982) p. 105.

²J.M.S. Tompkins, The Popular Novel in England 1770-1800 (London: 1932), pp. 340-41; as quoted by Fowler, p. 105.

In fact, far from being "just entertainment," melodrama was the era's most popular means of conveying information and inculcating values. Dickens used it; so did Eliot, Dostoyevsky, Twain, Tolstoy, and all three Bronte sisters-- something our age tends to forget.

The events that took place in The Bride's Sacrifice, and in most pulpit-endorsed fiction, did not have much resemblance to reality. They did form the basis for the fantasy world shared by most of Nellie's contemporaries. Nellie, her family and society were at one in their taste in reading material, as they were in most of their preferences.

Nellie learned the conventions of melodrama early. By the time she was six, when the family moved from Ontario to Manitoba, she and Hannah, the sister closest to her in age, were rehearsing dialogue such as the following:

"Lorelie--may I call you Lorelie? Your loveliness has haunted me since first you crossed my path--and not one peaceful hour have I known since then, so now I must, and will know my fate. Is there a spark of hope that you might grow to love a rough warrior? Nay do not shrink!"

To which . . . Lorelie made reply with downcast eyes and blushes mantling [her] snowy brow, "How do I know--I am so young--so ignorant of the world--Sir Hector, I have so lately left my lessons" (CW 49).

Nellie had not started on her lessons; she was still a pre-schooler. But she already knew the stereotypes of male and female perfection.

Nellie did not continue to admire melodrama unreservedly. For example, it usually took place "elsewhere." Some writers churned out backwoods serials for consumption in England, and castle serials for consumption in the colonies. McClung preferred

to describe what she knew.

However, her rejection of some aspects of the genre was again in keeping with trends. She shifted her admiration from works like The Bride's Sacrifice to the far more acclaimed novels of Charles Dickens.

His books were a revelation to the sixteen-year-old Nellie: They were true-to-life in a way she was unprepared for. Yet they did not break completely with the literary conventions she was familiar with: they combined many of the elements of melodrama with the depiction of the world he knew. Dickens became her major role model.

But she did not create imitations of his works. Instead, she too kept what was emotionally true for her while avoiding many melodramatic commonplaces. Like Dickens, she retained the clear-cut morality. Unlike him, she added a New World optimism.

Dickens had the American reading public eagerly awaiting the docking of the ship that carried the installment in which sick little Nell's fate is resolved. Nell dies. In McClung's Sowing Seeds in Danny, Arthur's life hangs by an ever thinner thread for a chapter. Pearlle Watson is ready to go for a doctor when the others want to wait till morning. She eases Arthur's pain when someone else has gone to fetch the doctor, tracks down the second doctor when the first does not show up, and helps in the operation which is a success before the end of the chapter. In McClung's world, people can usually live well if they--or a friend--work hard enough; and the unhappy and misguided can be made to see the light if those who know better use the right methods.

Happy endings were not uncommon in melodrama. But the plot convolutions usually made such an outcome increasingly less possible.³ In McClung's three Pearlle Watson novels, however, the likelihood of a happy ending tends to increase as the stories progress and various obstacles are overcome.

McClung's optimistic world view was not as innovative as her substitution of the shero, a strong and capable yet loving and lovable woman, for the traditional hero and two heroines. Leslie Fiedler terms the two female stereotypes the Lily and the Rose.⁴ The Lily is "the Fair-haired Maiden, the symbol of feminine purity, the woman-as-muse";⁵ the Rose is "the dark-haired, sensuous, unsubmitive woman."⁶ Though McClung does not recount which woman wound up with Herbert in The Bride's Sacrifice, if either of them did, it must have been the blonde Jessie married in a novel: the Rose never gets her man.

McClung, in her essays and fiction, hardly ever mentions or portrays the Rose. McClung was not a loser. Further, the Rose's "strengths" did not appeal to her. The unsubmitiveness was

³Dion Bouicault's The Streets of London (1857) has a representative plot. A happy family undergoes so many misfortunes that eventually all seems lost and only the wildest concatenation of coincidences and other improbabilities stops the family from starving to death, returns it to financial prosperity, and allows true love to triumph.

⁴Leslie Fiedler, Love and Death in the American Novel, rev. ed. (New York: Stein and Day, 1966).

⁵Cheri Register, "American Feminist Literary Criticism: A Bibliographical Introduction," Feminist Literary Criticism, Josephine Donovan, ed. (Lexington: University Press of Kentucky, 1975), p.5.

⁶Ibid., p.4.

frequently a proud, hard, overbearing selfishness. And the sensuous Rose was, in any case, usually a woman who treated herself as a sex object; McClung was concerned that, for once, women be treated as people.

McClung did work to supplant the Lily. The Lorelie of her childhood needed to be pursued; Nellie's Pearlie knows whom she loves. Lorelie is coy; Pearlie is candid. Most of all, Lorelie goes from her school lessons to Sir Hector's love. As well as saving several people (among them Dr. Clay, the man she loves), Pearl Watson becomes a teacher and politician who helps get women the vote. Lorelie is also often sickly. As McClung recalled:

One breath of cold air and then crape on the door
and a new mound on the hillside!

"She sat at the door
One cold afternoon
To watch the wind blow
And see the new moon."

That was enough. (CW 225).

It would not have been enough to even give Pearlie a cold. Rescuing people is hard work; it takes good health. In short, Pearlie never faints, shrieks, sobs hysterically, sighs plaintively, or gives up the ghost.

If McClung rarely dealt with the Rose and concentrated on the Lily, this is because she did not see the differences but the similarity between the two:

People tell us of the good old days when womanhood was really respected and revered--when brave knight rode gaily forth to die for his lady love. But in order to be really loved and respected there was one hard and fast condition laid down, to which all women must conform--they must be beautiful, no getting out of that. They had to have starry eyes

and golden hair, or else black as a raven's wing.
(TLT 39)

According to McClung, the main counterpart to the Lily was not the Rose but the witch: "The homely women were all witches, dreadful witches, and they drowned them, on public holidays, in the mill pond" (TLT 39). McClung also remarked that, while witch-burning had become less prevalent:

The pretty woman still has the advantage over her plainer sister-- . . . When a newspaper wishes to disprove a woman's contention, or to demolish her theories, it draws ugly pictures of her. If it can show she has big feet or red hands, or wears unbecoming clothes, that certainly settles the case.
(TLT 39-40)

Naturally, with such a premium on attractiveness, the majority of Lilies and Roses worked hard to make the most--according to the standards of the time--of their looks. In fact, as far as most women could, they turned themselves into sex objects. McClung was not pleased:

The hideous mincing gait of the tight-skirted woman . . . said: 'I am not a useful human being--see! I cannot walk--I dare not run, but I am a woman--I still have my sex to recommend me. . . .' Rather an indelicate and unpleasant thought, too, for an 'honest' woman to advertise so brazenly.
(TLT 62)

McClung the author did not spend much time on the physical attributes of her sheros. In place of adjectives like starry-eyed are ones like strong, healthy, hot-tempered, laughing, clear-headed. While all the sheros are at least acceptably attractive, she describes them in terms of who they are and what they are like. They flourish outside the

flower and crabgrass school of womanhood.

Shero is not simply a variant for heroine. A heroine is by definition a relative being; moreover, the word is a diminutive. The shero is not.⁷

With her assertive and active sheros,⁸ McClung helped create a new mythic reality for her readers, one radically different from the one of traditional melodrama. She subverted the genre to her own ends.

Yet in her content as in her format, she gave her readers much of what they were accustomed to. Most of all, as she had been pulled into the world of the fiction of her youth, she too crafted "cliff-hanger" plots as well as characters her readers could empathize with: "She has been described as a 'spell-binder' and she was! Her audience laughed with her, cried with her, rejoiced and grieved with her."⁹

⁷Hero and heroine are linked in the same manner as god and goddess. The National Theatre production of the Oresteia (March 1982, London) used Tony Harrison's recent translation. Instead of relying on the words, god and goddess, he employed he-god and she-god. This changed the play, for no longer were there "neutral" gods who were all male, and goddesses, lesser creatures.

⁸I coined the term shero because I was unable to find an appropriate word for McClung's central female protagonists. The lack of an apt term for these women is especially significant in that sheros are not uncommon in fiction; for example, Jane Austen's Fanny Price, Charlotte Brontë's Jane Eyre and Lucy Snowe, Anne Brontë's Helen Graham, Margaret Laurence's Morag Gunn and Adele Wiseman's Hoda are all sheros.

⁹Ruth Scott, "My Aunt Nellie," Nellie L. McClung, by M.J.G. McMullen (Winnipeg: Manitoba Travel and Convention Association, 1965), p. 6.

Nellie loved to entertain her father. Writing melodrama gave her a chance to entertain a much larger public. She also knew the importance of duty. Writing melodrama was a means of serving others, of reaching out and teaching, among other things, the importance of serving others. One of her short stories ends with the lines: "Her world had suddenly grown alive and glorious. She was needed."¹⁰ As for McClung, she knew the world, and especially the women of the world, needed her; and one of the most effective means of meeting that need was through her fiction.

Though she used the familiar form of melodrama to tell something partly new, even the new was acceptable. Probably because their experiences were similar to hers, many people were eager to listen to what she had to say. In the early years of the twentieth century, the economy in the west was frequently booming. The suffrage movement was also gaining ground rapidly. Once again, in both what she kept and what she changed, McClung expressed and fostered the beliefs of a significant segment of the population.

¹⁰ Nellie L. McClung, "When No One Needs You," Flowers for the Living, p. 134.

III. The Self-reliant Shero

Perhaps, had her family stayed in Ontario, Nellie Mooney McClung would not have categorically rejected centring her stories around the standard heroine of her time. While her hard-working mother and sisters had none of the fragility of most Lilies, Nellie was taught that girls ought to be meek and quiet and obedient. Back East, she would have started school at six; her family's message would have been reinforced:

It is not to glitter in a sunbeam, and display a ceaseless variety of gay and gaudy colors that woman should be educated; but to occupy her station with grace, and to fulfill its duties with humility.¹

Woman's nature, physical, intellectual, moral and emotional, clearly points to home as her sphere.²

Our natural and happiest life is when we lose ourselves in the exquisite absorption of home, the delicious retirement of dependent love.³

To resign one's self totally and contentedly into the hands of another . . . to cease taking thought about one's self at all, and rest safe, at ease, assured that in great things and small we shall be guided and cherished, guarded and helped--in fact, throughly 'taken care of'-- how delicious is all this!⁴

¹Mrs. Sandford, Woman in her Social and Domestic Character (London: 1839), p. 183; as quoted by Fowler, p. 190.

²William Landels, Woman: Her Position and Power (London: 1871), p. 93; as quoted by Fowler, p. 188.

³Dinah Maria Mulock, A Woman's Thoughts About Women (1st. ed., London: 1858), p.62; as quoted by Fowler, p. 188.

⁴Ibid., p. 131; as quoted by Fowler, p. 192-93.

Along with reading and writing, these were the lessons drilled into schoolgirls.

Luckily for Nellie, in 1871, two years before she was born, Manitoba was opened to homesteaders, to men (only) who were given land provided they lived on it at least half the year and transformed a certain acreage from prairie to farmland. John and Letitia Mooney ended up as the parents of three daughters and three sons. There was little unclaimed land near their Grey County Farm. Reports from out West described the fertile black earth of Manitoba and the huge spaces available to settlers. For the parents, the move offered the family a chance to stay together and to reach a level of prosperity unattainable from the rocky soil of Grey County.

The move also gave Nellie, like many other prairie daughters, a much greater chance than was usual for the time to deviate from approved "feminine" behavior. Within the more settled society, she would have been restricted to doing largely "women's work." In Manitoba, she was needed as the family's cowherd.

Until she was ten, for over three years after the move, she did not go to school because there was no neighborhood school. So for those years she was relatively free from peer pressure to sit quietly like a good girl, to be docile and demure. She knew what the male and female stereotypes were. But she was far more affected by her day-to-day life. By the age of ten, she aspired to be a cowboy.

She spent days outdoors without getting sunstroke in summer or frostbite in winter. The neighborhood school, when it was finally built, was two miles from her home; Nellie walked there and back and stayed healthy.

She was already kept busy in Ontario. On the Manitoba homestead, she also had to be responsible. One of her chores was to ensure that the hen-house door was closed at night. If she forgot, weasels or foxes might get in and kill the entire flock. For years Nellie often woke up worried that she had not locked the door.

The major result of the chore was not a permanent sense of self-doubt, but a growing faith in her ability to do what she set out to do and in the possibility of a happy ending. One night, for instance, she did not remember to lock the hen-house door. She woke up in the middle of the night. Nap, her dog, was asleep outside the hen-house. All was safe--and Nellie made sure there were no more lapses. Years later, for a school play, she borrowed her mother's shawl, an heirloom from Scotland; nothing happened to the shawl. Helping out on the farm, herding the animals, watching her mother cope, Nellie learned to trust her own judgment and to behave responsibly.

She was not the only girl or woman to thrive away from conventional restrictions. The women she knew and liked best as a child were "calm, cheerful self-reliant, and undaunted" (CW 82). This preference was encouraged by Nellie's mother. The women her mother cared for least were those

who were helpless because they had internalized conventional restrictions--those who did not have backbone and were concerned only with clothes and comfort.

While Nellie's experiences were in many ways unlike those of most women brought up in settled areas, they were frequently undergone by girls and women in the Canadian prairies, the American midwest, the Australian outback. The diaries, letters, autobiographies and fiction left by these women attest to their comparative freedom to be active achievers. This freedom led to the generation of women whose self-perception was not that of the ever-ready-to-die clinging vines of melodrama and song. Many prairie women, for example, were active in the farmers' union. Many were also involved in the W.C.T.U. and signed pro-suffrage petitions. Nellie simply went further than most in her activism.

As a child, she pretended to be the sighing Lorelie in games with her sister. But when McClung grew up, she came to see Lorelie as the woman who waits:

Women have had to do a lot of waiting--long, weary waiting. . . . although marriage and homemaking are her highest destiny, or at least so she has been told often enough--she must not raise a hand to help the cause along. No more crushing criticism can be made of a woman, than that she is anxious to get married. It is all right for her to be passively willing; but she must not be active (TLT 82).

McClung's greatest objection to the waiting woman was that, in fiction, this was the woman who wins--while in life she was often less lucky: she might stay unsought after or

catch the attention of an unreliable provider. Further, even if she was snared by an eminently dependable sort, what kind of woman would she most likely be? Due to what men were usually trained to desire, she would probably be all beauty and no brains, not the ideal marriage partner: "The light and silly fairy may get along beautifully in the days of courtship, but she palls a bit in the steady wear and tear of married life" (TLT 33); "Men like frivolity--before marriage; but they demand all the sterner virtues afterwards" (TLT 40). McClung's most positive statement about the "gentle lady" (TLT 59) is her acknowledgement that "it is hard on the woman all the same. All our civilization has taught her that pink frills were the thing. . . . You see the woman suffers every time" (TLT 33).

Yet McClung was often less than sympathetic to her--especially when, by conventional standards, the lady was a winner, a woman married to a man who protected her from all unpleasantness. These women had the most time and money to help other women; McClung found that many were rabid anti-suffragettes who did not want to hear anything that might discomfit them. According to McClung, such women were the worst that women could be, parasites: "Women were intended to guide and sustain life, to care for the race; not to feed on it" (TLT 64).

McClung was not a parasite. Understandably, in her fiction, the passive Lorelies of her childhood are never the

centre of attention. Instead of focusing on a hero who is a destroyer of villains and savior of damsels, and on heroines who are endangered by villains and--sometimes--saved by the hero, McClung chose to write about sheros, women in many ways like herself. In her autobiography, she described her pre-marital relationship with Wes:

I made no pretense of being the Victorian maiden who sits on the shore waiting for a kindly tide to wash something up to her feet--not at all! Having seen something on the shoreline rocking on the current, . . . I plunged boldly in and swam out for it (CW 275).

She could just as well have been depicting the behavior of her sheros: above all they are doers, straight-dealers, winners.

For example, they are honest about whom they love--and successful in love. At the beginning of Purple Springs, Pearlle Watson is about to turn eighteen. She lays out her best dress because, three years earlier, Dr. Horace Clay, whom she loves, told her he would propose on her eighteenth birthday. In many melodramas, Pearlle would have been doomed to disappointment; she might have lost the doctor to another, discovered he was unworthy of her love, and only after many trials and tribulations that taught her to be meek, met a truer love. In Purple Springs, there are plot complications--the doctor falls sick--but Pearlle never doubts his love, and she is right not to; nor does she ever become meek or subservient. Of course Pearlle and Horace will live happily for a long time.

The sheros not only are active in love, they come to the rescue of the less fortunate. They are nurses, teachers, politicians--in various ways, they work for the well-being of the troubled within the community. The nurse in When Christmas Crossed "the Peace" is one of McClung's most exuberant creations. She is "resourceful, self-reliant, full of youth and optimism."⁵ When the local R.C.M.P. officer is injured and cannot prevent the illegal arrival of the liquor which will lead to the destruction of the holiday for the women and children of the community, "a wave of rage filled the nurse's heart. This, then, was all they cared for their families."⁶ The nurse does not just sit and fume. Her anger leads to action. She disguises herself as an R.C.M.P. officer, stops the shipment of liquor, takes the money intended to pay for it, and makes the bootlegger spend it on toys.

When Christmas Crossed "the Peace" is a high-spirited fable. But even in McClung's most realistic fiction, the most positively presented women characters are "a foreshadowing of what women could be--strong, independent, courageous, outspoken, never confusing innocence and ignorance. [They] looked out at life and met its challenge" (SRF 80-81). Pearlie Watson, for example, campaigns for women's suffrage and heads a triumphant Mock Parliament that brings down the

⁵McClung, When Christmas Crossed "the Peace," p.82

⁶Ibid., p. 84.

anti-suffrage government. This is not wish fulfillment: the women who are foreshadowings are based on McClung's reality. Pearlie's victory is an only slightly fictionalized account of McClung's own political activities, though in life it took two elections to bring down the Manitoba Conservatives.

Her sheros express her values. They have fun when they can. They work because they like to. They also serve without being self-denying. They help themselves to what they care for--and are also concerned with others' welfare. In Painted Fires, the happily married Helmi Doran nurses Arthur Warner when his arm is broken. Later, when Helmi is temporarily in dire straits, she is taken in by the happily married Maggie Corbett and the rest of the kindly Corbett family.

These sheros are not, it should be noted, simply female heroes. Heroes frequently slay dragons, shoot Indians, punch villains over cliff edges. Sheros do not destroy. Instead, whenever possible, they reform. They do not necessarily persuade wrong-doers; they more often give the misguided no option but to do right. In When Christmas Crossed "the Peace," the bootlegger's reaction to being coerced into buying toys shows McClung's preference for non-destructive (i.e., non-heroic) methods; he later tells the injured officer:

Your way was to arrest me, seize the stuff--send me to jail--that's no damn good! I'd be swearing my soul away in jail--boys all mad--everything in a mess. Look at this girl--she skins my roll, but look what she does with it--. . . made me the best liked man in the neighborhood.⁷

⁷Ibid., p. 144.

Though sheros deviate from the frail heroine stereotype, they conform to some Victorian conceptions of "women's nature" precisely because they are not destroyers. They are nurturers: the nurse's impulse to reform, for example, comes from her desire to take care of people. Only, instead of confining herself to her own home, she is a caretaker on a larger scale.

McClung's vision of women's nature began with self-perception, and observation of the women around her. For her, as for her mother, it was essential to be capable and to serve others. Becoming a mother herself reinforced her desire to improve the world: "I guess I felt like a lot of young mothers, that all the children of the world were now my children. I wanted to do something about inequalities. That's why I started by joining the W.C.T.U."⁸

She did not accept all her mother's views: her mother, who did not defer to her own husband, nevertheless believed that women should defer to men.

McClung, like her mother-in-law, did not. Her tenet that women should have the same rights as men was based, not only on her understanding of women's nature, but of men's: the shero exists in juxtaposition to the hero/destroyer. In Nellie's youth, all the drunks she saw were men, as were all the spouse-beaters she knew of; when World War I broke out, she

⁸Nellie L. McClung, quoted in Margaret Ecker Francis, "Nellie McClung," Canadian Home Journal, October 1947, pp. 96-97; as quoted by Savage, p. 46.

was well aware that all the political leaders were men.

Like most of her contemporaries,^o she believed that women were morally superior to men: "many men tried to put all their religion and virtue in their wife's name" (TLT 48). Like most other early-twentieth-century feminists, she came to the further conclusion that "the hand that rocks the cradle does not rule the world. If it did, human life would be a sweeter, safer place than it is" (TLT 22). This is precisely because, according to her and most of her feminist friends, women have a strong mothering instinct--and most men lack one. In other words, McClung re-viewed even those conceptions about the nature of women and men that she accepted: "Deeply rooted in every woman's heart is the love and care for children. A little girl's first toy is a doll, and so, too, her first great sorrow is when her doll has its eyes poked out by her little brother" (TLT 22-23).

McClung knew that, far from being too fragile for anything but pedestals, women could accomplish a tremendous amount of physical and educational work. According to her, it was time to make sure the nasty little brother was not the only of the siblings to be allowed to get into politics:

Women have been thinking. Among other things they have thought about the German women, those faithful, patient, homeloving, obedient women, who never interfere in public affairs, nor question man's ruling. . . . According to the theories of the world, the sons of such mothers should be the gentlest men on earth. The home has been so sacred. . . . What, then, is the matter with the theory? Nothing, except that there is nothing in it (TLT 22-23).

If there had been women in the German Reichstag, women with authority behind them, when the Kaiser began to lay his plans for the war, the results might have been very different. I do not believe that women with boys of their own would ever sit down and wilfully plan slaughter. . . . But the German women were not there--they were at home, raising the children! . . . In German rule, we have a glorious example of male statecraft, uncontaminated by any feminine foolishness (TLT 89).

These words were written when World War I was at its height; Canadian newspapers daily carried stories of German atrocities. But McClung subverted the war propaganda to her own ends: Germans were enemies for the duration of the war; the greater and more enduring evil was women's exclusion from public affairs.

There was yet another reason why women needed to get into politics--self-protection: "When social conditions are corrupt women cannot escape by shutting their eyes, and taking no interest. It would be far better to give them a chance to clean them up. . . . Women have cleaned things up since time began" (TLT 48). Clearly, women's energies were misdirected if we were confined to looking after individual homes. The world needed women, and sheros more than other women.

McClung's view of the nature and role of women was reinforced by her mother-in-law's agreement; many other women had similar outlooks because of social conditions. Annie McClung, as unlike the stereotypic mother-in-law as McClung's sheros are unlike fainting Lorelies, was both a role model and support. She was a serene and beautiful woman, committed

to working for social change and ensuring that, within her family at least, the changes were made immediately. Her daughter and sons shared the household chores. Her daughter had the same freedom to go out of the house unaccompanied as the sons. And her eldest son was a suitable husband for Nellie because, as Nellie realized before she married him: "I would not need to lay aside my ambition if I married him. He would not want me to devote my whole life to him, he often said so" (CW 354). Annie McClung herself circulated the area's first petition asking for women to be given the right to vote.

Despite the cult of female frailty, many nineteenth and early twentieth century women developed and recognized their personal stamina. Even the wealthier women who had servants often had to take part in household work. There were few household appliances and no supermarkets. Women not only cooked and cleaned and looked after the children. They sewed, gardened, canned, pickled, smoked meat, beat carpets; some made soap, spun and wove. Most rural and a good many urban women could relate to McClung's ever-busy women characters.

Not surprisingly, McClung was not the only woman to write about sheros--and not even the first. For example, in Catherine Parr Traill's Canadian Crusoes (1857), two girls and a boy are lost in the Canadian wilderness--and the girls are as resourceful as the boy. In the early twentieth century, the Australian Miles Franklin and Henry Handel Richardson--both women using male pen names--were writing

feminist novels. So was the American Willa Cather, among others. In Canada, L.M. Montgomery's Anne of Green Gables came out in the same year as Sowing Seeds in Danny: Anne is another outspoken nurturer.

In fact, Canadian literature of the teens and twenties, written by women, features shero after shero: there was an approximately two-decade coast-to-coast flowering of fiction with feminist sentiments, from approximately 1908 to the Depression. Emily P. Weaver's The Only Girl (1925), for example, centres around an Ontario tomboy in whose family roles are reversed: the father, blinded in an accident, does the housework and knitting while the mother does the plowing and other heavy farm work. In Nan and Other Pioneer Women of the West (1913), Frances E. Herring portrays a variety of women living on the west coast, among them--a rarity--a hard-drinking woman; once more, tomboys are favorably portrayed.

In Grace McLeod Rogers' Acadian Stories of the Land of Evangeline (1923), even the most conventionally feminine woman is clever, resourceful and clear-headed. In several of the stories there are weak men; in none does a weak woman have a central role. Though two women are--atypically--killers, even these do not stop being sheros: one kills the man who seduced and abandoned her daughter who has died in childbirth; the other kills the man about to murder the shero's ailing sweetheart. Both women are protectors of the weak.

All the above-mentioned works portray sheros positively. They also share several other characteristics with McClung's fiction. Most are tales of success and achievement. All are oriented toward a large reading public, unlike the writers of the slightly later McGill School whose works appealed mainly to the university-educated. Yet whenever education is mentioned, it is put forward as something of great value, as much for girls as for boys. Finally, the locales described are rarely urban.

A distinguishing feature of writings by women who grew up in a pioneer environment, as opposed to those who either arrived as adults or spent their lives in more settled areas, is that the former works tend to assume that women are capable. On the other hand, Susannah Moodie's Roughing It in the Bush (1852), for example, records a woman's developing sense that she is not entirely helpless. Georgina Binnie-Clark was outspoken even before she arrived on the prairies in 1912; even her thinking about men and women underwent considerable changes:

Always at the back of my mind had been the belief that [men] had a genuine title to the splendid term which has come to be a byword, 'lord of creation.' To make life possible, one drank at the fountain of thought of men, not women; but through the shoulder-to-shoulder rub of everyday working-life in Canada it grew clear that although more giants had issued from the male division, within the crowd men have hoisted their pretension to superior power not on the rock of superior work, but on the sands of superior wages--⁹ the misappropriation and unfair division of money.

⁹Georgina Binnie-Clark, Wheat and Woman (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1979), p. 164.

Just as McClung's sheros were neither outcasts nor loners; so too McClung's demands for justice for women occurred at a time when there was a growing awareness of the need for a better deal for women. In Iceland, New Zealand, and a few American states, women already had the vote. Elsewhere there was widespread agitation for reform. There was no unanimity on the need for women to be recognized as people; however, McClung was never a lone agent: her causes, as she knew, had supporters in all parts of the British Commonwealth, in the United States, and in many parts of Europe. Henrik Ibsen's The Doll's House had been produced. George Bernard Shaw was encouraging the advent of the "unwomanly woman."

Nellie L. McClung's fiction, with its sheros, described what she knew. It also reflected the aspirations of those who hoped and worked for a world in which women would have a chance to develop fully.

After two decades, its popularity waned. McClung's assumption regarding women's moral superiority was generally ridiculed. After women got the vote and did not immediately reform the world, the beliefs of many of her generation were discredited. No one took into account that women, by and large, lacked the self-confidence necessary to reach for positions of power; that we were still faced with voting for the same politicians that men had voted for; that we might have to learn to use power; that, in short, the vote, while a necessary precondition, was not enough to ensure women's

emergence into the public world.

Then came the Depression. Women were pressured to give up what few jobs we held: "ladies first" meant that women were the first to go.

World War II forced many women into the job market. Afterwards, we were legislated back home. We were also trained to believe in the feminine mystique: according to this doctrine, our sphere was what it was widely held to be during Victorian times--the home. Yet we were no longer agreed to be morally superior: therefore our presence outside the home could not help things--after all, our failure to create a New Eden when we got the vote proved our ineptitude for public life. According to the prevalent Freudianism, we were dependent, narcissistic and masochistic.

The only part of Nellie's sheros that was not out of keeping with the feminine mystique was their healthiness. Servants were becoming very scarce; most middle class women had to do their own housekeeping and childrearing. It was convenient to portray women as passive, uncreative . . . yet bloomingly healthy, bearing children and keeping the home sparkling clean with little effort.

In 1951, the year Nellie McClung died, the heroine of the day was a sweet adorable child-wife, often played by Doris Day.

