ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

Each year, Women's History Month is celebrated across Canada as a way of publicly recognizing the achievements of women as a vital part of our Canadian heritage. It is also a means of encouraging greater awareness among Canadians concerning the historical contributions of women to our society.

For 2000, the Manitoba Women's Directorate focused on the many talented Manitoba women who write. This initiative, IN THEIR OWN WORDS: A CELEBRATION OF MANITOBA WRITERS recognized the achievements and contributions of Manitoba women writers to our province from a historic, economic and cultural perspective. It also encouraged people to appreciate their work for the combination of imagination, knowledge and skillful use of words.

The Directorate worked with three partners – Doreen Millin, of the Arts Branch, Manitoba Culture, Heritage and Tourism; Shelley Sweeney and Jan Horner of the University of Manitoba Libraries, Archives and Special Collections; and Kathleen Darby and Robin Maharaj of the Winnipeg International Writers Festival.

The initiative included the commissioning of an essay, Manitoba Borders: Women Writing Over the Line, authored by Shelley Sweeney and Jan Horner. The essay, a historical overview of ten Manitoba women writers, was presented at an Opening Reception in October, 2000 at the Manitoba Legislative Building, along with readings from four contemporary women authors, as part of the Opening Event of the Writers Festival. Shelley and Jan also produced a historical display, featuring personal artifacts of the ten women. The display was open for public viewing in the Legislative Building, for the month of October, 2000.

Shelley Sweeney is the head of Archives and Special Collections at the University of Manitoba. Her department’s collections include a manuscript research collection emphasizing western Canadian prairie literature and agriculture. She is currently near completion of a Doctorate in Archival Studies with the university of Texas (Austin).
Jan Horner is the Coordinator of Collections Management at the University of Manitoba Libraries. She has an M.A. in English Literature. In addition, she has published three volumes of poetry and is a past winner of the McNally - Robinson Book of the Year Award.

The Directorate acknowledges the valuable contributions of these individuals and organizations who helped to make this initiative a success. Thank you to everyone!

Introduction

Manitoba has a long tradition of women writing in Manitoba of which it can be justly proud. But these women have had to struggle against social conventions in their careers, the themes of their writing, their politics, and their sexuality. They crossed both geographic and symbolic borders to write over the line. Ten authors have been selected from Manitoba’s history to represent these women writers. The selection includes journalists, novelists, poets, editors, and playwrights. They reflect in their origins many of the ethnic groups in Manitoba such as the Franco-Manitoban, Scots-Irish, Jewish, Icelandic, and Ukrainian communities. We have grouped them into three generations: the Pioneers, the Literary Founders, and the Third Wave.

The Pioneers:  
Francis Marion Beynon, E. Cora Hind, Nellie McClung

Born around the time of the creation of the province of Manitoba, it is not surprising that these three women, Francis Marion Beynon, E. Cora Hind, and Nellie McClung, were pioneers in every sense of the word. All three, as well as Beynon’s sister Lillian Beynon Thomas, were deeply involved in the suffragette movement, pursuing the right to vote for women. They wrote a satirical play about the Conservative Roblin government entitled "Women’s Parliament." The play, or burlesque, was first performed at the Walker Theatre in Winnipeg, and featured McClung as the Premier. The play raised both money and awareness for the suffragettes and enabled them to campaign against the government. Although not successful in defeating the Conservatives in the 1914 election, the Conservative government fell the following year due to the Legislative Building scandal, and in 1916 the newly elected Liberal government granted full suffrage to women in Manitoba, the first province in Canada to do so.

These authors broke new ground in the labour market as well. They were employed in areas traditionally reserved for men. Hind ran her own typewriting bureau and became an agricultural reporter and crop predictor. Beynon taught briefly but soon moved to Winnipeg where she worked at Eaton’s in the advertising department, one of the first women to be employed in that field in the province. McClung was one of the first women to sit in a provincial legislature, being elected to the Alberta government in 1921. In addition, McClung was the first woman to be appointed to the board of governors of the Canadian Broadcasting Corporation and the only woman to represent Canada at the League of Nations in 1938.

