
When I heard that Carole Gerson was bringing out a book entitled Canadian Women in Print, 1750–1918, I wished that I had been able to read it before submitting the final version of my book manuscript. Gerson is the kind of meticulous front-line researcher – veteran of archives and databases, hunter-down of obscure and illuminating facts – that ordinary literary scholars both revere and rely upon: few can research so thoroughly and interpret so ably. In her latest book, she has written what amounts to the first book-length history (representative rather than comprehensive) of the material practices and publishing strategies of Canadian women to 1918. She does not create a single unified chronology but instead follows various strands in succeeding chapters. The result is a must-read for all students of women’s writing in Canada: as useful for its clarifying generalizations as for its effective marshalling and analysis of details, Canadian Women in Print demonstrates why Gerson has been, ever since the publication of A Purer Taste in 1989, such an important scholar in Canadian literary and book history studies.

Canadian Women in Print analyzes various dimensions of women’s relations to print culture, ranging from their work in the printing and binding of books to their success in finding appropriate publishing venues. Religious conviction often inspired authorship, including the earliest devotional and historical writing by Catholic nuns in New France, translations of the Bible by Mohawk, Métis, and Cree women converts, and missionary reports for home congregations by Baptist, Presbyterian, Methodist, and other foreign missionaries. No less evangelical were the purposes of the many women who wrote school textbooks, temperance articles, domestic manuals, and moral tales for children. But as early as the late eighteenth century in the Maritimes, and slightly later in Upper and Lower Canada, cultural as much as spiritual and social revival motivated women to publish
or circulate their poetry, found literary journals (often short-lived), and record their experiences of travel or settlement. The opening of newspapers to women columnists in the last two decades of the nineteenth century, and women’s increased participation in the suffrage and related reform movements, led many more into print – a few to realize dreams of financial and popular success.

In addition to charting these various forms of women’s involvement in print culture, Gerson is particularly compelling in tracing the material realities of their publishing lives, including the terms of their contracts, how much they were paid, and the number who made a decent living. The vast majority of women writers (like their male counterparts) paid the production costs of their books and never profited financially from them. But there were notable exceptions, particularly those who were able and willing to take advantage of the rewards offered by the American literary market: May Agnes Fleming, for example, was a writer of sensational fiction who made more than $10,000 per year by supplying the American popular press in the 1860s and 1870s. In discussing “the business of a woman’s life,” as the chapter on money is titled, Gerson is at her most fascinating. We learn, for example, of how Susanna Moodie, disadvantaged by both distance and gender, seems to have been paid substantially less for her popular Roughing It in the Bush than were both Anna Brownell Jameson, for a one-volume art book, and Moodie’s own brother, Samuel Strickland, for Twenty-Seven Years in Canada West. L.M. Montgomery continued to publish poems in magazines, earning on average only a few dollars per poem at a time when her fiction was making her rich, because she believed herself a poet. Just how lucrative the American market could be is made clear in the fact that American sales of Anne of Green Gables were “twenty-three times the Canadian sales in 1908, eleven and a half times the Canadian sales in 1909, and more than twelve times the Canadian sales in 1910 and 1911” (101). Even considering that her unscrupulous publisher managed to prevent her from profiting from the film rights to Anne (which he sold to Hollywood for $40,000), Montgomery achieved a level of financial reward that few could match. Many women financed their own books to pull themselves out of penury, sometimes with disastrous results: the best-known example is Isabella Valancy Crawford’s attempt to sell her poetry by subscription, a common practice throughout the nineteenth century. It did not work with Old Spookses’ Pass, which sold only 50 copies for fifty cents each. It did, on the other hand, prove successful for Sara McDonald, who had no trouble selling the first
five thousand copies of *Sabra, or the Adopted Daughter*, which went through three more printings. These are only a few of the fascinating details that fill *Women in Print*.

Gerson makes clear that her study is a survey of varieties of print contexts rather than a literary analysis of her authors’ words. In the case of writers such as Moodie and Sara Jeannette Duncan, whose major works are comparatively well known, this is an effective, justifiable strategy; substantial discussion of content would have detracted from the arguments about publishing and markets. But occasionally it is a shame not to be informed about an obscure book’s content, as when Gerson regrets the dearth of information available about the author of *A Peep at the Esquimaux* (1825), a book of poetry for young readers by “A Lady.” A few sentences or more on the book itself – and the same is true for other titles – would have been welcome. Gerson’s tracking of gender bias in the critical establishment would also have been strengthened by more detailed analysis of content and quality. It is not entirely convincing to be informed that Madge Macbeth’s *Shackles* has been “undervalued because of the gender of [its] author” (88) without such analysis. But to regret that there is not more of the author’s always worthwhile interpretations and informed argument is to suggest the excellence of what is here: abundant details, original research, helpful summations, and the fruit of the author’s deep knowledge of the field. I am disappointed that the physical book (paper, reproductions, and copy-editing) does not do justice to the first-rate contents.

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Although not a descriptive bibliography in the strict sense of the term, this book partly fills a long-standing void by ably presenting the authors’ many years of searching out and establishing those details that will allow collectors of L.M. Montgomery’s books to determine whether they have found a genuine first edition (i.e., first impression). As the authors note in their foreword, when they compare the use of this book to that of the *Peterson’s Field Guide to the Birds* series,