Despite the eventual belittlement of the shero, for a long time Nellie and her sheros were in step with the times. Her first novel appeared when she was thirty-five. A

generation of women with experiences like hers had grown up. McClung was the first Canadian whose account of a prairie girlhood captured the attention of the nation.

She not only expressed women's reality. For some of her readers, McClung's Pearlie Watson was a fantasy alter-ego, just as Lorelie had been to the young Nellie--or a role model, as her mother-in-law was to McClung. Pearlie was active and assertive--and loved.

Perhaps the shero is due for a comeback. A significant percentage of present-day feminists, among them Mary Daly and Françoise d'Eaubonne, do not believe that, given equal opportunities, women and men would automatically develop identical personalities. They (we?) find it impossible to believe that women, on the average, would be equally willing to condemn birth control, condone the denigration and ownership of members of the opposite sex, encourage the destruction of the environment and the outbreak of war. Possibly, women are more life-oriented for the very reason McClung thought: we have always been the birth givers and usually the child-rearers--in other words, the nurturers. McClung's views are not entirely "up-to-date"; there is now a consensus among feminists that normal women are not all child lovers; but many feminists hold that the world would probably be a better place if women did "guide and sustain" (TLT 64) life.

Recently, American critic Marcia Holly envisioned a book called Patterns of Strength. It would consist of essays

analyzing some of the many female literary characters who are "self-reliant, independent, strong, courageous--that is, healthy, sane, and mature."²³ She found that "the awaited deluge of essays . . . never came."²⁴ She concluded that there were no sheros to write such essays about.

Holly obviously did not know about Canadian literature. Her being American does not entirely account for this: most early-twentieth century Canadian sheros, including McClung's have been largely forgotten. Only Anne of Green Gables is still widely read, and even that is widely dismissed as a "girls' book."

Perhaps, ultimately, McClung's sheros will not be among the most celebrated literary characters who provide patterns of strength. However, Nellie did strive to create an enduring vision of women's potential, to leave "some small legacy of truth" (SRF xiii).

²³Marcia Holly, "Consciousness and Authenticity: Toward a Feminist Aesthetic," Feminist Literary Criticism, p. 38.

²⁴Ibid., p. 38.

IV. Lifters and Leaners

McClung aimed to reveal prairie settlers to themselves. She certainly could not do this by portraying exclusively sheros: life away from "civilization" encouraged women to deviate from the frail maiden stereotype; it did not make all women courageous, capable and self-affirming. Many of McClung's female characters are not sheros. In her short stories, even the central female figures may not be.

The term, shero, applies to girls and women who share a set of characteristics, though each shero is readily distinguishable from the others. The aim of this chapter is to delineate what other types of women, and what types of men, people McClung's fictional universe.

The Bride of "The Neutral Fuse" starts as sweet, fluffy-haired, hard-working and unfailingly comforting:

It would break Joe's heart if I were cross with him, and it would be a shame to do that, for he is the best fellow in the world. And I am sure I could never be cranky with my good neighbors; and it would be a crime to work if off on the boys [her sons]. So there you are--what can a poor woman do?¹

She can remain sweet and hard-working; but years later, she goes temporarily insane because she has always been ready to put others' needs ahead of her own. "Jane Brown" is also

¹Nellie L. McClung, "The Neutral Fuse," All We like Sheep (Toronto: Thoman Allen, 1926), p. 105.

about a woman who has worked too hard: Jane has just died, leaving a boorish husband and half a dozen young children. In Painted Fires, sixteen-year-old Minnie, who came to the city to earn money to help her poor family, and especially her overworked mother, has been seduced and abandoned.²

John Brown's widower is later turned down by Maud Thompson, a shero who lets him know exactly why she is refusing his proposal:

Your yard looks like a machinery shower
 But your house was run on woman power;
 And of course one day that power gave out!
 And that is how it comes about
 That you must fill that woman's place,
 And you think that I have a lovely face!³

As Maud is well aware, John Brown has not come courting her for her lovely face: she is big and strong; he is out of woman power; and hired help is expensive. Still, the rejection is only a minor setback: John is free to try his luck elsewhere.

The Bride is luckier than Jane. She is given a second chance by two sheros, a woman judge and a woman doctor, who both recognize the cause for her mental breakdown and provide her with a holiday during which she is, for once, cared for.

And as for Minnie, McClung violates a convention of melodrama on her behalf. Minnie's standard fate, in the fiction of the time, is suicide, or failing that, death in

²Minnie's seduction does not form part of the novel. Helmi's efforts on her behalf do.

³Nellie L. McClung, "Jane Brown," Be Good to Yourself (Toronto: Thomas Allen, 1931), p. 17.

childbirth. In Dickens' David Copperfield, for example, the wronged woman walks into the ocean. Minnie's mother writes to her daughter as soon as she finds out what has happened: "A great cry broke from Minnie's lips as she read--a cry of joy--- her mother loved her still, loved and believed in her and would stand by her to the end. There was a dollar bill in the letter, and a whole row of kisses, and many a word of loving comfort."⁴ Minnie can go home.

Minnie, Jane and the Bride are over-lifters, girls and women who give too much of themselves. Over-lifters appear in McClung's fiction with even greater frequency than sheros. Nineteenth- and early-twentieth-century women were trained to devote themselves totally to home and family; they were taught, in other words, to be eminently exploitable. Many were also so uninformed about their bodies that they did not realize sexual intercourse was linked to pregnancy. Over-lifters set too low a value on themselves: they work selflessly for the benefit of others.

They are living reasons (while they live) why the shero is of paramount importance to women. Not only is the latter a role model, but non-sheros rarely win on their own.

These self-effacing women are not belittled. In McClung's first novel, there is a conventional heroine, the drunkard's shy but brave daughter; a gentle young minister falls in love with her; the two will marry and live happily. McClung

⁴Nellie L. McClung, Painted Fires (Toronto: Thomas Allen, 1925), p. 89.

understood that, due to circumstances, not all women could be sheros. In her fiction, she does not punish the tired and worn-out for their weaknesses and fears. As in "The Neutral Fuse," sheros often help them. The nurse in When Christmas Crossed "the Peace" acts to rescue the women of the community, especially the one who is losing touch with reality.

An over-lifter is a shero gone astray, a potential shero with a deactivated ingredient: she lacks, but sometimes develops, self-interest. McClung's fiction was one of her tools for making women aware that we should take better care of ourselves, and for educating men to realize that they share the responsibility for our well-being.

Still, McClung does depict the unhappy fate of many non-sheros, usually worn down after marriage. Jane Brown is based on a young wife Nellie knew as a child. Many prairie women went mad from a combination of overwork and isolation. McClung refused to encourage women to be losers in life, by showing self-destructive traits leading to eternal bliss in fiction. Instead, as one of her sheros tells her long-suffering mother: "I will talk . . . and you'd be better if you talked more. What right has he to hog every cent--and plow it in for his own pleasure. . . . you work for this money--so do I . . . but he has the spending of it--you've been too blamed easy."⁵

Some women, though, are not easy enough. These are the

⁵Nellie L. McClung, When Christmas Crossed "the Peace," pp. 23-24.

leaners. As the shero in "The Changing World" tells a man who has just spent the evening with a leaner: "There are two kinds of women--lifters and leaners. It is generally supposed that the best men prefer leaners. That's rather too bad, Jerry. I had rather a different future mapped out for you."⁶ Jerry did as well--and his description of his experience with the leaner lets us know why:

The boss said to me today that his young ward is the sort of a girl who brings out the best in a man--his protective instinct--and that noble emotion makes men do their bravest and best, and brings life's greatest happiness. . . . But I did not get one bit of a thrill today in protecting this little fluffy thing. I was mad at her for coming out in mosquito netting and holding me up for a taxi twice. . . . My little adventure today in the world of true romance cost me forty per cent of my week's salary, and I had other plans for that eight dollars. I wanted socks and a new hat.⁷

The leaner treats herself as an object and the man as a wallet. She wears flimsy clothes and flutters her eyelashes because that is how to get a man to pay her way. Not only does she assume that men ought to pick up the tab, she has no consideration for how hard it may be for a man to foot a bill.

The only leaner with a major part in McClung's novels is Eva St. John in Painted Fires. She is so concerned with her own pleasure and convenience that she lets Helmi go to jail for her. Eva is married to a very good man; probably for his sake, McClung causes Eva to undergo a change of attitude late in the novel.

⁶Nellie L. McClung, "The Changing World," Flowers for the Living, p. 192.

⁷Ibid., pp. 192-93.

Many put-upon women are potential sheros; with enough help from less self-sacrificing women, they may become a little less exploitable. Leanners, on the other hand, do not usually improve. These are the "gentle ladies" who do not want their complacency disturbed. In one story, when there are guests, a mother who is a leanner tells her drooling baby: "Don't chew the lady's handbag, Winky, the color may run and poison you."⁸ In another, an old leanner who has refused to let her daughter marry, sighs that: "Martha grows a little difficult as she gets older. She wants to join a sort of literary club here."⁹ The hallmark of the leanner is her selfishness, which is especially dangerous to other women: few women are sheros who have learned to stand up for themselves.

McClung repeatedly advocated a balance of self-interest and altruism. In "The Life of the Party,"^{9a} this is very explicit. A bride of six weeks is faced with a husband who does not want to attend a party though the couple has accepted the invitation. Further, he wants her to cancel. The wife refuses both to make the call for him, and to stay home herself. Still, she has fixed him some sandwiches; he will be all right. The result of her behavior is that he eats, feels refreshed, goes to the party, and they both enjoy

⁸Nellie L. McClung, "O Canada!" Flowers for the Living, pp. 210-11.

⁹Nellie L. McClung, "The Ways of Women," Be Good to Yourself, p. 38.

^{9a}Nellie L. McClung, "The Life of the Party," Be Good to Yourself.

themselves. It is not that selfishness pays off; the husband, not the wife, was selfish. But, in McClung's universe, a sufficient concern for oneself and for people outside one's family--in this instance, the friends who expected the couple at the party--is essential to happiness.

It is also essential to true "lifterhood." The shero is more of a lifter than the selfless woman. Women who do not give away all of themselves do not stand as great a risk of dying from overwork or having a nervous breakdown. Most of all, they will not defer when they know something wrong is being done. In "Carried Forward," the mother knew she should speak up for herself and her daughter. And that is her deathbed legacy to her daughter: "Learn to speak out . . . when you feel something ought to be said. All your life, I mean. Don't let anyone make you so frightened that you cannot speak. I have been like that, and it is no good. . . . I sat still, too patient. It isn't patience, it's cowardice."¹⁰ Sheros have the courage to be lifters, both for themselves and for other women.

McClung sorted men, like women, into the lifter and leaner categories. But men lifters and leaners are not identical to women. For example, a woman leaner takes what she can get from a man or woman; she constantly calls out for assistance. Further, she has no goals of her own--so she

¹⁰ Nellie L. McClung, "Carried Forward," All We like Sheep, p. 211.

succeeds or fails, depending on whom she is financially dependent upon.

A man leaner does not only hold back those around him. He is far more directly destructive. He is, for example, quite likely a drinker who ruins the lives of his wife and children. Usually he impoverishes them. But this is not necessarily the case. In "The Return Ticket," a woman dies because, though her husband provides for her financially, he is never there for her when she needs him.

Not all men leaners are drinkers. He may, on the contrary, be "such a perfect darling in his manners--always ready to open a door or pick up a handkerchief . . . if he needed the handkerchief."¹¹ McClung's qualifier turns the traditional sign of gentlemanliness to one of selfishness: she held that women paid dearly for men's small courtesies. For example, smooth talkers often seduced girls and women "innocent" of all knowledge about sex. A seducer is the worst kind of leech: when a wealthy womanizer wants to marry a poor young woman who will not be misled by his flattery, her mother turns him down (with her daughter's permission): "I don't know why you think you have the right to marry a decent girl. Why do you not stick to your own class?"¹² She is not delighted by how well her daughter has defended her virtue; she is outraged that he tried to lead her daughter astray.

¹¹Nellie L. McClung, "You Never Can Tell," The Black Creek Stopping-house (Toronto: Thomas Allen, 1912), p. 162.

¹²Nellie L. McClung, "Return of the Lizard," Flowers for The Living, p. 86.

The difference between the drinker and the womanizer is that the former may be partly a victim of his own weakness; the latter is a villain--and not only toward women. In Painted Fires, Helmi's troubles can be traced to Minnie's seducer, who becomes Helmi's husband's business partner; the seducer is no more scrupulous in business than elsewhere.

Though the womanizer is worse than the drinker, neither is portrayed as an eligible catch. McClung knew of too many drinkers who did not quit when they promised to, to entrust a woman's welfare to a drinker's care: in her sixteen books, she never has a woman permanently reform an alcoholic. At any rate, women are not meant, in her opinion, to redeem men: a woman, like a man, is best off with a lifter.

However, there are not very many men lifters in McClung's universe. This is partly because of the prevalence of a third type of male leaner: the one who unthinkingly exploits the over-lifting woman. John Brown, widower of Jane, neither drank nor fooled around. But he took her unflagging strength for granted: Jane was his wife; naturally it was her job to do all the housekeeping, cooking and childcare. Why should he show her any appreciation if all she did was her duty? And since crops--which he grew--brought in the cash, there was no reason to lighten her load.

Women's problems do not end with leaners, overt and covert. As Nellie realized, those men who are lifters usually prefer women leaners. She repeatedly wondered "why, Oh why, do some of our best men marry such odd little sticks

of pin-head women . . . while the most intelligent, unselfish, and womanly women are left unmated?" (TLT/41)

In McClung's books, the best man is not a lifter, but a lifter who is happiest with a woman like himself. In "The Changing World," Jerry is sure that, "I do not want a leaner. I am not a hero. . . . I don't want to be a sacrifice! I want a fair break."¹³ Jerry is the male equivalent of the shero, the sufficiently self-interested woman: both want partners, companions; neither is interested in someone who is far from an equal. In McClung's novels, Pearlie and Helmi each finds her match. In her short fiction, as in "They Are Not All Married," sheros sometimes do not. There are not enough Jerrys to go around.

McClung's universe includes radical departures from the traditional one of melodrama. For example, Jerry and his like, just like Pearlie and hers, are staples in McClung's writings; they do not even put in an appearance in most of her childhood readings. Further, in conventional melodrama, the John Browns of the world are usually classified as unfailing lifters upon whom their wives can unhesitatingly rely--and the Jane Browns are viewed as leaners upon their strong, dependable menfolk. Nellie McClung trusted her own perceptions--and therefore reversed the status of John and Jane.

Finally, it should be noted that, of all her characters, those who are presented as least desirable are the conventional

¹³Nellie L. McClung, "The Changing World," p. 193.

heroine and hero. Both are leaners--and leaners are usually lost causes. The heroine is a self-centred burden who usually needs to be saved. As for the hero of popular romance, he is typically an officer (an explicit destroyer) or a man with "a past." The latter is at best like the lizard who endangers a woman's baby: "No doubt he was a good enough lizard in his way, living up to his own standards . . . I did not kill him. But I did throw him out!"

Nellie L. McClung wrote to give a voice to the voiceless. She believed that "the fact that I have a good man and a good family lays a responsibility on me. The broken-hearted, embittered woman cannot do anything to help anyone else" (SRF 209). But the person Nellie's fiction most gives voice to is herself: in her novels and stories, she consistently portrays her own vision of women and men, a vision which includes positive alternatives to the "ideals" of her day.

¹⁴Nellie L. McClung, "The Return of the Lizard," p. 87.

V. Simplifications, Evasions and Distortions

"Lies, secrets, and silence"¹--these are, according to present-day feminist Adrienne Rich, the traditional boundaries of women's existence. Nellie McClung saw many truths widely unperceived in her society. For example, she realized how dangerous "innocence" can be, celebrated women's potential, and redefined the hero and heroine as the least attractive of all fictional characters.

While her insights are astute, it is vital not to ignore her weaknesses as a thinker: her fiction and non-fiction aim to convey her understanding of reality; and her political positions were the result of her ideology. Nellie occasionally oversimplified, evaded and distorted. Further, because she was so firmly a member in good standing of the reform community, she sometimes found it impossible to use her logic to come to conclusions which might have made her an outsider.

McClung did her utmost to change the wrong-thinking of others. In this chapter, I will deal with the origins and outcomes of her own, occasionally flawed perceptions and presentations of reality.

The childhood on the prairies fostered the development of

¹Adrienne Rich, On Lies, Secrets, and Silence (New York: W.W. Norton, 1979).

a Nellie not at all like the heroines she read about. It also gave her time to think things through on her own. The Mooneys had no neighbors their first winter. The following spring a family took up a homestead close by: three miles away. For another two years, there was no local school--and therefore little impetus for children from different families to get together regularly. A term after the school opened, Nellie had to miss several months because she was needed at home as a herder. Then too, to attend school meant a two-mile walk there and back. Nellie also had time to herself because she was the youngest in the family: she did not have to spend her days minding a baby.

When she became a teacher, she took long walks on her own. On warm days, she often passed hours in a hammock, reading and thinking.

She married at twenty-two; ten months later, she was a mother. Only then did she lose out on time to herself. She did not get it back for forty years, until she was over sixty. By the time her three oldest children were in school, there was a fourth baby--and Nellie L. McClung was an acclaimed novelist. She began giving readings from her works, had a fifth and last baby, and became involved in the growing suffrage movement. When women won the vote, McClung was one of the first women elected.

But before the busy years, she had already thought many matters through, and had come to conclusions she rarely moved from.

Perhaps the most important decision she arrived at was that girls and women did not have a fair deal--neither in life nor in literature. All her adult life, McClung worked for better opportunities for women. Her sheros are positive role models, as is McClung herself. Due to the legal reforms she helped bring about, women are now defined as persons in matters of rights and privileges, as well as pains and penalties: we are no longer in the lunatic and criminal category of those who may not vote, be elected or sit in the Senate.

But while the prairie years gave Nellie both the gumption and time to make up her own mind, they also caused her to form her judgments in a very simple environment. The Christianity she was taught has a black-and-white morality. So do the melodramas her society was so fond of. Both her religion and popular fiction also encouraged people to have faith in the possibility of rapid and radical change: her religion preached the dogma of instant conversion; in the melodrama of her childhood, utter villainy, love at first sight and absolute redemption are staples. Understandably, Nellie came to believe in either/or options and in the possibility of one-step solutions.

However, probably the most important factor leading to these beliefs was life on the prairies. It was not until 1914, when World War I broke out, that she was even temporarily overwhelmed by the extent of a disaster. During the 1880's, the homesteading years, Nellie knew few people;

and the problems of those she did encounter tended to stem from loneliness, overwork and drink. Even after she became a teacher and then a wife, for many years she lived in small towns; most of the troubles she saw were the result of individual weaknesses and had at least seemingly self-evident remedies.

For example, drink was the most popular diversion from the boredom of day-after-day hard repetitive labor. It also tended to destroy the drinker. Homesteaders could become prosperous, but only if they worked indefatigably and did not squander their hard-gotten gains: "men were divided into two classes; they either drank, or they didn't drink. . . . So our attitude had to be one of unyielding opposition, the only alternative being the easy-going, shallow tolerance of the unconcerned" (CW 336).

The drinkers' most serious offense was against their families. "No woman drank, needless to say" (CW 336)--yet the wives and children were hurt. As an adult, McClung crusaded for women's rights. As both a child and adult, she realized that denying men access to liquor meant that far fewer women and children would suffer from want and physical abuse:

A woman stooped over her stove in her own kitchen one winter evening, making food for her eight-months-old baby, whom she held in her arms. Her husband and brother-in-law, with a bottle of whiskey, carried on a lively dispute in another part of the kitchen. . . . Surely this woman was protected; here was the sacred precincts of home; her husband, sworn to protect her, her child in her arms--a beautiful domesticated Madonna scene. But when the revolver was fired accidentally it blew off the whole top of her protected head; and the mother and babe fell to the floor (TLT 100).

McClung is making fun of the many clichés of her time, according to which a woman is safe as long as she remains within her sphere, which is bounded by the four walls of her house. The kitchen is, of course, the most sacred section of the house. McClung is also pointing out that drunks endanger women who fulfill social expectations.

Currently, there is considerable pressure for gun control. Then, especially outside the towns, most men hunted. Currently, many women have enough actual or potential financial independence to be able to leave an abusive situation. At the turn of the century, even if a married woman earned money, it was her husband's to do with as he liked: he had the right, for instance, to sell the family home even if his wife had paid for it, to pocket the money and disappear.

McClung wanted many laws changed. But the law that promised the largest and most immediate relief for women and children was the one prohibiting the sale of alcoholic beverages:

The liquor traffic has waged war on women and children all down the centuries. Three thousand women were killed in the United States in one year by their husbands who were under the influence of liquor. . . .

A great deal is said about personal liberty in connection with this matter of the prohibition of the liquor traffic. . . . If there were only one man on the earth, he might have the personal liberty to do just as he liked, but the advent of the second man would end it. Life is full of prohibitions to which we must submit for the good of others (TLT.99-103).

This is the "bottom line" of McClung's pro-prohibition

argument, for once delivered without humor.

In most of the prairies, the sale of liquor was outlawed for only five years. It did not stop all drinking; it did lead to a marked decrease in public drunkenness.

During her twenties and thirties, Nellie slowly became aware of the extent to which the law was not for women. A man who beat his wife risked, at most, a small fine. If he killed her, he was sometimes imprisoned for only a few months--as long as he was drunk at the time of the murder. The law allowed a man to bequeath all his possessions to his sons; his wife and daughters were guaranteed nothing. A farmer often gave a son a farm upon marriage; a daughter was lucky to get a feather bed and a cow. Nellie's scathing wit points out the double injustice: "The gift of a feather bed is rather interesting, too, when you consider that it is the daughter who raised the geese, plucked them, and made the bed-tick" (TLT 91).

Unmarried women who became visibly pregnant landed in Refuges for Unmarried Women. As for "a man with a past," "He's a devil with women," they say, and it is no disadvantage in the business or political world--where"--as Nellie drily notes--"man predominates."²

²Nellie L. McClung, In Times Like These, pp. 84-85. Because it would not help her argument, she conveniently overlooks that the man with the past is the hero of much of the romantic fiction aimed at women.

The abduction of a young girl netted a five-year sentence; the theft of a cow, a fourteen. "Property has ever been held dearer than flesh and blood," Nellie begins--and then continues, "when the flesh and blood are woman's."³ By giving a new meaning to an old adage, she caustically appraises men's evaluation of women.

Laws were made by men and for men. The rural and small-town women McClung knew tended to be both competent and nurturing. Most politicians were not care-takers, but self-centred men whose concerns extended at most as far as other middle-class men.

McClung's proposed remedy was as simple as her attitude to the liquor trade. She wanted to end every injustice; she did not conclude that she had to expend her energy urging men to change individual laws that each affected only a small percentage of women. Women needed to have the right to vote, and in this way, to be involved in politics. In 1912, she and several other Winnipeg women formed the Political Equality League.

In 1914, World War I erupted. At first McClung, like most people of her era, was stunned. A century had elapsed since the Napoleonic Wars, the last large-scale wars between nations. People had assumed that civilization had reached too high a stage for anything more than local conflicts to be

³Nellie L. McClung, "The Social Responsibilities of Women," typescript of a speech, McClung Papers, about 1914; as quoted by Savage, p. 83.

possible.

Soon McClung decided that the war was yet another example that "the world has suffered long enough from too much masculinity and not enough humanity" (TLT 94), reversing the conventional assumption that it is men who represent humanity. The war was, in other words, still another reason why women needed to be enfranchised.

The international campaign for women's suffrage, in which McClung played a major role in the Canadian prairies, was more permanently successful than the prohibition movement. During and shortly after World War I, women gained voting rights in most of North America and Europe; these rights have not been rescinded.

At first, McClung's proposed remedy for the woes of the world seemed to have merit. She noted that, immediately after women were enfranchised in California, "although there was not one woman in the house of representatives, the men members had a different attitude toward moral matters when they remembered that they had women constituents as well as men" (TLT 76). She wrongly deduced that women did not need to become actively involved in politics in numbers equal to men.

McClung applauded the few women politicians, and for a time, became one herself. But both she and most other early-twentieth-century feminists were against a woman's party, and against encouraging the women they had politicized, to be a base for fighting for specific reforms. They failed to see that, unless women--as a group--agitated for further

changes, we would not have even indirect power: our vote would be split between the traditional parties with their man-made priorities.

McClung did not move from her pro-prohibition stance when it was, by the mid-twenties, no longer popular. Nor did she call for women's increased participation in government as elected representatives, when our enfranchisement did not substantially improve the world. Instead, she was saddened because she became convinced that she had misjudged women's nature.

Her rural and small-town experiences left her unaware of the extent to which our natures are formed--the degree to which, for example, most women were trained to lack the self-confidence necessary to run for political office. Her background also did not prepare her for many of the impediments to achieving large-scale pro-feminist changes. She underestimated the prevalence of anti-woman biases, stronger in long-established communities but slowly gaining ground in the West. She was amused, for example, by the psychoanalytical theories coming into style; she did not recognize that psychology and other soft sciences were being used to convince women to stay financially dependent on men and out of positions of power.

Her background did encourage her to go along with community-approved beliefs. Both in her advocacy of the largest possible step (the abolition of the liquor trade to stop alcohol-related evils) and the smallest possible step

(the enfranchisement of women to humanize politics), Nellie McClung adhered to the most common reformist positions of her time.

She did not, however, conform entirely. Her society had a one-step solution for women who wanted to achieve outside the home: such women were to stay single and virgin. In her teens, Nellie had two role models. Lizzie, her sweet-tempered eldest sister, married at twenty-one; she had no aspirations beyond being a wife and mother. Elizabeth, the virgin queen of England, led her country through half a century of peace and tolerance; but when all was said and done, she was only a ruler, diplomat and scholar. E. Cora Hind, a prairie newspaperwoman and Nellie's idol, was a contemporary career woman; like Elizabeth the First, she never married.

Nellie knew she wanted to be the Dickens of her people. That seemed to mean she would have to follow in the footsteps of the long-ago Elizabeth. Yet when Lizzie gave birth to her first baby prematurely, Nellie was willing to renounce all her ambition if the child lived. It died; Nellie was not called on to fulfill that particular vow. But she did realize how much she herself wanted to someday be a mother. Nellie wished she could be either one thing or the other, totally dedicated to a profession or to family life; because of her limited experiences and the literature of the time, she did not realize that many women were faced with her dilemma.

Nellie was lucky. Wes McClung was brought up to

recognize that women are full-fledged human beings. He was supportive of Nellie's plan to become a writer. Nellie believed that, in Wes, she had found her means of combining career and motherhood.

Just as women's votes did not reform the world, the right man was insufficient to revamp the institution of motherhood. In the first ten years of Nellie's married life, she had almost no time for anything but her husband and children.

Her essays and fiction repeatedly express pro-prohibition and pro-women's-suffrage viewpoints. On the other hand, McClung hardly refers to her personal conflicts of interest. Shero Helmi Milander of Painted Fires is initially against marriage--but solely due to her fear that having babies will turn her into a tired and worn-out drudge like her overworked sister. Two of McClung's stories are about mothers with professions. The mother in "Every Woman is Not a House-keeper" becomes a teacher because she has a knack for teaching and is totally inept at running a household; the story does not mention the woman who is an efficient cook and cleaner but prefers to be a lawyer. "You Never Can Tell" centres around a woman writer who is the mother of two; there is no reference to any difficulty she might have finding time to write.

McClung strongly desired to make an impact outside her individual home! By her life, she showed that a woman can have a variety of careers and be a successful mother. Yet despite the fact that McClung was not only a self-appointed

voice of the common folk, but considered herself as one of them, her sheros have far fewer unconventional aspirations than she did. Perhaps they are, in her opinion, equally admirable and more representative.

Only in the first volume of her autobiography does McClung publicly deal with her partially conflicting desires. And even there she omits much--such as the violent mood swings she experienced in the half-year before her marriage:⁴ she was certain of her affection and respect for Wes; she was less sure of her ability to adequately discharge her obligations--self-imposed when it came to writing, socially dictated as regards wife- and motherhood. By the time she was forty, she had worked out a balance. She also stated that "every gain in life means a corresponding loss; development in one part means a shrinkage in some other. . . . Life is full of compensations" (TLT 31). But these words are about wheat and wealth, not career and child care.

The general silence regarding any difficulties in integrating her several callings may have occurred partly to protect her privacy. This does not explain why such problems have no place in her fiction. The extent to which career and motherhood could be combined was a more controversial subject, even among feminists, than suffrage and prohibition. Further, McClung may never have quite resolved her own views as the topic was complex and not topical.

