

*A Woman of Influence:
Evlyn Fenwick Farris*

Sylvie McClean

Victoria: Sono Nis, 1997. 288 pp. Illus. \$22.95 paper.

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Sylvie McClean often uses the word “unshakeable” to describe Evlyn Fenwick Farris, who was, she argues, “for a time, the most influential woman in British Columbia” (12). In this well-researched biography, McClean focuses on Farris’s influence on the development of the province. Accordingly, McClean describes the events in Farris’s youth that influenced her belief system and the years between 1905 and 1942, when Farris actively worked towards her political and social goals. Born in 1878, Evlyn Fenwick Keirstead was raised in Nova Scotia, the daughter of a Baptist minister who left parish work to take the Chair of Moral Philosophy and English Literature at Acadia College. Following the death of her brothers and mother in 1890, her father raised Farris alone. He taught her to rely on reason rather than emotion, to believe deeply in the Baptist faith, and to look to education to provide her with the skills needed to contribute to society. From the age of twelve, Farris was included in her father’s professional and private life. Arguably, he was the foremost influence in the development of her social and political conscience. Farris attended Horton Collegial Academy, then moved to Acadia College where she received her BA and MA. At Acadia she was influenced not only by her father, but also by the wife of the

college president. From this woman Farris learned about a woman’s duty to her family, to society, and to God.

Like most well-educated middle-class women at the turn of the century, Farris embraced maternal feminism, with its belief in complementary but different roles for men and women. McClean argues that her strong belief system led Farris to influence society in general rather than to work towards gaining personal power. Having introduced the social, religious, and political context within which Farris operated, McClean concentrates on the years when Farris acted in the public sphere. Farris was instrumental in founding the University Women’s Club of Vancouver and the Women’s Liberal Association, and, most important, she promoted and worked to establish the University of British Columbia. For thirty years, Farris served on the university senate and board of governors and lobbied the provincial government and various organizations for support. In all her public work, Farris insisted that men and women should work together. As McClean points out, Farris never believed in women’s rights for their own sake. She supported suffrage as a way to enable women to play their own special role within Canadian society. In 1942, Farris retired from the public world of university and political

affairs. While McClean's narrative ends here, Farris lived on for another thirty years as a wife, mother, and grandmother.

A strength of this biography is its integration of the religious, political, and social contexts. The sections on the modernist Baptists are particularly useful. McClean addresses the biases of many middle-class Canadians, including Farris, and demonstrates just how contradictory and complex any individual's belief system and behaviour can be. While McClean does not dwell on the anti-Asian prejudice or the class bias of her subject, she raises these issues and does not attempt to play down the effects of racism or elitism on Farris's behaviour.

McClean writes in a rather dispassionate style, which makes it difficult for the reader to care about Farris and masks the effect she had on people. While McClean takes a good look at

Farris's beliefs and achievements, she is less successful in uncovering how other people saw this woman. Farris had little in common with most of Vancouver's moral reformers and first-wave women's movement activists. Nor did most of the men in the Liberal party seem to like either her or her "influence" on policy. While McClean argues that Farris's influence faded as her ideas and beliefs became dated, her early personal influence on party politics is possibly overstated, particularly given the lack of personal and official support for many of her ideas. These criticisms aside, McClean fills a gap in BC women's history. Her portrait of Farris as a "warts and all" maternal feminist whose influence moved beyond her family into the political culture of British Columbia is an interesting and useful reminder that much of the political history of this province's women remains to be written.

*The Gentle Anarchist.
A Life of George Woodcock*

Douglas Fetherling

Vancouver/Toronto and Seattle: Douglas and McIntyre/
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The West Coast has always attracted men and women in search of a more stimulating environment. The belief that life would be better West of the Rockies brought to our shores many who still had to make their mark in society as well as those who were already fairly well known in other parts of the world.

Among the latter, George Woodcock is by far the most famous. A native of Winnipeg who spent his formative years in England, he emigrated to Vancouver Island in 1949 and stayed in British Columbia until his death. The decades he lived in Vancouver were years of tremendous intellectual growth and visibility that extended well beyond Canada.