Fiction of a feminist: Nellie McClung's work for children

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Résumé: *Les préoccupations féministes de Nellie McClung se sont avérées importantes pour l'histoire canadienne: elles imprègnent toutes ses oeuvres fictives destinées aux jeunes, de ses fables mettant en scène des animaux à son roman à thèse* Painted fires.

As an established author, Nellie McClung looked back with great amusement at childhood endeavours to become a writer: "My earliest writing was epitaphs for dead kittens, setting forth their virtues and the sad parting from their bereaved mother, which was purely fictitious in both places, for they had no virtues, conspicuous or otherwise, and the old cat didn't give a tinker's hoot about them."[1] McClung, of course, ultimately went on to do much more than write sentimental epitaphs for kittens. As satirist, feminist, and regional realist, she celebrated human life. In the early twentieth century, her energy, her humour, and her fiery commitment to social causes shifted the direction of fiction for children and young adults. Anyone interested in Canadian children's literature should give considerably more than a tinker's hoot about Nellie McClung.

Like many women writers in the early twentieth century, McClung found few outlets for her first creative work other than in church magazines and Sunday School papers. The editorial material for such publications was entirely determined by moral intentions: to offer lofty messages and spiritual uplift. But McClung's pieces are notably superior to comparable work appearing in the same pages. She was in touch with the real world of children – she knew how they think and feel, how they view the adult world about them, and how they express these views. Such natural children were needed in the world of children's fiction where the reprehensible "Elsie Books" held sway with the sentimentally good heroine constantly awash in tears.[2]

McClung did much to bring in a new tone – too much, perhaps, in the eyes of her timid editors. At times in the early 1900s, McClung was so prolific that she inundated Dr. W.H. Withrow, the Methodist Sunday School paper editor, with her voluminous efforts. He occasionally contrived to send her two dollars, along with tell-tale notes: "I do not know that I can use all of your articles...but will put them on file," he wrote in 1907; or, "I will be happy to use your last

batch of articles in early numbers of our papers," or, perhaps with exasperation, " I have enough on hand for some time."[3]

At the same time that McClung was working on her first novel, *Sowing seeds in Danny*, begun in 1906, she made inquiries of her American publisher regarding paying sources of publication for a group of unidentified "children's stories." By April 1908, her publisher still had not secured a magazine for these and, indeed, they may never have been published. Some of these stories may have been based on her pioneer experiences in southern Manitoba in the 1880s and 1890s. One such story, entitled "The first winter," was included in *Golden tales of Canada*, edited by May Lamberton Becker (Dodd 1938).

McClung also wrote two beast fables: "A short tale of a rabbit"(1908) – obviously meant for children – and the later story, "The tale of William Wolf," probably written for her grandchildren.[4] In the earlier tale, the boastful young Johnnie Rabbit feels "hampered" by his mother's constant warning against dogs and men with guns. Entering a stable in the Agricultural Grounds, he is set upon viciously by a group of dogs, men, and boys slashing at him with sticks. A newcomer stops the "savage" chase, opens the gate, and lets the terrified Johnny run free. The moral is that Mrs. Rabbit made the mistake of "thinking that a man who hunts must be cruel, forgetting that the true sportsman loves the wild thing he makes war on, and though he kills them, he does it fairly and openly." The moral is far too ingeniously forced, but no doubt McClung had to defend her husband who was an avid member of the Dog and Duck Hunting Club.

"The tale of William Wolf" is a more developed story. "A young spirit about to come into the animal world" is asked to fill out a form indicating which animal life he will choose: that of a sheep or a wolf. The differences between the two are clarified for him. The sheep "can neither run nor fight, nor lie, nor scheme, nor plot nor steal." The wolf is swift of foot and easily evades pursuit, sharp of eye, cunning and feared. The young spirit, laughing uproariously, chooses to be a wolf, and is born in the Alberta foothill country. Like Johnny Rabbit he laughs at his mother's warnings. With each kill of a lamb he becomes more boastful and careless. Sheep, he mocks, are just "dinner wagons with bells on them." He considers his mother a "sour old wolf and...made a face at her when she wasn't looking" – a typical child-like touch.

Young Willie's boastful songs bespeak a social Darwinism better understood by adults than by children:

> There's nothing wrong, and there's nothing right,
> There's only the weak and the strong,
> The weak must die and the strong will live,
> And this is the wolf's own song!

