

Female Histories from Australia and Canada as Counter-Discourses to the National*

MARION SPIES

(1) Transnational Female Historiography

This is a reply to and a continuation of the articles by Sanjay Sircar, "*My Career Goes Bung*: Genre-Parody, Australianness and Anglophilia" and by Barbara Korte, "Survival of the Nation(al)? Notes on the Case of English-Canadian Literary Criticism." Sircar illustrates that in the fictitious autobiography *Bung* the Australian writer Miles Franklin, who can be regarded as an early feminist, decidedly moves away from conventions of the genre, as they were upheld in her British mother country. And at the end of her article, Korte asks: "Should and how can literary criticism engage with the national discourse(s) of the societies in which it is practiced?" (Korte 371). On the basis of Sircar's arguments the following contribution is trying to answer Korte's questions by demonstrating with the help of five fictitious (auto-)biographical works, Franklin's *My Career Goes Bung* (written in 1902, publ. in 1946), Margaret Atwood's *The Journals of Susanna Moodie* (1970), Daphne Marlatt's *Ana Historic* (1988), Kate Grenville's *Joan Makes History* (1988) and Drusilla Modjeska's *Poppy* (1990), that especially in relation to national history a female counter-discourse has established itself in Australia and Canada, which manifests itself in a criticism of national historiography as well as in a specifically female way of representation. The novels and the poetry cycle *Journals* have been chosen because each of them discusses different aspects of history.

* Reference: Sanjay Sircar, "*My Career goes Bung*: Genre-Parody, Australianness and Anglophilia," *Connotations* 8.2 (1998/99): 175-200; Barbara Korte, "Survival of the Nation(al)? Notes on the Case of English-Canadian Literary Criticism," *Connotations* 8.3 (1998/99): 362-73.

In postcolonial societies the national never is or was the only discourse—although it was at times dominant. But rather, nationalistic notions have always provoked other discourses; in Australia and Canada, for example, feminism was always very pronounced when nationalism was clamorous as well. According to Stephen Alomes (1987), the 1890s, 1940s and 1970s were "... a time of national self-consciousness ..." (Alomes 3) in Australia. The same is true for the time around 1988, when Australia celebrated the 200th anniversary of the arrival of the First Fleet (see e.g. Whitlock, "Introduction" xxix). At these times feminism was also very prominent in Australia (see e.g. Sheridan 29-30). For Korte, the heydays of Canadian nationalism are the years about 1867, the establishment of the Dominion of Canada, the 100th anniversary in 1967, and in a modified way the late 1980s and 1990s. And at these heights of nationalism the female discourse was also particularly strong in Canada.

The national and the female discourses do not always, but sometimes, see issues from a different angle. One area in which they differ significantly, is the interpretation of history and historiography. Generally speaking, in a colonial context a nationalistically inclined interpretation of history is fixed upon progress and sees the opening up of the country and its socio-economic development under the aspect of achieving political independence, in Canada by propagating the "'National Dream' of a Coast-to-Coast link" (New 82) of the Canadian Pacific Railway, for example, and in Australia by glorifying discoverers, cartographers and settlers as national heroes (see e.g. Coungeau; Eden). Such a kind of historiography worships men of an unusual psychic or physical stature and of public interest or those with political visions of an Australia or a Canada which is independent of the mother country. By contrast, female historiography wants to re-evaluate either conventional female tasks—like the raising of a family—or the life of a simple pioneer woman. It also strives to point out that a woman's influence is not restricted to the home, since she can also be active in the church and even in local politics. Beginnings of such a literary female historiography can already be found in the nineteenth century, in Canada for example in Elizabeth Lichtenstein Johnston's *Recollections of a Georgia Loyalist* (written in 1838, publ. in 1901), in Australia

it is represented by the suffragette, social worker and novelist Catherine Helen Spence. A first climax of female literary historiography is reached with Louisa Lawson and Miles Franklin (for more details see Sheridan). Fundamental female attacks on male constructions of history, however, are only to be found since the 1970s, when women have developed the concept of "transnational feminist subjects." What exactly is meant by this is to be shown in the following with the help of the texts already mentioned, which could be classified more precisely as postmodern feminist meta-fictional historiography.

