‘Tiny anarchic guerrillas’ PAGE 11

LRC
LITERARY REVIEW OF CANADA

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PASHA MALLA

That’s Not Funny!

CanLit’s humour deficit

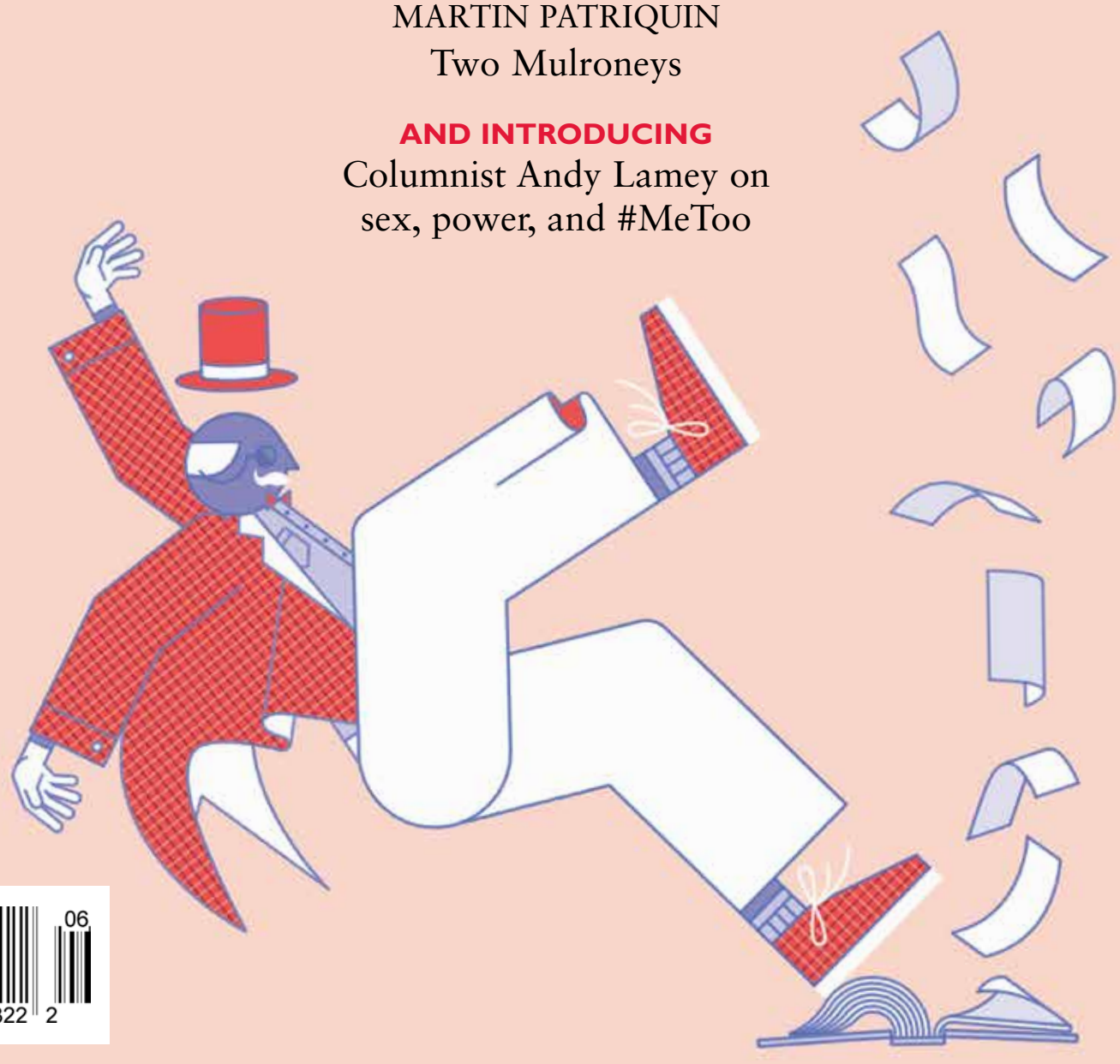
PLUS

LEANNE BETASAMOSAKE SIMPSON
& DIONNE BRAND
The Art of Unsettling

MARTIN PATRIQUIN
Two Mulroneys

AND INTRODUCING

Columnist Andy Lamey on
sex, power, and #MeToo



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Illustrations by **Meaghan Way.** Meaghan Way is an illustrator based in Toronto. She loves architecture, sculpture, set design, bold colours, and layered textures. Her work has been recognized by the Society of Illustrators, 3×3, and Applied Arts; her clients include *Vice*, Samsung, Frank + Oak, Canon, and Droga5.