Increasingly, Willie "swanked up and down in plain sight of the shepherds, and sang more offensively than ever." Men on horse-back, with guns, organize a

day of reckoning. Willie first mocks, later manages to escape, but is mortally wounded. He looks down at the peaceful sheep, with everything done to feed and protect them. When he dies and becomes a spirit again he warns "the world is sheep-country and don't you forget it!" The moral is McClung's antidote to social Darwinism: "There seemed to be a great law at work, which could not be broken, even by a wolf" – the law of the Paschal Lamb: "He that seeketh to save his own life shall lose it, and he that giveth his life shall save it." No doubt this moral required greater explication to Nellie McClung's grandchildren.

Another charming animal story – though not a fable – appears in *The Black Creek Stopping-house*.[5] "The ungrateful pigeons" appears to be a story based on an actual occurrence in the McClung family in Manitou, Manitoba, for the four children involved parallel young Jack, Florence, Paul – the innocent freckle-faced Philip of the story – and Horace McClung. Philip buys two pigeons at a farm where pigeons are bred for restaurant pies. The young businessman speculates in the futures market by selling pigeons in advance of their production – though it would appear that he has two birds of the same sex, for no eggs are produced. When the pigeons fly away young Philip concocts a romantic story of a "Lost heir" to explain their departure. McClung pokes a sly hole in the child's romance by having Philip find his pigeons just across the street. The moral, "Don't count your pigeons before they are hatched," seems appropriate.

The story is narrated with humourous understatement and a witty kind of innocent comedy since Philip has been required by his mother to keep a "pigeon diary." Philip's diary, with its amusing misspellings and malapropisms, is a delight to read. Once the birds are returned for being too troublesome, Philip's terse and exasperated entry reads, "They are ungrateful broots!" Yet, setting out her own literary creed, Nellie McClung insists "It was only right to put in the bad as well as the good. That is the way of all stories." The variety of McClung's harsh themes – avoided by critics who argue that she is merely writing rural idylls – would astonish the casual reader of her work.[6] Sometimes McClung wrote what one can only describe as children's stories for adults. "The perils of heroism" is typical of such stories.[7] The narrator says,

> Johnny Martin was a hero! On the lonely northern farm where he and his parents lived a tragedy had occurred. The father, coming home drunk and raging, had smashed the furniture, terrorized his wife and the younger children, and was beating the fifteen-year-old boy who had tried to stay his fury when Johnny, aged thirteen, arrived on the scene. He took the shot-gun from the wall, and shot his father dead.

At the trial – where Johnny is acquitted – he cries bitterly and receives great sympathy. The account spreads widely in Canada and the United States, and Johnny receives much praise in letters and poems where he is likened to various heroes. He also receives numberless gifts, including a revolver. All the attention completely turns his head. As the flood of publicity subsides, Johnny

goes back to school, "but its gray walls and dull silences depressed him. The teacher's insistence on attention when she was teaching exasperated him, and when she declared he must come in when the bell rang, he drew his revolver on her, and through his set teeth hissed, 'I shoot to kill.'" The class breaks up in fear and disorder much as in similar incidents in our time. Johnny has become the typical hero of Western American tales where the only law is the law of the gun. Like Ralph Connor, Nellie McClung knew the differences between the opening of the Canadian and American Wests: the role Johnny plays is both unCanadian and antisocial. Events have made Johnny socially useless.

The story bespeaks the power that adults have to ruin a child's life. Very early in her speaking career, Nellie McClung declared that some people are defeated more by what is behind them than by what is before them. This was the theme of an early speech entitled "A child's right to a good start in life" (1911), emphasizing the influence of parents who do not stifle in their children the joy of living. Given society's current concern for battered women and children – a hush-hush topic in McClung's day – we cannot pass off such tales as mere didacticism on the subject of temperance. One can only say that McClung faced such lives and the consequences of such lives with authenticity long before family abuse became a major public concern. "I hear and see so many things which I think should be set down in print," she said. "I have no art in writing – except that I have a good memory and am a close observer. Also I can listen well, and often when I write a story, I have to blur it over a little with my pen. People would not believe it if I wrote it exactly as it happened."[8]

McClung was aware, then, of the distinction between the actual realities of life and literary realism: that is, the creation, in words, of the illusion of reality. In her short stories, however, McClung does not give a single physical detail about any of her characters. It is largely their speech and actions as well as their dramatized relation to other characters that make them vividly alive and memorable to her readers.