Thanks mainly to Hayden White and Roland Barthes, since the late 1960s both literary theory and historiography have upgraded the narrative element in historical documentation. A historical presentation, says Barthes, is no objective reproduction of facts, but a narrative, which does not essentially differ from a fictional narration in literature (see "Le discours de l'histoire," quoted. in White 68). Neither in history nor in literature—for example in an historical novel—has the writer direct access to the *res gestae* (cf. Hutcheon, "History" 173). Rather, historical 'reality' always is a mediated story, embedded in a narration. In their works the women writers mentioned above present a gender-specific reconstruction of history as—according to them—it could or should have happened. They project their feminine perspective onto certain points in history. To achieve this, they avoid traditional forms of autobiography, which to readers having in mind famous Western models like St. Augustine's *Confessiones* or Rousseau's *Confessions* might be expected to feature a male narrator, a linear narrative, a unified, individual subject and an (allegedly) objective rendering of historical facts. Postmodern female writers, on the other hand, can be said to interpret a subject as multi-layered, as constructed, even as inconsistent, having several identities and they question the ability of language to reproduce reality (cf. Prain 43; Neuman 34). In "Resisting Autobiography[:] Out-Law Genres and Transnational Feminist Subjects" (1992) Caren Kaplan points out that writing women in the postmodern age deliberately deconstruct former "master genres" such as the autobiography; for Kaplan the now relevant former "out-law genre" is transnational feminist literature, which she subdivides into prison memoir,

ethnography etc. To Kaplan's mind, the writing subject is in the first place a woman, only then a prisoner, black, and so on. Consequently, a woman's nationality is only *one* component of her identity. In the texts which are to be discussed in the following sections, gender is the most important issue. In the spirit of Kaplan's female transnationalism, the writers of these texts oppose certain elements of national historiography and propagate their counter-models.

(2) Miles Franklin, *My Career Goes Bung* (1902/1946): Deconstruction of Historical Female and Literary Role Models without a Counter-Model

In *Bung* the narrator Sybylla comments on the effects of her recently published "fictitious autobiography" *My Brilliant Career* (1901) on her neighbours and acquaintances. As one consequence, Sybylla leaves her parents' farm for Sydney, because she feels persecuted by prospective suitors. As a young, successful author, she is lionized in Sydney society. But her hopes of finding some kind of employment in which she can use her talent as a writer, remain unfulfilled, and thus she has to go back to the farm. Nevertheless, she still dreams of becoming a famous writer in London.

In this book Franklin's rebellious tendencies already become visible, since the narrator Sybylla revolts against various conventions: as Sircar points out, Sybylla rejects English literary models, especially the form and content of the Penny Post Novel, a type of romance which calls for an English setting, a plot set in High Society, a knightly hero and a submissive, rather naive heroine. But Sybylla is more radical than Sircar admits: she also demands equal rights for women and polemicizes against "artificial womanliness" (Franklin 20), which wants females to be silly and passive, uncritically accepting the physical and spiritual superiority of males (see e.g. Franklin 12). Sybylla advocates equality in all areas of private and public life; among other things she is all for women's right to vote, their free choice of a career and equal pay (see Franklin 27). Living in Sydney, she storms at the male notion that she has to be formed both as a woman

and an author (see e.g. Franklin 180, 186, 226). But her protest is not very successful: Already in *My Brilliant Career*, says Sybylla, she tried to parody traditional, i.e. male, forms of autobiography (see e.g. Franklin 31, 34, 54-55) and to cast her energetic heroine as an "antithesis of conventional [English] heroines" (Franklin 37). But she has to realize that her readers do not understand that her first book is meant to be both fictitious and parodistic.

