"Going Past the Islands": Women's Great Lakes Literature

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"Going Past the Islands": Women's Great Lakes Literature

VICTORIA BREHM

Women's literature of the lakes begins with the stories told by Native Americans. "Now Great-Lynx" was one of the most typical; it describes two women traveling across a lake who encounter a great current of water. Paddling with all their might to escape, they suddenly see Missipeshu, the huge, horned, underwater beast who creates storms by thrashing his body. When they realize he is going to sink the canoe, one of them raises her paddle, strikes off the monster's tail, and they escape. Her power to do this, she explains, came from her puberty fast when she dreamed of Thunderers, those creatures of the sky who are inimical to underwater monsters, and they gave her their war club. In some versions of the story, the severed end of Missipeshu's tail falls into the canoe and turns into a lump of copper, a sacred mineral that would bring wealth and happiness to its owner.²

This woman in her canoe is the mother of Great Lakes women and their literature. The image of a woman paddling upon a seemingly limitless body of water and overcoming a storm is a particularly powerful one; it suggests not only freedom from social restraint, but also a maternal triumph over death. To cut off Missipeshu's tail is, figuratively, to castrate him—to kill his power—and therefore to control death, as well as to control the water. This explains the function of the text in Native American culture and underscores the role of women in that society.

This superhuman dream of power is no less seductive for white women writers, particularly after the industrialization of lakes shipping in the late nineteenth century. Moreover, because the historical record of their lives is fragmented and incomplete, the record women left in literature becomes doubly important. Often it is the only source that remains of a century and a half of lives spent on or near the water, and the way women perceived that water is at once a corrective to the male attitude of life on the lakes and a fascinating story in its own right. Women have rewritten the commonly accepted history of Great Lakes maritime life from a feminine perspective, one that concentrates not on the competitive race to command a ship or to

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outrun every other vessel into port, but on the intense joy of handling a small boat well, of running a galley, or of knowing that the light reaching clear and bright over the water to guide mariners shines because they have done their duty faithfully.

The fiction of white women on the lakes began with Constance Fenimore Woolson in the 1870's. Despite an education designed to prepare her for a life of genteel domesticity in Cleveland, she was a child of the frontier, which she saw whenever she left the city and during the summers she spent on Mackinac Island. Her work is set in a timeless wilderness before the Civil War, and it is filled with images of women testing their strengths and limitations in the maritime world. To create for herself in her fiction the mentors she did not have in life, she envisioned a world filled with strong women acting in a landscape of high escarpments overlooking the water or reigning securely on islands.3

Elizabeth Pyne, of "Ballast Island" (1873), a story set on the Wine Islands of western Lake Erie, is a typical example. When her sweetheart does not propose as promptly as she thinks he should, she takes a skiff from the hotel and rows away to dispel her anger. Caught in a fall equinoctial storm, her boat is swept into the channel leading into the open lake; she realizes that unless she is strong enough to row her boat against the wind and the current to nearby Ballast Island, she will be carried out into Lake Erie and drown. Already exhausted from hours of rowing, she must turn the boat abruptly across the current, but after a final "short and desperate contest," the "well-developed physique, the superabundant vitality and electricity . . . gained the victory." She then beaches the skiff and climbs up a hill to the lighthouse, where she encounters a woman keeper who is the epitome of feminine strength and mastery.4

Like the Indian woman who overcame the storm Missispeshu raised, Elizabeth rowed herself to safety and gained the higher ground, something that a number of Woolson heroines do, teaching their men that they are quite capable of taking care of themselves without help; in fact, they usually take care of their men. While much of Woolson's Great Lakes fiction ended with marriage--her readers complained vociferously when she tried to be less conventional--she often managed some opportunity for the woman protagonist to demonstrate her skill with a small boat or her ability to overcome the elements.5 Woolson's women reinforce their self-confidence on the water they negotiate.
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But by the 1890's the lakes were no longer a frontier, and the freedom allowed women had diminished accordingly. Economically, the lakes had become dominated by industrial capitalism, marked by competition between corporations rather than individual and family entrepreneurship, as was common on a frontier; there was little place for women in such an environment except the home. The fluidity of character and plot that Woolson created relapsed into conventional, domestic fiction in the hands of later writers, because once women lost the power that identification with the landscape of the lakes during the frontier period gave them, they also lost the courage to invent new characters and new forms. As their physical lives became bounded, so did their imaginations. Woolson's characters were defined by their marine landscape, rather than by their tasks or inherent traits, and they were as singular, isolated, and powerful as the places they inhabited. This is a much different image of power than is common in nineteenth-century literature, particularly in sentimental romances, where characters draw their strength from connectedness to others.