Of course, McClung is best known for her "Pearlie Watson" trilogy of novels, especially the first one, *Sowing seeds in Danny* (1908).[9] It is interesting that in 1908 L.M. Montgomery's *Anne of Green Gables* also appeared. Like Anne, McClung's Pearlie places a strong priority on the power of the romantic imagination. In Montgomery's book, however, the romance is centred in the life of the child, whereas McClung offers a great deal of good-natured spoofing of adult romantic nonsense. Yet in reading comments on McClung's novels by literary critics, one notes that many of them attribute the romantic flights to McClung herself, rather than to the charming little girl she created as a fictional character. McClung may have had a romantic's heart, but her mind was strongly and consciously anti-romantic, and her spirit was essentially that of a satirist. Romance writing she considered an "insidious" influence, particularly on young people. "The Lady Gwendolyn has nothing to do but lie on a couch and eat bon-bons and ponder whether she will say 'yes' or 'no' to Lord

Elfenstein, and when the sixteen-year-old gets her poor foolish head filled with scenes like these it is hard for her to get down to washing dishes and cleaning lamps."[10]

Sowing seeds in Danny is as notable for its serious social satire as for its protagonist, "the engaging little gamin named Pearlie Watson."[11] The first subject of McClung's satire is Mrs. Francis, whose romantic flights of theorizing show her to be out of touch with the realities about her. As a member of the "Society for the propagation of lofty ideals," she delivers bookish papers of "uplifting talk on motherhood" (11). Even her friends mock her "flights of fancy" drawn from "the debris of cold theories and second-hand sensations," for she is a "child authority" who is childless (139, 38-39). McClung cleverly frames her first satiric chapter by referring to a portrait of the Madonna. This traditional image of perfect motherhood is an ironic undercutting of Mrs. Francis's theories and an ironic commentary on her complacency: in the sunlight, even the Madonna "seemed to smile" with amusement at Mrs. Francis (4, 29). The chapter concludes with a glance at Pearl's mother, Mrs. Watson. She has real problems to face, such as "how to make trousers for four boys out of the one old pair...not the kind [of problems] dealt with in [a] book on 'Motherhood'" (7).

McClung next spoofs Pearl's melodramatic romancing. When Tom Motherwell sneaks out of the family farmhouse to attend a party at Slaters' (he has a crush on Nellie Slater), Pearlie's imagination is immediately fired to a high romantic pitch. "Has she eyes like stars, lips like berries, neck like a swan, and a laugh like a ripple of music?"(186) – all conventional traits of the romance heroine.

> Pearl knew all about frustrated love. Ma had read a story once, called "Wedded and parted, and wedded again." Cruel and designing parents had parted young Edythe (pronounced Ed'-ith-ee) and Egbert, and Egbert had just pined and pined and pined. How would Mrs. Motherwell like it if poor Tom began to pine and turn away from his victuals? (187)

The homely term "victuals" undercuts the flight of Pearlie's romantic imagination.

Pearl is a twelve-year old child whose flights of romantic imagining help her to bear her poverty and her lack of time for play. Yet her feet are planted firmly on the ground and her mind is wholly practical. Even when washing dishes, she sees a shipwreck in the dishpan. "They're all drunk, not a sober man on board.... And crash! a cry bursts from every soul on board...but I ain't sorry for them, for they're old enough to know that 'wine is a mocker, strong drink is ragin'" (105). Pearlie has remembered her temperance Band of Hope lesson very well, and she whoops and hollers every time she rescues a cup or saucer from the dishpan sea. Usually McClung was serious about temperance matters, but occasionally – as in this instance – she could have fun with it. At

no time is she moved to stop the progress of her story and sermonize (as, for example, Ralph Connor would do).

Sometimes in her anti-romantic passages Nellie McClung can be deeply moving. In the treatment of a woman ironically named Mrs. Motherwell, for example, she draws a significant contrast between girlhood and present reality. As a child this character had played the "tinker tailor soldier sailor" incantation; she ends up with "rich man." "Then she had dreamed dreams of silks and satins and prancing steeds and liveried servants, and ease, and happiness – dreams which God in his mercy had let her forget long, long ago, ... and as time went by she became greedier for money than her husband"(158). Their bare granite house is both a reality and a symbol: "an outward manifestation of wealth and power;...a symbol of spiritual dearth."[12]

The hailstorm that breaks Pearlie's attic window in the Motherwell house is less a sentimental device than "a structure of significance."[13] It signifies that, unlike the Motherwells, Pearlie has an open, searching mind. As Nina Baym has pointed out in *Women's fiction*, unlike late nineteenth-century heroines, Pearl Watson from the beginning of *Sowing seeds in Danny* "is her own woman and requires no parent to provide identity."[14] She is a child with "force of character," a strong will and a strong ego which knows its worth. As a heroine she functions well in adversity (29, 34-35). Both Watson parents work, with the result that Pearlie is in charge of the family. Even in relation to her parents, Pearl is the "director-in-chief" (*SSD* 300). Hers, then, is the power base in the family, and McClung presents in her a strong and decisive role model for her young female readers. If the centre of women's fiction may be defined as "how the heroine perceives herself" (Baym 19), one would conclude that Pearlie Watson possesses self-esteem from the beginning. Her active, practical, and down-to-earth character is never undermined by her romantic imagination, her quaint sayings, and her amusing Irish dialect.