In addition to certain literary conventions, Sybylla also criticizes the structure of British society as it is aped in Sydney. She does not accept British "society pretensions" (Franklin 138, 148), which judge people, and especially women, according to their family connections, money and influence. Since she does not possess any of these 'qualities,' and also does not present herself to the world as a subservient little woman, she is not very much in demand on the Sydney marriage market. Additionally, or so Sybylla thinks, a woman is supposed to be religious. Since she is a fierce critic of the Church of England (see e.g. Franklin 19, 47, 219, 221), potential suitors like Big Ears are scared off.

Ultimately, Sybylla paradoxically fails because of her strength of character. She rebels against the traditional 'task' of women to submit to men as a matter of course. Rather, she delights in making fun of harmless little faults of character in her suitors Gaddy and Big Ears (see e.g. Franklin 220). Thus, she does not experience a romance. Her dreams of a career as a writer in London do not come true because she disdains to play-act and flatter men who could possibly take her to London (see e.g. Franklin 195, 201). Hopes of a marriage with Henry are not fulfilled because Sybylla is afraid that he might ask her to stop writing novels (see Franklin 232). Her plan to live from her earnings as a writer does not materialize, because Sybylla declines as demeaning the only job offer she gets in Sydney, that is to work as a "society gossip" for a newspaper. Thus, *Bung* does not fit into the pattern of a conventional autobiography, mainly because an autobiography often is a teleological success story. Sybylla's life, however, runs in a circle: the heroine vehemently protests against social conventions, but because of her position as a moneyless woman in Australia she cannot realize her dreams of a life as a single woman writer in London. Thus, she has to go back to her parents' farm.

(3) Margaret Atwood, *The Journals of Susanna Moodie* (1970): Deconstruction of British Culture—Construction of the Unity of Woman and Nature

In Atwood's *The Journals of Susanna Moodie*, Franklin's discrepancy of male and female role models is narrowed down to a gender specific interpretation of personal development and history. In her cycle of poems Atwood uses material from the autobiographies *Roughing It in the Bush; or, Life in Canada* (1852) and *Life in the Clearings versus the Bush* (1853) by the British immigrant Susanna Moodie. Atwood's cycle is subdivided into three parts: Susanna's arrival and her first few years in a log cabin in Upper Canada, life of the Moodie family in a little town, and the disorientation of old Susanna as well as her 'surfacing' in Toronto in 1969.

Arriving in Canada, Susanna at once realizes:

We left behind . . .

...

one by one our civilized
distinctions

and entered a large darkness.

It was our own
ignorance we entered (Atwood 12).

For the Moodies, emigration to Canada sets a development in motion which begins with the shedding of British culture. But whereas Lieutenant Moodie and other men, immigrants and pioneers, try to overcome the difficult situations they have to face in the wilderness by working with all their might for the development of the country, by serving the country as soldiers, and by dreaming of a glorious future (see Atwood 16-17), Susanna tries to adapt herself to the new country and not to subject it to her will as the men try to do. During this process she has to learn to live without social amenities, female society, fine clothes, art, i.e. all the privileges she enjoyed as an officer's wife in England. In Canada she no longer yearns for urban culture, but for the union between woman and nature (see e.g. Atwood 21). Such a union is possible, because in women organic and

cyclical nature very much comes into its own (cf. Groening 173-74). As the years pass by, Susanna has to realize, however, that even the primitive civilization of Canada with its log cabins and garrison towns is a "prison" (see e.g. Atwood 22), which impedes and delays the union with nature. But since she is nearly always in close contact with natural forces, Susanna finally achieves the desired symbiosis:

Looking in a Mirror

It was as if I woke
after a sleep of seven years

to find stiff lace, religious
black rotted
off by earth and the strong waters

and instead my skin thickened
with bark and the white hairs of roots

My heirloom face I brought
with me a crushed eggshell
among other debris:
the china plate shattered
on the forest road, the shawl
from India decayed, pieces of letters

and the sun here had stained
me its barbarous colour (Atwood 24).

Such a unity is not reached without a struggle; whereas Lt Moodie distinguishes himself in the putting down of the Riel rebellion, Susanna fights against bush fires and loneliness and learns to get over the death of some of her children.