All were involved in unpopular causes, with Beynon advocating pacifism during the First World War, and Hind and McClung supporting temperance or the total abstinence from alcohol. Beynon ended up losing her position at the Grain Grower’s Guide, and afterwards moved to New York, returning to Canada only once before her death. McClung, the mother of five children, was attacked for her involvement in public life. Photographers would hang about her house during the day in the attempt to catch a picture of her children appearing dirty or neglected. She had the dubious distinction of being burnt in effigy for her political ideas.
Both Beynon and Hind wrote for journals and newspapers, although Beynon did produce the autobiographical *Aleta Day* in addition to her journalistic writing. Because so many people read and followed Hind’s crop reports, they were used to establish the world price for wheat. McClung wrote fiction that was extremely popular during her lifetime. Her first novel *Sowing Seeds in Danny* was a great commercial success, running to 17 editions and selling 100,000 copies, thereby netting the author $25,000, a considerable sum at the time it was published in 1908. In the end, however, McClung is less honoured for the literary merit of her writing than what she achieved by it politically or socially. Likewise, Beynon is more remembered for her political and moral rhetoric.

The Literary Founders: Dorothy Livesay, Vera Lysenko, Martha Ostenso, Gabrielle Roy, Laura Goodman Salverson

This second generation of writers reaped the benefits of the work that Beynon, Hind, and McClung had done in achieving recognition for the power and legitimacy of women’s writing. In contrast, Livesay, Lysenko, Ostenso, Roy, and Salverson established literary reputations based on the quality and strength of their fictional and poetic writing. Between Livesay, Roy, and Salverson alone, the three women won seven Governor General’s Awards. The group as a whole received numerous prizes and honours. Winner of many literary distinctions in Canada and abroad, among them the Prix Femina in Paris and the Literary Guild of America Award in New York, Roy is considered one of Canada’s pre-eminent writers in the French language. Ostenso won a prestigious American prize for her first novel *Wild Geese*.

Interestingly, similar to the previous group of women writers, all applied their talents to non-fiction and journalistic writing in addition to their literary creations. Livesay wrote about post-war conditions for the *Toronto Daily Star*, Lysenko worked for the *Globe and Mail* and the *Windsor Star*, and Roy wrote articles for a number of magazines in both France and Canada.

Four out of the five authors pursued higher education, a sign of both more liberated times as well as their ambition. They used education to further their goal in becoming self-sufficient in society and to enrich their writing. Livesay, for instance, received two degrees and two diplomas over her lifetime, earning a Bachelor of Arts, a Diplôme d’Etudes Superieures, a Master of Education, and a Secondary Teacher’s Diploma.

Although all, except for Ostenso, were forced to rely on traditional occupations such as teaching and social work to support their writing, they wanted to change the society in which they lived. Journalism, an unconventional occupation for women, allowed Livesay, Lysenko, and Roy to promote their views on politics and social justice, although Lysenko’s life was changed dramatically by her inadvertent brush with communism. Manipulated by the people, who funded her sociological study of Ukrainian immigrants, Lysenko allowed her manuscript to be altered so that it seemed to promote communist ideals. The resulting publication caused her to be vilified by a large segment of the Ukrainian community that abhorred these socialist ideas, and brought her under attack from many academics.

Moving and travel were two important themes in this group’s work and both were often necessary for their writing. Ostenso chose to leave Canada altogether in order to make a living from her writing, while Livesay went to British Columbia, Lysenko to Ontario, and Roy to Québec. Salverson herself lived a nomadic existence, moving around the Prairies as a child and later as a woman married to a railway dispatcher. Additionally, Livesay travelled to France and
Africa, and Roy lived in France. Yet, all were deeply influenced by their Prairie childhoods. Their experiences provided motivation, material, and language for their writing. Roy, for example, employed her experiences growing up in St-Boniface and teaching in rural Manitoba, for many of her novels. These years she described as "les plus belles années de ma vie" or "the most beautiful years of my life." In addition, the sacrifices and hardships of others that came to Canada as immigrants became a focus in many of the author’s works. Being children of immigrants themselves, Lysenko, Ostenso, and Salverson were sensitized to challenges their parents had to overcome as new Canadians.