Pearlie's outer behaviour is explained by the inner workings of her mind, revealed in musings with herself and in dialogue with others. As in McClung's early short stories, there is practically no external description of her. The only exceptions to this come in *The second chance* (1910), where McClung describes Pearlie at fifteen years of age as "tall and slight, and lithe and graceful in her movements, with pansy brown eyes and a smooth olive skin that neither sun nor wind could roughen,"[15] and in *Purple Springs* (1921), where Pearl at eighteen is further described as "a well-developed, tall, boyishly athletic girl with a color in her cheeks like an Okanagan peach, hair of richest brown, with little gleams of gold, waving back naturally from a high forehead; a firm chin with a dimple; and great brown eyes, full of lights, and with a dazzling brilliance that registered every thought of her brain and emotion of heart."[16] Nellie McClung as a young woman had only to look in a mirror to create these descriptions. The distinctively Canadian touch and the authentic details contrast

humourously with the younger Pearlie's conventional romance description of "Edythe."

The second chance and *Purple Springs* are better plotted, more coherent novels than *Sowing seeds in Danny*. Lacking the almost slapstick gusto of the first novel, the two latter books still exhibit much anti-romantic spoofing and social satire, and they show Pearlie as a developing character growing into a mature young woman.

Early in *The second chance* there is considerable mockery of the then-popular Delsarte method of elocution. In the annual WCTU recitations, a girl named Maudie Ducker describes with exaggerated gestures an elderly widow who has ended up in the poor house after her husband dies a drunkard and her son turns to crime. To indicate "the devil's winding stair... Maudie did a long waving sweep with three notches in it" and "scalloped the air three times evenly to indicate the down grade" (41). For Pearlie, "Old women wid their hearts just breakin' don't cut the figger eight in the air, and do the Dutch-roll, and kneel down and get up just for show – they're too stiff, for one thing.... Maudie... don't care a cent for the poor owld woman" (42). Pearlie, last among the contestants, wins a storm of applause – and the medal – for her realistic and natural evocation of a tragic old woman. More than one young elocutionist of the time must have quailed at this demonstration that elocution is "something more than gestures." Indeed, it was Nellie McClung's naturalness and simplicity that won great praise from every audience during her recital tours in the West and Ontario.

In *Purple Springs*, Pearl and Dr. Clay have agreed that he will propose to her on her eighteenth birthday. Clay discovers that he has tuberculosis and can't marry Pearl. Nor can he bring himself to speak of his disease. Pearl's hands may "tremble" and her face "go white", but she will not, like the heroines of sentimental novels, indulge in paroxysms of tears and cajoling, followed by a lengthy decline. More mature and down-to-earth, Pearl, like her author, "had always been scornful of the tears of lovelorn maidens" (60). Indeed, McClung was opposed to "intensely subjective stories, where the heroine is always spreading her feelings on the table and analyzing them and minutely describing them."[17]

There is also considerable social criticism – often in the form of satire – in both novels. In *The second chance* twenty-five year old Martha Perkins endures the humiliation of having to ask her father for two dollars to obtain a woman's magazine. He refuses, though she "might have reminded him that she was watering and feeding the stock, and saving the wages of a hired man" (4). Here McClung criticizes the economic dependence of women on men – a feminist attitude she maintained over many years. In *Purple Springs* Pearl is shown by McClung as progressive and feminist, with moral autonomy and independence of mind. She is drawn into the tragic situation of a woman whose husband practices vicious verbal abuse against her and is about to sell their

farm against her wishes and to remove her children from her. As a suffragist familiar with unjust laws made by men for men, Pearl is able to enlighten her friend on the laws of the land that fail to protect women. Non-feminist critics of McClung tend to denigrate such passages as didactic moralizing, when in fact they are notable instances of what today we call consciousness-raising.

Also in *Purple Springs*, after one of the men has absorbed Pearl's feminist attitudes to women, to the law in reference to women, and to their desire for woman suffrage, he tries to present Pearl's arguments to the Manitoba Premier. The Premier speaks as an all-knowing and world-weary father to an erring son:

> The world is very old; certain things are established by usage, and the very fact that this is so argues that it should be so. Women are weaker than men – I did not make them so – God made them so. He intended them to be subject to men.... It sounds well to talk about equality – but there's no such thing. It did not exist in God's mind, so why should we try to bring it about?... It would not do to make them independent in the eyes of the law, independent economically, if they were they would not marry. (222)

In contrast to this conventional, patriarchal attitude to women regarding woman suffrage, Pearl's fiancé simply wonders, "Why should any woman have to ask for what is her right?" (124).

