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Margaret Atwood's Historical Lives in Context: Notes on a Postcolonial Pedagogy for Historical Fiction

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In November 1996, Margaret Atwood delivered the Bronfman lecture at the University of Ottawa, a lecture that was later published as In Search of Alias Grace by the University of Ottawa Press and then reprinted in the American Historical Review in December 1998 as part of the AHR Forum on "Histories and Historical Fiction." The introduction to the AHR Forum avows, more than 25 years after the publication of Hayden White's Metahistory, that "[s]torytelling has returned to claim a prominent place in history" (1502). While this announcement is late arriving, its striking similarity to the statements of anthropologists like James Clifford a decade earlier locates the discussion within the "linguistic turn" in the social sciences. The AHR Forum presents this turn, or return, as a historical moment; in Michel de Certeau's terms, it is one of the ruptures that announces the present. For literary critics, this moment has placed literary analysis, especially literary revisionism, at the centre of historical interpretation. For professional historians, however, the return to narrative has served a number of different purposes, including arguments for resisting the use of social scientific methodology (see Stone; Burke).

Nevertheless, in both disciplines, scholars debate ideas advanced by postmodernists, particularly the need to undermine master narratives of history by narrative means. The theoretical discussion of master narratives shapes the criticism of contemporary Canadian historical fiction, with
literary studies by Dennis Duffy, Bernd Engler and Kurt Muller, Martin Kuester, and Herb Wylie building on Linda Hutcheon's work in *The Canadian Postmodern*. This critical work provides a theoretical context for a proliferation of self-reflexive historical fiction in the latter half of the twentieth century based on the premise that, as Wylie phrases it succinctly, contemporary Canadian historical novels "highlight the codes and discursive conventions that govern historical writing and reflect the sense that the politics and technologies of representation of traditional history and historical fiction need to be questioned" (33).

As literary critics grapple with literature that reconstructs marginalized historical lives, calls for a return to the master narratives of a national history follow on the backlash brought by Jack Granatstein's *Who Killed Canadian History?* While some literary critics attempt to reduce what professional historians do to a set of writing strategies, extreme nationalists attack professional historians for failing to produce a coherent narrative. Citing their own surveys based on testing facts, these nationalists bemoan the failure of citizens to respond correctly to their arbitrary questions, warning that this means the future of the nation is at stake. In this way, they attempt to manufacture a crisis in the teaching of Canadian history whereby "Canadians" generally, but often "young people" specifically, are said to not know what they ought to know about Canadian history. These discussions leave the impression that "history" is a set of names, dates, and other details, a warehouse of data to which historians hold the key; that is, precisely the idea of history that academic historians spend their time trying to dispel from the minds of undergraduates.

Attacks led by Granatstein and his followers are often, not surprisingly, directed at politically committed revisionists, including feminist, multiculturalist, and social historians, some of whom have answered with excellent rebuttals, such as Timothy J. Stanley's "Why I Killed Canadian History: Towards an Anti-Racist History in Canada." For Stanley, anti-racist history "kills" nationalist history, in part, because it is *better* history. Stanley embraces postcolonial critique as a mode of inquiry dedicated to understanding the way imperial and national narratives shape the lives of colonizer and colonized. In his work on the history of the Chinese in British Columbia, he dispels the notion that historical meaning derives solely from the rhetorical strategies the historian chooses, by emphasizing the sources that have been ignored or discounted, including Chinese
language books and newspapers. From the historian's point of view, and it is a view I share, a history that takes these sources into account is by definition better than a history that does not. Using this example, Stanley counters Granatstein's naive nationalism by demonstrating that there cannot be a disinterested historical interpretation since there can be no world of "facts" without interpretation, and therefore, interest. The anti-racist historian, then, is interested in both studying and eliminating racism.

For postcolonial scholars who are actively engaged in decolonization, such as committed anti-racists like Stanley, consciousness is a first step towards making visible the discourses shaping any society. In literary studies, it is also a powerful counterweight to the appreciation model still gripping many English departments. Teaching how to evaluate literature by cultivating literary taste and value through appreciation only prepares students to be discriminating consumers in the exchange of cultural capital. Rather than merely preparing students to fulfill their roles as individual consumers of cultural products, postcolonial pedagogy is meant to enable and to transform in a collective way. Yet, postcolonial critique can have its own exchange value if it is treated only as a standpoint and not as both a methodology and a form of knowledge. In such a case, meaningful social transformation may be confounded by a purely instrumental use of postcolonial literature and theory.

