

of millions of people, and was, indeed, a "triumph over winter" (135).

The brief summary above makes clear the importance of Carpenter's nine Canadian inventors. They were key architects of the twentieth century; their influence was global as well as national. We should know about their contributions and we should understand something of their lives. Thomas Carpenter makes this an easy task. His book is well-researched, accessible to young readers, and interesting to people of all ages. *Inventors: Profiles in Canadian genius* makes an important contribution to the knowledge of our heritage and is highly recommended.

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#### EARLY NOVEL HAS NOT SURVIVED ITS AGE

**St. Ursula's convent, or The nun of Canada.** Julia Catherine Beckwith Hart. Ed., Douglas G. Lochhead. [Centre for Editing Early Canadian Texts Series, 8.] Carleton University Press, 1991. 237 pp., \$12.95 paper. ISBN 0-88629-140-2.

Shortly after it was published in 1824 one reviewer found *St. Ursula's convent* to be "a heterogeneous account of shipwrecks, battles, slavery in the mines, changing children, the atrocity of an avaricious friar, &c." (xxvii); another, lamenting the misery of "the tedious labour, the hard task of reading through, and the still harder one of keeping awake while reading, the dull, the namby-pamby, and common place pages" of innumerable novels such as this one (xxviii), thought that *St. Ursula's convent* might, despite all its flaws and excesses, appeal to juvenile readers, whom he couldn't resist associating with "the sickly meridian of circulating libraries, and the depraved taste of maiden aunts, and boarding-house misses." Unfortunately, the opinion of the first reviewer was well founded: this novel has not improved over the 170 years since it was written. Unfortunately, too, the second reviewer is certainly now wrong in the more generous part of his judgement: Julia Hart's tale, apparently the first truly Canadian work of fiction, is very unlikely to hold much appeal for younger readers today.

The value of *St. Ursula's convent* is entirely historical, as a sort of musty landmark in Canadian literature. The value of the present edition of this work lies in the labour which Douglas Lochhead has put into a learned study of the text, its author and the circumstances of its creation. To the scholarly reader the volume offers an interesting introduction and evaluation, together with 37 pages of end matter consisting of notes, bibliographical data, textual emenda-

tions and a list of subscribers to the original editions.

However, despite the historic literary interest that *St. Ursula's convent* may hold, it is no longer really apt to interest the modern juvenile reader, even the young adult reader. Its plot is more crammed with improbably convoluted developments than a committee of soap opera writers could imagine; the swarm of characters remain undelineated, but tears (from innumerable deaths, separations, rediscoveries) still flow liberally on alternate pages; the world of these "Scenes from real life" (part of the book's subtitle) seems populated almost exclusively by counts, lords, marquis, earls, baronets, colonels, chevaliers and *vicomtesses*, English and French, who for some reason all know and visit one another at a whim, and who flit back and forth across the Atlantic with as much nonchalance as a modern reader might cross town. In short, the plot has virtually nothing to do with reality. In elaborating the incredible complexities of her plot the author depends upon narratives within narratives to such an extent that this reader was tempted on occasion to stop worrying what these obscure subsidiary stories might eventually have to do with the central plot. It all became a bit too much.

Julia Hart's style is that of the early 1800s, elegant and literate, occasionally ponderous, often, as in the dialogue, at the expense of realism: every individual in this confusing assemblage of relatives and acquaintances, whether count, Jesuit or nursemaid, expresses himself or herself with the same refined and abstract language: it is not too helpful to have the heroine confess that, between the ages of twelve and fifteen, she "plunged headlong into the vortex of dissipation"; or, at what must pass for an emotional climax of the book, for the distraught lover to pour out his feelings in these terms: "...Permit me to inform you, too charming lady, that, although I had conceived for you a passion as lasting as it was violent, yet, hearing you were affianced to another, who was doubtless the object of your choice, I resolved not to disturb the serenity of your bosom by declaring my hopeless passion, but confine it to my own heart, though that heart, where your image so imperiously reigns, should break." The reader who, like the second reviewer quoted above, succeeds in staying awake from episode to episode, from coincidence to coincidence, is rewarded only with the realization that the principal narrator is not really interesting, and that the best that can be said of her tale is that it is perhaps worthy of her.

The editor argues that Julia Hart's novel should be examined seriously "as a story written to edify and to entertain a juvenile audience" (xxxiii). That may well have been an intention in 1824; this edition does provide literary historians with ample matter for scholarly investigation along that line. For younger readers today, though, edification and entertainment have come a long way since 1824.

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