

the author of *School Wars* has not claimed to be even-handed in his treatment of events or their meaning — and in this regard he may have excused himself from his transgressions against the canons of historical scholarship. Clearly, the intent of this work is less historical than polemical; it is less concerned with augmenting our understanding of the recent past than with sounding a call-to-arms for those opposed to government policies in education.

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Vancouver Short Stories, edited by Carole Gerson. Vancouver: UBC Press, 1985. \$9.50.

Vancouver Fiction, edited by David Watmough. Polestar Press. N.p.

The historical occasion for the appearance of these two collections — Vancouver's centennial — offers a locally restricted, literary context within which to frame one of the historic and thorny questions for Canadian Studies: how do we define the relations between place (or setting), tradition (literary, or more broadly, cultural) and nationality (geographical or racial), given the exigencies of what Frye has called our "fore-shortened history"? Is "Vancouver fiction" written *about* Vancouver — its atmospherics, its settings, its cultures; written *in* Vancouver — in Point Grey, Kitsilano, Kerrisdale, on Commercial Avenue (in Dollarton?); or written *by* Vancouverites — by whatever dubious criteria we might identify these latter-day natives? (Of Carole Gerson's twenty writers, four — William McConnell, Joy Kogawa, Wayson Choy and Frances Duncan — are Vancouver-born; of the thirteen writers in David Watmough's collection, Keith Fraser is the sole Vancouver native.)

Carole Gerson's "Introduction" addresses these and related questions succinctly and intelligently, pointing out that the book "is not a collection of Vancouver authors, but of Vancouver short stories, chosen because they highlight facets of the city's social history and literary development." But choosing stories which highlight facets of Vancouver's social history created a problem and begs a question: Gerson found that "for the first seventy-five years of Vancouver's existence there is too little material, and for the last twenty-five there is too much." Presumably, this scarcity influenced Gerson's inclusion of the first selection, Frances Owen's lurid "The Prophetess" (1907). The story may indeed be "an intriguing account of

the great Vancouver fire of 1866," but it also manifests an intense and cloying admixture of the sublime, the gothic, the romantic and the outright purple — of most interest, perhaps, to an archaeologist of style or an anthropologist of idiom:

The sun was just setting; a crimson glow suffused the sky; the twilight blushed; the silver gems of the snow-capped peaks became golden with the sunset flush; the rushing streams seemed to allay their headlong course to be caressed by the lingering sunbeams, which left a purple hue upon the dancing waters, turning them into streams of gold; . . .

We stood gazing at the glory of the sunset, lost for the moment in the grandeur and nobility of the eternal, fascinated by the various shades of color, and the succession of changes from silver through all the mutations of gold and crimson to a deep purple hue as if the blood of battling spirits had stained the sky.

Perhaps the problem with this selection reflects a difficulty with the book's conception: stories which reflect social history may not be otherwise distinguished. The question begged, that of the relation of fiction to history, is addressed in Owen's story at the level of its lowest common denominator.

But *Vancouver Short Stories* generally strikes a careful and instructive balance between the demands of its twinned objectives. The stories, arranged chronologically by date of first publication — Owen's is the first, and the final story, Cynthia Flood's "The Animals in Their Elements" is first published in this collection — provide both a rewardingly variegated excursion through local social history as it is refracted through fiction and a panoramic view of developments in literary style and tradition. Reading or re-reading Malcolm Lowry's "Gin and Goldenrod" (c. 1950) or Ethel Wilson's "A Drink With Adolphus" (1960) on any occasion is exciting and engaging; to rediscover Lowry and at the same time to discover William McConnell's beautiful, unjustly ignored "Love in the Park" (published in *Klanak Islands*, the 1959 collection of stories McConnell edited) more than compensates for Owen's histrionics or for the occasional flatness of Bertrand W. Sinclair's "The Golden Fleece" (published from the Sinclair Papers at UBC), a too-predictable depiction of a middle-class shipping agent's longing for adventure running liquor down to Mexico through the Pacific's winter storms. Pauline Johnson is represented with two of her 1911 *Vancouver Legends*, Martin Allerdale Grainger with the opening chapter of his *Woodsmen of the West* (1908); Emily Carr's "Sophie," Dorothy Livesay's "A Cup Of Coffee" and Jean Burton's "Phyllus" provide, respectively, three quite separate

perspectives on native life and manners, hard times in the thirties, and the fatal fit between smart, stylish Vancouver's fashions and mores in the twenties.

With Audrey Thomas' "Aquarius" (1971), we cross definitively into the contemporary; the transition is particularly telling because the previous story is Ethel Wilson's delightful but searing sendup of the foppish, portentous, pretentious Leaper, a Victorian out of time and place at Adolphus' improbable party. From the seventies to the present, Vancouver is presented and represented by Alice Munro ("Forgiveness in Families"), Gabriel Szohner ("The First Woman") and George Bowering's "Spans"; the sombre excerpt from Joy Kogawa's *Obasan* counterpoints stories from two newcomers, Sky Lee's "Broken Teeth" and Wayson Choy's "The Jade Peony." Frances Duncan's autobiographical piece, "Was That Malcolm Lowry?" reads instructively after "Gin and Goldenrod," and Australian Kevin Roberts' "A Nice Cold Beer" nicely captures Aussie dialect and conduct in collision with the Vancouver drug and biker scene.