The manufacturers of the crisis in Canadian history education, with their trivia quizzes and sets of facts, imply a model of education that has been thoroughly discredited. In this model, students are empty vessels who, once filled up with the appropriate contents, become good citizens, and professors are the keepers of heritage, passing it on to the next generation. The ideological foundations of the pedagogy advocated by nationalists were critiqued in Paulo Freire's Pedagogy of the Oppressed three decades ago. As Freire shows, the model that treats students as receptacles filled up with the stories the professor tells them, or as the tabula rasa on which academics trace their ideas, plays a "domesticating" function. Freire calls for a pedagogy based on materialist analysis that would emphasize cultivating critical consciousness and that would reject the paternalism inherent in the education system. Consciousness means developing the awareness necessary to generate a critique and propose a course of action, not learning the prescribed vocabulary or merely reciting theories.

Postcolonial pedagogy works for decolonization through advocacy
and engagement while maintaining an open-ended learning process. How to achieve this is an ongoing challenge for politically engaged teaching and research, but the consensus of those who embrace advocacy, like the essayists collected in *Advocacy in the Classroom* (Spacks), seems to be that professors can balance advocacy and openness if they use an inclusive approach. In English departments, this striving for balance is often framed in response to Gerald Graff's call to "teach the conflicts" (see Cain). While Graff's *Professing Literature* provides a much needed historical analysis of English as a discipline, *Beyond the Culture Wars* presents a model for curricular reform, not pedagogy. In it, Graff argues that a curriculum built around debates over the subject, rather than isolating competing positions by adding courses, will offer students a more complete understanding of the discipline and give them greater access to the academic community. This essentially pluralist approach is based on the conviction that "the meaning of any text is determined within a conversation of readers" (85). As in *Professing Literature*, Graff demonstrates the shortcomings of a curriculum organized to minimize conflict. Not only does the "insularity" of the classroom and the absence of peer review protect professors from criticism and from potential conflict, it prevents them from preparing students to join the debate (107-14). What Graff also calls the "course fetish" or "cult of the great teacher" further undermines the intellectual community by eliminating opportunities for discussion and debate: "Our very use of the term 'the classroom' to stand for the entire educational process is a symptom of this constricted way of thinking..." (114). But, if there really is no intellectual community, no "conversation of readers," the question becomes what is there for students to access? Graff proposes to bring such a community into being by reforming programs, not individual courses, according to his teaching the conflicts model.

Whereas Graff's criticism of the way we use the term *the classroom*, with its emphasis on the individual professor and course, indicates why it is not possible for a professor to constitute a community by merely representing difference in the classroom, an analysis of power relations in the classroom further demonstrates the serious constraints on the professor's ability to represent conflicting positions. As the adjudicator of balance, the professor retains power over the subject. Even if it is assumed that all professors are ethical individuals who work hard to treat subjects (in all senses of the word) fairly, there are still serious problems with a model that
rely on the professor's ability to both advocate a position and articulate opposing, even incommensurable, positions. Inclusion tends to highlight the oppositional stance of the advocate, but it can also be counterproductive. What anti-racist would want to give equal time to racist views, for example? Not me.

In contrast, Spivak calls on postcolonial critics and professors to “suspend the mood of self-congratulation as saviors of marginality” (Outside 61) and to adopt a strategy based on an awareness of their own capacities. In an interview with Ellen Rooney, she describes this approach: “I will share with you what I have learned about knowing, that these are the limitations of what I undertake, looking to others to teach me. I think that’s what one should do rather than invoke multiplicity” (19). As Spivak’s answer indicates, the professor’s authority is the most serious limitation on the teaching the conflicts model. Given the professor’s responsibility to evaluate the student’s work in the course, professor and students are not on the same footing in the classroom, no matter how hard one might try to modify the imbalance. Even if a conflict is covered, opposing views aired, and counter-arguments included, the professor’s standpoint may still be regarded as authoritative if she is the one who determines how students do in the course. Peer evaluation can modify this effect, but creates other pitfalls. In any case, professors are ultimately responsible for evaluation and thus have institutional power regardless of their intentions and methods. If a proposed pedagogy relies only on the professor and the professor’s methods, and not on envisaging students as fully committed participants, it cannot produce transformation. The challenge is to create opportunities for positive transformation without overdetermining the learning process or avoiding responsibility.