In the last poems Susanna appears in 1969 as an old woman on a Toronto bus: She accuses twentieth-century Canadians of trying to supplant the natural wilderness by their mistaken settlement policy instead of simply accepting it. This subjection of nature is supposed to be the consequence of a brutal, male, expansionist view of history. Accordingly, immigrants did not create a Paradise in the new land, but a Babylon of stone; nowadays,

they do no longer know how to use their senses and have thus remained "invaders" (Atwood 57), who barricade themselves in their cities¹ and only feel safe there. But this sense of security is a fallacy:

Turn, look down:
there is no city;
this is the centre of a forest

your place is empty (Atwood 61).

In the afterword Atwood explains this pessimistic ending of her cycle of poems in the following way: "we are all immigrants to this place even if we were born here: the country is too big for anyone to inhabit completely, and in the parts unknown to us we move in fear, exiles and invaders" (Atwood 62).

According to Atwood, the national history of Canada is split into male² and female. The male history of conquests has prevailed, and thus one nowadays finds concrete deserts such as Toronto. But the female history, though repressed up to now, also exists. At its centre is the personal quest of each woman, like Susanna's. Therefore, the female variant of Canadian national history consists of a conglomerate of individual destinies, which, however, have a common denominator, since some basic women's experiences (like menstruating, being pregnant, grieving for a dead child) repeat themselves in a cyclical way. This is a typically female view of history, which—according to Atwood—should prevail. In those poems in *Journals* whose action takes place in 1969 Atwood demands this outright, and in the nineteenth-century episodes she suggests it. Lt Moodie and other male immigrants, for example, are not mentioned any more after their participation in suppressing the Riel Rebellion. Thus, Atwood implies that the male teleological view of history is wrong, since the justifiable claims of Louis Riel and other Métis, who were robbed of their hereditary rights by white invaders and their urge for expansion, were brutally suppressed by Canadian-English troops. Especially the figure of Riel was used by some Canadian writers of the 1970s in order to criticize past and contemporary Canadian imperialistic policy.³ It is quite possible to interpret Atwood in

this way as well, since for his share in suppressing the rebellion Lt Moodie was rewarded with a government job in the town of Belleville. And Atwood interprets this phase of Susanna's life as a setback in her personal development. Therefore, it may be concluded that in *Journals* Atwood criticizes the national imperialistic myth of Canadian history and instead pleads for individual histories, thus representing the development of each woman's character as historically significant (see Atwood, Epigraph of *Journals* n. p.).⁴

(4) Daphne Marlatt, *Ana Historic* (1988): Deconstruction of Pre-Postmodern Historiography—Construction of an A-Historic, Cyclical Variant of History

It is Marlatt who proceeds from female individual history to female national history. In "Women's Autobiographical Selves: Theory and Practice" (1988) Susan Stanford Friedman wrote:

... alienation from the historically imposed image of the self is what motivates the writing, the creation of an alternate self in the autobiographical act. Writing the self ... breaks the silence imposed by male speech (41).

Marlatt's *Ana Historic* indeed breaks the silence and newly defines the role of women in Canadian history and historiography. In her metafictional text the narrator Annie reconstructs with the help of just a few facts and a rich imagination the life of Mrs. (Ana) Richards, who has taught school since 1873 in the place which later became Vancouver. During and by her writing process Annie emancipates herself from her husband Richard, who is a historian, and she also reconsiders her problematic relationship to her dead mother. In this process she contrasts male and female notions of history as well as gender-specific nineteenth-century concepts of women's roles with each other. Whereas in Atwood's *Journals* the male view of history was only expressed by Lt Moodie's fight for the glory of Canada and later by the failure of Toronto citizens to feel at home in Canada, in *Ana* female history is contrasted with male history throughout.