⁴These are recorded only in her diaries; see Savage, p. 34.

But the major cause of her silence was probably the anti-feminist belief that a woman who did not devote herself day and night to her husband and children wrecked their lives. As part of her politicizing, McClung began speeches by telling her audience that she had just phoned home to confirm that the children were fine and Wes's socks were darned: "I never would have believed one man's hosiery could excite the amount of interest those socks do."⁵ Still, whether she gave readings, lectured or ran for office, she always did so in the name of the home: the expanded home--the world--impinged upon each dwelling. She would have been extremely reluctant to say anything that could encourage the rampant prejudice against women who were not exclusively homemakers.

Nevertheless, no matter what her reason, for once McClung's life and writings are not consonant.

One of her priorities was to leave a legacy of truth. Yet in her writings at least, she usually ignored at least one aspect of her reality. As well, her tendency to oversimplify is connected to her failure to grasp some political truths--and to her depiction of truth diluted with dishonesty in her fiction. For example, McClung knew very well the tremendous amount of time it took to care for a child. In Painted Fires, a newborn

⁵Quoted in May L. Armitage, "Mrs. Nellie McClung," Maclean's, July 1915, p. 38; as quoted by Savage, p. 98. Nellie immediately goes on to state that Wes's socks are always darned; she clearly understood that, according to the conventions of her society, behind every undarned sock is a woman who has failed in her duty to her family.

baby takes about fifteen minutes a day of the mother's time.

It took McClung many at-home rehearsals to polish her speeches. According to the literary conventions of her time, however, only slimy politicians have to practice their unctuous and misleading utterances; those with truth on their side can rely on inspiration: truth will out. In Purple Springs, Pearlie Watson makes terrific impromptu speeches.

McClung was in her late thirties before she began campaigning for women's suffrage. At seventeen, she once attended a political meeting; this was at the invitation of a woman farmer, the only other woman present. McClung felt ill at ease though she knew it was the politician who was in the wrong. In Purple Springs, events take another turn. Pearlie Watson, an inexperienced small-town eighteen-year-old, takes on and defeats the powers that be. It can be argued that there was no suffrage movement for Nellie to become involved in at seventeen. It is equally true that the adolescent Nellie was not as self-confident as the established novelist; a high point of the young Nellie's existence was dressing up to catch a glimpse of newspaperwoman E. Cora Hind.

Pearlie is also, unlike Nellie, politically involved before she marries; that is, she is doing work outside the home exactly when it was socially sanctioned for her to do so. Purple Springs was not published until 1921; by then, most unmarried women held paying jobs and many belonged to some youth organization. Pearlie's life, in other words, is more conventional than Nellie's--which became increasingly

adventure-packed after her mid-thirties.

Further, McClung understood that human beings are frequently irrational beings and that it is difficult to make adults change their ways--in fact, she came to doubt that it is possible to do so. In her fiction, on the other hand, characters frequently come to realize the error of their ways and then immediately reform. The widower in "Carried Forward" has never enjoyed his children's company. After his wife's death, he is delighted to be pampered by a housekeeper who obligingly keeps them away from him. Yet he fires her as soon as he finds out that she is underfeeding them and making Hilda, his eldest daughter, do all the work: "What must Hilda think of him?--faithful, hard-working little Hilda! He tried to think of how old she was, and was ashamed to find out he did not know. . . . He would make it all up to her tomorrow."⁶ His firing the housekeeper is plausible: she has, by letting his children go hungry, shamed him in front of the neighbors. But it is difficult to believe that a man as selfish as he has shown himself to be will carry out his impulse to be better to his daughter.

In Purple Springs, an even more radical about-face occurs. An anti-suffrage politician who wanted to take his grandchild from his widowed daughter-in-law (as the law entitled him to do), and who has bullied his wife their whole married life long, sees the light. Not only does he come to realize that

⁶Nellie L. McClung, "Carried Forward," All We like Sheep (Toronto: Thomas Allen, 1926), p. 230.

women ought to have the vote and that he was wrong to try to deprive his daughter-in-law of her son, he also becomes such a pleasant person that he, his wife, daughter-in-law and grandson are able to live happily together by the end of the book.

McClung may have considered her distortions insignificant, but helpful to put across her main points. Two major failures to apply her own logic occurred when they pointed to conclusions largely unacceptable to the reform community of her generation. After the outbreak of World War I, Nellie continued to know why she was against war:

If I go to my neighbor's house, and break her furniture, and smash her pictures, and bind her children captive, it does not prove that I am fitter to live than she--yet according to the ethics of nations it does. I have conquered her and she must pay me for her trouble; and her house and all that is left in it belong to my heirs and successors' forever. That is war! (TLT 17)

Nellie refused to be caught up by words like honor and glory. Her down-to-home image compellingly illuminates the nature of war.

Yet she was not a pacifist. She came to view the war as retribution upon the people for not living according to their Christian ideals.

Her anti-war arguments are hard to refute. Her reasons for taking part make little sense. For example, she claims that not to enlist is the same as not to come to your mother's defense. After all, if your mother is being clobbered, you do not stop to ask if she is right or wrong; you jump in and help

her.⁷ McClung, sometimes a superb logician, is temporarily unaware that if two mothers are fighting, it makes no sense for their children to join in the fray: in her own "Young Enough to Know Better," a story which has no reference to any war, the children's friendship causes two couples to patch up their quarrel.

Pacifists were far more the "lunatic fringe" than feminists. Faced with a calamity the size of World War I-- during which, moreover, most feminists were for the war effort--McClung could not think with clarity. Nor could she, used all her life to speaking from within a sizeable segment of the community, suddenly break with her society.

This was not because of a failure of nerve: McClung never indicated that she "went along" with the war mania. She recorded her ambivalence. She frequently asserted that war is just innocent boys killing other innocent boys. She also held that, now that the war had begun, it was important to get in there and finish it off.

A second lack of insight that can be partly traced to her background is her anti-union position. When she moved to Winnipeg in 1912, she soon became involved in pressuring the government to stop sweatshop factory conditions. Yet in the General Strike of May 1919, she turned against the strikers.

They were autocratic and showed no consideration for other citizens. As McClung noted:

⁷See Nellie L. McClung, Painted Fires, p. 187.

Every newspaper except their own was suppressed; water pressure was reduced to thirty pounds, for that is enough to bring it to one storey buildings, and the Western Labor News stated that it is in one storey buildings that the "workers" live, the inference being that it did not matter whether other people lived or not.⁸

McClung was always prepared to let her opposition have its say: she felt it was her task, not to muzzle, but to convince. She also did her best for the poor; understandably, she was not in favor of a movement which labelled her a class enemy.

Still, she never saw the need for labor to organize. She was for a decent standard of living for all hard workers. She was also for the voluntary sharing of prosperity and power: after all, men granted women the vote not too long after women established that many of us wanted it.

What is striking in her anti-union position is her failure to apply her arguments. In When Christmas Crossed "the Peace," the nurse coerces the bootlegger into doing good. By extension, at its best a union is a means of forcibly enlightening recalcitrant employers. In story after essay, McClung called for prohibition because "the object of all laws should be to make the path of virtue as easy as possible" (TLT 103). It seems apparent that it is as important to stop the abuse of labor as of liquor. Yet once more, McClung ignored her own arguments--which indicates that, for her, reasons were sometimes tools for achieving ends, rather than ends

⁸ Nellie L. McClung, "The Winnipeg General Strike," typescript, McClung Papers; as quoted by Savage, p. 143.

(truths) in themselves.

Naturally, her approval of Canada's participation in World War I, and her disapproval of unions, are amply reflected in her writings and other activities. For example, she repeatedly holds up good employers as role models. As for others--they need to undergo a change of heart.

McClung can be criticized for underplaying many complexities, remaining silent regarding a personal conflict of interests, occasionally not portraying her own vision of reality, and sometimes selectively applying her points.⁹ However, while her tendency to oversimplify is not a strength, it should be noted that much is simple and yet not widely perceived, that there are many clear-cut instances of right and wrong, and that some people do turn over new leaves. For example, women's humanity was long denied; Nellie affirmed it. For example, we should be, but have rarely been, guaranteed the same educational and job opportunities as men; Nellie worked for women's rights. And as for individual redemption: the reformed politician of Purple Springs was based on McClung's arch-enemy in the Manitoba suffrage campaign. Though they never became close friends, McClung and Rodmund Roblin eventually exchanged cuttings from their gardens--and

⁹The latter may be partly due to her changes in opinion. For example, her faith in legislated remedies decreased after women's suffrage did not reform the world. However, she was against the General Strike in 1919; and she ran for office in 1921. Her aim was legal reform.

not poison ivy either, as she pointed out. Purple Springs' happy ending is not all wishful thinking.

Further, McClung was concerned to reach as wide an audience as possible. Her fiction broke with some of the conventions of her time--because she could not ethically tolerate those particular conventions. Had she tampered with more of the formula, she might have alienated at least a part of her audience.

But that is not why she adhered to some literary precedents and not others. McClung was out to reform the world according to her own priorities. The abolition of the liquor trade and the enfranchisement of women were vital to her; women's right to contraception and divorce, and a mother's right to participate in the job market were comparatively less so. Nor did McClung care to show exactly what percentage of people underwent changes of heart; that was not necessary, in her opinion, in order to portray the truth. Instead, she cared to show that people could change, and to move people to follow the examples of her characters.

The weaknesses that stem from her simple background in which the natural environment, religion and literature combined to encourage her to see difficulties and injustices as easy to solve--these weaknesses are very evident today. Now we are trained to perceive problems as overwhelming. The individual stymied by the violence of New York; the individual powerless against the likelihood of a nuclear holocaust; the

individual beset by angst and guilt and various debilitating complexes--these are some of the clichés of today.

Our stereotypes are inappropriate to her setting. In fact, regardless of the setting, for those who accept them, they often lead to passivity. Nellie's acceptance of the possibility of simple solutions was an important influence on her involvement in public affairs. It enabled her to concentrate on a few goals (though it also led to her disillusionment when achieving the goal did not reap the expected reward).

Her approach to problems led to partial success. It prompted her, for example, to write accessible fiction, most of which promotes justice for humankind through a fairer deal for women. Much of her fiction also fosters the belief that, as long as we do not give in, a happy ending is possible. We can do with that belief.

Still, Nellie cared to improve the lot of all women. Because of where and when she grew up, there are many truths about women she did not learn. For example, she knew she wanted more than either career or children; she did not realize how many other women were like her.

Her weaknesses as a thinker are important precisely because her goal was, not to create art for art's sake, but to make people understand themselves. She could not enlighten her readers beyond her own limited vision.

VI. A Qualified Tolerance

Nellie was taught a black-and-white morality. As a girl and young woman she met far fewer people than she would have, had she lived in a large town or city. Still, while country and small-town life contributed to McClung's faith in relatively simplistic solutions, it did not give her a stereotypically small-town mentality. She was not suspicious of all new customs and of people from different ethnic and racial backgrounds.

For example, in Painted Fires, shero Helmi Milander, an immigrant from Finland, marries Jack Doran who is well-educated, upper class and Wasp. Helmi clearly deserves him--and not because she adopts Canadian values. Jack's all-Canadian sister is a "gentle lady" whose main interests are clothes and opium. Helmi deserves Jack because her values, made in Finland, are McClung's. Helmi is hard-working yet good-natured, ready to serve others but not to be a doormat. She is a fighter both for herself and anyone else in need.

Admittedly, McClung had shortcomings as a thinker. She also had definite strengths: one is her ability to draw unconventional conclusions from prevalent beliefs; another is

her refusal to accept many ethnic and religious prejudices. The major aims of this chapter are to show the causes for and limits of her tolerance, and ways in which her tolerance is reflected in her writings, as in her other political activities.

Its origins can be traced to her childhood experiences, as can most of her personality traits, ideas and outlooks. A prairie winter is a long time to be without neighbors. Anyone who worked hard and did not drink was more than welcome. This included people who were not Anglo-Saxon Protestants.

McClung's "The Way of the West" ends with a paean to the harmony that comes from living in the frontier environment:

Where could such a scene as this be enacted--a Twelfth of July celebration [British Protestant] where a Roman Catholic priest was the principal speaker, where the company dispersed with the singing of "God Save the King," led by an American band? Nowhere, but in the Northwest of Canada, that illimitable land.¹

It also helped that Nellie lived, as a child, in an area where the population was mixed. For example, her schoolteacher, Mr. Schultz, was German; and even during World War I, McClung rarely said anything ~~negative~~ about German women, or even German men--she just criticized the way many had been taught to think.

Perhaps Mr. Schultz, by being German and someone Nellie admired, caused her to realize that non-Anglo-Saxons could be decent human beings. However, he also advocated tolerance, far more tolerance than most people in the community were

¹Nellie L. McClung, "The Way of the West," The Black Creek Stopping-house, p. 224.

prepared to give. While most of the settlers Nellie knew were against the Riel Rebellion, and feared that dissatisfied Métis and Indians would scalp innocent whites, Mr. Schultz explained that the Indians were starving because the buffalo herds had been slaughtered by white hunters. As for the Métis, they had been treated arrogantly by the government agents, some of whom had even sent East insulting letters which were published. As Nellie points out, "the printed page has wings" (CW 179). All that the Indians and Métis wanted was a fair deal.

Nellie already accepted that one had to do one's utmost to help the needy. She was a quick convert to her teacher's way of thinking. In fact, she was sufficiently aroused to the plight of the Métis that she made her first political speech. Her audience was small, just her family and some family friends, but it was as antagonistic as any she was later to face. Still, when the cause was justice, the thirteen-year-old Nellie already knew it was her duty to speak out.

Decades later, she wrote "Red and White."² In the story, she denounces the treatment Indians suffer at the hands of whites, and especially of those white men who use Indian women for sexual gratification and then abandon both the women and any children.^{2a} Interestingly, it is the only one of McClung's fictional pieces in which she applauds separatism: the

²Nellie L. McClung, "Red and White," All We like Sheep.

^{2a}Note that, once again, McClung puts the blame on the seducer.

money-grubbing, pleasure-seeking, hard-drinking whites do not have values the Indians can adopt if they are to live fulfilled lives. In "Red and White," in fact, the Indian way of life is better than anyone else's. Perhaps McClung's belief in separatism for the Indians³ dates back to Mr. Schultz's teachings. It probably also reflects unease with the idea of racial integration. Finally, it is linked with her rejection of what she viewed as urban values: in other stories, it is whites who leave a destructive environment--the city--and return to small towns or the country.

McClung's tolerance extended to Orientals as well. And once again, it was an active tolerance: she promoted acceptance. In British Columbia, Orientals were denied the vote long after (non-Oriental) women had obtained it. Though McClung campaigned for the B.C. Liberals in 1935, she repeatedly took issue with their refusal to promise to enfranchise Orientals. She also portrayed Orientals positively in her writings: for example, she reminded her readers that a few polite Chinese would be an asset at the generally raucous political rallies.

Yet in Painted Fires (1923), a stereotypic Chinaman with clawlike nails runs the dope-den which supplies Eva St. John's habit. This does not show McClung at her tolerant best. But dope-dens were usually managed (almost invariably, in the fiction of her day) by Orientals. Further, she and Wes only moved to B.C. in 1931; and it was there, in the only province

³Separatism is endorsed by most present-day Indian leaders.

with a large Oriental population, that she first encountered much anti-Oriental prejudice. McClung tended to accept the conventions of melodrama unless she felt they were morally objectionable; and it was only in B.C. that she saw the need for good publicity for Orientals. She did her best to provide some.

She is occasionally patronizing toward non-Wasps. In The Stream Runs Fast, McClung mentions a Hungarian woman who gave up her boarding house and moved to a posh district. The woman found that the life was not for her and, in less than six months, went back to her old neighborhood and opened another boarding house. She left "the right side of town" because "no one needed me, and that's all right, too. Nobody's fault." McClung continues, echoing the separatism of "Red and White": "I looked at Elsa with admiration. How wise she was to know she was happier with her own kind and to arrive at that conclusion without any resentment or bitterness" (SRF 256-57; italics added). When an Anglo-Saxon woman, however, revels in being needed, "her world had suddenly grown alive and glorious. She was needed."⁴ True, that woman too is needed by someone of her own kind, another country woman, but the emphasis is on being needed.

There are, as well, quite definite limits to McClung's tolerance. First, it was not a disguise for indifference, something she labelled "cowlike contentment" (TLT 35), and

⁴Nellie L. McClung, "When No One Needs You," p. 134.

considered as great a danger to human welfare as plague and famine. Aside from her impatience with such selfishness, McClung had a strong streak of intolerance. This was not directed primarily at people, but at what she defined as wrong values and especially as urban values.

She was capable of seeing the drawbacks of living in the country. Women died from overwork. Children left as soon as they could because of the monotony of the chores and the lack of entertainments (other than drink). McClung called for the construction of community centres that her contemporary, social theorist Charlotte Perkins Gilman, would have applauded. The centres would offer meals and child care, and contain a theatre and a sports arena. At once, there would be jobs for those young people who did not want to work on the farms, and less work and more fun for those who did. McClung wanted, in other words, rural areas to have some of the amenities which country people moved to the city for.

According to McClung, those who moved rarely found what they were looking for. In several of her stories, she describes displaced country people who have come to the city in search of a little ease and glamor, some fresh conversations and faces. They are often, for the first time in their lives, devastatingly isolated. McClung was in favor of economic independence for all, but for emotional interdependence. Neighborliness was the watchword of country women, but self-sufficiency and unconcern for the less fortunate were the watchwords of many wealthier city women. This, at least, was

McClung's perception.

She did record favorable impressions of some city women, but these are usually of poor and/or foreign women with "rural" values. Many of them hold jobs to support their families, and care that their children will have a better life--just as McClung's parents, and many of their generation, homesteaded in isolation for their children's sake. Anna Ronig's daughter compares her hard-working mother to the mothers of middle class schoolmates:

My mother has gone hungry so I could have enough to eat; she has gone shabby, but I had always nice clothes for school. . . . Those girls can't think of their mothers as I do . . . their mothers never did anything more heroic for them than lending them a pair of stockings on Wednesday afternoon when the stores were closed.⁵

Nellie in other places repeatedly affirms that prosperity is good unless accompanied by selfishness. Yet part of her was clearly nostalgic for the pioneer life of her childhood. Many of the struggling city poor are urban "pioneers"--immigrants. Nellie knew where pioneers belonged: Anna and her daughter move, not from a slum to a middle class area, but out to the country.

McClung herself moved to Winnipeg, population 136,000, at thirty-seven. She soon found like-minded friends--middle class like herself--as she later did in Edmonton, Calgary and Victoria. Among those she met were many of the leaders in the Manitoba reform movements. Still, McClung persisted in

⁵ Nellie L. McClung, "Come True," Flowers for the Living, p. 36.

regarding wealthier city-dwellers as generally luxury- and pleasure-hungry.

McClung's anti-urban stance (despite her own move, and those of her relatives) can be traced to several factors. There was her nostalgia for her childhood days. Then too, in the city it was harder for her to control her children's environment. Nor was there much work for a child to do: so s/he did not learn to enjoy getting a job done.

The "gentle lady" was hardly to be found in the country, Nellie McClung, the druggist's wife, was one of the more affluent citizens of Manitou. The conspicuous wealth of some city dwellers far exceeded that of the small-town people she knew best. In Manitou, there were richer and poorer; there were no millionaires and sweatshop workers.

Further, in both the country and small town, life existed on a human scale. The needy could be helped by the efforts of concerned citizens. In the city, every individual action seemed a drop in the slop bucket. McClung's preference for simple answers may have furthered her intolerance of the urban environment. Just as she saw prohibition as the cure for the problems stemming from drunkenness, so too she saw a return to the country as the solution to urban blight.

Nellie also repeatedly confused her perception of something with the correct perception. For example, though the hell and brimstone variety of Christianity was the most prevalent form in her day, she insisted that Christianity was a religion of love, joy and charity. Her justification for

her view is that a good deity would not put us on earth and then lightly punish us. In other words, she relied on neither Christianity-as-is nor scripture. Quite the contrary. She recounted the grim story of Jephtha:

[He] vowed he would sacrifice the first living thing that came to meet him if the Lord would give him victory over the children of Ammon, and though it was his only daughter who came to welcome him, he kept his vow. The story carries no word of censure. Jephtha was "a man of valor." . . . But I can imagine what the women thought of the "valiant" man who paid his vow by slaughtering his daughter.⁶

She reconciled her faith with the record by putting all she found unfavorable as due to the exclusion of women.

She is right that no good deity would create us and then treat us cruelly. But she omitted to show that the Christian deity is good. Not did she establish that conditions on earth indicate there is any deity.

Her definition of women's nature again relies on a lapse in logic. In this case, she generalized from her observations of the women she liked best. Somehow the existence of women "concerned with bridge and golf, trips abroad, and alterations in their houses, visits to specialists and dressmakers, variations in styles, and in blood-pressure, calories, vitamins, and complexes"⁷ did not affect her belief in women's moral superiority⁸ and our preference for peaceful methods.

Her defense of rural living is similar to her "vindication"

⁶Nellie L. McClung, "Defensive Common-sense," Leaves from Lantern Lane, p. 35.

⁷Nellie L. McClung, "Flowers for the Living," Flowers for the Living, p. 4.

of Christianity. Instead of liking characteristics she has found more common in the country, she defined them as innate to country living. She recognized that Christianity-as-is had defects; so too, she admitted the deficiencies of life in a rural setting. But once more, only the advantages, not the drawbacks, were inherent. According to her, living in the country taught people the value of hard work, the pleasure of reaping what one has sown, and the importance of neighborliness. She saw herself, and not the country bumpkin, as the representative product of country living.

She is right that a country childhood taught her these things. But many prairie daughters were trapped in the house from an early age and were not given much chance to be neighborly. As for the connection between reaping and sowing, country living taught many just how tenuous that tie was: especially on the prairies, many crops failed. Drought, hail, frost--all these are innate threats to the farmer who wants to reap what s/he has sown.

McClung was a brilliant logician when it suited her to be. Her humor frequently relies on well-reasoned arguments to demolish her opponents' opinions. However, she seems never to have turned her critical eye on her own preconceptions.

Her failure to question many of her assumptions may be partly due to her belief in essences. In philosophy, an essence is "that which constitutes the inward nature of anything, underlying its true manifestations; true

substance."⁸ McClung's "essentialism" allowed her to define without relying exclusively on facts. Then she could approve or disapprove on the basis of her definition.

McClung had several reasons for her belief in essences. Had she not viewed Christianity as she did, she would have had to repudiate it--and it was accepted by most members of her community, especially by the reform-minded. Secondly, according to her, "we know there is another world, because we need it so badly to set this one right" (TLT 38): Her version of Christianity "validated" her happy outlook on life.

A more general reason is that most people in her society believed in essences. Woman's nature was widely discussed with no reference to actual women who did not fit the stereotypes. McClung, while rejecting her society's conceptions about women's frailty, did not continue and reject the thinking on which it was built. In fact, as with so much else, she used it to her own ends.

She was unwilling to take, sight unseen, anyone else's assumptions. Instead, she started with her own perceptions. For example, she recognized both her own strength and the strength of her favorite women. In her life, politics and writings, she worked at redefining our nature. She was as much of an "essentialist" as most of the people in her society; she simply believed they had gotten the essences wrong. She was, once more, largely of her time.

⁸ Webster's New Twentieth Century Dictionary (U.S.A.: Collins World, 1977), p. 624.

It is important to note that many of her conclusions have merit. Life on the frontier, for example, did encourage girls and women to develop into sheros. It is also likely that women are more nurturing than men. Further, while many present-day feminists prefer to stay as far from Christianity as possible--McClung was right about its misogyny--there is currently a tremendous amount of interest in the spiritual or religious in a more diffuse sense.

All her life, Nellie herself had "flashes" during which she experienced the possibility of a better world. The first time this occurred was when she heard one of her Sunday School teachers say to the other:

"No matter how they receive our teaching, we owe it to them, we, whose hearts have been touched with grace, we must not eat out bread alone."

I was about eleven when I heard this, and it opened another door for me, and gave me a glimpse of a heavenly country here on earth. If "no one ate their bread alone," we could have a glorious and radiant world here and now, a bright world! . . . I saw it in a flash, in a radiant beam that shone around me in that moment, and I experienced a warming of the heart that has never altogether faded even during my darkest hours (CW 101).

For her to hold that her vision was not merely a chimera, but something worth working for, Nellie had to have faith in an unrealized human potential for good.

McClung's tolerance came from her experiences. So did her intolerance. Further, both were the largely justifiable reactions of a woman who trusted her own insights.

VII. The Power of Words

Despite the physical isolation of the Mooney homestead, the outside world seemed close. All her life, Nellie remained grateful for books "that brought us pictures of far places, that pushed back the walls of loneliness, that opened golden doors, and created for us a sense of fellowship with the wide world, of which we had seen so little" (SRF 71). Even before Nellie could read, words were of tremendous importance to her: for example, they led her to know the female and male stereotypes, and to believe in the existence of an invisible deity.

This section will deal with McClung's perception of the power of words, and with ways in which she consciously used words as tools. But words have power only as long as they are read, heard or remembered. McClung's works are now largely forgotten; that is, at present her words are generally ineffectual. A final aim of this section will be to delineate one of the major causes for the present-day disparagement of her writings.

The move from Grey County resulted from words. A neighbor's son returned east to get married; he spread glowing accounts of the prairie's potential as farmland. His statements were reinforced by letters by Manitoba pioneers published in local papers. Nellie's oldest

brother determined to try his luck out west.

She came to realize that repeatedly, written and spoken words were, together, catalysts for action. Their combination, for example, contributed to the Riel Rebellion. McClung also noted that written words can carry further, last longer, reach more people: "Hitler knew the power of words, and so wrote down for all men to read, if they would, his whole plan of attack on humanity" (SRF 302). But all words matter:

Every little group of women who meet in mission circles, women's institutes, peace societies, or other groups to study the problems of the world, are helping to bring in the day of peace and goodwill between nations.¹

Each great movement begins in talk. A group of women who had met in a farm house in Stoney Creek, Ontario, talked as they sewed, about the need for greater opportunity to study their problems, and out of that came the Women's Institutes, the largest organization of women in the world.²

Let us renounce forever that "words break no bones," and the other one that "talk is cheap. . . ." Marie Antoinette was never forgiven for her witless remark about the people eating cake if they had no bread.³

There are no idle words; words may be wise or foolish, worthy or worthless, honest or insincere, but they are never idle. They work overtime, and carry their own impact of good or evil. . . .⁴ words can build or destroy, inspire or defeat us.

¹Nellie L. McClung, "Women Talking," More Leaves from Lantern Lane (Toronto: Thomas Allen, 1936), p. 162.

²McClung, "The Art of Conversation," More Leaves from Lantern Lane, p. 191.

³McClung, "Words," More Leaves from Lantern Lane, p. 73.

⁴McClung, "It was Loaded," Flowers for the Living, p. 46.

During a speech, McClung "saw faces brighten, eyes glisten, and felt the atmosphere crackle with a new power. I saw what could be done with words. . . . I was giving them . . . something which I hoped would work like yeast in their minds" (SRF 61). People needed such "ferments": "There is a new world to be built and it must come in the hearts of people. We must see it before we can build it" (SRF xi).

McClung is not merely giving her opinion of the impact words can have. She backs it up with instances. She also consistently uses her word power for women: by referring to the Women's Institutes, she publicizes their existence. Her reference to the little groups of women grappling with the world situation was written in 1936, when a large-scale war was becoming increasingly likely; she is encouraging women not to give up. When she does mention a woman whose comment led to her own destruction, she goes on to question whether Marie Antoinette ever made it.

It is also important to note that McClung makes her message explicit. She does not, for example, tell a story from which the reader may infer her view on the power of words. Instead, her statements, illustrations and stories reinforce each other.

Still, the power of words is non-coercive. McClung, due to her view of human nature, associated the use of such power more with women than men:

As it is, criminals have only man's treatment, which is the hurry-up method--hang him, and be done with him. . . . To hang the man who commits a crime is a cheap way out of a difficulty; a real

masculine way. It is so much quicker and easier than trying to reform him, and what is one man less after all? Human life is cheap--to men (TLT 89).

McClung was for the reform of the penal system. But that is not her major aim here. She uses men's punitive treatment of criminals to argue men's unconcern for each other, and to dispute their ability to govern by educating, rather than oppressing. Clearly, women are needed in politics.