The diminished role allowed women during this period is stunningly illustrated in a story set once again in the Lake Erie islands. In "Under a Steamer's Headlights: The Adventures of Two Silly Girls" (1898), a young woman visiting at an island resort decides to take out a rowboat. She has never rowed before, yet once away from land, she experiences great feelings of joy and freedom. But unlike Elizabeth Pyne of "Ballast Island," who was an accomplished oarswoman, the unnamed narrator of this story has no skills, and her newfound confidence is soon destroyed. As she returns from a nearby island, she puts the boat in the path of a steamer and is nearly run down. "Under A Steamer's Headlights" delineates a situation where a woman is in danger not from the elements like Elizabeth Pyne, but from a huge passenger steamer, a symbol of a masculine, mechanized, industrial world. The situation is nearly identical to Woolson's story—a woman in a rowboat faced with danger and having only the strength of her arms to save her—but the outcome is far bleaker. The protagonist of "Under A Steamer's Headlights" was saved not by her own efforts, but by "luck or Providence," since the steamer inexplicably veered away.

Historically, on the lakes after the turn of the century there were few opportunities for women. The small, family-owned trading schooners had been replaced by large shipping companies which ran fleets of ships and employed increasingly professional crews. The lighthouses once run by
women were kept exclusively by men. But some women still had to work, and cooking on a freighter was a time-honored way for them to earn a living on the lakes. So when Mary Frances Doner turned from a successful career writing urban romances to the childhood landscape she had known as the daughter of a Great Lakes captain, she began with a novel about a woman cook on a freighter. Her fiction was the first in many years to describe women other than as husband-hunting steamship passengers; there had been no maritime fiction by women for several decades until Doner's ground-breaking work. Not By Bread Alone (1941) is the story of three generations of women and the men they marry, and as usual in Doner's work, the women are strong, gifted, self-reliant, and utterly devoted to the fools they have wed. She repeatedly emphasizes that women must marry for love and take the consequences, bitter though they may be, since love and marriage are always superior to living alone—the exact reverse of Woolson's philosophy.

For all the ability and occasional independence of Doner's women, they seldom ventured out on the water by themselves in small boats, and when they did the results were often tragic. The motif of a woman alone and confident in her small boat disappears from fiction shortly before the turn of the century and does not reappear until the reemergence of feminism in the 1970's. Then women ventured out once again, but the bonds that had long held them to familial life ashore were broken only after tortuous self-examination. When they began to reject their social roles to test the boundaries of self and society in ways that were uncommon even on the frontier, they became, as the poet Judith Minty suggests, "blind mariners," who knew not where they sailed.

Minty's cycle of poems, "Palmistry For Blind Mariners" (1976), begins with the image of an Indian woman in a canoe. Now she serves as the poet's guide while Minty attempts to reintegrate the feminine and the powerful aspects of the self that have been severed by an exclusive focus on domesticity. But replicating the confidence of the Indian woman, however seductive, may require more than Minty is able to give. They set out in a birch canoe past the Sleeping Bear, dunes named by the Indians to memorialize a mother's devotion. But that devotion is what Minty is trying to escape in order to discover a self apart from her domestic role.

To go to a place you require giving up maternal waves, you must also risk losing self. The water that women has been nurtured in, the cruel sea, and self fights the wave once saw as easy. Once she casts it, itreplace it. Unlike power and dominance of the frontier and comfort.

Like Woolson's metaphor of the artist/woman/mother, Minty's cruel maritime is not comfortable. She remain, and the self is as

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Forget love rites and matings
and children. Bury them
deep under Mercury's mound.
This lake and mothers are cruel . . .

