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# Perfect Mismatch: Gwendolyn MacEwen and the Flat Earth Society

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# Perfect Mismatch: Gwendolyn MacEwen and the Flat Earth Society

DAVID ESO

When they are the work of poets, entertainments, pranks, and hoaxes still fall within the domain of poetry.

— François Le Lionnais, Regent, Collège de 'Pataphysique

**A**MONG THE INTELLECTUAL AFFILIATIONS on the fringes of Gwendolyn MacEwen's literary career, her connection to Canada's Flat Earth Society remains overlooked in scholarship. Founded 8 November 1970 in Fredericton, New Brunswick, by Alden Nowlan (Symposiarch), Leo Ferrari (President), and Raymond Fraser (Chairman of the Board), the satirical Society drew together a cross-section of oddball Canadian writers at its executive level, including First Vice-President MacEwen, David McFadden, John Newlove, Al Pittman, and Farley Mowat. General membership status was granted to applicants from many walks of life, whose various motivations for joining are documented in the archives of the founders. The present investigation of MacEwen's involvement with the Society draws on her preserved correspondences with Nowlan and Ferrari<sup>1</sup>; on Rosemary Sullivan's *Shadow Maker: The Life of Gwendolyn MacEwen*; on select receptions of MacEwen's work; and on MacEwen's poetry and prose, resituated in the context of her Flat Earth Society engagements.

The necessarily diverse range of these sources reflects the complex relationship of MacEwen to the Society. In some ways, her life and work demonstrate a natural affinity with the Flat Earth project, given its darkly humorous countercultural messaging and occult revivalism. Yet her status as a female and metropolitan writer puts MacEwen out of step with the group's male and Maritime founders. Gender difference constitutes a recurring point of reference in the preserved correspondence, as it does within her published works. Looking at MacEwen through the lens of her 1970s "Planoterrestrialism" highlights her oppositional perspective and mirthful humour, qualities inseparable from the dark side of her troubled life and writerly style.

In 1971, MacEwen agreed to serve as First Vice-President of the Flat Earth Society (hereafter, FES) after giving the invitation “a full twenty-five minutes” of “serious thought” (Letter to Nowlan [undated; Nowlan fonds 12.6.18]). Subsequent letters to Nowlan and Ferrari relate a “deeply committed” enthusiasm for their project’s blend of seriousness in satire and disruptive philosophy with absurdist play (12.6.18). The period of the MacEwen–Nowlan/Ferrari exchanges was brief. Accordingly, her planoterrestrial allegiance receives only passing comment in Sullivan’s lengthy biography (259) and a single-sentence mention in Christine Garwood’s *Flat Earth: History of an Infamous Idea* (284). MacEwen’s affiliation with the Maritime agitators behind the FES demands consideration, however, because her eccentric imagination made the author an ideal selection for an executive position, and because she made compelling contributions to the group’s discourse. Designed as a participatory experiment, the project’s specific aims are outlined in Nowlan’s article “Dr. Ferrari and the Flat Earth Society.” In brief, the Society sought to promote sensory knowledge, intellectual liberty, and metaphorical truth (an alternative path to transcendence in an overly secular era). Although MacEwen appears not to have co-authored any FES texts for general circulation, these aims correspond with her writing: embodied, eccentric, and overlaid with coy religiosity.

Those same qualities underwrite her contributions to the FES project. When MacEwen became the first member who would expand the FES circle beyond its Atlantic Canadian context, she entered through the window rather than the opened door and transformed a party already in progress. Stuart Hall gives a similar description of feminists disruptively entering Cultural Studies, an intellectual movement previously dominated by men (268). MacEwen responded to absurd FES proposals, offering equally imaginative counterpropositions expressed with inventive wit and deadpan earnestness. She protested their solicitations of the United Nations, for example, which called for a protective fence around the planet’s perimeter. This structure would protect humans from falling off the edge of the world into the “Abysmal Chasm.” In MacEwen’s view, a barrier of this kind would threaten “creatures which crawl out of the Chasm from time to time to deposit their Abysmal Eggs on the edge of the earth” (Letter to Nowlan [undated; Nowlan fonds 12.6.18]). She hoped that the celebrated oceanographer Jacques Cousteau might lower his bathysphere over the edge to investigate the

Chasm's unexplored ecosystem. Meanwhile, she proposed "to allow numerous holes in the Fence on the Brink which will permit passage for these little-understood creatures" (12.6.18). Her wildlife corridor proposal expresses concern for egg-laying creatures of the deep and resists the FES insistence on the necessity of barriers. Cast in a trans-species context, these suggestions carry a coded reference to MacEwen's female difference from the founders.