She ends by drily qualifying a cliché ("Human life is cheap -- to men") to change its meaning. This is a favorite technique of hers, and yet another instance of how she subverts whatever she can -- melodrama, Christianity, marriage -- to her own ends.

Because of her ethics and her respect for words, Nellie McClung naturally cared both to what ends and for whom she used language. She was concerned about the common people, and especially about women--those common people who had most been denied voice:

Many men have felt perfectly qualified to sum up all women in a few crisp sentences, and they do not shrink from declaring in their modest way that they understand women far better than women understand themselves. They love to talk about women in bulk, all women--and quite cheerfully tell us women are illogical, frivolous, jealous, vindictive, forgiving, affectionate, not any too honest, patient, frail, delightful, inconstant, faithful (TLT 70).

What a glorious thing it will be when men cease to speak for us, and cease to tell us what we think, and let us speak for ourselves (TLT 85).

By stringing together the adjectives commonly applied to women by men, McClung ridicules the male penchant for making

blanket statements about women, and partially justifies her belief that only women can speak for women. She wisely overlooks-- being a good debater-- the many women who speak of women just as men do.

It should be noted, in McClung's defense, that she never claimed to know men better than they knew themselves.

She accepted their self-definition and reinterpreted (subverted) it: for example, men's way, far from being admirable, is "the cheap way out of a difficulty."

She also gave other reasons why women need to have our voices heard. For example:

This wail for large families, coming as it does from men, is rather nauseating. . . . It does not seem to the thoughtful observer that we need more children nearly so much as we need better children, and, a higher value set on human life. . . . But all who endeavored in any way to secure legislation or government grants for the protection of children, have found that legislators are more willing to pass laws for the protection of cattle than for the protection of children, for cattle have a real value and children only a sentimental value (TLT 88).

According to McClung, because of women's greater "sentimentality," women would be less willing to sacrifice life to material prosperity.

Her comparison between the laws affecting cattle and children was especially apt because of the prevalence of the fictions that people prize children over prime beef, and that all women are by nature child-lovers. Children's lack of legal protection could only be attributed to men's excessive power.

Her written and spoken words form part of her attempts to

94
give power to women. Unfortunately, because she saw no need for women to attain a substantial degree of potentially coercive power, some of her counsel worked toward encouraging our power to remain limited to those words we could exchange.

Still, she used non-coercive power to its fullest extent: "I did not want to leave one good word unwritten, one good story untold" (SRF xi). Since all words can leave a mark, she saw no reason to keep to any one written or spoken form. Her lectures, essays, readings, short stories and novels reinforced each other's impact.

She did rate the written over the spoken word. Writings can reach more people. Further, without her writings, she could not leave a record of her vision of the world and "people must know the past to understand the present and face the future" (SRF x). She published sixteen books, throughout which she presents her perceptions of what is and her hopes of what might be. She knew, for example, that her sheros were atypical women. But she felt they were what most women could, at our best, be like. She expressed her own experiences and gave girls and women role models to emulate.

Yet, to leave a factual record was insufficient for McClung. Some records have no impact. According to her, the truth did not consist of a series of bald or bland facts; one good anecdote, for example, might be more effective than any number of charts and statistics. Similarly, with spoken words, she was aware that a poor delivery could destroy the

power of the words. Her son Mark remembered: "My mother wasn't content to read the news, she proclaimed the news, she declaimed the news, she exclaimed the news. . . . So, you know, you started the day with the feeling of participating in the world."⁵ By appealing to the emotions and showing her own involvement, Nellie was able to achieve significant results.

Another important aspect of the power of words is repetition. McClung reiterated her preference for lifters over leaners, left variations of her pro-suffrage speeches, frequently wrote of the plight of those farmers' wives who were worked to death. Her repetitions are not exact copies of each other. However, the gist of many of her stories and articles is similar. Her recurrent themes include an insistence that rural living is best; that loneliness is hard to bear; and that women as well as men need financial independence.

According to McClung, Hitler claimed that "people would believe anything if they were told it over and over again, and the bigger the lie, the better" (SRF 303).

McClung tried; to her utmost, to give the truth a chance. But she agreed that to say something once was not enough: she was the mother of five, after all, and knew how long it took to teach anything. Further, Nellie did not, as a child,

⁵Mark McClung, "Portrait of My Mother," transcript of a speech, available from Dr. Margaret Andersen, Department of Languages, Guelph, Ontario, p. 4.

pretend to be a simpering Lorelie because she once heard of a sweet-young-thing heroine; the delicate damsel was a staple in fiction. Nor did Nellie appreciate poems after a single reading; while minding the cattle, she spent hours squeezing every last bit of meaning she could find from the verses. Similarly, her Christianity can not be traced to a swift skimming of the family's Bible; she attended Sunday School for years.

There was another reason why McClung made similar points in various works. In the early twentieth century, reading was the most popular entertainment of the literate masses. There was a plethora of new books, of magazines and newspapers. McClung was far from the only feminist author; as previously noted, until about 1930, there was a growing output of feminist fiction. Nevertheless, McClung and other authors with similar viewpoints remained in the minority. To be effective, they had to create not only their own Bibles, but to be their own Sunday Schools. A single "definitive message" would still have been published only once--and would have been more rapidly drowned out by the flood of contrary messages.

Her readers did not turn from McClung because of the reiterations. Each work "confirmed" the content of the others, just as McClung's many political activities each increased the possibility of the success of the others.

The various categories of writing were not, for her,

isolated from each other, with some labelled art and others non-art; so too, her writings and political activities blurred into each other. In fact, her writings are part of her politicizing. In 1912, suffrage was not an important issue in the Canadian prairies. In 1915, the first of the prairie provinces granted women the vote, and the other two followed within a year. McClung did not accomplish the reform single-handed; she was not a person, in any case, who worked as a lone agent. Yet she was not jokingly referred to as Mrs. McLung for nothing: through her fiction, lectures, readings and the Mock Parliament, she played a major role in bringing about the change in women's status.

Toward the end of her life, as feminism waned and wars raged, McClung came to doubt that she had used words in the most effective way possible:

If I were young again--and I wish I could go back-- I would spend my life as a teacher of young children, doing all in my power to give them a vision of the dignity and glory of being builders and planters, makers and menders. Children are the great idealists, until the stupidity of their elders puts out the fires of their aspirations (SRF 314).

Further, had she remained a teacher, she could have come closer to tallying the results of her efforts: as a writer and politician her effect was much more diffuse--perhaps far greater, definitely more difficult to measure.

When, in the early forties, she wanted to be able to go back, she had also lived to see the popularity of her writings drop and many of her notions discredited, among them those regarding the importance of content in literature.

McClung's ideas on the possible impact of fiction were not controversial when she published her first work. They became increasingly suspect from the twenties onwards, as a new school of literary criticism gained in popularity. New Critics held that form, not content, was central in a work of art. They also claimed that form and content were inseparable, but in practice, their interest in form was primary.

In the 1930's McClung attended a lecture given by a New Critical professor:

The professor had a delightful theme which had to do with poetry and its implications--was it a means to an end, or an end in itself? Did it have to be true and moral, bound by laws, or could it exist and prosper for its own beauty? The professor . . . warned his audience against "doctrinal adhesions" and advised them to soak themselves in Shakespeare, whose personal opinions do not stick out through his characters. . . . we listened to him until we believed the foundation timbers of truth are of but feeble consequence if the superstructure of beauty be sufficiently compelling.⁶

McClung gives a clear and concise synopsis of the New Critical position. However, when she claims to have been swayed to the professor's way of thinking, it is clear that she is planning a rebuttal; otherwise she would not refer to "the foundation timbers of truth."

McClung and most of the other members of the audience

⁶McClung, "A Day in Vancouver," Leaves from Lantern Lane, p. 44.

did not stay convinced for long: "when we got away and out from the spell of his voice and his delightfully phrased sentences, we argued about it, and could not believe that the form of words was all, no matter how polished, or patterned, or full of sweet music they are."⁷ The truth of the words counted, they were sure of that.

But certainty, as McClung well knew, is not enough to win a debate. She remembered the section in de Quincy's Confessions of an Opium Eater in which he enthuses over his first experience with the drug:

The words are musical and rhythmic; and the scene is painted in unfading color, but it cannot move and bind me for all that. I have a "doctrinal adhesion" which tells me it was not a happy day for Thomas de Quincy when "the paradise of opium eaters was laid open" to him.⁸

McClung's society was strongly anti-opium. By citing de Quincy's Confessions, McClung drove home the fact that the professor's theory ignores an important aspect of the nature of words.

Still, she was willing to leave her rebuttal at that and end on a positive note: "but it's a good lecture that sends the audience out discussing and debating and leaves a kindling interest that makes one want to hear more."⁹

The opposition treated her with less kindness. At a Canadian Authors' Convention in the early forties, when

⁷Ibid., p. 44.

⁸Ibid., pp. 44-45.

⁹Ibid., p. 45..

McClung expressed her views on the importance of content, "I was assailed with particular vehemence by one of my fellow members who is a writer of novels--she cried out in disgust: 'Who wants to write books for Sunday Schools? I certainly do not'" (SRF 70). McClung sarcastically concluded that "no doubt she was thinking about her art" (SRF 70).

McClung cared little for such art: "What would have been our fate had no one cared for our mental and spiritual well-being?" (SRF 70). As far as she could see, there was no reason to exempt literature from ethical judgments.

While she disagreed with the New Critics as to the importance of content, she also vehemently objected to their lack of concern for the common folk. When she felt called to do for her people what Dickens had done for his, McClung defined her people, not as fellow writers, but as the prairie settlers she grew up with. The New Critics, many of them academics, found that a work's appeal to those without much education was irrelevant. What counted was whether or not it measured up to their aesthetic standards. And those standards belittled much of what appealed to the masses: most of them ridiculed Dickens, for example, and extolled the far more esoteric writings of T.S. Eliot. McClung's reaction to the New Critics' intolerance is brief and blunt: "Intellectual snobs are the most objectionable of all snobs."¹⁰

¹⁰ McClung, "New Year's Resolutions," More Leaves from Lantern Lane, p. 24.

She was not demanding that all writers "write down" for the less educated: "I'll admit there is poetry that I cannot understand, but I do not begrudge it to those who do."¹¹ She was against the assumption that "highbrow" fiction was the only kind with literary merit.

Ironically, though the New Critics valued form over content in the autonomous work of art, it was the content of their words which overpowered McClung's. Since many were academics, they trained the future generations of the university-educated to evaluate literature by standards that denigrated McClung's works. Shakespeare's opinions may not be self-evident to New Critics (though most casual readers perceive that, for example, he thought Iago a bad sort); McClung's opinions are, by her choice, hard to miss--which was enough to condemn her writings. Her works did not prove autonomous from their evaluations: the New Critics, with their standards and their contemporary prestige in literary circles, abetted the destruction of the power of McClung's words. McClung was right: "words are sharp edged tools, and we do well to consider them seriously."¹²

McClung clearly was aware of the threat that New Critical words posed. In her earlier writings, she occasionally affirmed that we do well not to underestimate words; in More Leaves from Lantern Lane, published in 1937 as the New Critics

¹¹ Nellie L. McClung, "Lady Tweedsmuir Helps the Poets," Leaves from Lantern Lane, p. 162.

¹² Nellie L. McClung, "Words," p. 73.

were more and more in the ascendant, McClung wrote repeatedly --reasonably and logically-- on the power of words. But New Criticism, like anti-feminism, is not based primarily on logic.

Literature was her first calling and the first area in which she won great acclaim. By the end of her life, her political contributions had become more esteemed. It was still considered acceptable to deliberately use words to bring about change, as long as one was making political speeches, though explicitly didactic fiction had become unfashionable.

Words affected life--as McClung knew. She used them skillfully. Ironically, the power of her writings was not merely deactivated; her words were replaced by anti-feminist words,¹³ some of them no less subtle than hers. The New Critics derided McClung for her emphasis on content; but words, by definition, are meaningful.

¹³For example, after World War II, much fiction targeted at women featured sweet young things for whom love and marriage were all that truly mattered. See Heather Rymell, "Images of Women in the Magazines of the '30s and '40s," Canadian Women's Studies/les cahiers la Femme, III, 2 (1981).

VIII. Difficult Harvests

One of the greatest unhappinesses of McClung's later years was the mental scarring of Jack, her eldest son, in World War I: "when a boy who has never had a gun in his hands, never desired anything but the good of his fellow man, is sent out to kill other boys like himself, even at the call of his country, something snaps in him, something which may not mend" (SRF 195).

Nellie was luckier. For over the first half of her life, no similarly traumatic experience shook her faith in her values and beliefs.

Her family encouraged her to work hard and help out wherever she could, to have a good time whenever possible. She also learned that she could do what she set out to do. She was taught to value words. She was loved and came to care for her own needs as well as those of others. Many of Nellie's attitudes and personality traits were formed by her mid-adolescence.

She recognized the importance of her childhood experiences: "I believe that a happy childhood is the best fortification against life's sorrows!" (SRF x) As for adults, "we can comfort them in sorrow, entertain them when they are dull, confirm them in what they already believe, but it is

hard to change their way of thinking."¹ She was writing about people who refused to progress. But the words apply equally well to herself: she consistently saw through the ethical framework and literary conventions she had learned as a child.

Yet the question remains: how did the girl with her characteristics become Nellie L. McClung, reformer, writer, politician? Further, to what extent did her opinions and mode of expression change over time? In this chapter, I will show the ways in which events affected Nellie's life and writings.

The world she went out into did not shake the beliefs she accepted in her childhood; it confirmed them. At fifteen, only five years after she became literate, she went off to Normal School. Within a few months, she was a teacher.

Her first teaching position increased her self-confidence. Her students quarrelled among themselves: their parents came from the same part of Ontario and had brought a local feud with them. Nellie intervened: she bought a football, and during recess and lunch hour, joined in games with her students. Soon, within the schoolyard at least, the children played together happily.

Two far more momentous events occurred in her first year away from home--and both again encouraged her to stay as dedicated and optimistic as she was. First, she discovered

¹Nellie L. McClung, "What Life Has Taught Me," Onward, 30 December 1951, p. 827; as quoted by Savage, p. 187.

Dickens and her own calling to be a writer for her people.

This was not the first time she had decided she wanted to write. When still illiterate, she made her sister record her compositions:

Four dear dogs--they died alone,
 * Nobody saw them, or heard them groan,
 There they died by the drifts of snow
 While the wind rockéd their tails to and fro
 (CW 94).

The dogs die alone, without their no-doubt-devoted owner beside them to ease their demise; should that not be enough to move the reader, she ends with a pathetic image. Shades of all the little match girls who crumple near lighted store windows. Nellie already grasped what was essential in the poetry with mass appeal of her day: it had to rhyme and stir the heartstrings.

Hannah wrote out Nellie's early verse under protest:

She knew I never had four dogs and so naturally had not lost them; that I had created them merely to cut them off in their prime, and she said a person shouldn't lie, even in an epitaph, but in that contention, I found out afterwards that she was in a hopeless minority (CW 94):

Hannah's protests did not carry the day because they did not give Nellie a positive alternative. Shortly after she began school, Nellie was filling scribblers with stories inspired by readings like The Bride's Sacrifice.

Dickens pointed out a substitute to the "Four Dear Dogs" school of writing. After reading his novels about the ordinary people of England, Nellie aimed to fuse her story-telling impulse with her concern for the folk around her. She stopped describing wan heroines and turned to doing

character sketches of people she knew. Her adult writings all draw on her own experiences and perceptions.

Nellie's meeting Annie McClung was at least as vital to her as her discovery of Dickens. Nellie and her father were very close: both were hard-working and fun-loving. Nellie and her mother had more differences: Letitia McCurdy Mooney liked neighborliness and a nice picnic; but she did not have much of a sense of humor. Further, while Nellie's father did not teach his daughters to be submissive to men, her mother certainly tried to. Nellie's father was sixty-two when Nellie was born; he died at eighty.

A year earlier, she had met Annie McClung, the new minister's wife in the area where Nellie taught. Annie McClung was the mother Nellie had not had: after the first meeting, Nellie informed her friends that Mrs. McClung was the only woman she had ever met whom she would like for a mother-in-law.

Annie was kindly and warm. She was also as fully as possible involved outside her home: she was the first woman Nellie knew who believed that the best motherhood is one that is concerned with all the children in the world. Nellie was soon arranging her teaching postings so that she could board with the McClungs.

Annie's eldest son, Wes, was a suitable husband for Nellie.

Nellie and her mother-in-law stayed close after the marriage. In fact, though Wes professed that Nellie was

free to develop her talents, it was Annie McClung who prodded Nellie to keep on writing. She did not stop at spoken encouragement: she ensured that Nellie had the day of quiet on which she began what became, over a three-and-a-half-year period, Sowing Seeds in Danny.

Perhaps Annie McClung did not have much impact on the form of Nellie's writings. Without her, however, Nellie might never have written or published. As well, Annie had a tremendous effect on Nellie's content by affirming Nellie's values. Nellie came to be an author in a very supportive environment--and one in which she knew that the moral worth of her writings was a primary consideration. After her first novel was published, for example, her father-in-law complimented Nellie: "So far as my knowledge goes Pearlie is the finest in fiction and it's because of her Christlikeness--her evangelical character if you like."² It is important to note that Pearlie is not a heroine: Nellie could rely on the McClungs' positive response to a girl who was forthright and courageous.

Charles Dickens and Annie McClung did not "bend the twig"; they gave Nellie a chance to grow.

Nellie spent the first fourteen years of her married life in Manitou, population 900. The Manitou years confirmed her liking of rural and small-town living--and of children. She

²Letter to Nellie L. McClung from Rev. J.A. McClung, 15 November 1908, McClung papers; as quoted by Savage, p. 62.

had enjoyed teaching; she took great pleasure in being a mother. She would consistently portray mothering as a joyous experience.

Shortly after her marriage, Nellie joined the W.C.T.U. In this way, she made what contribution she had time for to the well-being of citizens who were not family members.

Sowing Seeds in Danny (1908) tells the story of the Watson family and especially of Pearlle, the eldest child, who happily copes with her many siblings and works off the family's debt to a miserly farmer. There are various sub-plots; but most of all, the book recounts the loosely related incidents that befall Pearlle and Danny, her youngest brother. Sowing Seeds is picaresque. In fact, if one cares only for a linear plot progression, much of it can be described as digression: one chapter, for example, depicts Pearlle's first visit to a concert. It is interesting only insofar as we are interested in Pearlle and what moves her.

The book was an immediate bestseller. Reading Dickens made Nellie discover her vocation; Annie McClung nudged her to keep on writing; the critical and popular acclaim gave her confidence in her ability. Over the next four years, Nellie wrote another novel, a novella and various short stories.

Her literary success also led to her increased political involvement. In 1907, Nellie was a speaker at a W.C.T.U. convention for the first time--and was a resounding success. After Sowing Seeds was published, again due to the intervention of her mother-in-law, Nellie started to give public readings to

raise funds for the W.C.T.U. From this it was an easy step to becoming a lecturer for her favorite causes.

Still, she kept time for her fiction. The small daily round of Pearlie and her friends furnishes the content of The Second Chance (1910), as of Sowing Seeds. The Second Chance chronicles the Watsons' move from town to a farm. Pearlie, as might be expected, is consistently a shero. The novel also introduces a potential shero, Martha. She is twenty-five years old but looks older. Her life is drab because she has allowed her father to keep her from all enjoyments. Still, she is a hard worker; she gets her second chance at youth and a chance at happiness.

Martha is in love with a homesteading Englishman; she knows she has no hope of making him love her so she does not even try. Pearlie, seeing how matters stand, pushes Martha into giving it her best shot. Pearlie helps her find a more attractive hairstyle and clothes that suit her. But most of the changes are internal. Martha has had hardly any education because she was needed at home. Pearlie arranges for a teacher to give Martha lessons in exchange for some of Martha's good cooking. Soon Martha is spending every spare minute on history and geography. She also becomes more aware of current events because she defies her father, and with her own egg money, subscribes to a magazine.

As McClung drily observed, "the well-brought-up young lady diligently prepares for marriage; makes doilies and hem-stitches linen; gets her blue trunk ready and--waits. . . .

She must not ever make the move; she must not ever try to start something. Her place is to wait!" (TLT 82) Martha gets her man, but not by any ladylike needlework. McClung knew it was important to go after what one wanted, though by fair means only. In following McClung's advice (given by Pearlie), Martha becomes happier, more knowledgeable and assertive, and more attractive. By the end of the novel, she is a shero and not a hard-working doormat. At first she could have been no more than the servant of the man she loves; she evolves into a fit wife.

In 1910 and 1911, two breaks came in Nellie's life that enlarged it and yet bent it out of the shape that had become natural to it. Wes was the Manitou town druggist. He took his responsibilities very seriously. When an employee once filled out a prescription incorrectly, he became more fearful than ever of delegating any work. At least that is the reason Nellie gives for the McClungs' move, two years after her emergence as one of Canada's foremost novelists, from Manitou to a farm.

It is likely that the move was Nellie's suggestion. Nothing in Wes's background prepared him for rural life; nor did he have happy memories of a country childhood. In The Second Chance, the Watsons make a happy transfer. In life, the shift did not prove the cure Wes needed.

It was during this time that Nellie wrote the short story, "You Never Can Tell." Kate Dawson, a well-known young

writer married to an Alberta farmer, is a guest at an Arts and Crafts Convention. Most of the women who invited her pity her because they believe that "her husband is not her equal at all--perfectly illiterate, I heard--uncultured anyway."³ Only one ventures that "there is no accounting for love and its vagaries. Perhaps to her he is clothed in the rosy glow of romance. . . . I have read of it."⁴ When an old admirer takes to loitering in Kate's vicinity, the newspapers have a field day:

There was one paper which boldly hinted at what it called her "mesalliance," and drew a lurid picture of her domestic unhappiness "so bravely borne." All the gossip of the Convention was in it intensified and exaggerated. . . . And of this paper a copy was sent by some unknown person to James Dawson, Auburn, Alberta.⁵

McClung proves once again that there are no idle words.

The story ends happily. Kate returns home a week earlier than planned, only a day after Jim has received the clipping, and is able to reassure him of her love:

"Jim, do you know what it would feel like to live on popcorn and chocolates for two weeks and try to make a meal of them--what do you think you would be hungry for?" . . .

"I think, perhaps, a slice of brown bread would be what was wanted," he answered smiling. The glamor of her presence was upon him.

Then she came to him and drew his face close to hers.

"Please pass the brown bread!" she said.⁶

³Nellie L. McClung, "You Never Can Tell," p. 160.

⁴Ibid., pp. 163-64.

⁵Ibid., p. 170.

⁶Ibid., p. 176.

This is McClung's only reference, in her published writings, to sexual desire. That is not the only reason why the passage is noteworthy. Kate does not affirm her love for her husband and her pleasure in associating with town-dwellers. She portrays each as excluding the possibility of the other-- and of course, given McClung's rural bias, the town-dwellers are no match for the rugged farmer. There was considerable pressure on McClung to take such an either/or view: according to various reports, she had abandoned her husband, her husband had left her; she neglected her children; she was suing for divorce. Wes may also have felt threatened by Nellie's sudden fame: it is one thing to agree that your wife should become a writer if she has a fancy to; it is another to see her fêted from coast to coast.

In 1911, Wes found a job that suited him. He went to work as a manager for an insurance company. The McClungs had to move to Winnipeg; in other words, they suddenly became city folk.

Winnipeg had problems far greater than any Nellie had yet dealt with. There was not, as in Manitou, one Jennie Gills: "Jennie was 'expecting' again, and her husband had celebrated the last occasion by getting roaring drunk and coming home with the avowed intention of killing Jennie and the new baby" (SRF 62). In Winnipeg, there were thousands of Jennies, many of whom spoke no English. There were also, as previously noted, sweatshops, brothels, slums and saloons galore.

Nellie was able to cope with the immensity of the need for improvement by correspondingly increasing her efforts to alleviate suffering. In Manitou, the W.C.T.U. was the forum of reform; in Winnipeg, membership in it seemed insufficient. She sought to make more of an impact on society. Her fifth and last child was born in the fall of 1911, shortly after the family's arrival. Within a few months, Nellie was in all the progressive circles. She consistently used words and actions to reinforce each other: for example, she and a woman friend informed Premier Roblin of the appalling factory conditions women worked under; they also took him on a tour to make sure he saw for himself. In 1912, Nellie was a founding member of the Political Equality League, which was established to get women the vote.

Her third book, an anthology containing a novella and several previously published short stories, also appeared in 1912. It dates from earlier, easier-going days. The novella, "The Black Creek Stopping-house," is Nellie's only long work in which a fairly conventional heroine has a central role. There are actually two central women characters. Kindly Maggie Corbett is an older and earthier shero than Pearlle. But the plot centres around young, beautiful and headstrong Evelyn who has married for love though it meant being cut off without a cent by her wealthy father. Interestingly, we do not meet Evelyn until after she is married, though most popular fiction would take her up to the wedding and leave the rest to the imagination.

The rest is hard work. In her youth, and probably in her year on the farm with Wes, McClung saw many couples, unused to the continuous toil it took to make a homestead work, struggling to learn the new ways. The men, who had outdoor chores, often fared well. Nellie's sympathy was with the women who usually faded under the combination of constant childbearing and housekeeping in extremely primitive conditions. Evelyn is game, a lifter though unused to the role. Luckily for her, through the intervention of Maggie Corbett and a series of improbabilities, her father comes round before she is completely worn down.

The improbabilities include the concurrence, in a single night, of Evelyn's leaving her husband because he momentarily doubts her fidelity; her father's becoming inextricably entangled in barbed wire on his unannounced visit to make it up with Evelyn; her husband's rescue of her father; and the blizzard of the season. McClung is neither making fun of the conventions of melodrama, nor presenting her fiction as one hundred per cent undiluted real life. She enjoyed melodrama, as long as it did not feature dying damsels and an anti-feminist moral. "The Black Creek Stopping-house" is a light-hearted entertainment--which includes a portrayal of the rigors of homesteading.

Further, while the plot resolutions rely heavily on coincidence, it is Maggie's plausible intervention in Evelyn's life that actually brings the happy ending about. Like all sheros, she believes in giving a helping hand when

she can; in this case, she sent a letter off to Evelyn's father:

As near as I can make our you and her's out from the same cloth; both of you are touchy and quick, and, if things don't suit you, up and coming. . . . Maybe you'll be for telling me to mind my own business, but I am not used to doing that, for I like to take a hand any place I see I can do any good, and if I was leaving my girl fretting and lonely on account of my dirty temper . . . I'd be glad for someone to tell me. If you should want to send her a Christmas present, and she says you never forgot her yet, come yourself. . . .

Yours respectively,
Maggie Corbett⁷

"Yours respectively." McClung is not belittling Maggie.

It is, after all, straight-forward no-nonsense Maggie who saves the day by not being afraid of getting involved.

McClung liked and felt comfortable with the Maggie Corbetts of the world. McClung had become more educated; their values, however, continued to coincide.

"The Black Creek Stopping-house" was to be Nellie's last long work of fiction for nine years. She did not stop writing and publishing. In Times Like These, a collection of her essays, contains some of her most powerful prose. The Next of Kin (1917) is a companion piece to In Times like These: the short stories and semi-autobiographical pieces drive home the same points as the essays. Three Times and Out (1918) is an "as told to Nellie L. McClung."

The partial shift to non-fiction is tied to Nellie's move from small-town to city dweller. Nellie did not stop

⁷Nellie L. McClung, "The Black Creek Stopping-house," The Black Creek Stopping-house, pp. 55-56.

caring about individual people after the move; like Maggie Corbett, she interceded when she could. Yet even in Manitou, the W.C.T.U. had called for legal reform as well as for individual temperance vows. Nellie became increasingly convinced that only large-scale changes could accomplish generally improved conditions.

Nellie pointed out the insufficiency of the good Samaritan approach. She did not let the story end on the traditional note of praise for the good man who tends the beaten and robbed traveller. Instead, "the next day, the Samaritan again passed down the road from Jerusalem to Jericho, and about the same place found another man, beaten and robbed, undoubtedly the work of the same thieves" (TLT 78). Just as she subverts melodrama to her own ends, she continues the parable until it reaches a new moral, one which advocates cleaning up the road as well as being kind to needy travellers. McClung's is such a logical extension of the familiar story that it causes the original to seem truncated.