Political satire is strong in *Purple Springs*, as this is Nellie McClung's novel about woman suffrage, reflecting the irrational arguments she herself experienced as a suffrage campaigner. In this novel the Premier (who has a "well-fed, complacent look, ...was satisfied with things as they were – and would be deeply resentful of change. It showed in his narrow, thought-proof head" [93]) and a Member of Parliament (who can't open his mouth without putting his foot in it) are a joint burlesque of Manitoba's Sir Rodmond Roblin.

Pearl is very conscious of the political issues of her day. Invited to speak at her old school before leaving to teach at Purple Springs, she gives essentially a suffrage talk. Word of it precedes her arrival in Purple Springs. There, the town is so threatened by her suffrage stance that none of the women will board her, and none will send their children to school to her. As McClung puts it, satirically, "If she had read the crochet patterns in the paper instead of the editorials and had spent her leisure moments making butterfly medallions for her camisoles, or in some other lady-like pursuit, instead of leaning over the well-worn railing around the gallery of the Legislative Assembly," she would not have come across to the women of Purple Springs as too forward and too threatening. Nellie McClung was hopeless at knitting and needlework at a time when these were female-approved pursuits. She frequently attacked women who confined their minds to such "lady-like" activities, and who rejected using their minds in areas narrowly considered to be male prerogatives in her day (228).

Pearl is finally taken to board at the home of Mrs. Gray, an outcast in Purple Springs because it is (falsely) rumoured that she is a single woman with an illegitimate child. "And now to Pearl, on whom the taboo of the neighbourhood had also fallen, there came the peace of mind which could set quietly at defiance the opinion of the little world which surrounded her" with all its pettiness and its mean-minded spirit (238-9). McClung shows by this that her expectation for a young women was to do "what she thinks is right, regardless of how it looks to the world" (Baym 74).

Near voting time, when the anti-feminist conservatives become "so boastful, so over-bearing, so childishly important, it seemed to [Pearl] that it would be easy to make them look ridiculous, and she often found herself framing replies for the opposition"(*PS* 78). She mimics the conventional, empty-headed speeches which the M.P. and Premier make, with all their anti-feminist clichés. A capacity for mimicry was also a well-known trait of Nellie McClung from childhood on. Pearl, like McClung in real life, is called upon by Winnipeg suffragists to take the role of the Premier in a burlesque Women's Parliament. In it, male and female roles are reversed: women make up the legislature, and men come with a wheelbarrow full of petitions asking for the vote. Pearl rises to the occasion in such a way that every gesture, every mood of the Premier is burlesqued: his paternalism, his facetious manner, his "playful, God-bless-you mood, ...magnetic appeal, ...biting sarcasm, and...rages.... A howl of recognition came from the audience, beginning in the Cabinet Ministers' box," much to the chagrin of a rotund man in dark glasses who, having paid a scalper's fee for admission, finds "the words, the voice, the gestures were as familiar as his own face in the glass....The people gasped with the audacity of it" (277, 286).

The famous Winnipeg Woman's Parliament, as described by McClung, is amusing for her fictive purpose. And although Premier Rodmond Roblin and his Cabinet Ministers are not known to have been present in actuality, much is gained fictionally by McClung's imaginative placing of them in the theatre. The picture she creates in *Purple Springs* is far more graphically drawn than the description of the historic scene in her autobiographical *The stream runs fast* (1945). Both the incident and the double response which the audience give to it are memorable. Indeed, the entire book is a vivid description of one phase of our cultural past as it occurred in the West, and is as valuable for the social historian as for the literary historian.

Nellie McClung's immigrant novel *Painted fires* (1925) would not have been considered children's literature in its day. It deals with wife battering, lust and attempted rape, opium addiction and an opium den. It is a devastating satire directed against the judicial system for its misogyny and vicious prejudice toward immigrants, an attack on the so-called reform system for women, and the social harm that can come from malicious gossip. Today's young readers are more accustomed to finding such material in fiction. McClung's portrait of a young immigrant mired in personal and social prob-

lems perhaps prepared the way for the franker brand of young adult novels acceptable and popular today.