Chairman Fraser declared that the televised moon landing had been staged in Newfoundland, judging by the scenery. Interjecting once more, MacEwen recognized instead "a vacant parking lot in the outer suburbs of Toronto," her home city (Letter to Nowlan [undated; Nowlan fonds 12.6.41]). Atlantic Canadian and metropolitan environments are often represented via their desolate fringes, by Fraser and MacEwen (respectively), as opposed to fertile natural or cultural centres. In a separate letter, she alerted Nowlan to an insurgent threat that she had encountered in Toronto: "THE ROSICRUCIANS AROUND THE CORNER" (Letter to Nowlan [undated; Nowlan fonds 12.6.18]). Like the FES, the obscure Rosicrucian movement pursued revolutionary potential through mystic knowledge. MacEwen suggested to Nowlan that Akhenaton, the anti-hero of her novel *King of Egypt, King of Dreams*, was the father of Rosicrucianism, which "goes underground every five hundred years and then re-emerges like the phoenix." She hinted that this "underground might in fact be the Abysmal Chasm" itself (12.6.18). Warnings against this potential competitor effected a subtle jibe, alluding to historical uncertainty about whether the Order of the Rosy Cross was a secret society or mere hoax. Many would ask the same about the FES.

These challenges and interjections parallel MacEwen's original suggestions. She wanted to establish "a series of sunken cables linking N and S America to [/] with Europe and Asia" (Letter to Nowlan [undated; Nowlan fonds 12.6.41]). These would halt the progress of continental drift, which puts all land masses at risk of sliding over the edge. She thought her solution could "help to improve Continental relations as well" (12.6.41). The most elaborate of her proposals operates on the local rather than transnational level. She wrote the following to Nowlan:

An official plaque must certainly be erected in the Fredericton headquarters on Windsor Street. I have ransacked my kitchen in search of some metal thing which is of sufficient flatness and

roundness to serve as a symbol, but to no avail. Therefore I suggest that without delay, you as Corresponding Secretary should encourage your local pizza parlor to donate one of their pizza trays to be used for this purpose. In future, when our society is larger, we may be able to persuade some of these Italian gentlemen to make special Anniversary Pizzas for us, with the peppers and anchovies arranged in such a way as to skillfully depict the map of the world. You can imagine how subtly this effect could be produced; for example, the large cheesy patches would represent the Sahara and other deserts, whilst chopped peppers would depict the large forestry regions of the earth, and so on. Also, it goes without saying, these Commemoration Pizzas would be consumed by members of the society as a sacramental meal, with the President and Vice President blessing the various continents and islands before they are consumed. (Letter to Nowlan [undated; Nowlan fonds 12.6.18])

This delightful suggestion foregrounds satirical performance and metaphorical sacrament, centre and circumference of the FES project. The impulse to attach ceremony to physical objects — and, moreover, to nourishment — suggests a sacramental act. But the celebratory pizza dinner exists only on paper and in MacEwen's imagination, making it a strictly metaphorical or mystical event.

In contrast to the lively thought experiments about people and creatures, about ideas and inventions that one finds in her previously discussed Flat Earth correspondences, MacEwen's pizza party relies on Flat Earth clichés of a tabletop, disc-shaped planet. Other members advanced more eccentric views, such as Farley Mowat's vision of a "corrugated" earth (Letter to Ferrari [11 July, no year]). Her planoterrestrial conception pales, however, in comparison to idiosyncratic environmental images from her poetry. Therein, visions stretch from "the vast necropolis of space" (*Armies* 47) down to "the clumsy luggage / of the desert" (*T.E. Lawrence Poems* 55), from spiritual cosmology to psycho-geography. Comic and tense, MacEwen wears "the whole cosmos like a conical hat / with the raw brain set under it" (*Rising Fire* 55). Her verse worlds contain "trees that grow sideways" (*Shadow-Maker* 48) under "the secret houses of the sky" (*Magic Animals* 125). Her nonconformist engagement with place made the FES an appropriate channel for the author to redirect some of her creative overflow. Concomitantly, it united MacEwen with other ex-centric Canadian writers. David McFadden became an important ally at the end of her life, as docu-

mented in MacEwen's biography (Sullivan 374). Sullivan does not mention their FES connection, but the pair presumably became friends for the same reasons they separately joined the Society: irreverent humour, oppositional philosophy, and an anti-careerist approach to the literary industry.

Locating and inviting prospective members among her peer group were key duties MacEwen undertook, with little success. Writers who publicly enlisted in the absurdist organization risked reputation and career opportunities, risked being perceived as cranks. MacEwen unsuccessfully solicited the participation of Margaret Atwood, writing to her about the group's proposal for a protective fence around the world's edge. The same letter names one reason to join that is made explicit only once within extant FES correspondence and publications: "to discourage possible suicides" (Sullivan 259). Protective barriers aside, such discouragement must stem from the bolstering sense of support one would gain from participating in this unique interpretive community. "If you feel, then, that you are more or less On the Brink," MacEwen wrote, "you must join the club" (259). Enlisting could be seen as healthful by insiders but disastrous by outsiders. Better known Canadian writers did not join — however alienated they may have felt, however whimsically they wrote about social and natural environments. Atwood, Leonard Cohen, Robert Kroetsch, Margaret Laurence, and Al Purdy are all conspicuously absent from the FES roster. Perhaps forging such a reckless affiliation would have jeopardized the successful career building they had accomplished since the 1960s.