But though she still relied on words to convey her beliefs, fiction was no longer the most appropriate form of expression. She wanted to argue her case, to prove to people that, for example, World War I was evidence that we did not yet have a civilized society. She also began to lecture to increase support for women's suffrage. In her papers, she has left variations of her campaign speeches; newspapers published reports of them; hundreds paid to hear her at each of her

appearances.⁸ In Times like These contains McClung's definitive versions of speeches on a variety of topics, including chivalry, charity, and women in the churches.

She began writing fiction early. She also developed debating skills at a young age, first in school and then in the W.C.T.U. Her involvement in the W.C.T.U., in particular, sharpened her rhetorical skills: it made her increasingly aware of how to pace her material, to appeal to people's emotions while delivering a sound argument, to entertain while informing.

One of the best ways to get the audience on her side was through using humor. In her fiction, most of the mockery is gentle and appreciative. McClung saw no need to have mercy on injustice; the humor of her essays tends to be much more trenchant and sarcastic:

Once I heard of a woman saying the hardest thing about men I ever heard--and she was an ardent anti-suffragist too. She said that what was wrong with the women in England was that they were too particular--that's why they were not married, 'and,' she went on, 'any person can tell, when they look around at men in general, that God never intended women to be very particular.' I am glad I never said anything as hard as that about men (TLT 39).

McClung is taking a shot at men--who have, after all, long enjoyed making blanket statements about women. She also carefully dissociates herself and other feminists from the disparagement of men. Likely, she found the anecdote too apt to keep to herself; yet she undoubtedly realized that it

⁸Most of the proceeds went to defray the money-losing activities of the Political Equality League, the W.C.T.U., etc.

might lead to her being labelled anti-men.

At another point she more good-naturedly writes that "a member of the English Parliament declared with great emphasis that women . . . can have their smallest wish gratified. ('Smallest' is right.)" (TLT 41) Through her aside, McClung shifts the emphasis, and inverts the original meaning.

Still, in In Times like These, caustic, biting and scathing are the adjectives that most frequently apply to her humor. For once, there was no reason for Nellie to hold herself back. Sometimes she even shifts from black humor to anger. In the following instance, she begins by mentioning a man who was the life of the party at a day-long spree at a licensed bar:

It is often declared that prohibition will produce a lot of sneaking drunkards, but, of course, this man . . . was of the open and above-board type of drinker. . . . He drank openly, and when he went home, and his wife asked him why he had stayed away so long, he killed her--not in any sneaking or underhand way. Not at all. Right in the presence of the four little children . . . he killed her. . . . A blind pig could not have done much better for that family! Now could it? (TLT 105)

There comes a point when not even the most incisive and bitter sarcasm is sufficient to contain her reaction. Further, of course, the shift in emotions is an effective rhetorical technique: it lets her audience be entertained and then swept along on McClung's own moral outrage!

More often, however, she works to make her audience be on her side because it cannot help but agree with her humorously expressed arguments. When writing about social conventions, she slowly begins with: "Humanity is disposed to sit weakly

down before anything that has been with us a long time, and say it is impossible to do away with it. . . . Have you ever seen lizards walk into a campfire?" (TLT 101) At this point, the reader knows what the argument will be. But McClung goes on to make her point vividly because she wants the image to be remembered:

[The fire] looks so warm and inviting, and, of course, it is a social custom among lizards to walk right in, and so they do. The first one goes boldly in, gives a start of surprise, and then shrivels, but the next one is a real good sport, and won't desert a friend, so he walks in and shrivels, and the next one is no piker, so walks in, too. Who would be a stiff? (TLT 101)

So much for unexamined social customs.

McClung was, in fact, adept at revealing the ludicrous in a wide variety of ways. In "The Mock Parliament," the rights which belong to each sex have been reversed. To a delegation of men seeking the vote, Nellie (as Premier) responds:

Oh no, man is made for something higher and better than voting. Men were made to support families. What is a home without a bank account? The man who pays the grocer rules the world. In this agricultural province, the man's place is the farm. Shall I call man away from useful plow and harrow to talk loud on street corners about things which do not concern him!⁹

McClung is pointing out that men have many other concerns and yet find time to vote. She even demonstrates ways in which men, as a sex, are less qualified to be entrusted with the vote: "seven-eighths of the police-court offenders are men, and only one-third of all the church membership. You ask me

⁹Handwritten notes, McClung papers; as quoted by Savage, p. 89.

to enfranchise all these."¹⁰ If there was a flaw in her opponents' logic, Nellie was sure to spot it--and ridicule it. Humor won Nellie large audiences for her rather novel approach to political debate.

In the summer of 1914, the enfranchisement of women--a confirmation of the power of words to sway people to right-thinking, and of the possibility of human progress--was within reach:

I knew life had reached a pinnacle and we were standing on a high place, a place easier to achieve than to maintain. We were in sight of the promised land, a land of richer sunshine and brighter fruitage, and our heads and hearts were light. Whatever else can be said about us, one fact remains: We were in deadly earnest and our desire was to bring about a better world for everyone (SRF 134).

On August 3, 1914, war broke out in Europe. A year later, Jack, Nellie's eldest son, went off to do his part. He came back changed; twenty-five years later, at the height of his career as a judge, he committed suicide. Nellie was sure he would never have killed himself if he had not, when young, been twisted by his war experiences.

Nellie's nature was also bent by the war. She became convinced that an old Christian doctrine, which she had not credited, did have validity: "Humanity has to travel a hard road to wisdom, and it has to travel it with bleeding feet"

¹⁰ Ibid.; as quoted by Savage, p. 89.

(TLT 19).

A second discontinuity occurred in 1914. Just as the Manitoba suffrage campaign was nearing victory, and Nellie was almost assured a cabinet position in the Liberal government after the next election, Wes was given the opportunity of heading his company's Edmonton office. The McClungs moved to Alberta. Nellie never again came so close to achieving a significant amount of political power. It had taken positive reinforcement to make Nellie become a writer. She had more or less coasted into prominence and the promise of becoming the next Manitoba Minister of Education, should the Liberals win. It was seven years before she even ran for office in Alberta. She won a seat once, and even then was in the opposition.

The war. The relocation to Edmonton. Nellie's life would never flow as smoothly as before 1914.

The immediate post-war years seemed to show that humanity's feet had done enough bleeding. By the time the war was over, women had the vote in the Canadian prairies, and limited suffrage throughout Canada. In the post-war years, the United States and much of Europe enfranchised women.

McClung's last two novels, Purple Springs (1921) and Painted Fires (1925), and her second novella, When Christmas Crossed "the Peace" (1923), were written during this period. In none of them does she endorse her new-found belief that the route to knowledge and compassion is suffering. Instead, her sheros are still strong and courageous enough to give the

weaker a helping hand. In Purple Springs, Pearlie Watson works for women's suffrage though she has never been held back because she is a woman: Pearlie is fighting for justice.

There is a significant difference, however, between McClung's pre- and post-war novels and novellas. Only in When Christmas Crossed "the Peace" does the happy ending still flow naturally. In both Painted Fires and Purple Springs, the resolutions seem miraculous. In Purple Springs, for example, Pearlie's sweetheart is diagnosed as incurably ill. Pearlie, not knowing this, goes off and campaigns for women's suffrage. Luckily for her, she also finds out about the healing purple springs located in a remote area.

During the thirties, Nellie wrote: "One quality of mind, I hope I may retain, even after my hair falls out and my eyes grow dim. I hope I can still believe in miracles--the fortunate, unbelievably happy coincidences of life."¹¹ Before the war, she did not need to believe in miracles: she was sure that women would reform the world.

Still, the twenties were the time of the greatest Canadian outpouring of feminist fiction, the time when McClung's message was at its most popular. It was the last decade before both the form and content of her writings began to be widely attacked.

Her fiction was not McClung's only public accomplishment during the twenties. In 1921, she was elected to the Alberta

¹¹Nellie L. McClung, "Happy Endings," Leaves from Lantern Lane, p. 155.

legislature.

The disillusionment continued. Values were shifting. F. Scott Fitzgerald spoke for the Roaring Twenties; Nellie L. McClung did not. (Mary Pickford, who specialized in portraying streetwise urchins, still had mass appeal; the vamp, however, was gaining ground on "America's sweetheart." In the Canadian prairies, prohibition was abolished by the mid-twenties.

During her term in office, Nellie found out how little a single elected representative can achieve. In 1926, by a margin of sixty votes, she lost her seat.

There were some political victories, however. Under the leadership of her close friend, Emily Murphy, five women, Nellie among them, led the Persons Case which resulted in women's becoming legally persons in October 1929.

Still, the Persons Case did not take up much of Nellie's time. Eleven years after her defeat at the polls, she had another six books to her credit. Five are collections of essays and short stories. Only the first of these contains any lengthy pieces. From this point on, except in her two volumes of autobiography, she said what she wanted to say quite briefly. Many of the short stories are parables which illustrate points she wants to make: "Every Woman is Not a House-keeper," "When in Doubt, Please Yourself." Some recount her experiences: "All We like Sheep" describes the short and financially unrewarding career of Nellie McClung, sheepfarmer; "How it Feels to be a Defeated Candidate"

recounts her method of coping with political defeat.

McClung was back on the human scale. She still used humor but it was rarely biting. In the heat of the fray, she had had right on her side and wrong on the other. Then she challenged; now she affirmed her values.

In 1929, the Depression struck North America and Europe. The economy went into a tailspin. Several of McClung's stories reflect her concern for the willing-to-work poor. However, after World War I, the Roaring Twenties and the Crash of '29, she no longer recommended political solutions. The only collective action she encouraged was a nation-wide spending spree: according to her, if people ceased hoarding, the money that would be spent would stimulate the economy and provide jobs for many of the unemployed.

She now held that the root of all social problems lay in human selfishness, and the only hope in individual redemption. She had returned to the old-fashioned good Samaritan approach: people should help each other.

There was a diffusion of McClung's energies. Anything she wrote was still publishable, but she was no longer one of the most popular Canadian authors. She was invited to speak at various conventions and was appointed to various positions: for example, she was a Canadian delegate to the 1938 League of Nations. But she was out of the forefront. Now it was truly vital for her to believe that words matter; none of her words was reaping any visible large-scale results.

At the height of the Depression, she spent a couple of

years writing the first half of her autobiography, Clearing in the West. She was no longer certain, when she looked around her and saw women drinking and smoking, that her early impressions of women's nature were right. But she still believed that her experiences formed part of the past that should be preserved. When she had studied British history at school, she had always wanted to know how the common folk were faring; she had learned little beyond the titbit that they dyed themselves blue. Clearing in the West provides a much fuller account of the lives of some of the everyday people. Most of all, in it she recreates her youthful self, the best of her sheros: the young Nellie is a girl with spunk, intelligence and ambition.

Clearing in the West ends traditionally enough, on Nellie's wedding day. The day is dark and rainy, which does not dampen the couple's happiness. After the ceremony, Nellie and Wes take the train:

I cannot remember what we talked about, but I know we were hilariously, unreasonably happy, and confident, rich in the things we did not know.

Even in that gloomy, threatening morning, to ride on the back platform of the train gave me a glorious feeling of speed and adventure. We were off, and away!

Suddenly the landscape began to brighten. . . . It was clearing in the West! Tomorrow would be fine (CW 377-78).

This was Nellie's vision for the next twenty years of her life. And even though many later tomorrows were not fine, she could not help believing that the dry years of the Depression would be followed by renewed plenty.

At the height of the Depression, in 1935, Wes retired.

Nellie and Wes moved to Lantern Lane, a house overlooking the ocean six miles from Victoria. Nellie planned to write the second volume of her autobiography and to chronicle the lives of the many women who had been with her in her causes but had not had the time or the bent to leave their own versions of their stories. McClung eventually wrote a second volume of autobiography; she did not write the book she intended.

She continued to write newspaper columns. Those she published in her first two years at Lantern Lane were collected into two volumes, Leaves from Lantern Lane and More Leaves from Lantern Lane. Many of the articles describe her daily interests: her attempts to grow onions, her pleasure in skylarks. Though her pieces occasionally deal with the Depression, the background is not the traditional one of the dry, cracked prairie, but the fertile and well-watered soil of Vancouver Island. Most of all, Nellie is a financially unaffected spectator, not a participant. She had been "on course" most of her life; by the mid-thirties, her life was completely off the mainstream it had followed.

In 1939, World War II broke out. The first World War had stunned McClung. She had been expecting the second one for years. She had, years earlier, spoken and written against the Treaty of Versailles which humiliated the vanquished. Because she was sensitive to the power of words and conscious of people's longing for a vision, she had early become aware of the danger Hitler posed. In 1938, as a League of Nations

delegate, she had seen that most of the other participants were too concerned with getting credit to work for peace. But she had a bad heart and was crippled by arthritis.

In 1942, she had a total physical collapse. World War II was not her battle; but she knew she did have unfinished business. She had kept on writing her columns, but they were no longer being anthologized; her works were far less topical than previously. But she had not yet written the second volume of her autobiography.

The Stream Runs Fast (1945) takes Nellie over half a century of time. It recounts the highlights of the suffrage campaign, mentions reviews of her fiction, discusses her outlook on many subjects. Clearing in the West is chronological; The Stream Runs Fast is more like a series of chats in which McClung presents her side of many issues.

It is in this book that she asserts that, if she could go back, she would be a teacher of young children. Her longing is easy to understand: her arena had grown until it took in the world. As a teacher, she had helped mold young minds; in Manitou, she had had appreciable power; in Winnipeg, she had helped change some laws. There was nothing she could do to stop the war from breaking out. And yet she tried, as best as she could: she publicized the Oxford group which prayed for peace; she reported on the Pan-Pacific Women's Conference; she advocated the complete enfranchisement of Orientals.

In 1945, World War II ended. "The war that never ends"

continued: "To bring this about--the even chance for everyone--is the plain and simple meaning of life. This is the war that never ends" (TLT 11). After the second World War, a fair deal for all seemed less and less possible. Feminism was on the decline. Women were encouraged to marry earlier than before, to stay home and have babies in ever increasing numbers.

Nellie had always liked babies. When she almost died in 1942, she "knew all was well with the world--the nurse was knitting a little shirt" (SRF xi). For babies, all was yet possible.

Many of those World War II and post-war babies are part of the current wave of feminism which is reviving many of the values Nellie stood for. Unlike her, we aim for fewer simplifications and omissions. Like her, we hope that "women are going to form a chain, a greater sisterhood than the world has ever known."¹²

Nellie McClung died in 1951. She knew that she had had "a good innings and a long run. I had warmed my hands before the fires of life. I had been paid my wages in the incorruptible coin of loyal friendship and love, and the sense of life's continuity" (SRF xi). She had also done her best to portray her vision, to speak for herself.

¹²Nellie L. McClung, "What Will They Do With It?" Maclean's, July 1916, pp. 36-37; as quoted by Savage, p. 124.

PART II

Toward a Positive Appraisal
of the Writings of Nellie L. McClung

I. Several Critical Appraisals

Nellie McClung's writings, both fiction and non-fiction, are consistently consonant with her opinions. They explicitly state her stand on a variety of issues, affirm women's capabilities, and initially reached and influenced a large audience.

An important question, however, remains: is it possible to appraise McClung's writings positively using literary criteria rather than ones concerned solely with politics or ethics?

At the height of her works' popularity, reviewers almost unanimously recommended her books.¹ Even in the twenties, several respected critics of Canadian literature commented favorably on her fiction. For example, Lionel Stevenson conceded that McClung achieves "a whimsical, sympathetic portrayal of naive characters in every-day surroundings."² Further, "Nellie McClung can record an incident or a conversation with wit and vigour."³ The praise given by J.D. Logan and Donald G. French was even warmer:

¹Marilyn Davies, who sought out the early reviews, found only three which were negative. See Patricia Louise Verkruysse, "Small Legacy of Truth: The Novels of Nellie McClung," unpublished M.A. thesis, University of New Brunswick, 1975, p. 68.

²Lionel Stevenson, Appraisals of Canadian Literature (Toronto: MacMillan, 1926), p. 129.

³Ibid., p. 130.

The year 1908 may be said to mark the real beginning of the Second Renaissance in Canadian fiction for in that year there were published three novels of the Community type--Anne of Green Gables, by L.M. Montgomery; Duncan Polite, by Marian Keith; Sowing Seeds in Danny, by Nellie L. McClung.^{3a}

Many of McClung's readers were even more impressed; Earle Birney, a currently respected evaluator of Canadian literature, remembers that McClung was his mother's favorite author. He also records the reason for this preference: "it was McClung's sharp eye for the small realities of the prairie experience and her sympathetic understanding of farmers' families which brought most pleasure to my mother, and to many like her"⁴ In 1975, Dr. Mary Hallett remembered: "One friend of mine was telling me how she had read only English books--only books from England--and when she got Sowing Seeds in Danny and read it, she thought, 'Why this is my country. Somebody's talking about what I know.'"⁵ This is what McClung wanted to tell her readers about.

Yet despite McClung's popularity and despite her unprecedented ability to portray, in fiction, many aspects of pioneer prairie reality, she was not long a favorite of most critics. Her optimism displeased some reviewers. In addition, by the 1930's, for every reviewer who extolled her work for its morally uplifting qualities, there was one who

^{3a}J.D. Logan and Donald G. French, Highways of Canadian Literature (Toronto: McClelland and Stewart, 1924), p. 259.

⁴Earle Birney, Spreading Time: Remarks on Canadian Writing and Writers (Montreal: Véhicule Press, 1980), p. 259

⁵Mary Hallett, interviewed by Florence Bird, "The Incredible Nellie McClung," broadcast on CBC radio's Between Ourselves, 6 June 1975; as quoted by Savage, p. 62.

sneered at it for its resemblances to Sunday School sermons. The mixed reactions slowly gave way to predominantly negative ones.

There is, of course, still the occasional positive reference. In 1950, social historian Catherine L. Cleverdon applauded McClung's barbed wit; she claimed that, after January 28, 1914, "overnight suffrage had become respectable and fashionable"⁶ in Winnipeg due to the brilliant Mock Parliament. In 1972, historian Veronica Strong-Boag hailed McClung's as "the best feminist writing Canada has yet produced" because "her style is delightfully incisive and aphoristic, rising to comedy worthy of Leacock."⁷

Such praise is currently very rare. Even Earle Birney, the most positive of present-day literary critics, qualifies his praise by attributing his mother's admiration of McClung partly to shared ethics:

Mrs. McClung could scarcely lose with my mother, in any case: Nellie was a Methodist (the next best thing in my mother's eyes to a Presbyterian), a crusader for "temperance" (i.e., no liquor at all, except brandy for heart attacks), also for female suffrage and for the international peace which women's votes would bring.⁸

Further, the reference to McClung is the only instance in which he cites his mother's taste. All the many other examples of his parents' literary tastes are of his father's

⁶Catherine L. Cleverdon, The Woman Suffrage Movement in Canada (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1978), p. 59.

⁷Veronica Strong-Boag, "Introduction," In Times Like These, p. xiv.

⁸Birney, p. 4.

preferences. McClung, by implication, is for women only-- especially as Birney immediately eliminates any suspicion that he might have been a fan: "I much preferred reading about Indians and Eskimaux."⁹ Birney is poking fun at his boyhood self; he is also distancing himself firmly from "female" fiction.

Most other present-day literary critics are far more explicitly denigrating. Their first disparagement of McClung's fiction is of the form she often chose to employ. For example, Candace Savage, the author of an enthusiastic biography on McClung the reformer and politician, theatrically dismisses Painted Fires, one of her most popular novels, as melodrama: What can one say about a book in which the villain is struck dead by lightning just in time to prevent the hard-pressed heroine from doing him in? Presumably nothing, according to Savage.

Not only McClung's choice of genre, but her content is criticized. George Woodcock describes In Times like These as tractarian. Carlyle King sees McClung as an adherent of the "Sunshine School of Canadian fiction,"¹¹ of a "cheerful and dishonest tradition."¹²

A third form of belittlement to which her works have been

⁹Ibid., p. 4.

¹⁰Savage, p. 169.

¹¹Carlyle King, "Introduction," Wild Geese by Martha Ostenso (Toronto: McClelland and Stewart, 1971), p. v.

¹²Ibid., p. v.

subjected is that of silence. For example, both Savage and Woodcock ignore the existence of her many writings which are neither politically motivated nor melodramatic, and the literary quality of these works. Most critics simply overlook McClung's writings altogether.

The critics' inattention is reinforced by the absence of her works from the New Canadian Library Series--a series which was established primarily to keep "significant" Canadian authors in print. A paperback reprint of Clearing in the West is available from Thomas Allen, the original publisher of most of McClung's works. In Times like These was reissued in 1972 by the University of Toronto Press; it is available not because the book is generally acknowledged to have literary merit, but because it is currently viewed as part of the social history of Canada.

It is possible to take issue with the negative evaluations of McClung's writings. For example, the novel Savage dismisses in a sentence was a powerful vehicle for disseminating McClung's ideas; and it was popular precisely because of what Savage attacks: the implausible plot, a characteristic of most melodramatic fiction.

Savage fails to see that McClung is using melodrama, the most popular genre of her time, for her own purposes. But McClung is consciously subverting a genre to the feminist cause. As I have previously established, melodrama usually has weak heroines who are rescued by strong men; and no

matter how just their cause, frail heroines are never ready or able to kill a villain without assistance from a male avenger. McClung's shero, however, is a strong yet likeable woman, a radically untraditional role model for female readers.

McClung's subversion of the genre goes further. She makes her position clear on many issues by using melodrama to express ideas contrary to those frequently found in melodrama. For example, in Painted Fires, she suggests that racists whose bigotry endangers the well-being of women they consider inferior deserve death, and that she approves of a woman's dispatching them. That lightning does the job is merely further proof of the rightness of Helmi's intent: in McClung's universe, even her god is on Helmi's side.

Nellie L. McClung can be described as a Marilyn French of her time, although the comparison does not do justice to the social and political involvement of McClung's life and writings. Like French's The Women's Room, her writings used accepted genres to popularize her beliefs. McClung never tried to pass off her melodrama as documentary realism; it is inappropriate to condemn her for using melodrama as an effective means to her end.

Moreover, Savage's sweeping pronouncement against melodrama is unjustified. In The Stream Runs Fast, McClung quotes two emotionally charged passages, one from the highly acclaimed George Eliot, the other from the immensely popular Charles Dickens. She concludes: "Neither of these passages would be accepted by a modern short story group, but their

place in Literature is safe for all that" (SRF 12). She is right insofar as melodrama has always been an ingredient in powerful writing--witness Shakespeare, Sophocles, Dostoyevski--despite the distaste of many current critics for this form.

George Woodcock's criticism of McClung's content is as uncalled for and unfair as Savage's dismissal of McClung's chosen form. Woodcock begins his review of In Times Like These by claiming that the work now seems "an incredibly clumsy piece of tractarianism, yet it not only reminds one of a tough old temperance fighter, but even more of the beginning of Canadian feminism and the long trail to Women's Lib."¹³ McClung was indeed a leading Canadian feminist and was strongly pro-temperance, but her work is not clumsy. Throughout the collection, the language is strong, vivid, humorous, biting and accurate. It is, in effect, the rhetoric of a skilled debater.

"The New Chivalry," far from appearing dated, is a still-relevant critique of chivalry: "Chivalry is like a line of credit. You can get plenty of it when you do not need it" (TLT 41). "Hardy Perennials;" another essay in the collection, is a well-written satire on hackneyed and illogical reasons for withholding the vote from women:

There is [a] sturdy prejudice that blooms everywhere in all climates, and that is that women would not vote if they had the privilege; . . . those who use the argument seem to imply that a vote unused is a very dangerous thing to leave lying around and will probably spoil and blow up. . . . Of course the percentage of men voting . . . [is] quite small, too, but no person finds fault with that. . . .

¹³George Woodcock, "You've Come a Long Way, Baby," Books in Canada, II, 1 (January 1978), p. 5.

Then, of course, on the other hand there are those who claim that women would vote too much-- . . . In spite of the testimony of many reputable women that they have been able to vote [in schoolboard elections] and get dinner on one and the same day, there still exists a strong belief that the household machinery goes out of order when a woman goes to vote. . . .

Father comes home, tired, weary, footsore, toe-nails ingrowing, caused by undarned stockings, and finds the fire out, house cold and empty, save for his half-dozen children, all crying.

'Where is your mother?' the poor man asks in broken tones. For a moment the sobs are hushed while little Ellie replies: 'Out voting!'

Father bursts into tears (TLT 49-51).

McClung goes on to make the connection between political and financial oppression:

Another shoot of this hardy prejudice is that women are too good to mingle in everyday life. . . . These tender-hearted and chivalrous gentlemen . . . cannot bear, they say, to see women leaving the sacred precincts of the home--and yet their offices are scrubbed by women who do their work while other people sleep. . . . The tender-hearted ones can bear this with equanimity. It is the thought of women getting into comfortable and well-paid positions which wrings their manly hearts (TLT 51-52).

Having moved from non-threatening humor to more sombre instances, she ends with an anecdote sure to delight her audience--and put anti-suffrage politicians into a bad light. She remembers Mike, an old ox, whom she once watered, in her childhood, until he could not drink any more:

The thirsty cattle came crowding around him, but old Mike, so full I am sure he felt he would never drink another drop of water again as long as he lived, deliberately and with great difficulty put his two front feet over the trough and kept all the other cattle away. . . . Years afterwards, . . . one member of the Government . . . spoke for all his colleagues [against giving women the vote]. He said in substance: 'You can't have it--so long as I have anything to do with the affairs of this province--you shall not have it!' . . .

Did your brain ever give a queer little twist,

and suddenly you were conscious that the present process had taken place before? . . . Then, suddenly, I remembered, and in my heart I cried out: 'Mike! --old friend, Mike! . . . I see you again--both feet in the trough!' (TLT 57-58)

McClung's well-structured writings were instrumental in promoting her ideas.

Yet Woodcock labels In Times like These "an incredibly clumsy piece of tractarianism"! He is either covertly anti-feminist, denigrating McClung's style because he is unwilling to openly attack her opinions, or is an adherent of a prevalent double standard which acknowledges that belief in some ideas, such as feminism, is acceptable in Real Life, but not in Art.

Furthermore, while McClung's writings cannot be described as "art for art's sake," McClung provided her own defense against the accusation of being a tractarian. She did not deny the validity of the charge; as I have established, she argued that the term should not be used as a pejorative. For example, when a reviewer described her as a crusader whose didactic enthusiasm marred some of her work by giving it "the flavor of a Sunday School hymn" (SRF 69), she replied:

I hope I have been a crusader, and I would be proud to think that I had even remotely approached the grandeur of a Sunday School hymn. I have never worried about my art. I have written as clearly as I could, never idly or dishonestly, and if some of my stories are . . . sermons in disguise, my earnest hope is that the disguise did not obscure the sermon (SRF 69).

Woodcock assumes that his readers will accept his negative definition of tractarian. He does not explain why his values, so different from McClung's, are better than

hers and should be used to judge her work. His charge that In Times like These is tractarian, though accurate, is pejorative only as long as his values go unchallenged. Curiously, he himself challenges his own values: in an article on Margaret Laurence, whose work he admires, he admits that "Margaret Laurence is not entirely without didacticism (indeed, I have never yet read a major novelist who quite dispensed with it)."¹⁴

As for Carlyle King's assertion that McClung's fiction is dishonestly cheerful, McClung long ago countered that:

I cannot lay claim to public sympathy. I like my own folks. I get on well with my neighbors and friends. My hired help does not "sass" me. . . . Still I've had clothes-lines break and jellies that wouldn't jell. But I've had a very happy time all along. . . . Why should I not speak well of the world?¹⁵

One woman's realism is another person's "dishonesty."

Had McClung heard King's comment, she would probably have concluded she had met his like before. When she was nearing sixty, she went to a lecture:

The lecturer, a very sedate young man, was talking about Canadian literature. He was rather pessimistic, and said we had not any real literature in Canada. . . . Then he said we were a gloomy people. We were so concerned about the material things of life that we had no time to play. Facing the stern conditions of existence we had grown hard and unimaginative.¹⁶

¹⁴George Woodcock, "The Human Elements: Margaret Laurence's Fiction," The Human Elements, ed. Helwig (Ottawa: Oberon Press, 1978), p. 138.

¹⁵Nellie L. McClung, "An Author's Own Story," Women's Saturday Night, 25 January 1913, McClung Papers; as quoted by Savage, p. 44.

¹⁶Nellie L. McClung, "Are We a Gloomy People?" Be Good to Yourself, p. 33.