Through idle gossip and malicious lies, the innocent Helmi Milander, a Finnish immigrant to western Canada, is sent to the women's reformatory, a hodge-podge of prostitutes, mental defectives, and unwed mothers. As K.P. Stich says, "Helmi's imprisonment gives McClung the first opportunity to attack Canadian guardians of law and order for their discrimination against women and foreigners."[18]

"For years," McClung said, "I had wanted to write an immigration story in the form of a novel. I wanted to portray the struggles of a young girl who found herself in Canada dependent upon her own resources with everything to learn, including the language."[19] McClung chose to write about a Finnish girl because of Finland's "advanced attitude to women. Finnish women received the vote and sat in parliament long before any other women, and I wondered about this and what quality of mind had brought it about." McClung also had a Finnish domestic at this time, who was able to assist her regarding Finnish traits. "I tried to put myself into the character of Helmi [who saw herself] in the land of freedom, romance, and easy money....'Painted fires' was the name I chose for the book...for I wanted to lay down a hard [anti-romantic] foundation of truth as to conditions in Canada" which were not congruent with the literature put out by immigrant agencies in Europe and which only led to "dark tragedy...for the deceived ones" (237-241).

Unlike other novelists who deal with the immigrant theme – Ralph Connor in *The foreigner* for instance – McClung offers, "not so much an overemphasis on the Canadianizing of the newcomer...but an emphasis on the 'Finnizing' of Canadian women" who, McClung states, should take an active role in social reform. It is also significant that McClung's immigrant heroine "has shaped her own Canada rather than adjusted to a traditional image of the Canadian social reality" (Stich 102, 124, 127).

McClung's satire is biting. The Board of the women's reformatory in Winnipeg – "the Girls' Friendly Home" – is entirely composed of men: clergymen and "that type of middle-aged portly gentlemen who are usually alluded to as 'solid business men.'"[20] The clergymen believe there should be a woman representative on the Board, but "it was felt that the presence of ladies might prove embarrassing. There were certain matters [such as unwed mothers and prostitution] that were best discussed by men alone – besides there was always danger of women being too emotional" (71-3). This is a stereotypical image of women as overwrought.

The first matron of the Home, Mrs. Avery, a wise and kindly woman, establishes controversial methods, unlocks the doors, sets aside the girls' mud-coloured uniforms, takes the girls to movies, concerts, and lectures. "She planned picnics, corn-roasts, and excursions, and indeed made the Home such a happy place that not one of the girls attempted to escape" (72). In her hands,

it is, indeed, a "Friendly home." At a Board meeting, she hears a member pointing out that there should be some difference in the way well-behaved girls and fallen girls are treated:

> Here the matron interrupted to ask him to retract the word 'fallen.' She gave the Board members positive chills by the things she said about the double standard of morals which was made by men to shield men, and went on to tell them that many of her girls were innocent young things from the country who had come to work in the city to help the family at home, and had fallen victims to men's lust and hypocrisy. The very men who led them astray, fathers of families, some of them, and regarded as respectable men in society, no doubt now spoke of these girls as 'fallen women.' ...Anyone can see from this what sort of woman this matron was and why the Board dismissed her. (72-3)

Curiously, in a piece on Judge Emily Murphy, a magistrate in the Edmonton women's court, McClung reports the Judge as saying, "If that man uses the word 'ruined' again I will not allow him in my court."[21]

After firing the enlightened and innovative Mrs. Avery, the "Friendly home" Board hires a man, Mr. Wymuth, who believes in hell and firm discipline, and also, "for appearance sake," a woman, Mrs. Wymuth who, he says, in a proper Victorian manner, "will be guided by me entirely." This grotesque pair of Dickensian hypocrites particularly pick on Helmi as a stubborn case: she has been convicted of obtaining opium but won't say for whom. Her "proud and forward spirit must be broken." One night, in exasperation Mr. Wymuth shakes Helmi, trying to shake her secret out of her:

> Something broke in Helmi's heart with sudden fury. It was that flashing temper for which her countrymen are noted.... She was a flaming fury, with murder in her eyes. She hurled Mr. Wymuth from her with a swinging blow that sent him crashing into the china cabinet, and the words she said were words she did not know she knew....'You go to hell!' (85)

According to Johan Aitken, "There must be some kind of killing, however symbolic or ritualistic" to effect the heroine's release in women's fiction, for, "once domesticated, it is difficult to learn to be free, to dare, or to remember how to be wild."[22] Mrs. Wymuth pretends that Helmi has killed her husband, so there is, in a sense, a symbolic murder, which releases Helmi from the Wymuths' hold over her.