By joining the FES, MacEwen took the risk that many other Canadian writers did not. Further, she allowed themes from her private correspondence with the Symposiarch and President to spill over into her published work. Her 1972 *Armies of the Moon* collection contains the poem "A Lecture to the Flat Earth Society," a draft version of which is preserved in Nowlan's archive with the title "An *Undelivered* Lecture . . .," (Letter to Nowlan [undated; Nowlan fonds 12.6.18]; emphasis added). The archival draft, via its alternate title, stresses the conceptual rather than actual nature of the Society's campaign. Accompanying the draft is a handwritten apology; MacEwen felt "guilty" that she had borrowed so closely from Nowlan in her piece (12.6.18). She asked for his consent to publish the work, which he provided, stating he felt "flattered that the idea appealed" to her (Letter to MacEwen [29 Mar. 1971]). He

would not have been surprised, however; MacEwen's exuberant and darkly humorous poetics made her a natural ally for the Flat Earth project, which created a shared platform for metaphorical resistance to dominant or default beliefs.

Throughout MacEwen's literary output, in the words of Sullivan, "She was best when writing portraits of the broken, the misfits, those whom society had rejected as peripheral" (162). The FES celebrated the periphery, populated in MacEwen's terms by those "who inhabit with me / The Very Edge of the Abyss," as she writes in "A Lecture to the Flat Earth Society" (*Armies* 20). Her poem responds to alienating conformity in the broader society and expresses appreciation for her alternative Society's corrective spirit of camaraderie among misfits. "And those of us who always lived too near / The Edge to begin with // Have the consolation of each other's company" (20). Like much of MacEwen's writing, the poem conveys an uncomfortably palpable darkness: "we are doomed on this Disc which spins its insane dreams / Through space" (20). Its descriptions of fear and pain are attenuated by a compensatory sense of outcast solidarity and absurd humour. Indeed, she wrote that the piece came into being because she "couldn't get all the Flat Earth hilarities out of [her] head" (Letter to Nowlan [undated; Nowlan fonds 12.6.18]).

MacEwen enthusiastically accepted the FES's invitation to take on the role of First Vice-President and then boarded a plane to Athens — not Fredericton. In a postcard to Nowlan, she reported having viewed a concave horizon from the aircraft crossing the Atlantic Ocean: "the horizon curved *upwards* which gave me the impression we are dealing with a flat earth with upturning edges" (Letter to Nowlan [undated; Nowlan fonds 12.6.19]). This meditational projection may have helped to calm excited nerves, given her lifelong fear of flight. Safely landed in Greece, MacEwen would marry the Greek musician Niko Tsingos. She would also learn the zeibekiko, a dance she loved as "both a fight against gravity and a kind of flirtation with the earth" (*Mermaids and Ikons* 89). That the zeibekiko was officially the exclusive purview of males possibly fuelled her enjoyment in performing it. The FES, too, could reasonably be viewed as part of the male domain, although other women did occupy its ranks. The participation of poet Elizabeth Brewster, journalist Sharon Fraser, painter Molly Bobak, and FES Executive Secretary and early-childhood educator Claudine Nowlan

destabilized the group's male dominance. Women comprised a minority of the general and executive membership, but even so, two of the three Vice-Presidents were MacEwen (First VP) and Marilee Pittman (Third VP); they served alongside Romanian writer Nicholas Catanoy (Second VP). Of the women who joined the Society listed here, MacEwen is the only one from outside Atlantic Canada, the region where the leadership first recruited its members in the early 1970s. Yet, in public texts and private correspondence, she engaged the planoterrestrial project grounded in Fredericton with more intensity than her female counterparts.

Ferrari wrote to MacEwen in April 1972, expressing thanks for her "unremitting devotion to the cause," her "apostolic ardour" (Letter to MacEwen [13 Apr. 1972]). Despite her grand title and playfully sophisticated contributions, however, MacEwen's involvement in the Society was peripheral in comparison to the administrative work undertaken initially by Nowlan and his wife Claudine, and later by Ferrari. Nonetheless, she took exception to receiving a Xerox form letter from Fredericton without having had the opportunity to collaborate on its contents. While acknowledging her limited role as "Absent Vice President," she makes her sentiment clear: "Yuk!" (Letter to Ferrari [11 July 1973]). Ferrari responded to the situation with contrition and cheek: "*Dear Gwendolyn*, Please excuse any affront in the way we may have seemed to have treated you. Any form letter sent was simply to keep you abreast (so to speak) of what was going on" (Letter to MacEwen [11 Nov. 1973]). Labouring references to her femininity, Ferrari seems determined to relate to his VP in a gendered way. Or, he may have only followed her lead. A letter from MacEwen to Nowlan reports that she had been charged with flatness by an enemy of the Society while defending its ideological position. She writes, "I do hope that you and the other members of our group will appreciate the fact [that] since I am not a very buxom young lady, I cannot take such a comment lightly. I left, feeling edgier than ever" (Letter to Nowlan [undated; Nowlan fonds 12.6.18]). Conflating geographical and anatomical flatness in this joke recalls Ferrari's references to the sexism of "Globularists," who assert "a curvaceous conception of terrestrial creation" to "the Great mother" ("Feminism" 79). Biological sex and gendered archetypes were never far below the surface of MacEwen's planoterrestrial correspondences. Opportunities for ribald humour were exploited by Ferrari and, to a lesser extent, by MacEwen herself.