Before Annie got married to Richard, she was one of his students. Both as a student and as his wife, it was her task to type up Richard's notes and do similar unproductive jobs. Marlatt implies that during this time Annie uncritically adopted Richard's attitude towards history, and especially his conviction that historiography is only built on facts (see e.g. Marlatt 134) and that Canadian history was made by men of action.⁵ Annie says:

i learned that history is the real story the city fathers tell of the only important events in the world. a tale of their exploits hacked out against a silent backdrop of trees, of wooden masses. so many claims to fame. so many ordinary men turned into heroes. (where are the city mothers?) the city fathers busy building a town out of so many shacks labelled the Western Terminus of the Transcontinental, Gateway to the East—all these capital letters to convince themselves of its, of their, significance (Marlatt 28).

In this history women appear as mere appendages to their spouses; they are utterly silent (e.g. Marlatt 75). Even the teacher is only mentioned in the town chronicle as the widow Mrs Richards; it is Annie who invents a first name for her, toying with the various meanings of the Greek word 'ana':

ana
that's her name:
back, backward, reversed
again, anew (Marlatt 43).

She also lets Ana write a diary, in which her protagonist really lives up to her name and invents both the history of Canada and her own history anew. And—probably inspired by Hayden White—Annie, Ana's imaginative chronicler, realizes that historiography is not the reproduction of facts, but a coherent and interpretative narrative. She thus complements male history with female history (e.g. Marlatt 39), filling the holes in Canadian historiography (Marlatt 26) with up to this time unwritten stories by women (e.g. Marlatt 109). This historiography is comprised of both the private life of women, their fate and dreams (e.g. Marlatt 35), and also of bits and pieces of the political female history of Canada (e.g. Marlatt 30). Since women cannot recognize themselves in the narrative which male

historians have invented and perpetuated, they create a different image of the female self in history. Thus, Ana, for example, is not only the self-possessed teacher Mrs Richards, but also a passionate woman who dreams of dancing, giving private music lessons in order to be independent from the school board, going on a journey around the world, and having a female lover instead of being obliged to marry a second time just to have a "protector" in the Canadian wilderness.

The Canadian history with which Annie comes up, is a genealogy of interconnected women's lives: Annie tells the story of Ana's mother, of Ana, of herself and of her mother Ina. These women create one another and the stories which they write without the help of men:

we give place, giving words, giving birth, to
each other—she and me. you. hot skin writing
skin (Marlatt 153).

The master narrative which is thus created, is "a-historic" and a-teleological, because the fictitious historical and contemporary women characters basically always have the same kind of experience (e.g. Marlatt 121, 129). Marlatt invents female protagonists in order to show that their personal stories (e.g. 90), their wishes and sexual longings principally stay the same throughout the centuries, the only difference being that in the late twentieth century women voice their needs much more directly. With this personal history, an outer female cultural history of Canada is correlated (cf. Marlatt 22). However, the latter is a bit sketchy, because Marlatt only says that whereas for men events like the completion of the railroad are important, women set store on other things: for them, civilization means to continue in the Canadian wilderness the kind of life they were used to lead in England; consequently, in their letters and diaries they celebrate the buying of a piano, ladies' meetings with "English china, Scotch shortbread" (Marlatt 118) and the birth of the first white baby as historically important events.

This specific version of history in contrast to traditional history is made possible in *Ana* by foregrounding female writings, i.e., diaries and narratives about the cultivation of Canada by women; by rendering stories

which combine fact and fiction. Taken together, they do not comprise a linear narrative, but something like a kaleidoscope with bits of coloured glass, representing events which are especially important for women.⁶ In such a way, women belatedly, a-historically, write themselves into the history of Canada (e.g. Marlatt 47), in which there still is enough "... space for stories forgotten or not yet imagined ..." (Curran/Hirabayashi 111).

(5) Drusilla Modjeska, *Poppy* (1990): Deconstruction of the Irrelevance of Private Female History—Pledge for the Equality of Private and Public

As Alison Bartlett pointed out in "Other Stories: The Representation of History in Recent Fiction by Australian Women Writers" (1993), since the 1970s Australian feminists have been increasingly concerned with the roles and the representation of women in history and literature. In this context they redefine what is historically significant, doubting the necessity of the separation of public and private spheres (see Bartlett 166), which was still important for Atwood and Marlatt. Both Modjeska's *Poppy* and Grenville's *Joan Makes History* belong to this new tradition.