Earlier in the novel, upon seeing wild canaries skimming about among caged canaries in the St.John's garden, Helmi muses, "'Cages bring safety; the open air held danger. There you are – choose'"(52). (There is a curious reprise here of the little "Tale of Willie Wolf.") Helmi rapturously chooses the freedom of the wild birds. The canary metaphor accords with feminist postulates: where "anatomy is destiny, ...typical metaphors for this determinism are a cage, or, more seductively, an enclosed garden, from which women try, often somewhat ambiguously, to escape" (Aitken 67). There is no ambiguity about Helmi's re-

bellion against stereotypical sex roles. While she is as physically strong as many men, Helmi is aware that, as a woman, she can't do everything that she wants. "Wasn't it provoking being a girl and not able to hit out for yourself – never able to step out and do big things, and here she was, working all day long for twenty-five dollars a month, while the poorest man in the mines had four dollars a day and only worked eight hours" (275). Equal wages for work of equal value is not so recent a concept!

When chased by two men, earlier in the novel, Helmi had braced herself and with a strong sudden blow sent one rolling down the bank of the road. She was then picked up by Miss Abbie, a woman who was driving home after telling a romantic fairy-tale to the inmates of the women's reformatory:

> Helmi had the quality Miss Abbie lacked; she was not afraid of anything.... All her life Miss Abbie had craved to be fearless and unconcerned about public opinion.... Miss Abbie had heard it put very wickedly once. It made her shudder at the time but it fascinated her too – 'So live that you can look the whole world in the face and tell it to go to – .' Miss Abbie could not even think the word. (25)

Miss Abbie wants to become – in spite of "years of careful puritanic living" – something like the mature Pearl Watson in *Purple Springs*, when she boarded at the home of the town outcast. Helmi, like Pearl – and like Johnny Rabbit and Willie the Wolf in the animal fables – has been hunted, but she is not finally trapped.

Painted fires is essentially an anti-romance. Helmi moves from the romantic illusion that North America, in comparison to Finland, is a paradisiacal garden. At the end of the novel, however, Helmi has moved east of Eden, and the garden she has created is a vegetable garden, worked over and sweated over. She earns money by selling vegetables to the miners' boarding house. She has also moved from the evils of a patriarchal authority system to a redeeming and nurturing matriarchal society. Away from the magistrates – one "florid-faced" and "fiery-looking," the other drunk and dissolute – and away from the black-eyed, pale, anaemic Mr. Wymuth, Helmi settles into her own house. She has her two-and-a-half-year-old daughter Lili with her, as well as a woman teacher who boards at her house. It is a life somewhat like that found by Pearl Watson and her friend in *Purple Springs*. Helmi's neighbours befriend her, and "the hearts of the women were knitted to Helmi's because she had a way of comforting in their troubles. There was strength in the touch of her hand and healing in her presence" (313-314).

It is assumed that Helmi's husband, Jack Doran, will fit into this society when he returns from the war, but Helmi's world, as determined by her, would exist whether Jack returns or not. Essentially, his return is irrelevant. McClung's position has shifted from a gentle spoofing of romance to an outright feminist position. The question, "Is there life after marriage?" has been answered by McClung in *Painted fires*, where the protagonist has married early

in the novel, and most of the story's action follows the marriage. In feminist fiction, "marriage no longer strikes the same note of finality in the story of a woman's life." At no time is Helmi referred to as Helmi Doran or as Mrs. Jack Doran, showing that she is not defined by her relationship to Jack as wife, or to little Lili as mother. She is an autonomous human being whose successful rise to power and riches marks her as female hero of her story, rather than as conventional heroine. When the female protagonist in women's fiction acquires economic and personal self-sufficiency, then it is clear that "the traditional rescuing function of the lover is denied him." (Aitken 50, 245; Baym 40).

Coincidence occasionally mars this story but it is a minor defect, for McClung has plotted her story well, with a series of hardships and misunderstandings that are realistically drawn in order to show the social forces which help or hinder Helmi's development from a naïve and romantic immigrant girl to a mature woman who has learned that chasing fabulous "painted fires" is a useless illusion. Helmi's is a constant battle for self-determination. In the end, like Pearlie Watson, Helmi refuses the feminine limitations that society would impose on her. She defies the patriarchal authority system and questions the secondary nature of being female.

These are the lessons of the novel, and even a young reader can assent to them because one can assent to Helmi, the central character. Her courage – which is partly rooted in her physical strength – her loyalty, her power of endurance which overcomes her despair and thoughts of suicide, and her unflagging hope and trust that all will come well in the end, are all traits called forth by events in the novel and strengthened as she matures.

Indeed, in *Painted fires*, "the failure of the world to satisfy either reasonable or unreasonable expectations awakens the heroine to inner possibilities. By the novel's end she has developed a strong conviction of her own worth. [This may be related to the idea of] the fortunate fall, showing that the woman cast out of childhood's garden of Eden has the opportunity to develop a truly noble moral and intellectual nature" (Baym 19). Helmi achieves this, like Pearl Watson, through the triumph of her feminine will. Again like Pearl Watson, she has learned to depend upon herself. "At the end of the novel [Helmi] is no longer an underdog.... The idea that a woman's identity or place in life is a function of her father's or her husband's place is firmly rejected, not merely on idealistic grounds but also on realistic grounds" (Baym 19-20). In this, Helmi reflects the quality of Nellie McClung's marriage to Wes McClung.