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Sisterhood of the Secret Pantaloons

Suffragists and their descendants

Susan Whitney

One Hundred Years of Struggle: The History of Women and the Vote in Canada
Joan Sangster
UBC Press
328 pages, hardcover
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Just Watch Us: RCMP Surveillance of the Women's Liberation Movement in Cold War Canada
Christabelle Sethna and Steve Hewitt
McGill-Queen's University Press
318 pages, hardcover
ISBN 9780773552821

Feminism's second wave was as underestimated by authorities as its first.
'NEW FEMINISTS ABORTION CARAVAN' (1970), BY JAC HOLLAND / TORONTO TELEGRAM. COURTESY YORK UNIVERSITY

At this point in history, women have governed six Canadian provinces; Beverley McLachlin presided over the Supreme Court for eighteen critical years; Chrystia Freeland serves as minister of foreign affairs and negotiator-in-chief to Donald Trump's America; and the prime minister proclaims himself a feminist. It can be hard, then, to imagine—or remember—just how long Canadian women had to battle for that most basic of political rights, the vote. Joan Sangster's *One Hundred Years of Struggle* jolts us back into women's often grim historical reality, reminding us that the political rights that we often take for granted today were keenly opposed in years past.

Timed to coincide with the centennial of the 1918 law granting women the right to vote in federal elections, this is the first major study of women's suffrage in decades, as well as the most comprehensive. The lead volume in a series on the subject, it takes a national perspective on a deeply regionalized effort. (The regional and Indigenous suffrage campaigns will be taken up by other authors in six subsequent volumes.) Sangster aims to tell a story that speaks to twenty-first century readers, many of whom have lost confidence in the vote's power as a political tool.

There were some narrative challenges in achieving that aim. Middle- and upper-class suffragists often held views of Indigenous peoples, black Canadians, non-British immigrants, the poor, social reform, drinking, and eugenics that are out of step with present-day sensibilities. Moreover, the Canadian movement was, as suffrage movements go, a pretty tame affair. There were no defiant mass marches; no disruptions of all-male political meetings; no women chaining themselves to gates; no hunger strikes; no burning of slogans such as "Votes for Women" into the putting greens of beloved golf courses. As Sangster admits midway through the book, "Canadians who wanted to embrace militancy…were better off moving to Britain."

Sangster, one of Canada's pre-eminent historians of women, confronts these challenges by approaching women's suffrage from a new angle, going back in time all the way to the eighteenth century, as well as according non-white women a central place in the narrative. Along the way, the book brings to life such women as Isabella Macdonald, who, while pregnant, led a group of rebellious P.E.I. farmers against an armed tax collector in 1833, and the American-born socialist Margaret Haile, who had the temerity to run for the Ontario legislature in 1902.

As it happens, being female had not always disqualified women from voting in Canada. After representative assemblies were established in colonial Canada, the vote was restricted to those who met a certain property threshold. Property owners had a greater stake in society, the thinking went, and thus could be trusted to vote responsibly. Nothing specifically prohibited women from voting, and so a smattering of property-owning women cast their votes in early elections, which were public affairs often held in alcohol-fuelled settings and which lasted days. Fake votes and bribes were common occurrences, and hired thugs not unheard of. Not surprisingly, the elections' very raucousness became justification for excluding the so-called gentler sex. Despite the limited number of women who went to the polls and the unremarkable results of their doing so, the provinces and the Province of Canada both moved by the mid nineteenth century to prohibit women from voting, in what historians, Sangster included, view as a masculinization of politics.

That women were prohibited from voting did not stop them from becoming politically active. They wrote for journals, lobbied friends and family, participated in popular protests, circulated petitions, worked behind the scenes in political parties, and became active in trade unions. The right to vote emerged only gradually as a central feminist demand, in part because nineteenth-century women faced so many other, more pressing inequities. In fact, the first woman to receive Sangster's sustained attention, Mary Ann Shadd Cary, was little interested in the vote. Shadd Cary arrived in Ontario in 1851 as part of the wave of black American emigration following passage of the 1850 *Fugitive Slave Act* (which gave slave owners virtually unlimited power in hunting down escaped slaves), and returned to the United States after the death of her husband, in 1860. While in Canada, this teacher-turned-journalist used the pages of her paper, the *Provincial Freeman*, to publicize the ideas and activities of American abolitionist women, whose work on behalf of slaves had led them to the discovery of their own bondage. At mid century, these American feminists campaigned for women's access to education, the right of married women to control their earnings, and women's right to custody of their children in the case of divorce. Canadian women took up these issues, soon making some gains. In 1871, for instance,

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married women gained the right to own land in their own names in Manitoba.