In *Poppy* Lalage, who lives in Australia in the 1980s, retells in non-chronological episodes the biography of her British mother Poppy, who got married during the Second World War, gave birth to three daughters, left her husband Richard after she had a breakdown, managed a centre for young offenders for a long time, had a love affair with a priest, travelled to India and died of cancer at the age of 60. The name 'Lalage' comes from the Greek, one meaning is 'literary narration.' Consequently, in her "Acknowledgements" Modjeska—just like Lalage throughout the novel—emphasizes the fictitious character of her history:

The resulting *Poppy* is a mixture of fact and fiction, biography and novel The evidence I have used, the diaries and letters, the conversations and stories, come from memory, the papers I have been given, and from the imagination I have inherited (Modjeska 317).

How and what a woman writes is one important theme of this text, which, however, can only be mentioned here. The second major theme is the

education of women, or, more precisely, the questions of when, how, and why a woman learns that she is a political being, that she has a voice and that her voice counts. Modjeska shows that this process is closely connected with British social history, because it is only through changes in law that women are finally allowed to vote; thus social and political history directly influence individual history.

Right from the beginning, Lalage repeatedly emphasizes that the experiences of women in all English-speaking countries are similar, because they have had a similar education and read the same kind of books; feminists, for example, are acquainted with works by Ursula Le Guin, Luce Irigaray, and Marianne Moore (see e.g. Modjeska 198 and "Sources Quoted" 319-20). British culture in all countries belonging to the Terranglia influenced the emancipation of women (see e.g. Modjeska 250, 253). Here, Modjeska expands Kaplan's concept of a transnational women's literature into that of a transnational women's culture.⁷ Writings by well-known feminists on changing role models are to prove the existence of a common female culture: "Doris Lessing, Elizabeth Jolly [sic] and Nadine Gordimer were born within five years before Poppy. Consider them" (Modjeska 90). Modjeska argues that in the Second World War both the British Empire and a rigidly patriarchic society came to an end,⁸ a society which had tied women to their families. As a consequence, women were now more and more looking for work outside the home, and social customs, services and divorce laws changed for their benefit. Just as in *Ana Historic*, these improvements are illustrated with the help of a female genealogy: China, Poppy's mother, still is a completely helpless creature, who from her birth to her death needs to be taken care of. The young Poppy also is seen only in typical female roles:

... I piece together the story of Poppy who was born in 1924 and died in 1984, daughter of China and Jack, wife of Richard, lover of Marcus, mother of May and Phoebe and me. That is how we mark a woman, by her kin and progeny (Modjeska 12).

She does not yet have any kind of political awareness; world history hardly seems to touch her private history, her little family world:

When I [i.e. Lalage] asked Poppy to remember the crises of the fifties she'd reply with domestic details.

'Do you remember the outbreak of the Korean War?' I asked.

'Yes,' she said. 'I was pregnant with May.'

....

'What about the day Nasser refused to accept the UN's proposal for the international board to run the canal?' I tried

'Yes, as a matter of fact I do,' she said, looking pleased with herself, as if she'd trumped me. 'It was the beginning of September. The school holidays were about to end. It must have been a weekday. Julia Jensen had asked us to lunch ...' (Modjeska 64).

It is only when she goes into a psychiatric clinic after a breakdown and thus severs herself from her family, that her emancipation process from a rather narrow family life begins. The reasons for her breakdown are not explicitly given, but the narrator insinuates that Poppy has realized that there is a life outside the family bonds, that not only her own, but world history in general is important. The reason why Poppy recovers also remains largely in the dark. But it has something to do with finding her identity: "The best I [i.e. Lalage] can do is to say Poppy recovered because she found her voice" (Modjeska 93). Poppy begins to read newspapers and books, goes back to school, starts to work, becomes independent and as a lover also learns to enjoy her body and her sexuality, which she didn't when she was only a dutiful wife. Lalage comments upon a difficult meeting in the Day Centre during which Poppy spoke up for herself:

She was working out of the labyrinth of her own femininity. At this most public moment of her life, I see her vulnerable and exposed, for what she stood accused of was that for which she had struggled so long: the ability to speak freely, and as a woman (Modjeska 150).