McClung, never, one to let the gloomy have the last word, in this case allowed another woman answer for her. This woman had arrived in Alberta before the railway:

If we had been gloomy we would have died. We have lived on hope and optimism and the sure knowledge that next year would be a good one, and it usually was. We were always expecting something here, something pleasant and thrilling. With us it is the Day Before Christmas all the time. With that poor boy it is the Day After.¹⁷

The poor boy, however, gave no indication that he was ready to admit that, while he was certainly gloomy, this did not mean all Canadians were. McClung, however, did acknowledge his negative outlook, as well as her positive one.

The lecturer also ignored that McClung, sitting in his audience, was one of various Canadian authors creating an at least ethically worthwhile literature. His talk, in fact, was given just toward the end of the proliferation of feminist fiction. He obviously did not appreciate these works.

But then, how could he? McClung wrote that "life is a joyous adventure. I wouldn't have missed it for anything."¹⁸ This is certainly not gloomy enough for the lecturer's taste--or for King's.

The charge of dishonesty camouflages King's true grounds for criticizing McClung. He is actually condemning her for

¹⁷Ibid., p. 35.

¹⁸Nellie L. McClung, "My Religion," Be Good to Yourself, p. 132.

portraying an unfashionable attitude to life. For example, current writer Margaret Atwood acknowledges that her life has been basically happy;¹⁹ since most women's lives, in her opinion, are not, she writes about their unhappy lives and not her own "unrepresentative" one. Yet Atwood, who is not true to her own experiences, is lauded by most critics; her fiction depicts prevalent preconceptions of reality.²⁰

Despite McClung's "out of date" Weltanschauung, she is to be praised for her honesty. She was over forty when, with the wholesale carnage of World War I, her optimism was first shaken.

But even before that war's outbreak, she did not ignore suffering. As previously noted, in her works some women go almost mad from loneliness and others die from overwork; alcoholics--invariably men--impoverish their families; one wealthy father refuses to let his grandson visit home and another wants to take his grandson from his widowed daughter-in-law.

¹⁹See Judith Timson, "The Magnificent Margaret Atwood," Chatelaine (January 1981), p. 68: "It's pretty good compared with what other people have. For one thing, none of the traditional battle lines have been drawn." Timson is quoting Atwood on her long-term relationship with Graeme Gibson.

²⁰In the same article, Atwood's Life Before Man is heralded as "a novel of modern times, and that means emotional alienation, sexual confusion, separation and divorce" (p. 65). Presumably, Atwood's own story is not one of "modern times."

However, because McClung was able to overcome most obstacles, until World War I she encountered very little misery which she felt unable to alleviate. She faithfully recorded life as she knew it. She believed in the possibility of a happy ending whereas Carlyle King does not; King unreasonably blames her for not sharing his pessimism.

McClung accomplished what she set out to do. Ironically, her detractors accuse her primarily of doing exactly what she intended. However, they consistently fail to even attempt to justify the basis of their negative evaluations.

While it is easy to devalue the judgments of McClung's detractors, it is equally possible to disparage the praise of her admirers. For example, though Logan and French attribute the start of the Second Renaissance in Canadian fiction in part to the publication of McClung's first novel, their standard for screening out unworthy art is not currently widely accepted:

To become a poet may not be a moral duty. But if one elects the office of poet, . . . beautifully or compellingly embodying in verse whatsoever is lovely in Nature or noble in ideas is to attain to high moral dignity in one's soul as a poet and to impress on the world the high spiritual function of poetry.²¹

Logan and French also expect writings other than poetry to ennoble, to uplift, to elevate. It is little wonder that they are pleased with the works of the woman who believed that "it is the writer's place to bring romance to people, to turn the

²¹Logan and French, p. 279.

commonplace into the adventurous and the amusing, to bring out the pathos in a situation" (SRF 70). Those who hold that art need not have "a high spiritual function" can disregard Logan and French's favorable review of McClung's fiction because, according to us, their evaluation is based on an irrelevant criterion.

Lionel Stevenson's praise is even easier to devalue. He is most impressed by Painted Fires because it presents the modifications in the personality of a Finnish girl "by unpleasant experiences in such Canadian institutions as dope-dens, prison, rescue-home, mining-camp, and police-court."²² This seems an inadequate reason for judging the book as having literary, as opposed to sociological merit; and Stevenson nowhere more amply accounts for his preference or attempts to justify his standards.

Catherine L. Cleverdon and Veronica Strong-Boag are both historians and feminists. Few literary critics consider a background in history sufficient to qualify anyone to evaluate literary merit. Cleverdon and Strong-Boag's feminism makes them even more suspect: perhaps they are unable to separate their ideological concerns from aesthetic standards.

It should also be noted that Strong-Boag waters down her own praise. After calling McClung's the best Canadian feminist writings to date, she continues that Nellie "failed, as did the majority of American feminists, to provide women

²²Stevenson, p. 136.

with satisfactory role models."²³ Strong-Boag gives no reason why accomplishing this should have been one of McClung's priorities; and she ignores that McClung provided role models according to her own idea of what women should be like. Strong-Boag further qualifies her initial assertion by concluding that "McClung's arguments often have anti-masculine overtones. Men were frequently portrayed as aggressive, selfish, and uncontrollable."²⁴ Presumably, McClung should not have mentioned that, for example, most alcoholics and spouse-beaters are men. Strong-Boag considers the negative portrayals of men a result of myopia--as if, had McClung looked elsewhere, she would have seen nicer men. Strong-Boag's "praise" seems more an attack.

Obviously, McClung's evaluators cannot all be objectively correct. Some of their conclusions are based on conflicting premises: according to Logan, literature should ennoble; according to King, ennobling is irrelevant. As well, critics with similar tenets reach opposing conclusions: King, who extols realism, complains that McClung's fiction isn't realistic; Stevenson, also pro-realism, claims her fiction is.

A general weakness of both McClung's critics and her acclaimers is their tendency to assume the validity of their criteria. Currently the criteria are not only unjustified but usually unstated: neither Woodcock nor Savage, for

²³Strong-Boag, p. xix.

²⁴Strong-Boag, p. xx.

example, outlines his/her standards.

Refuting the validity of the claims of McClung's detractors is sufficient only to demonstrate the flaws in their positions. In addition, to continue to evaluate the many derogatory and laudatory statements made about McClung's literary output would not lead to the establishment of a methodology for judging either the worth of the various appraisals or the literary merit of her writings.

As I intend to justify a positive evaluation of these writings which have undergone several decades of neglect and disparagement, I will no longer deal with reviews of her work. Instead, I will attempt to lay a basis--other than personal preference--for my evaluation.

In the following chapter, I will begin by cursorily examining several past and present literary standards. My goal is not to find an approved standard by which McClung wrote first-rate prose, but to show the connections which exist between the art consumed by a group and the art approved by it. Subsequently, I will give a brief feminist critique of these standards. I will conclude by validating a feminist methodology of literary criticism.

In the concluding chapter, I will use this methodology to establish the literary merits of McClung's many writings.

II. From "Objective" Literary Criticism to Feminist Critical Methodologies

Primarily during the past decade, feminist literary critics have developed methodologies for reassessing literary merit, especially of women's past works which have been neglected and/or belittled. They have also pinpointed two assumptions which have frequently been linked to the categorical belittlement of women's fiction: first, that there are objective standards for judging literary merit, standards known to the critics and rarely in need of justification; second, that there exist universal myths, archetypes and truths.

These assumptions are of great importance to most literary criticism. In fact, central to the debate concerning literary merit is the question of whether universal standards, objectively applied, exist for measuring this intangible. The various evaluations of McClung's writings, for example, all accept the tenet that there is a single criterion of excellence.

Yet present-day critics have access to a wide array of ready-made and often mutually exclusive standards. Many contradictory--and supposedly objective--yardsticks for appraising the quality of Art have been revered, denounced,

ignored, rehabilitated.

One of the oldest of these, and one of the most frequently revived, is found in Aristotle's Poetics, which dates from almost twenty-five hundred years ago. In Aristotle's day, all the action in a play usually occurred within a twenty-four hour period and in one location. He approved of these practices and, in his Poetics, describes unity of time and place as requirements for a properly crafted play.¹ We have no records of contemporaries who disagreed with him.

But two millenia later, the Elizabethan playwrights did not unanimously share his beliefs; some, at any rate, did not adhere to his rules. A century after the Elizabethan age, the educated English were taught to consider Aristotle's unities a sine qua non; several writers of note felt called upon to apologize for Shakespeare's violations of Aristotle's values. Present-day critics, now that Aristotle's unities are once more not de rigeur, find such an approach to Shakespeare beside the point.

Disagreement has arisen not only over form, but over language. For centuries after Latin and classical Greek had ceased to be living languages, scholars maintained that great literature, as opposed to the far less meritorious entertainments of the masses, could only be created in

¹See Laila Gross, An Introduction to Literary Criticism (New York: Capricorn Books, 1972).

Latin and classical Greek. They claimed this was because of the innate superiority of these languages--languages which were, at the time, linguas francas for almost all European intellectuals.

As a literary critic, Dante is best remembered for his--now widely accepted--counter-argument that a poet can express himself more fully in his own language than in any other. However, he also advocated the use of extremely long words, preferred "furry" to "shaggy" works, and held that his particular dialect was superior, as a vehicle for refined poetry, to any of the many other variants of contemporary Italian.² In fact, Dante's theory about what constitutes literary excellence is as much a would-be validation of his poetry as Aristotle's Poetics "validates" classical Greek drama.

Not only has Dante's advocacy of living languages been retained while his other ideas have been discarded, but few present-day critics do more than summarily dismiss the tenets of Dante's most respected predecessors. Nor have most recent critics asked how the importance of using one's own tongue affects women writers forced to try to communicate in a language which oppresses women. Neither the possible benefits accruing from the use of a lingua franca nor the disadvantages inherent in the use of a language which oppresses the users have been of major interest to most recent critics; they

²See Gross.

operate in a world without a common language and the vast majority of them are men.

In this century several methodologies have gained wide acceptance. The one most respected in Great Britain and North America is New Criticism, which aims to analyze literature by an objective standard, which exists outside the context of the culture in which the literature was produced, and apart from the intentions of the writer. It presumes, for example, that a poem either intrinsically has or lacks literary merit, and that it can be understood outside its historical context. In practice, such objectivity is neither achieved nor possible.

The following lines are from Tennyson's "The Princess," written in 1847:

Man for the field and woman for the hearth,
 Man for the sword and for the needle she,
 Man with the head, and woman with the heart,
 Man to command, and woman to obey,
 All else confusion.³

Is Tennyson serious or is he satirizing conventions? Is he postulating an absurdity, one acknowledged as ludicrous by his contemporaries? Is his language clichéd or his style innovative? Is Tennyson a woman mocking past customs and literary conventions? I am unable, except by locating the work in time and space, even to comprehend its meaning, much less judge its aesthetic qualities. Yet, according to some New Critical critics, any information that cannot be gleaned

³Alfred Tennyson, "The Princess"; as quoted by Fowler, p. 191.

from the work itself is irrelevant. Nor is the work's relationship to reality, such as its effectiveness as propaganda, considered important.

Further, if there is a single aesthetic yardstick, the troubadours' long ballads, the delight of the nobility for centuries, were never other than repetitive and seemingly interminable accounts of gory chivalry. Either that, or present-day people, few of whom can concentrate on Le Roman de la Rose, allegedly one of the more gripping of such ballads, are unable to appreciate true literary greatness.

New Critical preferences are another obstacle to objectivity. For example, many adherents of this school are fond of paradox and irony; and they explain the appeal of their favorite poems on the basis of the poems' paradoxes and ironic content. They discount the likelihood that other people enjoy the same verses for different reasons. Poetry which does not meet their objectively unjustified standards is considered inferior to poetry which does.⁴

The current Eastern Bloc and French equivalent of New Criticism is Structuralism. Structuralists do avoid making value judgments: they restrict themselves to delineating what they see as the content of a particular piece of literature. But, just as listing the items in a grocery bag reveals only what is in the bag and not which object is poisonous, nutritious, delicious, despised, so too the structuralist

⁴See Cleanth Brooks, "The Language of Paradox," Critiques and Essays in Criticism, ed. Robert Wooster Stallman (New York: Ronald Press, 1949).

approach does not lead to an evaluation of literary merit. Nor does it explain why people bother with literature; or why we enjoy some works more than others, and different works at different times. Then too, structuralists, like many New Critical critics, are unconcerned by the connections between life and art: they dismiss the relevance of the author's perspective, and ignore both the importance of reader reaction and the ways in which reader reaction is affected by expectations.

Structuralism is, however, an extremely safe approach to literature. It cannot be denounced as ideologically unsound; this is an especially vital consideration for Eastern Bloc critics who do not like Siberia. Nor can it be attacked as unscientific, which is a pejorative in the many countries which are currently science-oriented.

A third extremely prevalent standard, Socialist Realism, still predominates in most Communist countries. According to it, the purpose of art is to instruct and uplift the populace. What the proletariat is to learn is considered evident. Those parts of reality perceived as potentially counter-edifying-- for example, those which show workers in a bad light or capitalists in a good--are to be left undepicted. Form, as well as content, is judged: if a form is considered too difficult for general appreciation, it is held to be inferior to a simpler form. Exponents of this approach to literature, far from viewing works in a cultural vacuum, value them primarily as party-approved propagandizing agents.

As might be expected, this approach thrives in countries with autocratic one-party politico-religious systems. It is, on the other hand, slightly less safe than Structuralism: the critic risks approving works later rated counter-edifying. This may be a factor contributing to the growing popularity of Structuralism.

It is evident that critics tend to uphold standards which supposedly validate their tastes. It is equally evident that the most popular critics "justify" either a literary status quo or what becomes such a status quo. These things may be inevitable; and there is nothing wrong with using standards to delineate what we enjoy and to explain why we prefer one work to another. One objects only when taste assumes the mask of objectivity.

One has a lot to object to.

Many non-feminist critics do not restrict themselves to claims of objectivity. The following is George Henry Lewes' century-old, but still widely accepted, definition of great literature:

In proportion as these expressions are the forms of universal truths, of facts common to all nations or appreciable by all intellects, the literature which sets them forth is permanently good and true. Hence the universality and immortality of Homer, Shakespeare, Cervantes, Molière. . . . Hence tragedy never grows old, for it arises from elemental experience.⁵

⁵George Henry Lewes, "The Lady Novelists," Women's Liberation and Literature, ed. Elaine Showalter (New York: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1971), p. 173.

More recently, critic Northrop Frye and psychoanalyst Carl Jung have been similarly concerned with universalities: Frye with universal myths and Jung with universal archetypes. There seems little immediate reason to take issue with Lewes' approval of common truths, or Jung and Frye's quest for common ground.

It should be noted, of course, that the profusion of aesthetic standards is matched by the proliferation of contradictory "universal truths." For example, according to popular nineteenth-century tenets, women are "physically delicate, retiring, submissive, passive, intuitive"; the ideal woman sits "quietly at home embroidering."⁶ On the other hand, when present-day feminist Mary Daly refers to women, she writes of "our Female Pride, our Sinister Wisdom. . . . our Creative Anger and Brilliant Bravery. . . . our Autonomy and Strength." Instead of embroidering, "we Spin our Original Integrity."^{6a}

It should also be remarked that one cannot accurately rate a work's universality-quotient unless one perceives reality.

As a result, Lewes' predilection for valuing universalities seems harmless only until he begins appraising women's writings. He concedes a place for such works: some literature is "the expression of the emotions, the whims, the caprices, the enthusiasms, the fluctuating idealisms which move each epoch and inasmuch as women necessarily take part in these things, they ought to give them their expression."⁷ Such

⁶Fowler, p. 9.

^{6a}Mary Daly, Gyn/Ecology: The Metaethics of Radical Feminism (Boston: Beacon Press, 1978), p. 423.

⁷Lewes, p. 173.

literature, in Lewes' opinion, can never be great: "in proportion as these expressions are the forms of individual, peculiar truths, such as fleeting fashions or idiosyncracies, the literature is ephemeral."⁸ Inexplicably, there seems no way for women to gain access to universal truths.

Current writer and critic Anthony Burgess is even less impressed by women's writings; and he more overtly relates his depreciation to the authors' gender. As feminist critic Cheri Register has noticed, "he cannot bear to read Jane Austen because she is too feminine. Yet he is equally critical of George Eliot for achieving a successful 'male impersonation' and of Ivy Compton-Burnett for writing 'sexless literature.'"⁹ According to Burgess, whose viewpoint is not atypical, women simply cannot create significant literature.

Again, one could not object if Lewes, Burgess and others with similar opinions acknowledged that they were biased in favor of exclusively male outlooks, just as critics are often prejudiced for or against various subjective standards for measuring aesthetic merit. Once more, one has grounds for objection.

Not surprisingly, feminist literary critics put forward

⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 173. Lewes wrote "The Lady Novelists" in 1853, shortly before he and George Eliot became lovers. It is worth mentioning that he never subsequently published anything on women writers as a group.

⁹ Cheri Register, "American Feminist Literary Criticism: A Bibliographical Introduction," p. 9.

ideas different from those of most universalists. For example, Dolores Barracano Schmidt cautiously asserts that men writers do not express everyone's truths:

I do not mean in any way to denigrate the literary accomplishments of . . . Hemingway, Lewis, Fitzgerald [who] are giants of twentieth-century literature. . . . I do think, however, that we must reconsider our critical judgments and be particularly careful how we apply such sweeping critical terms as "realistic," "acute social observers," "universal in theme and values." They present a specifically male view, and in these particular cases, a threatened male view of their times.¹⁰

Nancy K. Miller is blunter: "the attack on female plots and plausibilities assumes that women writers cannot or will not obey the rules of fiction."¹¹ Such disparagement, in her opinion, ignores that women's fiction tends to be distinguishable from men's, not because women have fluctuating whims and caprices, but because:

The fiction of desire behind the desiderata of fiction are masculine and not universal constructs the maxims that pass for the truth of human experience, and the encoding of that experience in literature, are organizations, when they are not fantasies, of the dominant culture. To read women's literature is to see and hear repeatedly a chafing against the "unsatisfactory reality."¹²

Though women's fiction, continually judged against male norms,

¹⁰Dolores Barracano Schmidt, "The Great American Bitch," College English 32 (May 1971) p. 900; as quoted by Register, pp. 6-7.

¹¹Nancy K. Miller, "Emphasis Added: Plots and Plausibilities in Women's Fiction," PMLA, XCIV, 1 (January 1981), p. 46

¹²Ibid., p. 46.

has been confined largely to the depiction of male visions of reality, Miller notes that much has "emphasis added."¹³ The devaluation of such fiction is therefore linked, not to its less universal content, but to its originality--its differences from men's fiction.

Feminist poet and scholar Adrienne Rich addresses herself more to Frye and Jung than to Lewes. She argues against the assumption that there exist universal myths and archetypes. She perceives that a myth, far from being static and universal, is "a response to the environment, an interaction between the mind and its external world. It expresses a need, a longing. And myth has always accumulated, accreted; the profile of the goddess or hero is always changing, weathered by changes in external conditions."¹⁴

In the following example, feminist novelist and critic Virginia Woolf remarks on an aspect of women's lives unexplored in the old myths:

"Chloe liked Olivia," I read. And then it struck me how immense a change was there. Chloe liked Olivia perhaps for the first time in literature. Cleopatra did not like Octavia. And how completely Antony and Cleopatra would have been altered had she done so. . . . All these relationships between women, I thought, rapidly recalling the splendid gallery of fictitious women, are too simple. So much has been left out, unattempted. . . . It was strange to think that all the great women of fiction were, until Jane Austen's day, not only seen by the other sex, but seen in relation to the other sex. And how small a part of a woman's life is that.¹⁵

Doubtless Frye and Jung would view Rich's accumulations and accretions as mere variations and permutations of their universal

¹³ Ibid., p. 36.

¹⁴ Adrienne Rich, Of Woman Born: Motherhood as Experience and Institution (New York: Bantam Books, 1977), p. 79.

¹⁵ Virginia Woolf, A Room of One's Own (Harmondsworth: Penguin Books, 1973), p. 82.

myths and archetypes. But this is "emphasis erased," an attempt to see heterogeneity as homogeneity by focusing on similarities. It is also a means of downgrading new myths and viewing the current man-made ones as prototypic. There would not, however, be such resistance to the depiction of, for example, traditionally male deities as female, if the alterations were not manifestations, in myth, of new realities.

Women writers' reputations have been damaged by the unconventional realities presented in their works. Yet there is a more common reason for disparagement. Many critics cannot evaluate women's fiction by the critics' own criteria. Instead, their literary judgments are affected by non-literary preconceptions.

For example, evaluations of novels assumed to be by a man have undergone rapid transformation when revealed to be by a woman. Scholar Elaine Showalter recounts that, after George Eliot disclosed her identity, the tone of the reviews changed immediately: "where critics had previously seen the powerful mind of the male George Eliot, they now, at second glance, discovered feminine delicacy and tact, and here and there a disturbing unladylike coarseness."¹⁶

Some critics are even candid about extra-literary biases. They may see nothing amiss in believing, for example, that certain truths may be divulged only by men. Showalter reports that "what chiefly astounded and baffled the readers of Jane Eyre was the presentation of feminine independence and female passion. . . . Many critics bluntly admitted they thought the book was a masterpiece if written by a man,

¹⁶ Elaine Showalter, "Women Writers and the Double Standard," Woman in Sexist Society: Studies in Power and Powerlessness, ed. Vivian Gornick and Barbara K. Moran (New York: Basic Books, 1971), p. 476.

shocking or disgusting if written by a woman."¹⁷

Prejudices that preclude a fair appraisal of women's works did not disappear with hoop skirts and top hats. In the early 1960's, novelist and critic Cynthia Ozick taught freshman English for a year:

You could not tell the young men's papers from the young women's papers. They thought alike (badly), they wrote alike (gracelessly), and they behaved alike (docilely). And what they all believed was this: that the minds of men and women are spectacularly unlike. They believed that men write like men, and women like women. . . . And they were all identical in this belief.¹⁸

When these students discovered that writer Flannery O'Connor was a woman, they predictably "noticed" how "feminine" her language was.

As in the nineteenth century, feminine did not denote merely different from masculine. Feminine meant, in Ozick's words, that "she is either too sensitive (that is why she cannot be president of General Motors) or she is not sensitive enough (that is why she will never write King Lear)"¹⁹ -- in short, feminine still meant inferior.

A 1968 study reinforces Ozick's impressions. In the study, both women and men rated essays supposedly by men more highly than those supposedly by women.²⁰ Once again, what

¹⁷ Ibid., p. 475.

¹⁸ Cynthia Ozick, "Women and Creativity: The Demise of the Dancing Dog," Woman in Sexist Society: Studies in Power and Powerlessness, p. 433.

¹⁹ Ibid., p. 347.

²⁰ See Gail Zellman, "Prejudice and Discrimination," Women and Sex Roles, ed. Frieze et al (New York: Norton, 1978), pp. 281-82.

counted was not the author's gender, but her/his perceived gender. In other words, readers unknowingly preferred, not masculine content, but men's signatures.

Nevertheless, most critics deny their inability to see the prose for their prejudices. They tend to be convinced of their impartiality in judging according to their subjective partial visions, just as they cling to belief in the objectivity of their standards.

The predilection for confusing opinions with absolute truths, and favoritism with fair-mindedness, can be traced to several factors. According to sociologist Gail Zellman, "what is familiar tends to become a value, whether or not it was valued at first. . . . That is, we come to like certain customs with which we have grown up simply because we grew up with them."²¹ Familiarity breeds acceptance--and not only acceptance, but prejudice in favor of the known.

This finding has relevance to literary criticism.

"Objective" aesthetic yardsticks are frequently justifications for enjoying the familiar and belittling all else. Aristotle, for example, valued the unities of time and place at least

²¹Zellman, p. 296. In an example Zellman gives (see p. 296), over a period of several weeks, Turkish words were inserted into two American university newspapers from one to twenty-five times. The words were not defined; nor was any reason given for their publication. Yet when asked which of the words they liked best, students noted those which had appeared most frequently.

partly because these were in common use. New standards reflect and "validate" emerging customs: Latin and classical Greek were slowly being supplanted as vehicles for enduring literature long before Dante's time.²²

The human preference for the known is encouraged by, in Mary Daly's phrase, "cosmic false naming."²³ Within western patriarchies, people are trained to value "the truth, the whole truth, and nothing but the truth." Simultaneously, we are to hold many beliefs despite their unverifiable and manifestly unlikely nature.²⁴ As a result, most of us act and argue from "objective" positions, are rational within very narrow limits. It is natural for literary critics to display the same mindset to literature as to other parts of life, and to mislabel assumption "truth."

Further, Jung and Frye's efforts to force life to fit a

²² Beowulf, written in Old English, dates from approximately 1000 A.D.; the Nibelungenlied, written in Old German, from the twelfth century. Dante was not born until the thirteenth, 1265. His seemingly revolutionary argument in favor of mother tongues "confirmed" the correctness of what was happening and so became accepted. Dante at most hastened the shift to the many vulgates; later writers could cite him as an "authority."

²³ Mary Daly, Beyond God the Father (Boston: Beacon Press, 1974), p. 47.

²⁴ Catholics are told there are an other-dimensional hell, heaven and variety of purgatories. Most Christians and Jews are currently supposed to believe that an omnipotent God who is Love allows war, cancer, geno- and gynecide, famine, etc. In the face of acid rain, nuclear pollution and other ecological hazards, we are to increase the Gross National Product (and acid rain, nuclear pollution and so on) in the name of prosperity. False naming enters in, in that the absurd is presented as the self-evident or at least "the thinking man's choice."

few patterns indicate that the following tenet may have validity. According to French feminist Claudine Herrmann, "man prefers himself to all that surrounds him to such a degree that he imposes his mental categories first, before those of objective reality."²⁵ Many other present-day French feminists likewise accept that men tend to be pattern-makers who perceive life only insofar as it stays within the confines of their models, and that women are frequently better reality-perceivers who draw conclusions tentatively from life.

Finally, those most sure of their impartiality are those in power. The mightier cannot be coerced into conceding that their values are arbitrary, misguided, biased. Those with law, money and conventional religion on their side, do not have to admit their subjectivity.

Whatever the causes for the widespread penchant for confusing the discrimination stemming from prejudice with the

²⁵ Claudine Herrmann, "The Virile System," trans. Marilyn Schuster, Articles by French Feminists (Montreal: Simone de Beauvoir Institute, 1982), p. 182. See also Annie Leclerc, "Woman's Word," trans. Gillian C. Gill, Articles by French Feminists.

discrimination stemming from discernment, feminist women have not escaped the conditioning to misname. However, at present we tend to be aware of at least some mislabeling because women are repeatedly victimized by it--and because feminists are refusing to accept the vision of those with greater power and are instead reinforcing each other's perceptions/new biases. Doubting the "justifications" for the many prevalent woman-denigrating practices has led to a mistrust of much so-called objectivity.

Consequently, most feminist literary critics are sceptical of supposedly bias-free standards. In fact, assumptions of impartiality are so much the targets of present-day feminist critics that, by 1975, Cheri Register wrote of the "ritual invective against the New Criticism,"²⁶ and especially against its erroneous insistence on the timelessness of its standards and the autonomous nature of the work.

Feminist criticism helps debunk old methodologies, many of which have been used to downgrade women's fiction.

Its major aim, however, is to recredit women's literature. It also calls for less women's fiction with chafings against unsatisfactory realities, and

²⁶Register, p. 10.

more with depictions of women's realities.

Since feminism includes "a firm and deep refusal to limit our perspectives,"²⁷ feminist criticism should encourage a greater degree of written self-expression among women. It does, in fact, begin with a redefinition of literature to include, not only all fiction, but autobiographical writings, letters, diaries, essays--the written self-expression of humankind.

Yet Aristotle's optional "prerequisites," Lewes' inaccurate "universalities" and Ozick's misguided students, do not establish the necessary preeminence of feminist criticism. Perhaps positive reevaluations of women's fiction are based on prejudice in favor of the aesthetically and ethically inferior. In the remainder of this chapter, I will demonstrate that this is not so; I will validate a feminist methodology of literary criticism.

There is one thing immediately to be said for it. Its goal is not to replace man-made masterpieces with women's mistresspieces, but to re-place women's works.

