Janice Fiamengo. *The Woman's Page: Journalism and Rhetoric in Early Canada*. Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2008. 256 pp.; \$25.95
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An important new book by Janice Fiamengo examines the “intellectual ferment, questing spirit, rhetorical assertiveness, and moral confidence that marked women’s reformist writing in the last two decades of the nineteenth century and the first two decades of the twentieth, when a significant number of Canadian women began to speak publicly on questions affecting the nation” (4). The great accomplishment of this generation of authors is not simply that they made themselves heard, but that they found a way to put women at the very centre of public discourse – a position they had not enjoyed before and would lose again for much of the twentieth century. This well-written book explores the means by which these pioneering social reformers managed to claim public attention.

Fiamengo’s method demonstrates a broad scholarly approach to early Canadian culture, one that envisions “a multifaceted, historically grounded inquiry that pays attention to details of language and considers the manifold relationships between writers, texts, their audiences, and the social and institutional contexts of literature” (216). Avoiding the question of literary merit and focusing on the question of public influence, Fiamengo selects several of the most prominent authors of the period and she examines their rhetoric in relation to three interrelated modes of thought: maternal feminism, Christian doctrine, and social reform. Today, some of these authors are better known for their fiction or poetry but Fiamengo focuses on the frequently overlooked journalistic writing by or about these women. Such writing regularly addressed the major issues of the day and, although it was often relegated to the woman’s page, Fiamengo demonstrates that its influence should not be underestimated.

In a detailed chapter on each author, the rhetoric of Agnes Maule Machar (1837–1927), Sara Jeannette Duncan (1861–1922), E. Pauline Johnson (1861–1913), Kathleen Blake Coleman (1856–1915), Flora MacDonald Denison (1867–1921), and Nellie L. McClung (1873–1951) is examined in an attempt to illuminate each writer’s self-construction and her use of persuasive strategies. Fiamengo demonstrates that the implications of Machar’s “earnest, theologically orthodox social gospel” (209) has not been appreciated by scholars. She traces the wide range of subjects which invited Duncan’s ironic and amused scorn, revealing that nothing was sacred, including both the sacred

and the feminist, especially when they were expressed with stale or overly ponderous language. Fiamengo shows that Coleman's advice column, "one of the most widely read features in the whole newspaper industry" (121), resisted the social conventions of the day even while it helped to define the journalistic conventions of a new format. She argues that Denison's radical feminism (more connected to the militant suffragettes in Britain than with Canadian suffragists) is best imagined as a kind of holy war in which women's suffrage is figured as a powerful corrective to widespread injustice. While Machar, Duncan, Coleman, and Denison were pioneering journalists, both Johnson and McClung delivered their most effective social interventions as platform performers. Fiamengo uses newspaper reports to reconstruct both the content of and the audience response to platform performances by both Johnson and McClung. This method allows Fiamengo to bring greater clarity to scholarly debates about Johnson's reception and legacy. It also reveals the dexterity with which McClung both challenged and rehabilitated anti-feminist language for her own purposes in her own feminist rhetoric.

Resisting readings that measure early authors by more modern ideals, Fiamengo's analysis of the linguistic awareness and ideological positioning of her subjects is balanced and sensible. Acknowledging that these women did not always challenge the norms of their time in a way which satisfies contemporary feminists, Fiamengo reveals that their moments of accommodation are not always what they appear to be, indeed, that many of these moments may be best understood, in the context of larger reformist rhetorical strategies, as tactical retreats. Seeking "neither to praise nor to blame" her subjects, Fiamengo asserts that "[a]s with any widespread movement, social reform partook of the complexities and tensions of the society from which it sprang, in some ways forward-looking and hopeful; in others, conservative and fearful" (26). Despite such limitations, these women extended their own influence beyond traditionally female spheres into a range of fields, including politics, history, and theology. In doing so, their skilled rhetoric claimed new authority for women in the public sphere. The book will convince readers that this group of authors deserves a greater place in Canadian social and print history.

LINDA QUIRK

Queen's University