Modjeska's Poppy embodies the aims of early feminists (cf. Levy 165): Women free themselves from their private world and learn to speak in public. But nevertheless, Poppy's political self-awareness is still very slight; she rather shows a social than a political commitment. This is also true later, during her stay in India (see e.g. Modjeska 273). It is left to her daughters, especially Lalage, to inform themselves thoroughly about world

politics and to be politically active. It is only Lalage, a woman of the third generation, who realizes rather late in life, i.e., towards the end of the writing of *Poppy*, which represents her process of emancipation from her roles of daughter and wife, that private and public discourse can indeed be linked. She describes this insight with terms by Ursula Le Guin, who talks about "father and mother tongue." By "father tongue" she means public discourse, by "mother tongue" instinctive, emotional utterance. Lalage hopes that she has found for herself "... Le Guin's third term: a native tongue, a dialect that accommodates learning with blood and heart, father tongue perhaps with mother tongue" (Modjeska 152). That Lalage is able to finish her book about Poppy, which combines fact and fiction, closeness to reality and emotions, historiography and metahistoriography, that she is also teaching at a university, and can finally straighten out her tumultuous private life, is supposed to prove to the reader that she—and with her every woman of the 80s—has successfully finished her emancipation process and is both a private and a public person: "... breaking down dichotomy and refusing splits ..." (Modjeska 151).

(6) Kate Grenville, *Joan Makes History* (1988): Deconstruction of Biased Feminist Historiography—Synthesis of Male and Female History Making

For the female protagonists discussed so far, men only live on the outskirts of their world and are not only unimportant for their development, but downright impeding. This is very different in Grenville's *Joan Makes History*. This historiography is much more conciliatory, perhaps pointing to an impending change: from the militant feminist or female studies of the 1970s and 80s to the more relaxed gender studies of the 90s.⁹

The narrator Joan is born in 1901, the year in which Australia also becomes an independent nation. Joan is convinced that she is predestined to make history. To her mind, this right has so far been denied to women—not only in Australia. In eleven scenes, interrupted by episodes from the life of the contemporary heroine, Joan imagines eleven predecessors, who are also called Joan and who are present at events which

are important for Australia as a nation, like the Depression around 1890 or the opening of the first Australian Parliament in 1901. These historical Joans either comment on the political events or directly interfere in politics, using the vocabulary and voicing opinions of the late twentieth century. Thus, Grenville wants to illustrate that a consequently female view of history is only possible since then.

Of the texts under discussion, *Joan* is the most outspoken and critical one. Grenville mainly undermines three conventional notions about history (cf. Haynes 74-75):

(1) Like Marlatt's Annie, she refuses to accept that historiography is only an enumeration of facts. Much more elaborate than Annie, Joan invents instead historical episodes which could have happened. So, her second Joan is a prisoner, who in 1788 jumps from one of the ships of the First Fleet into the water and swims ashore, thus being the first white person to touch Australian soil. This shows that in spite of its inherent objective factuality, for Grenville the historical discourse is always dominantly subjective and heavily determined by imagination (cf. Goulston 24); accordingly her book begins:

In writing this work of fiction, the author has made use of real historical events only when it suited her purposes. She gladly acknowledges historical inaccuracies (Grenville n. p.).

Joan's historical awareness spans the period from the discovery of Australia to its independence; she invents female protagonists who at the beginning of the novel make history in the place of men, and later together with men, or who correct the male concept of history.

(2) Thus Grenville undermines the view that in history only male heroism counts, as demonstrated e.g. in battles or great political decisions.¹⁰ So, the only event in the novel which, seen from a male point of view, is politically important, the opening of parliament, appears in the self-critical words of Joan, the wife of a mayor who witnesses it, as an insincere half-truth:

We [i.e. Joan and her husband] were happy enough to be Mayor and wife of Mayor: we stood, fleshy ourselves, listening to other fleshy folk speak of

opportunity and freedom, when we knew it meant their own opportunity, their own freedom, to do nothing but make profit on profit and let the rest go hang (Grenville 258).