Sangster embeds ideas about race into her history of the vote from the outset. Of course, the black-white racial divide that dominated Mary Ann Shadd Cary's native land did not pertain in Canada, even if Canada never proved the utopia for escaped slaves and other black residents depicted in Heritage Minutes. By the time elected officials began in earnest to consider extending the vote to women in the late nineteenth century, Indigenous men comprised the largest group of unenfranchised men. In 1885, two years after receiving a petition requesting the vote from a Toronto suffrage group, prime minister John A. Macdonald introduced a bill that would enfranchise a limited number of property-holding Indigenous men and white women. Opponents catalogued the horrors that would surely result from women voting. One Quebec MP foretold "indescribable trouble and social disorder" while others warned that suffragists secretly wanted to "wear the pantaloons." At the same time, Canada's two main political parties portrayed Indigenous peoples, in Sangster's words, as "lower down on the scale of social and political development" than white Canadians and lacking the "education, ability, experience, or inclination to engage in politics." For their part, Indigenous leaders were divided on the benefits of franchise, with many fearing the loss of treaty rights—understandable given that the federal *Indian Act* allowed Indigenous men to become "enfranchised" as British subjects, but only if they gave up their Indian status. Meanwhile, white suffragists shared the racist views of men of their class.

Sangster, who has written extensively on labour history, is sensitive to the role played by class in suffrage politics. Although property-based qualifications declined in importance by century's end, class divisions continued to mark and divide women. As Sangster reminds us, middle- and upper-class women were able to devote their time and energy to suffrage and other reform causes precisely because working-class women were busy performing their domestic labour for them. Some working-class women nevertheless became involved in the Socialist Party of Canada or joined utopian socialist communities, such as the one established by Finnish socialists on Malcolm Island, off the coast of B.C. These women have been traditionally excluded from suffrage histories, but Sangster demonstrates how they often combined paid labour with militant advocacy for a range of causes, including suffrage, and joined socialist men in puzzling over the reasons for women's inequality. In the process, they pushed the limits of femininity in ways not always matched by middle- and upper-class white women.

Canada's vast size and low population density, cultural and linguistic divisions, and varying political practices all prevented the development of a centralized movement—and complicate any organizational analysis now. Instead, Sangster takes a more thematic approach. The two chapters devoted to suffragists explore, for instance, how suffragists brought their ideas to life in the cultural realm, providing a lively tour of the mock parliaments, plays, novels, posters, cartoons, and films produced by the international suffrage movement. In these early days of advertising and consumer culture, suffragists used billboards, sandwich boards, and all manner of paraphernalia (suffrage dolls, hats, pins, dishes, salt and pepper shakers) to embed their cause in the fabric of daily life. The goal was not only to persuade outsiders, but to forge an emotional bond between the women, to create what Sangster describes as "a deep and abiding feeling for suffrage." This commitment provided protective armour against the insults often rained down on them from some of the era's most celebrated cultural figures. Stephen Leacock put his talents to work ridiculing suffrage and its supporters, while Charlie Chaplin donned women's clothes to mock British suffragettes in the film *The Militant Suffragette*.

But there were men who played pivotal assisting roles. Suffragists did not need Sheryl Sandberg to tell them how important a supportive husband could be to a woman's success—all the more so in a political system where women could not directly represent themselves. James Hughes, chief inspector of the Toronto School Board, husband of feminist and pioneer kindergarten educator Adeline Hughes, and founder of the Men's League for Women's Suffrage, exemplified those men who made a difference by speaking, writing, and agitating for suffrage. Hughes was such a supporter of the cause that he gave his daughter Laura a lifetime suffrage membership on her eighteenth birthday.

In the end, it was the First World War that created the immediate conditions for women getting the vote. Starting in 1916, women began to win the vote in provincial legislatures, with the Prairie provinces leading the way. In September 1917, the *Wartime Elections Act* allowed women with close relatives serving overseas, as well as soldiers' widows, to vote in federal elections. According to Sangster, this "tore the suffragist and women's reform organizations apart," heightening tensions between pacifists and war supporters, sharpening the French-English divide, and fracturing the various ideological strains within the movement. The federal *Act to Confer the Electoral Franchise upon Women*, which granted the vote to women who were British subjects over the age of twenty-one, followed in 1918.