As a dodge or tease regarding the gender divide separating her from



Nowlan and Ferrari, she invented the FES applicant Icarus Platis. MacEwen wrote that she translated Platis's application letter from its original Greek, although remnants of that alphabet appear. He "came to Canada some years ago to escape the overwhelming pressure of [his] country's history — the folly of the Pythagoreans, the shame of Plato and Aristotle, the inexcusable blindness of the like of Aristarchus and Ptolemy" (Letter to Nowlan [9 Aug. 1972]). Alienation from the standard, "gyroglobular" cultural inheritance of his homeland pushes Platis toward the Society, its conceptual place of refuge for renegades. In that respect, the statement of faith could be signed by him or by MacEwen. The signatory also resembles MacEwen's émigré husband, Tsingos, who had fled Greece due to "the overwhelming pressure" of the Regime of the Colonels (1967-74) rather than because of Globularism. Platis writes, "Friend, I have flown across continents, braved the ridicule of my associates, disowned the unfortunate heritage of my ancestors, and have not faltered in the Cause" (9 Aug. 1972). The attitudes of Platis and MacEwen overlap, even if he — orderly, formal — dated his letter, something MacEwen seldom did in correspondence signed by her. A lack of dates on her missives to the FES founders prevents a chronological narrative of her involvement. Still and all, such linearity would likely be inappropriate to an account of her otherworldly Planoterrestrialism. The spirit of these engagements with the FES is marked by erratic transformations. She sometimes signed her letters as Gwendolyn MacEwen, sometimes as Icarus Platis, and once as "Gwendolyn Platis" (Letter to Ferrari [11 July 1973]).

MacEwen's letters to Nowlan and Ferrari are compelling ephemera that showcase her humour and enthusiasm for the occult. The exchanges with Ferrari are of secondary value, because they are limited to Flat Earth topics and lack the peer-to-peer intimacy of her exchanges with Nowlan. Ferrari excelled as an academic philosopher, but he produced only two slim collections of poetry that did little to add to his reputation as a writer. When sending MacEwen his first poetry collection *The Worm's Revenge*, Ferrari wrote with a self-abnegating tone: "here I trepitate, since I am no poet, but a mere philosophe" (Letter to MacEwen [12 Apr. 1972]). MacEwen and Nowlan garnered much more significant attention for their verse rather than prose writings. In 1968, Nowlan received a Governor General's Literary Award for his poetry. One year later, MacEwen received the first of two such awards for her

poetry. Their public recognition and personal association predates the FES. They first met in Fredericton in 1968, presumably at his university-owned residence on Windsor Street. “Windsor Castle” doubled as offices for receiving students and colleagues while he worked as the University of New Brunswick’s long-term writer-in-residence. (Today, the “Alden Nowlan House” serves as the UNB Graduate Student Association offices and pub, more appropriately.) After their meeting, Nowlan wrote to MacEwen the following:

Frankly, the moment I started talking with you here I liked you. For some reason I hadn’t expected to. I guess I had heard somewhere that you were writing a novel about ancient Egypt and, irrationally, I decided that anyone who wrote a novel about ancient Egypt must be a painfully academic and hopelessly solemn young woman.

I apologize for having thought such stupid thoughts about you.

As I told you here I think your new poems are beautiful and you read better than anyone else I’ve heard. (Letter to MacEwen [7 Jan. 1969])

His literary admiration and personal affection resulted in several requests. In the fall of 1969, she agreed to participate in Catanoy’s anthology *Modern Romanian Poetry*, for which Nowlan assembled Canadian poets to act as collaborating translators (Letter to Nowlan [14 Oct. 1969]). MacEwen contributed English versions of poems originally composed by Ion Barbu. In 1971, the invitation for her to join the FES was delivered “over a few drinks in a Toronto bar” (Garwood 284). Despite the involvement of MacEwen and other notable authors, including Romanian-born Theatre of the Absurd playwright Eugène Ionesco, the FES remains an astoundingly understudied social, countercultural, and literary network.

In her reply to Nowlan’s letter quoted above, MacEwen stated that she felt “envy” for the “relaxing” pace of life in the Maritimes, that she had been “impressed” by “weird landscapes in Nova Scotia with sunken forests and haunted misty pools.” Toronto, by comparison, was its “usual cold slushy self” (Letter to Nowlan [undated; Nowlan fonds 17.49.2]). The journey out of Fredericton showed her that ground travel could be as frightening as flight. Her unease is reported in Brenda Longfellow’s film *Shadow Maker: Gwendolyn MacEwen, Poet*, based on Sullivan’s biography. The film won the 1998 Genie Award for Best Short Documentary and includes the following recollection:

“Discovered to my horror that I now have to add trains to my list of frightening things. Before, it was only cars, planes, and subways. The train I was on was particularly fast. I spent five hours in paroxysms of terror” (Longfellow). On the same train, she met an old seafarer. She gave him a copy of her latest book before learning of his illiteracy. He gave her, in ritual exchange, his antique compass. A book for someone who cannot read may seem an ironic gift, although it may help them to acquire that skill. In this instance, her poems make an appropriate token: exchanged for a compass with a woman who could not find her way. She related the anecdote to Nowlan and reproduced the encounter in “The Compass,” included in her 1969 collection, *The Shadow-Maker*, the same book honoured by the Governor General’s Literary Award in 1969. MacEwen’s writing attracted supporters and acclaim, in part because she transformed experiences of disorientation and fear through courageous explorations of her interior landscape.