Then too, men's writings have often been only partially understood because of critics' mistaken premises. In Marcia Holly's words, critics tend to determine "the limits of meaning for a work; that is, the critic and/or teacher can set

²⁷Daly, p. 7.

the terms within which a work is questioned, thereby establishing the boundaries of potential response. It then takes a rare reader to pose questions outside those limits."²⁸ By disclosing invalid preconceptions, feminist criticism brings about a fuller comprehension of men's literature. Kate Millett's Sexual Politics, for instance, traces recent developments in men's changing myths about themselves and women.

Further to the credit of feminist criticism, it acknowledges that, even if sexism were eliminated, literature could not be appraised by means of universal truths or unwavering standards of literary excellence. For example, in the Rhodesia of the 1950's, such standards were used against both male and female blacks: most local whites held that the inferiority of black natives was reconfirmed by the blacks' lack of interest in European classics.²⁹ Such standards also enable a critic to disparage a work as provincial if it does not attract the approval of an urban self-styled elite, or as transitional if it does not fit within the supposedly objective guidelines at which the critic has arrived.

Yet though truly impartial knowledge of literary

²⁸ Holly, p. 41.

²⁹ Novelist Doris Lessing recalls that, in one library for blacks, the plays were "the complete works of Oscar Wilde, Noel Coward and J.M. Barrie. They had, said my [white] guide, in the voice of one who says 'I told you so!' never been taken out." See Doris Lessing, Going Home (Frogmore: Panther Books, 1973), p. 185.

excellence is impossible, some evaluative standards are viable. The author's criteria should not be ignored. Not all writers have left neat records of aims. But for those who have, or whose priorities are implicit in their works, the appraisal can at least begin by determining the extent to which the work is successful by the writer's own goals.

As well as the author's aims, the critics' preferences can be used, providing these are not presented as objective. Feminist critics repeatedly affirm the need for "honest criticism that involves an examination and presentation of the critic's own biases."³⁰ For instance, as feminist scholar Josephine Donovan points out, "the new feminist critic is . . . (and knows herself to be) politically motivated by a concern to redeem women from the sloughbin of nonentity in which they have languished for centuries."³¹ Feminist criticism starts by disproving claims of total neutrality; Donovan indicates that openly admitting one's slant equally threatens supposedly disinterested academics:

The feminist critic is saying, moreover, that each person "sees" phenomena through a filter of concerns and awarenesses; we feminist critics recognize these in ourselves and so at least come to the critical dialogue in relative good faith. For this reason we pose a challenge to the assumptions that any scholar is free from ideological bias or value preference.³²

The critic's obligation is perhaps a trifle overwhelming.

³⁰Register, p. 36.

³¹Josephine Donovan, "Afterword: Critical Re-Vision," Feminist Literary Criticism, p. 76. Italics added.

³²Ibid., p. 76.

Marcia Holly knows that "a Norman Mailer, for example, who posits the masculinist ethos that a woman's highest purpose is as a receptacle for omnipotent sperm, cannot be expected to question the reality of such a character as Hemingway's Brett Ashley."³³ Yet Mailer is called upon to delineate his assumptions qua assumptions; after all, the critic "is responsible for admitting and understanding any biases s/he maintains."³⁴ From her vantage point, Holly can fault Mailer for his acceptance of common prejudices. On the other hand, her outlook is also colored by the time and place she occupies: she holds, for example, that it is possible for someone like Mailer to concede his biases.

Perhaps no critic will prove able to reach complete awareness of her/his unverified preconceptions. Still, as I have shown, many critics felt--and continue to feel--at ease treating male perceptions as universal truths, and literary conventions as undeniable standards of excellence. Since the prevailing male viewpoint is not irreproachably impartial, feminist scholar Lillian Robinson rightly asserts that "the application of a feminist perspective will not mean adding ideology to a value-free discipline."³⁵ Instead, it should lead to a decrease in disguised subjectivity, in premises purveyed as facts.

³³Holly, p. 41.

³⁴Ibid., p. 41.

³⁵Lillian Robinson, "Dwelling in Decencies," College English 32 (May 1971), p. 88; as quoted by Register, p. 7.

The recurrent feminist insistence on making tenets explicit is justified. This facilitates a closer approach to accuracy. Standards can be constructed on an admittedly qualified objectivity based on the fullest possible revelation of assumptions regarding life and literary preferences.

Yet since most feminist critics acknowledge that "absolute" standards have proven as fallible as Aristotle, and ironically proceed to demands for critical objectivity, an important question arises: what, objectively, can a critic ascertain regarding a book? James Hart writes that "each period has its own standards and its own tastes; like theatre tickets, they are good only for this day and place."³⁶ Is the critic then restricted to the Structuralist position, to delineating the work's content? That is, is s/he unable to reach any conclusions that are not merely impressions?

It is possible to analyze the relationship between life and literature, and between more and less popular fiction.

Most past and present-day feminists accept that life and art interrelate. Unlike I.A. Richards, who propounded the doctrine that "criticism must be concerned with filtering out irrelevant responses,"³⁷ by which he meant any input from outside the work, most feminist critics unreservedly agree with Josephine Donovan:

³⁶James Hart, The Popular Book; as quoted by Verkruysse, p. 66.

³⁷Donovan, p. 79.

Critics and readers are whole persons who come to literature with the tunnels of experience through which they view the happenings of the text. We will recognize that much of literary appreciation is a personal subjective experience, and that to brush off such responses as irrelevant is only to perpetuate destructive antinomies drawn in the Western cultural identity: between personal and public, emotional and intellectual, subjective and objective.³⁸

For Virginia Woolf, for example, literature is "a series of personal transactions, a series of encounters between people writing and people reading."³⁹ Therefore we should regard books "in such a way that they matter, not in literary history, but in our lives."⁴⁰ Gloria Femen Orenstein is one of the many feminists who see art as even more influential: it is not something we freely choose to let ourselves be affected by; instead, "art is a truly potent force in shaping of consciousness."⁴¹ Because of these ties between art and non-art, according to Adrienne Rich, "a radical critique of literature, feminist in its impulse, would take the work first of all as a clue to how we live, to how we have been led to imagine ourselves, how our language has trapped as well as

³⁸Ibid., p. 79.

³⁹Barbara Currier Bell and Carol Ohmann, "Virginia Woolf's Criticism: A Polemical Preface," Feminist Literary Criticism, P. 57.

⁴⁰Ibid., p. 57.

⁴¹Gloria Femen Orenstein, "Art History," Signs, I, 2 (Winter 1975), p. 512

liberated us."⁴² For Rich, as for many other feminists, feminist criticism means a changed perspective on literature and new opportunities in life.

The existence of connections between life and art is confirmed by personal experiences and sociological studies. Both show that, not only does who we are affect what we see, but that art influences life. To illustrate: Beautiful Joe alerted me to the cruelty with which some people treat animals. Uncle Tom's Cabin taught me that slavery had occurred, and ensured that I would always see it as something utterly horrific. The Man Who Loved Children made me more aware of the prevalence of wilful ignorance.

Numerous sociological studies corroborate these individual impressions regarding art's impact on life.⁴³ The most discouraging finding is that the connections between art and life are strongest when art reinforces the reader's perceptions of reality.⁴⁴

Because of the links between art and non-art, feminist

⁴² Adrienne Rich, "When We Dead Awaken: Writing as Re-Vision," Adrienne Rich's Poetry, ed. Barbara Charlesworth Gelpi and Albert Gelpi (New York: W.W. Norton, 1975), p. 90.

⁴³ For example, see Deborah Read, "Movies Do Arouse Violence," Canadian Women's Studies/les cahiers de la femme, III, 2 (1981), p. 29.

⁴⁴ For example, when children whose mothers did not have paid jobs were shown pictures of women working in non-traditional fields, after a few weeks both girls and boys tended to "remember" that the pictures were of men. Only children with working mothers, and especially with mothers employed in non-traditional jobs, usually recalled correctly. See Letty Cottin Pogrebin, "How to Stop Worrying about Gender and Just Love Your Child," Ms., IX, 4 (October 1980).

critics are especially interested in how women's literature reflects or distorts women's reality, and how literature can be an agent of change. Women's reality is not taken to mean whatever affirms preconceptions or even sociological findings--after all, sociology, psychology, anthropology, etc. have been used to "prove" women's multiple inferiorities--but whatever is verified by women's self-knowledge and knowledge of other women. Josephine Donovan writes:

We are making judgments based on an assessment of the authenticity of women characters, women's situations, and the authors' perspective on them. Such judgments may be based in large part on the critic's own experience as a woman, but also upon the new awarenesses of the female experience that have come and are still coming to light through the women's movement. The feminist critic maintains, in short, that there are truths and probabilities about the female experience that form a criterion about which to judge the authenticity of a literary statement about women.⁴⁵

It is hard to fault this method for measuring authenticity: what but women's lives, and our perception of our lives, can be taken as a yardstick? The subjective is not the opposite of the objective. In fact, according to Virginia Woolf, the mind of the nineteenth-century woman author was damaged because it could not credit its own observations and self-perceptions, but "was pulled from the straight, and made to alter its clear vision in deference to external authority."⁴⁶

⁴⁵Donovan, p. 77

⁴⁶Virginia Woolf, A Room of One's Own (New York: Harcourt, Brace and World, 1929), p. 77; as quoted by Register, p. 19.

The only reservation that has to be made is that women have been formed by specific cultures. Therefore what is now true for us may not be true at all times; nor is one woman's truth every woman's. For example, at present much feminist literature focuses on women's fears, failures, setbacks, oppression: Fear of Flying, The Edible Woman, The Women's Room and Diary of a Mad Housewife are a representative selection. While these expose the reality of many present-day women, one can only hope that some day readers will find that the books present an alien and perhaps incomprehensible world.

However, men critics castigated Charlotte Brontë for portraying, in Jane Eyre, a passionate and independent woman-- in other words, a woman who, according to their theories, could not exist. The sentiments proper to womankind were not determined by relying on women's inner truth criterion: women were not consulted. Instead, men critics accepted "universal truths" about women's very limited qualities. Though no one entirely escapes biases, a feminist critic would not judge the women characters in a book as "others" to be measured without reference to actual women.

But a feminist analysis of the authenticity of the women characters in a piece of fiction will not only lead to the conclusions: "So that is what, in this particular story, the women are like. And this is how realistic/unrealistic I feel they are." While New Critical critics do not wish life to impinge upon their appreciation of literature, most feminist critics stress that our critical concerns are influenced by

ethical standards:

When a writer does focus on male-female interaction or on male or female psychology, the writer is to be judged by her/his assumptions about women and men. We reject facile answers in works that treat non-sex-related topics: we find Horatio Alger ludicrous because he presents an invalid personal solution to social questions. . . . We cannot accept the validity or truth of literature that exhibits no understanding of male-female power relationships when concerned with male-female interaction.⁴⁷

Such a stance is of particular significance because human interactions are of central importance to most fiction, and because sexist assumptions are as pervasive in literature as in life.

Feminist criticism negatively reappraises much past and present writing because of the content; yet its primary goal is positive. By advocating reliance on an inner truth criterion, it encourages "an art true to women's experience and not filtered through a male perspective or constricted to fit male standards."⁴⁸ The aim is to locate and stimulate the creation of, not so much women's candid autobiographies, as "the fictional myths growing out of their lives, and told by themselves for themselves."⁴⁹ Through such ever-changing myths, "the experience of all women becomes, in a sense, our communal property, a heritage we bestow upon each other."⁵⁰

⁴⁷Holly, p. 45.

⁴⁸Register, p. 19.

⁴⁹Ibid., p. 19.

⁵⁰Ibid., p. 22.

Feminist critics value explorations of women's various realities because, in Hélène Cixous' words, "writing is precisely the very possibility of change, the space that can serve as a springboard for subversive thought, the precursory movement of social and cultural structures."⁵¹ Emily Collins, a nineteenth-century American, illustrates the importance of precursory writing. She felt isolated in her belief that woman did not occupy her rightful place in society. Then, "when I read . . . and found that other women entertained the same thoughts that had been seething in my own brain, and realized that I stood not alone, how my heart bounded with joy."⁵² Present-day sociologist Alice S. Rossi experienced a similar exhilaration at her discovery of the writings of feminist fore Sisters. She gained strength from "the vision of a sisterhood that has its roots in the past and extends to the future."⁵³ Even though it is easier, as sociological studies have shown, to reinforce what is than to bring about change, the opposite is far from impossible.

Claudine Herrmann rightly labels women who create revolutionary writing "voleuses de langue";⁵⁴ tongue

⁵¹Hélène Cixous, "The Laugh of the Medusa," trans. Keith Cohen and Paula Cohen, Signs, I, 4 (Summer 1976), p. 879.

⁵²Emily Collins, "Reminiscences of Emily Collins," The Feminist Papers, ed. Alice S. Rossi (New York: Bantam Books, 1978), p. 422.

⁵³Alice S. Rossi, "Preface: Feminist Lives and Works," The Feminist Papers, p. xi.

⁵⁴Herrmann, p. 177.

'snatchers, speech stealers. Such women appropriate language in order to increase everyone's awareness of women's potential.

But not all literature is equally effective as an agent for change. Should a writer wish to be read, to have a chance to influence perceptions of reality, s/he can succeed with, at most, "a slightly perverse fiction."⁵⁵ Géraud Genette amplifies: "to understand the behavior of a character (for example), is to be able to refer it back to an approved maxim."⁵⁶ Nancy Miller continues on the importance of adhering to maxims, literary precedents:

To produce a work not like other novels, an original rather than a copy, means paradoxically that its literariness will be snuffed out; . . . the critical reaction to any given text is hermeneutically bound to another and preexistent text: the doxa of socialities. . . . A heroine without a maxim, like a rebel without a cause, is destined to be misunderstood.⁵⁷

The notions of cognitive consonance and dissonance are central to an understanding of why literature is non-static yet precedent-bound. Cognitive consonance is the affirmation, in the judgment of an individual or a society, of entrenched beliefs, ideas, knowledge. Cognitive dissonance is created by

⁵⁵Roman Jakobson, Essais de linguistique générale (Paris: Minuit, 1963), p. 33; as quoted by Miller, p. 43.

⁵⁶Géraud Genette, "Vraisemblance et motivation," trans. Nancy K. Miller, Figures II (Paris: Seuil, 1969), p. 175; as quoted by Miller, p. 36.

⁵⁷Miller, p. 36.

the unorthodox, by whatever is outside the ordinary and the accepted: Lady Chatterley's Lover in 1925; Reefer Madness in 1982.

Things which are cognitively dissonant are often quickly dismissed, forgotten, ridiculed, or not even perceived.⁵⁸ As social theorist Charlotte Perkins Gilman observed, "we must remember, in attempting to look fairly, to see clearly, that a concept is a much stronger stimulus to the brain than a fact."⁵⁸ It is equally important to realize that attempts to look fairly are few and far between.

Cognitive dissonance has played a vital role in evaluations of women's writings, especially their feminist writings. According to Nancy Miller, "female plots and plausibilities . . . are taken to be not merely inferior modalities of production but deviations from some obvious truth."⁵⁹ Up to and including the present, explicitly feminist authors have expressed minority opinions; they have therefore risked having their works not published, not taken seriously, and--almost inevitably--soon forgotten. Mary Wollstonecraft's A Vindication of the Rights of Woman (1792) was out of print for almost a century after her death.

Dissonance affects reader appreciation; works that break from literary norms about reality are likely to meet critical

⁵⁸ Charlotte Perkins Gilman, The Home: Its Work and Influence (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1972), p. 162.

⁵⁹ Miller, p. 46.

disapproval. In other words, a work's value as propaganda⁶² is partly determined by its relationship to other literature. Examining the most popular literature of the time helps explain why authors chose to express themselves in the ways they did.

For example, in most nineteenth-century novels, heroes are "physically strong, competitive, controlling, unsentimental, aggressive, rational,"⁶¹ and heroines are the opposite. Feminist critics do not immediately and unanimously denounce these polarized stereotypes as blatant "idealizations." By now, the inaccuracy of such stereotypes is self-evident. Many feminist critics are concerned, on the other hand, with the means whereby feminist and partially feminist authors nevertheless managed to reach large audiences.

Conventional forms and characters frequently enable authors to popularize atypical outlooks. In Olive Schreiner's bestselling The Story of an African Farm (1883), there are both a melodramatic plot and a fairly standard heroine. The tiny and delicate beauty lives a painful and lingering but touchingly romantic death. But she does not die of unrequited love; she dies because society denies women the opportunity to live a full life.

Scholar Kate Millett believes that "emerging peoples have

⁶⁰ Propaganda includes all "ideas, facts, or allegations spread deliberately to further one's cause or to damage the opposing cause." See Webster's Seventh New Collegiate Dictionary (London: G. Bell and Sons, 1967), p. 683.

⁶¹ Fowler, p. 9.

great difficulties with form. . . . They are actually saying something different, something new. But they are saying it in an old way." She immediately goes on to remark that "there are also rare eccentric figures, such as Gertrude Stein, saying new things in such novel ways that no one hears them at all."⁶² Perhaps form is not the greatest difficulty encountered by those with emerging realities; it may be that the new is most effectively disseminated through old forms-- that is, through forms which are as cognitively consonant as possible.

Accepted forms are not, of course, the only option open to authors who do not wish to entirely affirm the status quo, but who do care to reach an audience. George Eliot, for example, suppressed part of her truth: though she has several atypically intelligent and strong-minded female central characters, she never centres a novel around a woman artist. Other authors, like Kate Chopin in The Awakening, use established reputations as the springboard from which they go on to present increasingly unconventional realities.

Feminist literary critics evaluate works partly by a truth criterion. However, in order to more fully understand a piece of fiction, it is also compared to other writings, and especially to the most popular writings of the time.

There has been one option closed to feminist authors

⁶²Kate Millett, "Prostitution: A Quartet for Female Voices," Woman in Sexist Society: Studies in Power and Powerlessness, p. 60.

unwilling to deny their visions. They have been unable to write except against the backdrop of the dominant perspective, against the background of the culturally consonant. Therefore, whatever their methods of gaining popularity, they have often created works which are explicitly protests.⁶³

Further, as has been established, even women's writings which conform to many male expectations reveal some "unsatisfactory realities." Both for this reason, and because feminist literature, most of it by women, is necessarily formed against prevailing preconceptions, "the concept of a female subculture is an extremely useful one for the consideration of women's literature. . . . it provides a coherent framework for studying the development of writers in a separable tradition."⁶⁴

Kate Millett goes even further. She claims that, "because of our social circumstances, male and female are really two cultures and their life experiences are utterly different."⁶⁵ She describes "the glamorization of masculine comraderie in warfare" as "a particularly cloying species of masculine sentimentality."⁶⁶

In practice, it is impossible to completely separate

⁶³See Register, p. 10.

⁶⁴Elaine Showalter, "Literary Criticism," Signs, I, 2 (Winter, 1975), p. 445.

⁶⁵Kate Millett, Sexual Politics (New York: Ballantine Books, 1978), p. 42.

⁶⁶Ibid., p. 48.

women's culture from men's. Most women accept some aspects of the dominant male ideology; some accept all of it. Emmeline Pankhurst, a British suffragette, was a rabid nationalist and elitist. Nor is male ideology monolithic, with all men subscribing to one set of ideas.

Still, women's literature has long been widely treated "in passing as epiphenomena."⁶⁷ Further, feminist literary critics care to rehabilitate women's works, to "make visible an otherwise invisible intertext."⁶⁸ This can best be accomplished by seeing women's literature as separable from yet interconnected with men's.

Reality, ethics, dissonance, inner truth, subculture--to most New Critical critics, the repeated emphasis on these words would indicate that no literary criticism was being done. Clearly, whereas New Criticism assumes that aesthetics are more important than ethics, feminist critics tend to concentrate on ethical merit and on the relationship of literature to cultural expectations. Josephine Donovan explains the shift in emphasis:

Until we have had a chance to study women's art, history, and culture more extensively, so as to begin to codify the patterns of consciousness delineated therein, I believe we will be unable to develop a more substantial feminine aesthetic. For aesthetic judgments are rooted in epistemology; one cannot understand why someone thinks something is beautiful or significant until one understands the

⁶⁷Miller, p. 37.

⁶⁸Ibid., p. 37.

way s/he sees, knows the world.⁶⁹

Aesthetic standards are as varied as ethical--and are harder to defend, because they rely strongly on taste: "I find this funny." "I find this repetitive and therefore boring." "I find the repetitiveness leads to an interesting pattern of expectations." A written work, like any other piece of art, cannot be definitively pronounced aesthetically meritorious or not; it is a collective object, the product of the reader as well as the writer.

Yet it is possible to follow Virginia Woolf's route. She advocated "less . . . system and more sympathy."⁷⁰ She noticed that most of the literary critics of her time treated books as so many noxious insects, to be dissected, classified, mounted under glass. For her, however, reading was an instrument of pleasure and learning, a potentially humanizing experience. In other words, even the search for an aesthetic standard leads back to ethics.

It may be objected that feminist literary critics behave as if the most prevalent feminist approaches to literature were new, whereas these have precedents. Tolstoy, Dickens, Dostoyevski--to name but a few--are authors who used their art to propagate their visions of reality and to stimulate change. Then too, especially before 1800, it was "the official creed

⁶⁹Donovan, p. 78.

⁷⁰Bell and Ohmann, p. 50. For an analysis of Woolf's literary criticism, see their entire article.

of authors, critics and public, that the function of the novel was explicitly educational and that its main business was to inculcate morality by example."⁷¹ Even now, Socialist Realism holds to this tenet.

Feminist critics, like all others, react within the context of the events and ideas of the time. As already noted, New Criticism, the dominant school of criticism in Britain and North America for nearly half a century, extols form over content in the autonomous work of art. It denies the importance of seeing literature within a historical framework and of using it as a means of conveying ideas, information, values. Reacting to this, feminist literary critics stress content.

Further, while feminist criticism has not occurred ex nihilo, it differs from previous critical schools in seeking to examine women's realities, and by letting women speak for ourselves.

Feminist critics do not, despite the common quest for viable methodologies for evaluating literature, work within a single area. For example, some search out women's texts which were once popular and are now forgotten; others concentrate on men's recently published works.

In general, however, modern feminist critics are interested in the ways in which women's literature reveals how

⁷¹J.M.S. Tompkins, The Popular Novel in England 1770-1800 (London, 1932), p. 70; as quoted by Fowler, p. 8.

women live and perceive life; the ways in which it both validates the experiences of women and precipitates change; and the ways in which women writers have broken with man-made conventions to forge new, evolving myths.

Further, works are considered in relation to the culture in which they were produced. In the case of women's writings, this is often a female subculture. Many feminist critics also analyze the differences and similarities of various writings published in the same era to determine the extent to which dissonance-intolerance affected their reception.

Feminist approaches to literature are not only unconventional. They cannot peacefully coexist with prevalent critical standards which claim to be objective, universal and objectively applied, and which usually denigrate the content and aesthetic qualities of women's works. Consequently, much feminist criticism begins by disproving the validity of such "objective" standards: for example, it has established that current norms, and not absolute truths, decide a work's popularity. Feminist criticism does not aim to replace men's literature with women's; it does displace male-oriented and supposedly bias-free standards.

It also lays the basis for viable and more objective methodologies for judging literary merit. For example, it calls on critics to disclose values as fully as possible to eliminate pseudo-objectivity. It also calls for women's realities to be appraised, not by man-made definitions of woman's nature, but by women's own self-awareness, and

awareness of the experiences of other women. Hélène Cixous considers writing "the very possibility of change"; feminist literary critics create defensible standards which foster revolutionary writings.

In the concluding chapter, I will evaluate McClung's works with a feminist methodology. A major aim will be to show that her writings, while traditional in form, are frequently highly innovative in content because they are based on her own perceptions.

I will begin, however, by indicating some of the aesthetic characteristics of McClung's writings. These are, after all, the means whereby she presented her view of the world.

III. A Positive Appraisal

Nellie McClung's writings are clear, forceful, insightful, witty--all qualities generally associated with good prose. For over twenty years, her fiction was hailed for its realistic portrayals of prairie life, and for its alternations of pathos and humor. Most present-day critics, on the other hand, disparage McClung's "simple stories of the people she knew so well and so lovingly understood":¹ Carlyle King sneers that "nobody ever suffers long or gets really hurt or says 'damn.'"² Further, pathos is currently out of style. Humor, however, is not. I will therefore begin this positive appraisal of McClung's writings by analyzing her uses of humor.

As earlier established, her humor can be dry, acerbic, scathing, gently self-mocking, trenchant, aphoristic. Veronica Strong-Boag, as noted, compliments McClung for "rising to comedy worthy of Leacock."³ Strong-Boag is right

¹Nellie L. McClung, "You Never Can Tell," p. 166. This quote is from McClung's description of Kate Dawson's writings. Kate is McClung's only fictional alter-ego who is an author.

²King, p. v. King's distaste, in fact, affects his ability to perceive accurately. He derides Pearlie Watson, the shero of three of McClung's novels, for her "humorless zeal" (p. vi). Yet Pearlie, like her creator, both has a sense of humor and uses humor to accomplish her ends.

³Strong-Boag, p. xiv.

in that," when McClung chooses to be, she too is a first-rate humorist. But the comedy of McClung and Leacock have little in common.

For example, each of them wrote a story in which a person tries to open a bank account. Leacock's "My Financial Career"⁴ relies on the comedy of incompetence. His would-be depositor accidentally withdraws all the money he intends to deposit, and so closes the account he is in the process of opening. Aware of having made a fool of himself, he beats a hasty retreat.

In McClung's semi-autobiographical "Banking in London," the butt of the humor is institutionalized absurdity. McClung, who knows that depositing money is the easiest of financial transactions, enters a bank fairly certain of her ability to open an account. She finds out that, in London, she needs references before a bank will accept her money. When she asks the manager why this is so, "It is our rule," he said with finality."⁵ Still, despite her lack of references, she eventually succeeds in her goal--only to discover that the bank is equally reluctant to return money. "Banking in London" does not rise to comedy worthy of Leacock; the humor is--almost--pure McClung.

Her use of humor is typified in an incident she recounts in The Stream Runs Fast. Having bought travel insurance, she

⁴See Stephen Leacock, "My Financial Career," Laugh with Leacock (Toronto: McClelland and Stewart, 1968),

⁵Nellie L. McClung, "Banking in London," All We like Sheep, p. 179.

takes the policy and reads the fine print: though males are covered even for minor injuries, "females are insured against death only" (SRF 111). Once more, it is Nellie against The Rules. This time, as more often happens, there is an "explanation": "'Don't you know,' said Mr. Brown severely, taking off his glasses, as if to let his brain cool, 'that women are much more highly sensitized than men . . . They would think they were hurt when they really were not, and there would be no end of trouble'" (SRF 112). Mr. Brown has not reckoned with Nellie: "But, Mr. Brown, what about the clause relating to the loss of hand or foot? You would not be altogether dependent on the woman's testimony in that, would you? You could check them up--if they were pretending, could you not?" (SRF 113)

McClung's humor operates within self-imposed parameters: its target is not primarily any individual. Rather, her comedy is based on her exposure of the illogicalities of her opponents' position. She sometimes does this directly, as in the above instance. More often, though, she achieves her end through analogies, as in her comparison of anti-suffrage politicians with patriarchal old Mike, both feet in the trough; through allegories, as in her revised parable of the good Samaritan and her fable of the precedent-bound lizards; and/or through anecdotes, as in her account of the father with undarned socks, ingrown toe-nails, six wailing children and a wife who is out voting. In all cases, however, her humor draws on her intelligence: she clearly and vigorously presents frequently irrefutable arguments.

McClung's humor, further unlike Leacock's, is constructive. She usually proposes alternatives to the status quo: making fun of the insurance company's unfair treatment of women is clearly not McClung's only aim in describing her run-in with Mr. Brown. Her humor is meant to encourage change by bringing wrongs to people's attention.

Leacock's is not. His story does not indicate how the inept narrator is ever to learn how to open a bank account. Nor is Leacock concerned with raising people's awareness of human incompetence. A primary difference between Leacock's humor and McClung's is that his aims primarily to entertain!

Yet another difference is that Leacock's humor can be classified as timeless--"permanently good and true,"⁶ in George Henry Lewes' words--if we assume that embarrassing ineptitude will exist throughout eternity. Much of McClung's wit is directed at specific practices which, one hopes, will be abolished: in other words, it aims to eliminate its target and so perhaps render itself defunct.

Finally, Leacock is first and foremost a humorist, and McClung is not. In "Jane Brown," the six children are faced with the grief "that only comes when a mother dies."⁷ In Painted Fires, Minnie's letter from her mother, with its many loving words and row of kisses, is not meant simply to amuse. After reading Sowing Seeds in Danny, E.S. Caswell, McClung's first editor, wrote her that "I don't know when a story moved me

⁶Lewes, p. 173.