In the book's remaining pages, Sangster analyzes the uses to which white women put their new political weapon; describes how Quebec women captured the vote provincially; and demonstrates how racially based exclusions finally gave way to enfranchisement for all Canadians after the Second World War. It was not until 1960 that all Indigenous people were allowed to vote in federal elections without having to give up their legal status as "Indians."

If winning the vote in 1918 was the culmination of what came to be seen as first-wave feminism, a second wave of feminism washed over North America in the 1960s. Begun at the end of the decade by female university students frustrated with their treatment in the era's student movements, the women's liberation branch of the movement aligned itself with other 1960s global movements of the left. Christabelle Sethna and Steve Hewitt's *Just Watch Us* provides some wonderful glimpses of women's liberation, though the RCMP's surveillance of this cohort is the book's central focus. Combining their expertise in women's history (Sethna) and the Canadian security state (Hewitt), the authors have much to say about the biased, misguided, and ultimately unnecessary surveillance to which the young feminists were subjected.

The RCMP and its security service do not come off well in this account. A preserve of white men, the Cold War-era RCMP was obsessed by the threat of communism. For Sethna and Hewitt, this obsession distorted both how the RCMP's security service understood threats to national security and how informants and intelligence officers interpreted the individuals and activities they were spying on. The RCMP surveilled the women's liberation movement not because its agents viewed the movement as a particular security threat, but rather because they were concerned that the feminists were vulnerable to infiltration by so-called subversives intent on overthrowing the state. For the authors, the "red-tinged prism" came together with assumptions about appropriate female behaviour to cause the RCMP to miss what was truly radical about women's liberation and downplay the legitimate security threats the movement sometimes posed.

This risk is on vivid display in the lively chapter on the Abortion Caravan of 1970. Organized by the Vancouver Women's Centre, the caravan journeyed to Ottawa to protest the 1969 law prohibiting abortion except in cases where the mother's life was at risk. Led by a Volkswagen bus with a black coffin strapped to its roof, symbolizing women who had died from illegal abortions, the caravan made its way east at a pace of roughly three hundred miles a day, trailed by Mounties in unmarked cars and the occasional local policeman. Each night, the women performed guerrilla theatre and held a public meeting to publicize their cause. Upon arriving in Ottawa, they held a large rally on Parliament Hill. At one point, roughly half of the crowd, an estimated two hundred and fifty women, took off in the direction of 24 Sussex Drive to demand a meeting with the PM, who, unbeknownst to them, was at his summer residence on Harrington Lake. At 24 Sussex, the women overwhelmed the eight guards and three policemen guarding the west entrance and made their way onto the grounds. Eventually the women were allowed to leave their coffin there if they agreed to leave peacefully. One gave an impromptu speech over the coffin, explaining how the objects deposited there—Lysol, garbage bags, knitting needles, and a vacuum hose—were used in illegal abortions. According to one participant, the guards "turned green at the gills."

The next day, adopting the time-honored female activist's disguise of dressing like a respectable, middle-class woman to escape police notice, twenty-five young women accessed the public galleries in the House of Commons on forged passes. Taking inspiration from the British suffragettes, they chained themselves to their chairs using bicycle locks. At three o'clock, the contingent stood to denounce the abortion law. One woman threw a water bomb, which landed near the prime minister's empty chair. Another managed to take over the simultaneous translation system and used it to broadcast her speech to the House. According to the authors, the House was suspended for the first time in its history.

The authors astutely situate their analysis of this type of surveillance within current discussions of racially biased law enforcement, the treatment meted out to women brave enough to join the RCMP once it began accepting women in 1974, and twenty-first century surveillance overreach in liberal democratic states. That the RCMP was spying on the first women's studies courses at McGill and the University of Toronto is eye-opening to say the least (though it would have been helpful had Sethna and Hewitt uncovered more evidence of how this surveillance affected those who ended up in RCMP files). The authors nicely document the police force's perplexity when faced with the feminists' leaderless organizations and performances of guerrilla theatre. They are persuasive in arguing that the men of the RCMP security service—not unlike the men opposing the suffragists—simply did not take the women's liberationists terribly seriously. The gendered assumptions they brought to their duties often caused them to miss the remarkable work that was really going on. LRC