Those who write about MacEwen’s work often invoke her difficult life as relevant context for their readings, especially in accounts that postdate Sullivan’s 1995 biography, which borrows the title *Shadow Maker* from its subject. The book feels astonishingly complete, with detailed insights about the author’s experience and importance. Sullivan’s biography — rich in scholarly appreciations and emotionally responsive analyses — follows a downward spiral in the narrative of MacEwen’s life. Sections on the author’s formative years relate distressing familial strife as well as her intense intellectual acuity. Sullivan identifies MacEwen’s troubled parents as primary sources of disorder in their daughter’s life: “If they had gone over a dark edge, she too would know that edge and that darkness. It was extraordinarily brave, but it was not a survivor’s strategy” (Sullivan 44). The act of going over, the fact of a “dark edge” to consciousness mirrors the ends-of-the-earth geography that characterizes MacEwen’s 1970s Planoterrestrialism, which developed thanks to an invitation from her fellow tumblers over the brink, the FES founders.

Sullivan depicts MacEwen’s parents as set against stifling normalcy by poverty, addiction, and psychological troubles. The same difficulties impinged on their daughter’s life, which helped prepare the way for affinities with the FES’s prime mover, Nowlan. Correlations between him and MacEwen are striking, as shown by comparing Sullivan’s biography to those of Nowlan by Patrick Toner and Gregory Cook. Both

Nowlan and MacEwen suffered childhood traumas that led to compensatory artistic play whereby each made efforts to extend and recover an earlier stage of life. They also shared a fatal reliance on alcohol in adulthood. Nowlan survived until age fifty, MacEwen until age forty-six. Autodidacts of hardscrabble beginnings, they possessed profoundly scholarly intellects but were deeply suspicious of academia. Neither completed public school, but Nowlan developed an encyclopedic knowledge of world history, while MacEwen's literary experiments transformed her into a polyglot and Egyptologist. Writer in residence positions situated them on the fringes of academic institutions, providing Nowlan and MacEwen regular or intermittent paycheques (respectively) without overly restricting the time they could dedicate to writing. Better remembered as poets, they both nevertheless made contributions in diverse genres, including fiction, radio and stage plays, journalism, history, translation, children's literature, and travel writing. Primarily homebodies, each is associated with a single urban centre: Toronto for MacEwen, Fredericton for Nowlan. Despite establishing themselves in relatively fixed locales, they shared a refusal of singular or stable identity. Nowlan invented alternate personae that indicate a diffusive character. These extend from the more discreet Max Phillip Ireland and Kevin O'Brien to the flamboyant characters of Bihku Bannister, Prince of Fortara, and Symposiarch of the Flat Earth Society. MacEwen discovered name play, or role-playing, early and often used those relieving tactics to blur a constrictive gender binary.

A habitual shifting of guises predates MacEwen's literary career. Wendy, as she was called as a child, became Gwendolyn at the age of twelve because, Sullivan writes, "she thought one day she might be somebody important, and Wendy was not the name of somebody important" (38). Fulfilling this prophecy, as a young teenager she appeared on stage at Toronto's Bohemian Embassy, often outshining more practiced poets in terms of craft and elocution. Her family name was then revised in service of an elevated persona. "Having read that the Macs were the Scottish bards, she decided to change her name again, from McEwen to MacEwen" (56). Sullivan's biography charts international trips she undertook alone, travelling repeatedly to the eastern Mediterranean. These journeys inflamed the author's passion for world myth, but they also provoked a chilling fear of flying. During a sojourn in Greece, "she had invented herself as Lawrence of Antiparos" by affect-

ing Arabian headdress (317). Consider the scene: in the cradle of western civilization, a female Canadian artist mimics a male British military leader, one most famous for posing as an Arab insurrectionist. In this playful manner, she accumulated a repertoire of sub-personalities. Her habitual gender-bending and shape-shifting are exhibited in the creation of Icarus Platis. She named that FES applicant for the Greek figure who symbolizes hubristic failure. His family name likely derives from a bilingual riff on one FES motto — Flat Is Beautiful — which was in turn a take-off on the 1960s Black Is Beautiful movement.

According to Sullivan, strategically deploying male postures through a “tomboy” persona helped MacEwen achieve some of the status she lacked in the social world of her childhood (37). That lack extended from an impoverished home life and the limited roles prescribed to girls and women at the time. Recollecting the schoolyard, MacEwen “remembered being the only girl in a boy’s gang, imagining herself as Joan of Arc leading them in their ritualized war games” (37-38). The FES’s constructed conflict between heroic Planoterrestrialists and villainous Globularists recalls such playground imaginaries. Despite her participation and sometimes leadership in shared world-building projects, a wider isolation marked her relationship to peers in childhood and adulthood alike. Sullivan writes that “Gwendolyn decided . . . she would turn her loneliness into a gift; she would be the unapproachable initiate into mysteries others barely understood” (39). Long before joining the FES, MacEwen inhabited the precarious social fringe, had sighted the dread precipice of her own psyche.

