

*Aspiring Women, Short Stories by Canadian Women, 1880-1900, and Pioneering Women, Short Stories by Canadian Women, Beginnings to 1880.* Edited by Lorraine McMullen and Sandra Campbell. Ottawa: University of Ottawa Press, 1993.

Joanna Dean

Volume 24, Number 1, October 1995

URI: <https://id.erudit.org/iderudit/1019239ar>

DOI: <https://doi.org/10.7202/1019239ar>

[See table of contents](#)

Publisher(s)

Urban History Review / Revue d'histoire urbaine

ISSN

0703-0428 (print)

1918-5138 (digital)

[Explore this journal](#)

Cite this review

Dean, J. (1995). Review of [*Aspiring Women, Short Stories by Canadian Women, 1880-1900, and Pioneering Women, Short Stories by Canadian Women, Beginnings to 1880.* Edited by Lorraine McMullen and Sandra Campbell. Ottawa: University of Ottawa Press, 1993.] *Urban History Review / Revue d'histoire urbaine*, 24(1), 64–65. <https://doi.org/10.7202/1019239ar>

from Thornton's published memoir, or Starr Fairweather's unpublished autobiography—key sources for this book that are never cited. In a quick sampling of the book, I found other uncited quotations that did not appear to be from either of these sources. Since I assume endnotes are only of interest to "specialists," "specialists" would appreciate consistency in and sensible guidelines for citations.

Donald MacKay concludes his book by speculating that in 70 years "a national railway authority will have replaced both CN and the CPR to haul . . . bulk freight." (p. 303) Recent events in the corporate boardrooms of the two railways suggest that such a railway authority may be in the making. Whether that authority will be private or public, and how "public service" and "private interest" can be reconciled, will undoubtedly remain as contentious as they have been during the 70-year history of Canadian National outlined in *The People's Railway*.

Ken Cruikshank, History,  
McMaster University

**Aspiring Women, Short Stories by Canadian Women, 1880–1900, and Pioneering Women, Short Stories by Canadian Women, Beginnings to 1880. Edited by Lorraine McMullen and Sandra Campbell. Ottawa: University of Ottawa Press, 1993.**

"Let no one who may read this simple tale," warned Harriet Vaughan Cheney, at the close of "The Emigrants" (1850), "suppose it is entirely a fiction of the imagination." Cheney's work owes more to close observation of the city around her than to any flights of fancy. Her "simple tale" provides Canadian historians with a window on a world that we have imagined in other ways, an opportunity to

confirm and correct our assumptions about the past.

With a third companion volume, *New Women: Short Stories by Canadian Women, 1900–1920*, published earlier, these anthologies take us from "the beginnings" to the 1920s, through the critical and observant eyes of Canadian women writers. The volumes are prefaced with an overview of the period, and each author is introduced by a valuable biographical sketch and bibliography.

The stories are useful for historians because, as editors Lorraine McMullen and Sandra Campbell note, the lines between fiction and nonfiction were blurred. Diaries and letters, the primary material of history, are now analysed by literary critics as literary forms, constructions that mould a life to a particular genre. Conversely, stories like these often had a documentary nature.

Early Canadian fiction is particularly rich for historians. The need of Canadian writers to, as the editors put it, "imaginatively occupy" the new country led many of them to adopt descriptive forms of literature such as the sketch, a short piece focused on a single closely-described incident. Catharine Parr Traill's sketch—"The Bereavement" (1846), describes the death of an infant with a realism in which the conventions of sentimental fiction were only superimposed upon her close observations of the lives of pioneer women.

The documentary quality of the stories also reflects the fact that many of the writers were writing for a trans-Atlantic audience that was unfamiliar with, and intrigued by, life in Canada. Susanna Moodie's description of the rigours of a trip through the bush, "The Walk to Dummer" (1847), is aimed at such an urban audience, but serves equally to acquaint

modern-day readers with the material realities of early settlers. "It would be vain to attempt giving any description of this tangled maze of closely interwoven cedars, fallen trees, and loose scattered masses of rock," she writes, and then proceeds to describe the bush in a long and detailed paragraph.

Perhaps more important than the material realities are the opportunities these stories offer for the historian to understand the mental outlook of an earlier period. Harriet Vaughan Cheney's story is imbued with the Christian benevolence that underlay much nineteenth-century philanthropy. Our very antipathy to her sanctimonious depiction of the grateful poor, alerts us to the distances between her world and ours.