Two last cavils: why include Munro when "Forgiveness in Families" does not strongly evoke Vancouver and when Munro's writing is so often and justly celebrated for evoking the ethos of a very different region; and why *not* include a story of Jane Rule's, when Rule's writing is so often and justly celebrated for its pungent and detailed evocation of Vancouver's social and psychological atmosphere? Minor reservations aside, *Vancouver Short Stories* is painstakingly and helpfully edited, with clear, thorough biographical and bibliographical information on writers, stories, and dates and places of publication. Gerson has provided Vancouverites and the disinterested reader alike with a judiciously selected, educational and entertaining reading occasion, a revealingly diverse commemoration in fiction of the history of a young one hundred years.

David Watmough's *Vancouver Fiction*, although it rewards readers with brilliant individual flashes, is generally less satisfying a collection. If the book is intended as a "centennial celebration," as Watmough suggests in his "Introduction," then its scope should have been expanded in several directions. Gerson's collection articulates one new resonance among Vancouver's many ethnic sensibilities more clearly than Watmough's with her inclusion of stories by Wayson Choy and Sky Lee; as well, Gerson's historical perspective is more balanced, with eleven of her selections originally published before 1960. Watmough's selection includes only three out of thirteen pieces originally published before 1960; after these (an excerpt from Hubert Evans' *The New Front Line*, Ethel

Wilson's "Down at English Bay" and Lowry's "The Bravest Boat"), we are permanently, and rather monolithically, ensconced in the contemporary scene. In inviting submissions from twelve writers (Watmough's "Vancouver Summer Pudding" is the thirteenth piece), Watmough appears, consciously or not, to have leaned towards less traditional and more experimental writers — which makes for a sparkling sameness, and might have the unintentional effect of distracting readers from the merits of some fine fiction by Bowering ("Ebbie & Hattie"), Keith Maillard (an excerpt from his forthcoming novel "Motet"), D. M. Fraser ("Recessional") and Keith Fraser ("There are More Dark Women in the World Than Light"). Nor would Watmough, I suspect, wish *Vancouver Fiction* to suggest, as at points it might seem to, that "Vancouver fiction" is *by definition* experimental, innovative, avant-garde. Finally, because almost a third of the selections are excerpts from novels (Evans', Betty Lambert's *Crossings*, and Beverly Simon's *Da Vinci's Light*), these stand uneasily on their own, so that reading *Vancouver Fiction* becomes a more fragmented experience than it might have been if more of the selections were stories.

Watmough does include Jane Rule, although "Blessed Are The Dead" is a weaker story than Rule's "Dulce," which is also set in Vancouver, is also recent, and might have appealed to a wider range of readers than the fairly restricted story of a UBC academic's education in the universal claim of mortality on mortals; but since Watmough invited submissions, it is unfair to fault his judgement on this count. Robert Harlow's "Heroes" is a warm and sympathetic portrayal of the costs of a character's "heroic" attempt to be ideally human; less successful than Harlow's delicate but sharply etched and edged portrait is Beverly Simon's careful, minutely detailed but also laboured recreation of Laura's mindscape in the excerpt from Simon's projected novel. Watmough's "Vancouver Summer Pudding," with its incisive analysis of the foundations of a couple's troubled, troubling marriage, projected onto their intoxication with each other as they march in Vancouver's massive 1984 anti-nuclear demonstration, closes the collection with a suggestively ambiguous reflection on the functions of popular causes as social glue for fragmenting relationships.

Although Watmough includes (different) stories by four writers who also appear in *Vancouver Short Stories*, *Vancouver Fiction* has a different, more restricted orientation, and will appeal, I would guess, to a more restricted audience. Watmough's book provides attractive photographs of the thirteen writers, but the bibliographical information is less

complete than Gerson's, and the editing is not as thoroughgoing. There are too many distracting typographical errors in the stories, and someone — Watmough or Watmough's editors — should have dealt with the following construction in the "Introduction": "Indeed, while the use of natural phenomena as a determining [*sic*] factor in conduct and even thought patterns are perceivable in several of these fictions, it is nowhere more the case than in Maillard's pages."

That *Vancouver Fiction* is more restricted in its range does not negate the collection's worth. It bears out, as does *Vancouver Short Stories*, the various powers of fiction to create identity by imagining a place. Vancouver's topography haunts these fictions through language that conveys the figurative information necessary to conjure an imagined, imaginative locale. If Frye is correct in suggesting that Canada's cultural life is most troubled, finally, by some riddling question such as "Where is Here?", then these collections resonate with Vancouver's many-voiced reply.

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'*My Dear Legs . . .*': *Letters to a Young Social Democrat*, by Alex Macdonald. Vancouver: New Star Books, 1985. Pp. 187.

My father, then Chief Justice of British Columbia, used to be riled to read in the Elections Act that the only persons who could not sit in the Legislature were "Judges, Indians and Lunatics". Since then an Indian has been seated, no judges of course, and quite a few lunatics, whom I readily recognize. So will the reader who perseveres.

My Dear Legs . . . mirrors the character of its author. It is by turns amusing, obscure, passionate, radical, reformist and, one must say, in truth, ever so slightly haughty. So is Alex.

Alex Macdonald attempts to hide his serious purposes with an appealing after dinner kind of wit to be taken like mints so as not to offend. When gently discussing the sins of his colleagues in the legal profession he observes that "it reminds me of Voltaire who wrote that he had only been ruined twice — once when he lost a lawsuit and once when he won one." Sensitive to the ambitions of the young and the impatience of his seatmate Bob Williams, he notes that his "friends credit me with every Christian virtue but resignation." There is undoubtedly a purpose to his declaration that "this collection is dedicated to my wife Dorothy, whom I married at an early urge."