Echoing Sullivan, critic Joel Deshayé notes that MacEwen often focused her writing on male figures with a dual purpose: to launch a subversive critique of masculinity and to help make her own precarious position in life feel more secure. He writes that MacEwen wrote about T.E. Lawrence “to take from Lawrence some of the power that men, rather than women, often have” (189). This view is complicated by the nuances and catastrophes that undermine her male characters. They are ultimately men of failure rather than triumph, despite occupying positions of prestige. In MacEwen’s impersonation of Lawrence, militaristic aspects of his character are undercut by contemplative peaceability and the brutal attack that leaves him “reduced to shreds” (*Lawrence Poems* 46). The title character of *Julian the Magician* doubts his own miracles, is destroyed by the power of his self-propelled fame. In political matters,

Prime Minister Mackenzie King defers to his mother's ghost, playing the "little King" to her "Fairy Queen" (*Noman* 54). A seductively enigmatic cipher, Noman is relieved of his "dark remote glory" through a series of metaphorical deaths (*Noman's Land* 33). The novel *King of Egypt*, *King of Dreams* devolves into a chorus of testimonies, interrupting a singular focus on the title character. Such polyphony parallels the failure of Akhenaton's efforts to impose monotheism by fiat, which puts an end to his patriarchal reign. The Royal Navy's Sir John Franklin is the fallen star of MacEwen's verse play *Terror and Erebus*. This work troubles the narrative of Franklin as heroic imperialist by including the Inuk guide Qaqortingneq "as the most authoritative voice" (Hulan 124). Individually Icarus-figures, the men MacEwen depicts and invents are as troubled, confused, and lost as their author.

Atwood writes that "no-one has invoked the male Muse with such frequency and devotion as has Gwendolyn MacEwen" ("Muse" 25). The comment is apt, although we must bear in mind that MacEwen's Muses break from traditional representations not only because they are male but, further, because they tend toward uncontrolled descent rather than divine flight. This holds true from the "Icarus" poem of her first publication (*Selah*), through the "motorcycle Icarus" of *A Breakfast for Barbarians* (16), to the self-exiled Athenians who would conquer the sky in her adaptation of Aristophanes's *The Birds*. An attraction to male errancy helps explain the author's affiliation with Ferrari and Nowlan via their Planoterrestrialism, a wilfully wrong-headed belief that resists certainty in our ideas about the planet. As much as they invited her participation, MacEwen imported the FES onto the shaky ground of her creative writing and extra-literary engagements. Ever at risk of taking a fall of her own, the creator behind this sinking raft of Icarus figures carried the "Abysmal Chasm" within. The abyss looks out unblinkingly through the following self-description: "and behind my eyes there is / a great ensuing blackness" (*Rising Fire* 20). Sheer edges appear everywhere in her verse worlds, positioned directly underfoot. The opening poem of her first collection states, "the end takes place / in each step of your function" (3). That end (or edge) is circumscribed by the limits of one's social existence or personal psychology. The same poem establishes an opposingly infinite cosmology, "which fits your measures; has no ending" (3). Here, the finitude of human possibility confronts an endlessly

interpretable environment that stymies or inspires us as its enemies or allies.

Alongside her rebellious personality and imaginative cosmology, a mythic sense of Gaelic/Celtic heritage made MacEwen a good fit for the FES. The organization's closest analogue was Nowlan's farcical Stuart Monarchy revival operating in Fredericton during the mid-1970s. Like the FES, the Monarchy hoax sought to ennoble a losing position. Its satirical campaign championed a seemingly lost cause: that of restoring the Scottish royals to the British throne. MacEwen's poetry contains recurrent assertions of Scottish/Irish inheritance, a division blurred over centuries of settlement in Canada as well as close ties between the "old" countries. Transposing McEwen to MacEwen is emblematic of Gaelic/Celtic fluidity, personal will, and sensitivity to vital subtleties of language. Paraphrasing MacEwen's friend, writer and architect Leon Whiteson, Sullivan goes beyond MacEwen's appearance in referring to her as a "black Celt" (313). MacEwen observed others closely and would often "find the comment that cut to the bone. She was never cruel but rather relentless. In the tone of the words and the hardness of her eyes, it was as if she were looking up from a black pit and seeing the absurdity of the whole human comedy" (313-14). In a literary landscape, every black pit requires a magic castle.

MacEwen presents such a structure in the poem "I Have Mislaid Something":

I have mislaid something very important  
and possibly very large  
like a castle in the Highlands  
where the ghosts of my ancestors  
wait with bagpipes and with horns

I have mislaid many places  
in this house without history  
there are so many places for places to hide (*Armies* 7)

This castle symbolizes loss, strictly speaking. But it also represents a conceptual structure for the poet to cling to, however distant or ephemeral. Poetic leaning and ancestral inheritance enrich the perceived shallow soil of Canada's cultural landscape. A sense of mythlessness — within this "house without history" — was a foundational narrative for MacEwen's generation of Canadian writers, so they felt free to invent,

borrow, and sometimes appropriate. Inheritances from world myth and composing poetry from them provided her with “a way of being in the impossible world” (Sullivan 56). At odds with Toronto’s sober Protestantism, she sought out “fellow travellers, adepts in the labyrinths of myth” (85). They, in turn, found her. Her creative interpretations of cultural heritage must have been compelling to Nowlan, whose writing focuses on the lives of Atlantic Canadians. In turn, joining the FES would have given a sense of belonging to a nonconformist immersed in “Toronto the Good,” at that time a more anglophile and abstemious centre than any part of the country located east of the Ontario–Quebec border.