In this quotation an aversion to the wealthy upper classes makes itself felt which can be observed in the whole book. Grenville's 'historical' Joans almost always belong to the lower classes, they are washer-women or the wives of poor settlers.

(3) With this Grenville tries to contradict the notion that only the aristocracy was of any consequence in history. Joan, the mayor's wife who passes on her interpretation of historical events and her democratic world view to her little granddaughter, is more important than the Duke of York, although it is he who makes a pompous public speech and officially opens the first Australian parliament. Grenville's female figures fight for a democratic and egalitarian ethos, which also includes non-whites, since two of her most resourceful Joans are Aborigines.

But in spite of its vehement protestations, the novel is not a feminist, egalitarian manifesto. This is so, because the narrator Joan undergoes a development and because the various 'historical' Joans are portrayed less and less grimly feministic. As already mentioned, at the beginning of the novel the Joans make history instead of men, and the young narrator Joan also thinks that she has to decide between a family and a career. But in the course of the book Grenville makes her female protagonists see more and more reason; they learn, for example, that although ambition is important, there are various kinds of ambition, in politics and in the family. It is Grenville's credo that women should not try to step into men's shoes and make history as they would,¹¹ but that they should either 'demasculinize' historiography or try to make history in their own sphere, in the family. They should try to create a happy home for children and keep the family together. Consequently, *Joan* ends with a pledge of the narrator, who is by now a grandmother, to her family:

Stars blazed, protozoa coupled, apes levered themselves upright, generations of women and men lived and died, and like them all I, Joan, have made history (Grenville 285).

Although the programmatic title of the book is *Joan Makes History*, Grenville's message is much more conciliatory: All over the world, both men and women together make history, each in his or her own way.

Bergische Universität Wuppertal

NOTES

¹Here Atwood alludes to the Canadians' "garrison mentality" as criticized by Northrop Frye.

²Even in 2000 Paul Goetsch still reads Atwood as a literary nationalist. In connection with *Journals* this is only possible because Goetsch exclusively refers to Lt Moodie's relationship to his surroundings; he does not mention Susanna's. Neither does he seem to realize that the attitude of Atwood's Susanna towards Canada (which changes) is not identical with the attitude of the historical Susanna Moodie (which always remains double-edged), see Goetsch 168 and 173.

³For examples see New 234.

⁴According to Hutcheon, *Postmodern* ix, in Quebec as well feminism has replaced nationalism as the political basis of writing.

⁵"Dominance" and "mastery" are keywords, see e.g. Marlatt 25.

⁶Cf. Curran/Hirabayashi 110-11; Marlatt calls this "a piecemeal form," qt. in Curran/Hirabayashi 114.

⁷Both the text of *Poppy* and the "Sources Quoted" demonstrate that this transnational women's culture is not confined to the Terranglia, but that France and Germany are included.

⁸For more details see Bowers 55.

⁹For more information see Osinski 120-24.

¹⁰In an interview in 1994 Grenville criticizes: "... the assumption that the only history worth talking about is the kind where someone discovers something, or leads an army, or rules a country" (Turcotte 152).

¹¹Grenville explains: "When I began *Joan* what I was going to do was pretend that a woman was actually there at the great achievements of Australian history: that a woman was really the one to discover Australia, that a woman was really the first one to step ashore. In other words, I had women simply stepping into the shoes of men, dressing up in drag if you like As I went further with the book I realized that what I wanted to say was, those things [i.e. discovering something, leading an army or ruling a country] matter, but what also matters are the humble things, and the people who do them. The person who 'just' brings up the kids and washes the socks is as necessary to the whole picture as the kings and explorers. She, or he, is also making history in the sense that they are creating the climate in which humanity lives" (Turcotte 152).

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