⁷Nellie L. McClung, "Jane Brown," p. 14.

more than did your closing chapters. . . . those are wonderful chapters, there is a deep well of pathos in them. And yet through my tears I found myself bursting into a chuckle over some of your inimitable touches of humor."⁸ McClung does not just happen to combine pathos and humor: they reinforce each other. Most of all, pathos helps emotionally convince readers of the justice of McClung's causes.

In Sowing Seeds in Danny, for example, McClung ridicules the Motherwells' money-grubbing mentality. Their son early learned that

money! it was the greatest thing in the world. He had been taught to chase after it--to grasp it--then hide it, and then chase again after more. His father put money in the bank every year, and never saw it again. When money was banked it had fulfilled its highest mission. Then they drew that wonderful thing called interest, money without work--and banked it--Oh, it was a great game.⁹

But McClung does not stop at mockery. The Motherwells' English servant dies, partly from typhoid and homesickness, but more because she has been overworked and underpraised by her greedy employers. And Polly Bragg's death is not given as just another cold, hard fact. Instead, Pearlie Watson does her best for Polly: when Polly is dying in the hospital, Pearlie sends her the only connection to Polly's faraway home, the flowers Polly had planted before falling ill:

Polly's eyes were burning with delirium and her lips babbled meaninglessly.

⁸E.S. Caswell, letter to Nellie L. McClung, 26 April 1906, McClung papers; as quoted by Savage, p. 56.

⁹Nellie L. McClung, Sowing Seeds in Danny, p. 225.

The nurse held the poppies over her.

Her arms reached out caressingly.

"Oh, miss!" she cried, her mind coming back from the shadows. "They have come at last, the darlin's, the sweethearts, the loves, the beauties." She held them in a close embrace. . . . "It's like 'avin' my mother's 'and, miss, it is," she murmured softly. "Ye wouldn't mind the dark if ye 'ad yer mother's 'and, would ye, miss?"¹⁰

Polly's employers come to regret their hard-heartedness.. But the pathos is directed primarily at McClung's readers-- especially those who tend to be miserly and/or hard on their hired help.

It can be argued that, in the case I have just cited, the pathos glosses over the physical agony of death. But the main basis of the current critical¹¹ abhorrence of pathos is rooted in what is innate to pathos: its appeal to pity, compassion, tenderness, to "weak" and "feminine" emotions. After all, humor is rarely derided for distorting reality, though it frequently patently does so.

Humor plays a prominent part in McClung's writings, as does pathos, though the latter is found more frequently in her fiction. But each of these is an ingredient. McClung's favorite products were novels and stories "all of the class that magazine editors call 'homely, heart-interest stuff,' not deep or clever or problematical--the commonplace doings of common people--but it found an entrance into the heart of men

¹⁰Ibid., p. 179.

¹¹Though many reviewers feel called upon to apologize for any film or book that may cause anyone to shed a tear, many "tear-jerkers" are tremendously popular--as is, for example, the science fiction film E.T.

and women."¹² Further, she cared that, in her fiction, "there was no art in the telling, only a sweet naturalness and an apparent [i.e., obvious] honesty."¹³ She created the products she intended.

Her use of pathos and her preference for simple stories about everyday people cannot be condemned by aesthetic criteria. At most, one can claim that pathos is ethically indefensible because it may cause the heart to overrule the head. However, why should we assume that it is better to evaluate a situation "objectively"--that is, without being emotionally involved? For example, feminism is concerned with the integration of emotional and intellectual responses. McClung's aim is the same; among her tools for achieving it are humor and pathos.

As for her statements that "there was no art in the telling" and, in reference to her own works, "I have never worried about my art" (SRF 69)--these are demonstrable inaccuracies. McClung delighted in appearing entirely artless, just one of the common folk: she enjoyed recording that people who met her did not think she looked like a writer. There was clearly something superior, in her opinion, in not moving out of the ordinary and run-of-the-mill class. Yet, especially in her twenties, McClung analyzed works to see how writers achieved their effects, and reread her

¹²Nellie L. McClung, "You Never Can Tell," pp. 166-67.

¹³Ibid., p. 166.

composition texts for the examples of good prose." Further, her "artlessness" only appeared as such while the literary conventions she adhered to were widely accepted. When she began writing, her content was applauded for its realism; it was not generally perceived as reality filtered through, and reshaped in accordance with, many of the accepted standards of her day.

Those standards, however, are no longer unnoticeable. For example, McClung frequently ends at a happy moment--such as when "it was clearing in the West!" (CW 378) or when "the sun came over the treetops behind us, and fell on the glistening spray, and I saw the rainbow."¹⁴ Now critics like Carlyle King ridicule the regularity with which happy endings occur in her fiction. But such endings are as much staples of the stories of McClung's time, as song and dance routines are part of Hollywood musicals. In other words, her writings are currently derided for their artfulness, and for their appeal to the widely devalued "feminine" emotions.

Even her humor, deft and cogent, well-planned and well-paced, is not generally praised. Some types of humor are widely appreciated. But the New Critics, for example, do not delight in humor which aims to effect change. Once more, McClung does not conform to the literary conventions most prevalent today.

McClung's writings are aesthetically successful by the

¹⁴ Nellie L. McClung, "The Rainbow," Be Good to Yourself, p. 83.

standards of her time, which are in large part her own criteria. However, as previously noted, she herself cared to produce, not art for art's sake, but ethical and influential literature. The feminist literary methodology delineated in the previous chapter is only peripherally concerned with form: feminist critics, like McClung, tend to be more interested in content. In the second part of this chapter, McClung's writings will be measured against her own goals, and evaluated by the feminist methodology. The aim is to show that, not only do her works have ethical merit, but they form a significant contribution to women's literature.

I will begin by acknowledging her limitations. She could not reveal more than she knew; and she was unaware that women's nature might not be as nurturing as generally believed in her society. Further, she did not care to reveal personal problems. Her fiction never deals with her conflict of interest between career and motherhood. The young Nellie wanted to become a cowboy and a sweet-young-thing; her sheros have no similar two-way pulls. Nor does McClung ever mention any resentment she might have felt, relocating for Wes's sake, though the move to Edmonton cost her, most likely, the post of Minister of Education, and the subsequent move to Calgary cost her her seat in the Alberta government.

It is disputable whether guarding her privacy is a limitation. She had definite weaknesses, as previously established, as a thinker. She tended to oversimplify and she occasionally distorted; for example, Nellie was always

ready to affirm the impeccable state of Wes's socks; Helmi, on the other hand, is such a flawless shero that, while her husband is off prospecting, she nurses an injured man in her home--unperturbed by the gossip this will arouse. In addition, though racially tolerant, McClung's tolerance is mixed with intolerance: she felt that true tolerance is possible only in the huge spaces of the undeveloped prairies.¹⁵

McClung discarded as little as possible. She was content with the literary forms she grew up with; she simply wished to eliminate the deficiencies, as she saw them, of popular fiction. Yet her acceptance of many literary conventions sometimes causes her to present a simplified or standardized view of reality. Clearing in the West, which recounts her own youth, ends with marriage and not, for example, the publication of Nellie's first book or the birth of her first child.

Perhaps McClung's most persistent limitation is her unawareness of the many ways in which she was a reflection of her society. True, as she believed, she rebelled against some prevalent preconceptions. But she saw her departures from accepted ideology so clearly that she was frequently blind to the extent of her conformity.¹⁶

¹⁵This may be true for her kind of tolerance, in which people do not discard their old beliefs. In "The Way of the West," when an Orangeman celebrates a past cruelty to the Irish, even the Irish join in the picnic. McClung applauds the harmony people enjoy when circumstances make each individual precious.

¹⁶Present-day critics may be able to benefit from McClung's example: they/we should strive to be as aware as possible that some of our assumptions seem so self-evidently true as to pass unquestioned, but will subsequently be glaringly obvious as preconceptions.

Nellie McClung would have liked to call the second volume of her autobiography, "Without Regret." She was too honest with herself to do so: "I can see too many places where I could have been more obedient to the heavenly vision, for a vision I surely had for the creation of a better world" (SRF xiii). Similarly, I cannot end with unqualified praise for McClung's literary accomplishments: her writings convey her flawed perceptions. However, in the phrase of Canadian scholar Patricia Morley, Nellie's writings nevertheless form a significant part of the Canadian "literature of affirmation."¹⁷

Like most present-day feminist critics, McClung was aware that most depictions of women are man-made: "It is a very poor preacher or lecturer who has not a lengthy discourse on 'Woman's True Place.' It is a very poor platform performer who cannot take the stand and show women exactly where they err" (TLT 70). She realized that she did not know Helen's version of the Trojan war or women's role in early Christianity: all the extant records are by men who are, in general, notorious for their failures to depict women fairly.

McClung's proposed remedy for this is the one espoused by feminist critics. They call for a woman-made literature which shows how women live and perceive life. McClung likewise wanted to affirm women's viewpoints: women should speak for ourselves. Her greatest desire was to reveal the people she knew best to themselves; these people tended to be women.

¹⁷ Patricia Morley, "Survival, Affirmation, and Joy," Lakehead University Review, VII, 1 (Summer 1974), p. 30.

Her fiction, like the woman-written works discussed by feminist critic Nancy Miller, chafes against unsatisfactory literary conventions. Traditionally, melodrama takes itself very seriously; McClung makes fun of some aspects. In Clearing in the West, the young Nellie pines--for half a day. Traditionally as well, melodrama has a heroine who screams when she sees a mouse, and a hero who obligingly kills the mouse. McClung's shero, faced with a mouse, would either tame it or, more likely, competently sweep it out of the house.

McClung's ~~writes~~ ^{writes}, in fact, are her contribution to the woman's eye view of the world. In story after essay, she writes for and of women, some sheros with her own energy and strength of character, and some heroines who tend to be "innocent" and dependent, both financially and emotionally.

Virginia and her mother from The Stream Runs Fast epitomize the shero and the heroine:

Virginia and her mother were as far apart as two women could be. The mother, a frail looking little shell, made an appeal to one's pity. Her hands fluttered as she talked and her thin lips quivered . . . "I was married very young, and I knew nothing. I was a very innocent young girl. Girls were innocent then."

Virginia reached over and patted her mother's thin hands. Her own were strong and brown. The two hands told volumes.

"You learned everything the hard way, mother," Virginia said soothingly. (SRF 79-80)

In McClung's universe, the heroine, her courage sapped by her training, is rarely carried off to a conventional "happily ever after." But the shero, who in other popular fiction might crop up as the heroine's less attractive chum, is able to win out and to help heroines. This re-organization of who's

who is one of McClung's greatest strengths.

Because McClung felt that the future had to be imagined before it could be realized, her stories are, in part, not only presentations of her reality, but foreshadowings of possible futures. In Painted Fires, Helmi is always able to physically defend herself. In the Watson trilogy, Pearlle is consistently able to help those in need. Both Pearlle and Helmi are, on occasion, larger than life.

McClung does not, however, show how women live or should live only through her female characters. Her essays analyze women's status. They destroy the myths that women rest on pedestals protected from all injury. A woman's life is less valued than a piece of livestock; women can be ruined because their husbands drink; men are allowed to throw their wives out of the family home--these are some of the realities she points out. As previously noted, she also reiterates and thus reinforces her views.

McClung's version of "Woman's True Place"--both as it is and as she feels it should be--disputes most past pronouncements on women, and prevalent assumptions regarding the marvellous lot of conforming women. By doubting preconceptions, she finds that

we have a great blank book here with leather bindings and gold edges, and now our care should be that we write in it worthily. We have no precedents to guide us, and that is a glorious thing, for precedents, like other guides, are disposed to grow tyrannical, and refuse to let us do anything on our own initiative. (TLT 96)

McClung is writing of Canada. But her words also describe her

hope that women will create our own role models.

Another strength is her unwillingness to rank which words should be recorded and remembered:

Listening to a radio speaker today I hear that in the art of sculpture only the principal lines must be shown. . . . All minor folds and wrinkles must be smoothed out. Perhaps this applies to literature also, but who is able to choose and say: "This is a primary fold and therefore must be left in, but this is a secondary fold and therefore we will rub it out"? What I am writing now may be a minor fold in life's drapery, but it came flooding in upon me.

(SRF 191)

McClung recounted her political battles and her pleasure in a new automatic pea-sheller, her meetings with political and religious leaders and what she wore at the meetings. She satirized some of the conventions of melodrama and yet used those she liked. McClung tailored what she recounted less to prevalent literary theories about what mattered in art, and more to her own interests and perceptions.

Most present-day feminist critics are concerned not solely with the ways in which women's literature reveals women's lives, but also with the ways in which women writers have broken with man-made conventions and have created different myths. As noted, McClung was one of the early-twentieth-century authors whose central character is usually a shero, not a female hero and also not an earth goddess. The shero's destiny is not to nurture men. Instead, she is helpful to other women, has her own interests, and loves and is loved by a man who does not take up all her time and attention. McClung forges myths rather than perpetuates them. Within a feminist literary heritage, the shero is a pattern of strength and an image of

hope.

The creation of the possibility of change is, according to feminist critics, another of the major roles of feminist literature. By leaving a record of her present, McClung aimed to stop women from having to learn the hard way--the way of Virginia's mother. By giving voice to women's realities, McClung both validated the experiences of women--the first writer to do so for many of her readers--and precipitated pro-feminist changes. The realities she describes, such as the lot of the farmer's wife in "Jane Brown," needed to be reformed. By publicizing them, McClung helped bring the need for improved conditions for women to public attention.

The extent of the effectiveness of McClung's writings cannot be exactly determined. However, the Mock Parliament was a major means of arousing pro-suffrage sentiment. The essays from In Times like These are versions of her campaign speeches which raised public awareness of the unjust situation of women. In her fiction, she provides role models for aspiring sheros, affirmation for women who are already courageous, caring, and self-reliant--and a little consciousness raising for readers who accept all the conventions of popular fiction.

Yet, as established, humans tend to prefer what we know best: a writer is able to achieve and maintain popularity only through works that largely conform to prevalent literary conventions. As a result, bestsellers rarely deviate much from the formula for bestsellers of that genre.

A feminist author starts by including some dissonant content. Consequently, shifts in what is cognitively consonant and dissonant have a disproportionately high effect on evaluations of McClung's writings, as on other feminist fiction and non-fiction.

The first hazard faced by feminist works is the difficulty of finding a publisher. McClung circumvented this danger because, far from breaking with most literary conventions, she combined her frequently unconventional ideas with the most traditional of forms. Despite her shero and her readily apparent feminism, McClung gave her readers much of what they were used to: she employed the very popular format of melodrama. Her fiction was taken seriously by her intended audience.

But even while her books were still widely read, the critics were hailing the superiority of a newer literary style which they chose to call "realism." They frequently denigrated McClung's writings for not meeting New Critical stylistic standards; Yet judging McClung's writings without reference to the literary conventions of her time, and the historical and cultural conditions which she addressed, is akin to analyzing cars in terms of their upholstery, and using a 1982 standard to measure 1930 fabrics.

As time passed, McClung's ideas as well as her format became increasingly dissonant. She enjoyed her largest popularity during the early decades of the twentieth century, when feminism was a popular issue and feminist writings had a growing market. After women obtained the right to vote, the

feminist market became fragmented. Many women failed to realize that the right to vote was only one of the things we had to win to achieve equality of rights. McClung's topics became increasingly less topical. By the time of her death in 1951, her work had become doubly dissonant, stylistically and thematically "old-fashioned."

On her own terms, as well as by the standards of most present-day feminist literary critics, Nellie was an excellent author who espoused "survival, affirmation, and joy."¹⁸ Though some readers may not concur with her messages, nor delight in her media, casual dismissals of her work are unjust. Literary merit has nothing to do with why most of her writings are out of print.

McClung's writings, all sixteen books, belong to the passionate activism of her life and work. As we have seen, she wrote with wit, intelligence, conviction, pathos and humor. In a word, she wrote with skill and considerable talent. Let us hope that, with currently changing canons in criticism and taste, the rehabilitation of Nellie L. McClung, writer and reformer, has begun.

Bibliography

Primary Sources

- McClung, Nellie L. Sowing Seeds in Danny. Toronto: Thomas Allen, 1965 (1908).
- _____. The Second Chance. Toronto: William Briggs, 1910.
- _____. The Black Creek Stopping-house and Other Stories. Toronto: Thomas Allen, 1912.
- _____. In Times like These. Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1980 (1915).
- _____. The Next of Kin. Toronto: Thomas Allen, 1917.
- _____. Three Times and Out. Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1918.
- _____. Purple Springs. Toronto: Thomas Allen, 1921.
- _____. When Christmas Crossed "The Peace." Toronto: Thomas Allen, 1923.
- _____. Painted Fires. Toronto: Thomas Allen, 1925.
- _____. All We like Sheep and Other Stories. Toronto: Thomas Allen, 1926.
- _____. Be Good to Yourself. Toronto: Thomas Allen, 1931.
- _____. Flowers for the Living. Toronto: Thomas Allen, 1931.
- _____. Clearing in the West. Toronto: Thomas Allen, 1976 (1935).
- _____. Leaves from Lantern Lane. Toronto: Thomas Allen, 1936.
- _____. More Leaves from Lantern Lane. Toronto: Thomas Allen, 1937.
- _____. Before They Call... Toronto: Board of Home Missions, United Church of Canada, 1937.
- _____. The Stream Runs Fast. Toronto: Thomas Allen, 1945.

Secondary Sources

- Baird, Irene. Waste Heritage. Toronto: MacMillan of Canada, 1973 (1939).
- Birney, Earle. Spreading Time: Remarks on Canadian Writing and Writers. Book I: 1904-1949. Montreal: Véhicule Press, 1980.
- Chicago, Judy. The Dinner Party: A Symbol of Our Heritage. New York: Anchor Press, 1979.
- Cleverdon, Catherine L. The Woman Suffrage Movement in Canada. Introduction by Ramsay Cook. Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1978 (1950).
- Cixous, Hélène. "The Laugh of the Medusa." Signs, I, 4 (Summer, 1976).
- Crews, Frederick C. The Pooh Perplex. New York: E.P. Dutton, 1963.
- Daiches, David. Critical Approaches to Literature. Englewood Cliffs: Prentice Hall, 1956.
- Daly, Mary. Beyond God The Father: Toward a Philosophy of Women's Liberation. Boston: Beacon Press, 1973.
- _____. Gyn/Ecology: The Metaethics of Radical Feminism. Boston: Beacon Press, 1978.
- Denham, Robert D. Northrop Frye and Critical Method. University Park: Pennsylvania State University Press, 1978.
- Donovan, Josephine, editor. Feminist Literary Criticism: Explorations in Theory. (Lexington: The University Press of Kentucky, 1975).
- Eichler, Margrit. "Sociology of Feminist Research in Canada," Signs, III, 2 (Winter 1977).
- Fischer, Christiane, ed. Let Them Speak for Themselves: Women in the American West, 1849-1900. New York: E.P. Dutton, 1978.

- Fowler, Marian. The Embroidered Tent: Five Gentlewomen in Early Canada. Toronto: House of Anansi Press, 1982.
- Frye, Northrop. Anatomy of Criticism. Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1957.
- Gilman, Charlotte Perkins. The Home: Its Work and Influence. Introduction by William L. O'Neill. Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1972 (1903).
- Gomme, Andor. Attitudes to Criticism. Preface by Harry T. Moore. Carbondale: Southern Illinois University Press, 1966.
- Gornick, Vivian & Barbara K. Noran, eds. Woman in Sexist Society: Studies in Power & Powerlessness. New York: Basic Books, 1972.
- Goulianos, Joan, ed. by a Woman writt. Baltimore: Penguin Books, 1974.
- Gray, James H. Red Lights on the Prairies. Scarborough: The New American Library of Canada, 1971.
- Gross, Laila, ed. An Introduction to Literary Criticism. Edited, selected and with introductions by Laila Gross. New York: Capricorn Books, 1972.
- Harris, Ann Sutherland and Linda Nochlin. Women Artists: 1550-1950. Toronto: Random House, 1972.
- Hartman, Mary and Lois W. Banner, eds. Clio's Consciousness Raised: New Perspectives on the History of Women. New York: Harper Colophon Books, 1974.
- Hedenstrom, Joanna. "Puzzled Patriarchs and Free Women: Patterns in the Canadian Novel," Atlantis, IV, 1 (Autumn 1978).
- Herring, Frances E. Ena. London: Francis Griffiths, 1913.
- _____. Nan and Other Pioneer Women of the West. London: Francis Griffiths, 1913.
- Hess, Thomas B. and Elizabeth C. Baker, eds. Art and Sexual Politics. New York: Collier Books, 1975.
- Hiatt, Mary. The Way Women Write. New York: Teachers College Press, 1977.
- Hughes, Patricia. "Toward the Development of Feminist Theory," Atlantis, VI, 1 (Fall 1980).

- Hunt, Vilma R. "Reproduction and Work," Signs, I, 2 (Winter 1975).
- Jackel, Susan. "Prairie Wife: Female Characterization in Canadian Prairie Fiction." Unpublished M.A. thesis, University of Toronto, 1966.
- Jacobson, Helga E. "Women's Perspectives in Research," Atlantis, IV, 2 (Spring 1979).
- Janeway, Elizabeth. "On the Power of the Weak," Signs, I, 1 (Autumn 1975).
- Kay, Karyn and Gerald Peary, eds. Women and the Cinema. New York: E.P. Dutton, 1977.
- Kealey, Linda, ed. A Not Unreasonable Claim: Women and Reform in Canada, 1880s-1920s. Toronto: Women's Educational Press, 1979.
- Kelly-Godal, Joan. "The Social Relation of the Sexes: Methodological Implications of Women's History," Signs, I, 4 (Summer 1976).
- Laurence, Margaret. "Ivory Tower or Grass Roots?: The Novelist as Socio-Political Being," A Political Art. Essays and Images in Honour of George Woodcock. Ed W H. New. Vancouver: McClelland and Stewart, 1978.
- Lips, Hilary M. "Women and Power: Psychology's Search for New Directions," Atlantis, V, 1 (Fall 1979).
- Livesay, Dorothy. Beginnings, A Winnipeg Childhood. Toronto: New Press, 1973.
- Loesel-Wieland-Engelmann, Berta. "Feminist Repercussions of a Literary Research Project," Atlantis, VI, 1 (Autumn 1980).
- Logan, J.D. and Donald G. French. Highways of Canadian Literature. Toronto: McClelland and Stewart, 1924.
- Macbeth, Madge. The Land of Afternoon. Ottawa: Graphic Publishers, 1924.
- McClung, Mark. "Portrait of My Mother," transcript of a speech, available from Dr. Margret Andersen, Department of Languages, University of Guelph, Guelph, Ontario.
- McCullen, M.J.G. Nellie L. McClung. Winnipeg: Manitoba Travel and Conventions Association, 1965.

- Miller, Nancy K. "Female Sexuality and Narrative Structure in La Nouvelle Héloïse and Les Liasons dangereuses," Signs, I, 3 (Spring 1976).
- _____. "Emphasis Added: Plots and Plausibilities in Women's Fiction," PMLA, XCIV, 1 (January 1981).
- Millet, Kate. Sexual Politics. New York: Ballantine Books, 1978.
- Montgomery, Lucy Maud. "A Girl's Place at Dalhousie College (1898)," Atlantis, V, 1 (Autumn 1979).
- _____. Anne of Green Gables. New York: Bantam Books, 1981 (1908).
- _____. Emily Climbs. Toronto: McClelland and Stewart, 1980 (1924).
- Moodie, Susanna. Roughing it in the Bush. Introduction by Carl F. Klinck. Toronto: McClelland and Stewart, 1970.
- Morley, Patricia. "Survival, Affirmation, and Joy," Lakehead University Review, VII, 1 (Summer 1974).
- _____. "Artist at Play: Wiseman's Theory of Creativity," Atlantis, VI, 1 (Autumn 1980).
- Murphy, Emily Ferguson. Janey Canuck in the West. Toronto: McClelland and Stewart, 1975 (1910).
- Olsen, Tillie. Silences. New York: Delacourte Press, 1978.
- Orenstein, Gloria Feman. "Art History," Signs, I, 2 (Winter 1975).
- Ostenso, Martha. Wild Geese. Toronto: McClelland and Stewart, 1971 (1925).
- Petersen, Karen and J.J. Wilson. Women Artists: Recognition and Reappraisal from the Early Middle Ages to the Twentieth Century. New York: Harper Colophon Books, 1976.
- Rasmussen, Linda, Lorna Rasmussen, Candace Savage and Anne Wheeler, researchers and compilers. A Harvest Yet to Reap: A History of Prairie Women. Introductory essays by Candace Savage. Toronto: The Women's Press, 1976.
- Rich, Adrienne. Of Woman Born: Motherhood as Experience and Institution. New York: Bantam Books, 1977.
- _____. On Lies, Secrets, and Silence. New York: W.W. Norton, 1979.

- Roberts, Joan I., ed. Beyond Intellectual Sexism: A New Woman, a New Reality. University Park: Pennsylvania State University Press, 1976.
- Rogers, Grace McLeod. Stories of the Land of Evangeline. Toronto: McClelland and Stewart, 1923.
- Rossi, Alice S., ed. The Feminist Papers. Edited and with introductory essays by Alice S. Rossi. New York: Bantam Books, 1978.
- Savage, Candace. Our Nell. Saskatoon: Western Producer Prairie Books, 1979.
- Schlissel, Lillian, ed. Women's Diaries of the Westward Journey. New York: Schocken, 1981.
- Shields, Carol. "Three Canadian Women: Fiction or Autobiography?" Atlantis, IV, 1 (Autumn 1978).
- Showalter, Elaine, ed. Women's Liberation and Literature. New York: Harcourt Brace Jovanovick, 1971.
- _____. These Modern Women: Autobiographical Essays from the Twenties. Old Westbury: The Feminist Press, 1978.
- Smith-Rosenberg, Carroll. "The Female World of Love and Ritual: Relations between Women in Nineteenth-Century America." Signs, I, 1 (Autumn 1975).
- Stallman, Robert Wooster, ed. Critiques and Essays in Criticism. New York: Ronald Press, 1949.
- Stead, Robert J.C. Grain. Toronto: McClelland and Stewart, NLC #36, 1966 (1926).
- Stevenson, Lionel. Appraisals of Canadian Literature. Toronto: MacMillan, 1926.
- Stratton, Joanna L. Pioneer Women: Voices from the Kansas Frontier. New York: Simon & Schuster, 1980.
- Strong-Boag, Veronica. "Cousin Cinderella: a guide to historical literature pertaining to Canadian women." Women in Canada. Ed. Marylee Stephenson. Don Mills: General Publishing, 1977.
- Thomas, Clara. "Heroism, Feminism and Humanism: Anna Jameson to Margaret Laurence," Atlantis, IV, 1 (Autumn 1978).
- Trilling, Lionel. The Liberal Imagination: Essays on Literature and Society. New York: Anchor Books, 1953.

- Trofimenkoff, Susan Mann and Alison Prentice, eds. The Neglected Majority: Essays in Canadian Women's History. Toronto: McClelland and Stewart, 1978.
- Verkruysse, Patricia Lousie. "Small Legacy of Truth: The Novels of Nellie McClung." Unpublished M.A. thesis, University of New Brunswick, 1975.
- Vetterling-Braggin, Mary, Frederick A. Elliston and Jane English, eds. Feminism and Philosophy. Totowa: Littlefield, Adams, 1977.
- Watson, Barbara Bellow, "On Power and the Literary Text," Signs, I, 1 (Autumn 1975).
- Weaver, Emily P. The Only Girl. Toronto: MacMillan, 1925.
- West, Jr., Ray B., ed. Essays on Modern Literary Criticism. New York: Holt, Rinehart and Winston, 1952.
- Whitridge, Margaret. "The Distaff Side of the Confederation Group: Women's Contribution to Early Nationalist Canadian Literature," Atlantis, IV, 1 (Autumn 1978).
- Wiseman, Adele. Old Woman at Play. Toronto: Clarke, Irwin, 1978.
- Woodcock, George. "The Human Elements: Margaret Laurence's Fiction," The Human Elements, ed. Helwig. Ottawa: Oberon Press, 1978.
- Woolf, Virginia. A Room of One's Own. Harmondsworth: Penguin Books, 1973 (1928).
- _____. Three Guineas. Harmondsworth: Penguin Books, 1979 (1938).