MacEwen developed a matrix of female peers — Atwood, Joyce Marshall, Marian Engel, and Judith Merrill (Sullivan 300) — throughout her career as the “Sphynx of Toronto.” (The exotic honorific comes via Ludwig Zeller’s sculpture portrait of MacEwen, reproduced in Barry Callaghan’s *The Stories That Are Great within Us*.) Despite the influence of these women, MacEwen never explicitly aligned herself with feminist ideology. Her work is often read within the context of feminism, although she saw herself as a precursor to that movement rather than a proponent. Sullivan quotes her statement: “I was a feminist all my life before the word ever came into being. It never occurred to me that I couldn’t do anything I wanted to” (369). Because of her proud independence, MacEwen’s thought includes feminism more than the feminist movement includes her. She never converted to mysticism either, despite ample reading on the topic. Nor did she align with countercultural forces — such as Toronto’s Rochdale College — at least not until a Canadian brand of Flat Earthism emerged with its antidote to national disinterest in what she called “the surreal, the bizarre, the dream” (qtd. in Sullivan 95). Instead, MacEwen danced solo to an irregular beat along the margins of politics, spirituality, and gender. She wrote to Irving Layton, “The only real women I know are women who have something of the man in them . . . and the only real men are those who have something of the woman” (qtd. in Sullivan 161). Not paradoxically, gender confusion is held up as her coherent ideal. MacEwen’s approach to gender usually eschews patriarchal and feminist ideologies in equal measure.

Ironically, among the author’s books, an adaptation of the male tragedian Euripides conforms best to the label “women’s writing.” Her ver-



sion of the *Trojan Women* is a classical work about female perspectives, refigured through a contemporary voice. From Cassandra to Hecuba, various female archetypes appear in the script. In fact, MacEwen adds stereotypical descriptors to help contrast the various roles. Whereas Euripides introduces the tragedy's characters according to their familial connections — as wives, mothers, and daughters — MacEwen elaborates the *dramatis personae* as follows. Hecuba is “[a]ging, but ageless”; Cassandra is “a holy virgin. She is a nubile fifteen-year-old”; Andromache is “[a]bout thirty, self-righteous and shrill”; and Helen is “[i]n her mid-twenties, beautiful, a pathological liar” (*Trojan Women* 32). These inserted descriptors emphasize stereotypical female categories in the absence of Pallas Athena, the goddess whom MacEwen strikes from her adaptation. This leaves the male god Poseidon to set the stage for its limited range of action. However different in character, none of the play's women escape from suffering in the Trojan War's ruinous aftermath.

Articulate through pain, Andromache states:

I'm a *woman*.  
 I know all about the depths of suffering,  
 Great yawning chasms of pain  
 like black cavities in the earth  
 or the guts of volcanoes  
 That open up to reveal  
 The fathomless mouths of the fathomless “gods”  
 Which are nothing but our fears and desires  
 made huge and horrible,  
 spewing forth blood, and lava.  
 There is no bottom to those craters . . .  
 There is no end to pain . . . (*Trojan Women* 56)

Andromache's speech is an original contribution by MacEwen. She habitually adapts rather than translates her transnational source materials, to “re-create their atmosphere and charm in English in as relaxed a manner as possible” (*Honey Drum* 8). Euripides's women do not invoke geographical metaphors to describe their pain, whereas MacEwen's Andromache overlays startling and sexually suggestive environmental images with social and emotional burdens — a pattern that recurs across the author's oeuvre, including her work related to the FES. The speech's subtly anatomical references to geographical “depths,” “chasms,” “cav-

ities,” and “fathomless mouths” draws out our frighteningly precarious position on an ultimately unknowable planet in an infinite universe. But, Janus-faced, MacEwen committed herself to comedy as well as tragedy. Her work on Euripides complements her adaptation of Aristophanes’s *The Birds*. MacEwen’s version of that Greek comedy contains many original elements: references to the Plains of Abraham (52), Air Canada (79), and Superman (17), as well as a sign placed on the edge of the stage throughout, indicating a “Sheer Drop.” Separately, her adaptations of ancient plays balance humour and tragedy, just as the author’s planoterrestrial playfulness simultaneously masks and reveals her own anxious, edgy interior life.

MacEwen scholarship to date features manifold attempts to describe her elusive fascination. D.G. Jones employs cartographic metaphors to capture the boldness of her poetics. Positioning her in contrast to the cautious mainstream of Canadian poetry, he writes, “True, most Canadian poets tend to pick their way through space like surveyors with a fear of heights. . . . Even if they wander, we can find them on the map, anchored in immediate local detail. Whereas MacEwen invokes a dancer in a landscape where ‘all maps have resigned’” (Jones). Even amongst a generation of experimental writers, MacEwen stands out for going beyond known territories. Rather than developing a realist’s localism or regionalism that helps Canadian readers to recognize their own place, she unsettles the seeming objectivity of the external world by emphasizing personal subjectivity and eternal archetypes. In part because MacEwen draws extensively on sources of world literature and myth, Jones observes that her “words might be equally appropriate in Spadina, Beirut, or the U.N.” (n. pag.). Bearing out Jones’s perspective, MacEwen has recently attracted the attention of international critics like Sahar Al-Husseini and María Luz González-Rodríguez.