Urban historians will be interested in the implicit rejection of the city in most of the stories. Eden is placed in a country garden, juxtaposed to urban artificiality and stress, in Ethelwyn Wetherald's "How the Modern Eve Entered Eden" (1882). Most of the stories take place in the settled countryside, and even urban figures are depicted at their country estates. This bucolic bliss is bounded by the urban misery of Cheney's "The Emigrants," as well as the rough wilderness depicted in stories by settlers like Moodie, Traill, and westerner Frances E. Herring.

The stories also provide some insight into contemporary reactions to the great historical events. Annie Fowler Rothwell's piece, "How It Looked at Home: A Story of '85," (1893) gives us the Riel Rebellion from the perspective of a fiancée left at home.

Some of the stories reveal how slowly our outlook has changed. Pauline Johnson's "A Red Girl's Reasoning" (1893), and Catherine E. Simpson Hays' "An Episode at Clarke's Crossing" (1895), are fascinat-

ing studies of cultural conflict through relationships between a native woman and a white man. Johnson's heroine asks, when her husband questions the validity of her parents' native marriage, "Why should I recognise the rites of your nation when you do not acknowledge the rites of mine?"

In addition to revealing popular attitudes, the stories also provide insight into the women who wrote them. Sara Ann Curzon's mocking description of the stultifying atmosphere of a girls' boarding school provides insight into her work for women's rights. Agnes Maule Machar's description of a young girl's religious faith sheds light on her own motivations as a social reformer.

McMullen and Campbell tell us that the stories are mined from rich sources in nineteenth-century magazines and journals. The selections are well chosen. Many forgotten writers are given belated recognition, and well-known authors are represented by obscure works. Fans of poet Isabella Valancy Crawford, in particular, will be grateful for the publication of "A Rose in His Grace" from a holograph manuscript.

The retrieval of the stories, however, raises an important question: How were the writers chosen, and further, How were the individual stories selected from the range available? The editors do not tell us, and the reader is left with questions. Were these the most popular authors of the period, or are they those authors who most appeal to us today? Is the realism and critical stance of many of the writers typical of Canadian writers, or have the editors chosen exceptions from a pool of sentimental fiction? Who and what was left out?

Feminist critics of the literary canon have established that the selection of an an-

thology is a process fraught with questions of power. While there is no question that the editors have wielded their editorial scissors with intelligence and care, it would have been useful if they had made their choices more explicit.

The biographical and historical background to the stories is provided by a series of excellent biographical sketches. By setting the stories into the context of the lives of the writers, the editors have ensured that we are continually reminded of the intersections between the literature and the life of the nineteenth century. They have provided a fascinating introduction to the writers, their work, and their world.

Joanna Dean, Department of History,  
Carleton University

**Turner, Larry. *Ernestown: Rural Spaces, Urban Places: Odessa, Ontario: Corporation of the Township of Ernestown, 1993. Pp. 283. Bibliographical references, index, and black and white photographs. Can\$47.50 Hard.***

In my experience, a municipality usually takes one of two approaches when it decides to produce a local history. Either it relies on the services of one or a number of local citizens, or it turns to a professional purveyor of local histories. The first method can result in a couple of dozen poorly photocopied pages of questionable history or a truly fine effort such as William Patterson's *Lilacs and Limestone*, which documents the history of Pittsburgh Township. So-called "professionally" produced histories are usually more attractively packaged than the local efforts, but they can leave much to be desired as well. In fact, as history, they can turn out to be even worse than many of the poorest amateur efforts, which, at

their very worst, do give one something of the unique flavour of the locality. There are, however, very competent historians who have made a business out of producing local histories. Larry Turner is one, and his book *Ernestown: rural places, urban spaces*, is a good example of his work.

Turner understands that history, especially writing this kind of history, is both a science and an art. One must be objective, of course, and create a measured account of the municipality. After all, one must be able to face fellow historians with a clear conscience. But if one veers too close to the fashion of some of the more "advanced" forms of historical erudition, he or she is going to lose an intended audience.

In *Ernestown*, Larry Turner is very careful to provide his readers with the setting for his history. The first chapter, "Ernestown: Cultural Landscape," describes the geography, economics, and population that have dominated the township from the earliest Loyalist settlement in 1784 to the present. This is not a long chapter, and is interspaced with many photographs that help to illustrate the points Turner is making. Situated at the beginning, it is more likely to catch the attention of the casual reader than if it were placed further into the book. Once his setting has been established, Turner turns to more specific aspects. Generally, he follows a chronological pattern, from the earliest history to the most recent. Chapter 2 describes the aboriginal populations, chapter 3 the Loyalist populations, and so on to the twentieth century.

But the author knows that much of his audience is not likely to follow the book straight through from beginning to end. Nor is this history always best explained by following a strict chronological pattern. At various points in his account he