If you must, follow me. I am going
past the islands out
into the lake. There is a place
I have heard of where you can sink
deep into the center of dreams, where waves
will rock you in sleep, where everything
is as you wished it to be. 9

To go to a place in the lake where "everything is as you wished it to be," will require giving up all she knows. She must leave behind her family, and she must also risk loss of the self that has been defined by them. The feminine, maternal waves that would "rock you in sleep," are far from the safety of shore, out upon a lake that is as cruel as an inapproachable mother, or a mother who, like the poet, has abandoned and buried her children on shore.

The water that was once the place of freedom and reassurance for women has become cruel because Minty has been cut off from the possibility of being feminine as well as powerful in the landscape. Instead of being nurtured by the water as by a mother, all that is left to Minty is the cruel sea, and she does not have the confidence required to survive it. She fights the waves to endure and to return, having discovered that what she once saw as escape can become the nightmare of complete loss of self.

Once she casts away her domestic identity, she has nothing with which to replace it. Unlike her Indian foremothers, Minty cannot integrate personal power and domesticity; these were rent by social changes after the settling of the frontier and the advent of capitalist industrialization.

Like Woolson, Minty is using a voyage on the water in a small boat as a metaphor of power; she is attempting to explore the conflict of artist/woman/mother in a context free of restraint. But Minty's image of a cruel maritime landscape as mentor and mother is one which offers scant comfort. She is caught between her need to escape and her need to remain, and the power of the lakes to heal the split in her psyche is compromised. Instinctively, she seems to understand the connection
between women and water and power—that is why she first identifies with an Indian woman in a canoe—but she is unable to achieve it and integrate it into her world ashore. Unlike Woolson, she cannot totally reject the world of attachments; unlike Doner, she cannot totally accept the world of domestic duty. Minty, like so many other women in the late twentieth century, is caught between the two. Woolson first articulated this conflict in the 1870s but failed to resolve it, and a hundred years later women still struggle. The passage to freedom, inspiration, and finally integration that their voyages represent is as difficult as that of a ship struggling in a storm.

The lakes become for Minty and other late twentieth-century writers a negative place where nothing survives long. To embrace that unbounded space beyond the islands is to risk complete loss of self, or to die: metaphorically to be blessed by Missipeshu. Despite their attempts to follow the example of their Indian foremothers, the Great Lakes have become a place of desolation, of transient, compromised victories. Ophelia is an apt representative for these women who are powerless, marginalized by society, and see no alternative except death. The usual comforts of the family or the group—in other words, the shore—have been rendered useless for them. Although the Indian woman with her upraised, avenging paddle still beckons as a maternal metaphor of power, she did what most could not—confront the masculine, life-denying force represented by the stormy lakes, and survive.

Women's dream—to create for themselves a place in the maritime world—has not always been realized, but their literature suggests that neither have they given up. Their stories are a history of women's explorations of a place that is the antithesis of that settled place called home; as they redefined the paradigms of lakes fiction, they redefined home to be a lighthouse, or an island, or an escarpment above a frozen lake, because they could be free and powerful there. Whether they sailed by chance or by necessity, they pushed at the boundaries of what was allowed them, no matter what century they lived in. "Going past the islands," running a lighthouse, refusing to be marginalized, they sought on the water their dream of the united self of femininity and power. That they have not yet succeeded does not mean they have failed.

^This essay is condensed from the original which will appear in "Going Past the Islands: Great Lakes Literature by Women, Victoria Brehm, ed., forthcoming, University of Michigan Press, 1994.

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identifies with it and integrate it into the world of domestic conflict in the 1870s and still struggle. The dream of the frontier is that their voyages are not vain.

19th-century writers about the unbounded self, or to die: their attempts to compensate for the Great Lakes have symbolic victories. Ophelia has lost her husband, marginalized by her origin, the comforts of the home have been rendered useless and she is devoured by the stormy world.


7Mary Frances Doner, Not By Bread Alone (New York: Doubleday, Doran, 1941).

8The most dramatic example is Blue River (New York: Doubleday-Doran, 1946). Doner's protagonist takes a rowboat out into the river running past Detroit to rescue her drunken father from a burning freighter. The exertion of rowing causes her miscarriage, which nearly destroys her marriage.