Introducing an issue of *Canadian Literature* on avant-garde poetics, Alessandra Capperdoni invokes MacEwen and Pat Lowther as forerunners to more recent and overtly experimental poets. Given their relative directness of style, these writers might seem only distantly related to the radical grammars of Lisa Robertson or Rachel Zolf. Capperdoni’s recuperation of Lowther and MacEwen as experimentalists defies their usual categorization “within aesthetic categories of, respectively, the mimetic and the mystic, or a broadly defined modernism. But their poetry is replete with gestures and postures enacting ruptures of language and

representational writing” (104). Given a contemporary proliferation of conceptual art, language poetry, and Indigenous writing, MacEwen’s techniques can come to look — on the surface — increasingly conservative. Therefore, her resurfacing — which is to say, a critical reclamation and reappraisal — will require the insights of readers like Capperdoni, who wisely promotes her radical, not canonical, importance.

Among her peer group, MacEwen is most closely associated with Milton Acorn (via their brief marriage) and Margaret Atwood (because of their long friendship). Atwood’s iconic stature has superseded MacEwen’s by a wide margin. Paul Martin’s research shows that MacEwen’s texts appeared on no undergraduate reading lists created through major Canadian English departments during the 1997-98 and 2007-08 academic years, when Atwood’s books appeared ninety-four times (236-37; 267-68). Yet, as a writer, MacEwen surpasses Atwood with regard to the relative depths of their male characters. She often places marginal men at the centre of her works, whereas Atwood’s men represent dominant culture but remain underdeveloped in the shadowy peripheries of her female-focused narratives. *Surfacing*’s Joe and David are typical examples. A long-time supporter of her friend, Atwood has articulated MacEwen’s artistic power as well as any commentator and in a way that uncannily relates to her planoterrestrial flirtations. Without drawing that connection, Atwood states that what MacEwen “offered was an entrée to amazement, to a shared and tingling secret, to splendors. But there was an undercurrent of amusement too, as if you were a fool for being taken in by its voluptuousness; as if there were a cosmic joke in the offing, a simple, mysterious joke, like the jokes of children” (“Isis in Darkness” 65). This synopsis could apply to only a handful of Canadian writers. Darkly humorous FES authors are reasonable contenders: MacEwen or Nowlan, David McFadden or Farley Mowat.

Today, artist Kay Burns curates the Museum of the Flat Earth on Newfoundland’s Fogo Island, a place identified as one of the Earth’s corners by the FES’s Overseer of the Edge, Al Pittman. As her alter ego, Dr. Iris Taylor, Burns coordinates a reconstituted version of the Society based closely on the words and spirit of the original. Gwendolyn MacEwen’s contributions, both in her own name and as Icarus Platis, set an early example for the participation of female and fictional persons within the FES. The 1970s institution’s irregular structure and official newsletters are preserved in the archives of its founders. But these col-

lections show no evidence that actual meetings of the Society were ever convened, nor that votes on motions and bylaws were ever held. Rather, then as now, the Society operates on the conceptual level, as a collaborative and spontaneous performance played out largely through correspondence between members. Little is required from participants other than committing “unswerving loyalty to the cause,” words inscribed on membership certificates (Membership Certificate [Ferrari fonds 2.1.6-2]). A group with more specific and onerous demands would likely not have secured MacEwen for a vice-presidency, because she closely guarded against incursions on her time. In turn, the FES offers little more than moral support to adherents, who share a sense of alienation from an overly rational culture. MacEwen’s critics have noted her ex-centric place in Canadian literature. Her FES executive membership confirms her marginality to the established “tribe” of successful CanLit authors. Transience as opposed to fixity, holding an unruly rather than proper place — these traits make MacEwen appealing to readers with a taste for literary obscurity and creative defiance.

MacEwen sailed onto the Toronto literary scene as a natural, which is not to say a simpleton. The high-school dropout’s Juilliard-quality recitations displayed a potency and precision that belied her personal difficulties and disorderliness. A similar paradox marks her contemporary legacy. Her enduring importance to literary history is maintained by Atwood, Sullivan, Jones, Deshayé, Capperdoni, Longfellow, and others. Popular audiences have not embraced MacEwen’s books, possibly dissuaded by the intensity of her oddness and grace. Tragic qualities of her life and work prevent some from detecting her mirthful humour and ludic charisma, which merit wider appreciation. Hopefully, the twenty-first century will see a resurgence of MacEwen through new editions of her texts, the publication of forgotten works housed in archives, and an expanding scholarly discussion about her artistry. Her many accomplishments and bold imagination are well worth celebrating, whatever shape such celebrations might take.

#### AUTHOR’S NOTE

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## NOTES

<sup>1</sup> Flat Earth Society Chairman of the Board Raymond Fraser, a poet and novelist, remains in the margins of the present discussion for two reasons. His role was overshadowed by the Symposiarch's initiating vision and the President's sustaining labour; moreover, no Fraser-MacEwen letters survive in either writer's archive.

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