Feminist critics have identified "five functions literature must perform in order to be identifiably feminist. It must serve as a forum for women, help to achieve cultural androgyny, promote role models, promote sisterhood, and augment consciousness-raising" (Baym 32). Indeed, for young readers of either sex, fiction that serves these five functions offers a valuable corrective to the falsities of sentimental romance. McClung's *Painted fires* succeeds in all five of these areas. The Pearlie Watson trilogy succeeds in a few. In their day, they

brought young readers news "that alters our way of interpreting things." The two young protagonists shape their own destiny and act more than they are acted on. They rebel against everything that constrains or humiliates them in a time and place where men were expected to do and women were expected to be. For them, to be is to do, "to steer one's course rather than to drift" (Baym 19-20). Quite often, in women's fiction, the term "sentimental" "is used to imply that a work elevates feeling above all else," whereas women writers at the turn of the century – and McClung was no exception – "repeatedly...exalt heroines who have as much will and intelligence as emotion. Merely to feel strongly is to be at the mercy of oneself and others; it is to be self-absorbed and passive. [Such fiction refused to say that] women had to be victims" (Baym 24-25).

In the late 1930s, McClung sought out Joseph Menchen, a "Play broker" of Los Angeles, in an attempt to secure dramatic scripts for *Sowing seeds in Danny* and *Painted fires* in the hope that movies would be made of them. Menchen passed the two books on to a Mr. Wurtzel at 20th Century-Fox, suggesting Sonja Henie for Helmi's role, and either Shirley Temple or Jane Withers for Pearlie Watson. A new child star, Johnnie Russell, was suggested for Danny Watson. Wurtzel, however, wanted the role of Danny built up for Johnnie Russell, and on two separate occasions Menchen's writers attempted the job but he decided "as it now reads, [it] does not do justice to your book."[24] He forwarded the script to McClung in the hope that she would write a version "highlighted as only you could do it." Apparently, no movie script was attempted for *Painted fires*. The prospect must have excited McClung, but there is nothing to suggest that she worked on a movie script for either story.

Even if her work was never transcribed to that other medium, Nellie McClung as a writer of fiction reached and affected an international audience. She offered, as Cora Hind said in reviewing *Sowing seeds in Danny*, "not the romantic, the novel, the dramatic side of western life, all of which has been portrayed many times, but the everyday home life that has gone to build up the great Canadian West, the life of the farm and the village."[24] Indeed, Cora Hind's comment applies to all McClung's fiction: it is "pre-eminently sane and true to life." Her blend of regional comedy with social and political satire, and her feminist assault on debilitating sentimental romance can still initiate young readers into some of the complex and liberating pleasures of fiction.

NOTES

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2 "Some Humorous Sketches," rev. of *Sowing seeds in Danny* , *The Canadian Courier* 15 August 1908, Public Archives of Canada (PAC).
3 W.H. Withrow, letters to Nellie McClung (NLM), 4 Nov. 1907, 16 Dec. 1907, 12 Nov. 1907, McClung Papers, 10 (1), Provincial Archives of British Columbia (PABC).
4 "The tale of William Wolf," McClung Papers, 24 (1), typescript, (PABC).
5 "The ungrateful pigeons" in *The Black Creek stopping house* (Toronto: Briggs, 1912) (NLM).

6 Mary E. Hallett and Marilyn Davis, *Firing the heather: The life and times of Nellie McClung* (in press).
7 "The Perils of heroism," handwritten MS, n.d. McClung Papers, 22 (1), (PABC).
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12 Susan Jackel, "The House on the Prairies," *Canadian Literature* 42 (Autumn 1969): 46-55.
13 Clifford Geortz, as quoted in Carol Fairbanks, *Prairie women: Images in American and Canadian fiction* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1986) 31.
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15 *The second chance* (New York: Doubleday, 1910) 220.
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17 The Lorne Pierce Collection, #2001 a Box 1 (1), item 2. Queen's University Archives.
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19 *The stream runs fast* (Toronto: Allen, 1945) 237.
20 *Painted fires* (New York: Dodd, Mead, 1925) 71.
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22 Johan Lyall Aitken, *Masques of morality: Females in fiction* (Toronto: 1987) 66.
23 Joseph Menchen letter to Nellie McClung, McClung Papers, 12 (9), (PABC).
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