These second-generation authors favoured strong heroines even in their works of romantic popular fiction. *Wild Geese* by Ostenso, for instance, was ahead of its time in portraying the heroine’s longing for sexual fulfilment. Judith, the central character, is described as resembling "some fabled animal — a centauress, perhaps." The authors’ own lives provided a model for their literature. Livesay’s bisexuality and Ostenso’s adulterous relationship with her literary collaborator, Douglas Durkin, broke social taboos. In his reminiscences, Professor David Arnason has stated that "Dorothy lived an intense and passionate life."

**The Third Wave:**
*Margaret Laurence and Adele Wiseman*

The Third Wave, Margaret Laurence and Adele Wiseman, both knew from an early age they wanted to be writers and both emerged at a time of cultural nationalism and the great flowering of Canadian literature and publishing. Although Wiseman did have other employment in the early stages of her career, both women were more focused on their writing than previous generations.

Laurence and Wiseman shared an extraordinary and long-lived friendship which is amply documented in their correspondence, a selection of which was published in 1997 (Laurence and Wiseman, *Selected Letters of Margaret Laurence and Adele Wiseman*). Both authors were born in Manitoba in the Twenties and were educated through the University of Manitoba (Laurence through the affiliated United College). Their coming of age was marked by the Great Depression and by the Second World War. Laurence was profoundly affected by the death of boys from Neepawa she had known and by the horror of the atomic bomb. Wiseman was especially affected by the threat of the holocaust to her culture and her family. Both women had social democratic sympathies. In fact they are said to have met at the Ukrainian Labour Temple in Winnipeg’s North End where they were trying to get newspaper work (Laurence and Wiseman, *Selected Letters*). Both authors won the Beta Sigma Phi Award for their first novels. Eventually both received Governor General’s Awards among other honours.

Their early lives were strikingly different. Laurence was scarred by the deaths of both of her parents before she was ten, and by her forced move into the house of her dictatorial grandfather. Wiseman’s home life was enriched and fed by biblical stories, folktales from the old country, her mother’s doll making, and the accounts of Jewish persecution she heard from her family. Margaret was immediately attracted to Adele’s large, argumentative, and warm family so much so that the Wisemans became a second family to her and Adele a surrogate sister.

Wiseman achieved early critical and popular success in 1956 with her first novel *The Sacrifice* which also won the Governor General’s award. It took Laurence a longer apprenticeship, marked by her African books, before she achieved similar acclaim with *The Stone Angel* in 1964.
and then with the other novels in the Manawaka cycle. And Laurence indeed became the best-known and most successful English-Canadian novelist of her generation.

Both women travelled far from Manitoba, yet it can be argued that their most powerful writing lay in their Prairie story telling. Both were proud to call themselves Prairie writers. Each was personally affected by their childhood experiences, growing up in a small town for Laurence, growing up in the Jewish community in Winnipeg for Wiseman. Their individual ethnic heritages had a profound impact on their writing. Manawaka, the town featured in Laurence’s Prairie novels, was "an amalgam of all prairie small towns infused with the spirit of their Scots-Presbyterian founders." Wiseman’s Crackpot is recognisably set in the North end of Winnipeg during the Depression, while The Sacrifice (1956) depicts the hardships endured by Jewish immigrants such as Wiseman’s parents.

**Conclusion**

Strength, conviction, passion, independence — these words might be used to describe all of the Manitoba women writers featured here. They were neither bound by geography nor ultimately restricted by the circumstances of their lives. Their creativity has helped shape the ideas and myths Manitobans have of themselves and of the place in which they live. They have helped change our ideas of what women are and what they are capable of doing. Their writings tell us today that Manitoba is big enough to encompass many stories, many differences, and many cultures. They have passed on a rich legacy to contemporary writers; writers who have testified to their admiration for these women and drawn inspiration from their example. There is no question — these women wrote over lines of conformity, complacency, and convention into our hearts, into our minds, and into our dreams.

- Jan Horner and Shelley Sweeney