For these reasons, any pedagogy that makes the university “classroom” the agent of meaningful social transformation invites scepticism. Moreover, each time a well-planned syllabus, assignment, or lesson plan meets with the real students in a real classroom, we encounter the unruliness of experience and the uncertain but exciting possibilities that education holds for both professor and student. For Freire’s pedagogy to be achieved, the professor has to embrace unruliness and give up control, not necessarily of the classroom, but of the knowledge generated by those in it. Yet, classroom experience may set up conditions for a radical pedagogy, even if such a pedagogy cannot be achieved within it. Radical pedagogy
depends on the teacher’s engagement in the same process—not a narrative of “when I was a student before I was a professor,” but working with the class as a student and struggling to find ways to alter and to eliminate the subject-object relation of the classroom. Bearing this in mind, I have been working with two objectives: first, to promote a postcolonial view of Canadian history by placing historical events in the imperial context described in the historiography; and second, to develop critical thinking and to create the conditions necessary for a radical critique by concentrating on the methods used by historians and asking students to learn these methods.

When I started teaching at Saint Mary’s University in 1998, I was surprised to hear from students that some did not know that slavery had existed in Nova Scotia, the province in which they had lived all their lives and been educated, before taking the survey of Canadian literature with me. Having grown up on the myth of Scottish Nova Scotia, they were shocked to learn that slavery was still practised as free Black Loyalists were settling and being settled in the most inhospitable places. Although this experience indicates that the concerns about historical awareness are not completely unfounded, neither is the social history I wish to emphasize of any concern to the nationalists clamouring for more Canadian history in schools. Teaching Canadian literary history and Canadian history, including some of what nationalists would call basic facts, and a great deal that they would not, quickly became a priority in my feminist and anti-racist agenda. Over the years, students have prepared seminars and critical essays comparing novels such as *Away* and *The Englishman’s Boy* to their acknowledged sources; they have held roundtable discussions comparing *Roughing It in the Bush* and *The Journals of Susanna Moodie*, read literary history and criticism by Misao Dean, Carole Gerson, and others, and debated the uses of history in a number of short stories, plays, and novels. I began to revise the Canadian literature courses I had inherited accordingly and included classes on how to approach the past, how to distinguish evidence from argument, and how historical method can contribute to the study of literature. At the same time, I found the literary analysis of history too narrowly focused on rhetoric—as indicated by critics’ appeals to Hayden White to the virtual exclusion of other historians—to provide students with an understanding of historical research and historiography. Indeed, the analysis of the writing of history has its own history, one which links it
to similar discussions in social sciences but which does not adequately represent what goes on in historiography. If I was going to think about historical research and writing, it seemed important to find out what historians had to say and to treat it seriously. Instead of teaching a “conflict” between literary theory and history, I decided to structure the discussion of history around works by historians and to introduce some of the research on primary sources that I was doing myself. Rather than recount those earlier experiences in this discussion, I have chosen to explore these pedagogical issues by using the example of *Alias Grace*, a novel that I have yet to teach. By doing so, I will avoid the ethical pitfalls associated with writing about one’s classes, while sharing some of my more recent research.

The AHR Forum on *Alias Grace* presents an excellent opportunity to teach about literature, historiography, and their interdisciplinary contact. The forum is comprised of Atwood’s Bronfman lecture and brief responses by three American historians who, according to the preface, “share an interest in experimenting with the forms of historical presentation” (1502). These historians were: Lynn Hunt, a professor at the University of Pennsylvania who studies the French Revolution and has also published on cultural history; Jonathan D. Spence, a specialist in Chinese history who teaches at Yale; and John Demos, also from Yale, a social historian specializing in American colonial history. Given their expertise, it is not surprising that the discussion is *metahistorical* and sometimes has little to do with the novel.

Reading the preface to the discussion, which introduces Atwood as “one of our era’s master storytellers,” a reader could easily mistake Atwood for an American novelist (1502). The American scholars situate the novel within the present American hegemony, virtually ignoring the Canadian content; indeed, only Lynn Hunt makes passing reference to Canadian history, even though Atwood’s lecture insists on it. In fact, it is Atwood’s insistence on the period in question as part of “Canadian history” that complicates the interpretation of the novel. When she describes the “climate” of the day and argues its importance in the lecture, she presents it as a Canadian, not a colonial or an imperial climate. Atwood’s lecture describes a particular narrative of Canadian historical development with her send-up of the brazen little “burps” in the peaceable kingdom, the historical compromise of rational participants. In her account of why
Canadian writers have turned to historical fiction. Atwood again stresses the “Canadian” in what she calls the “real Canadian past” (1515). Yet, none of the participants comment on the particular history that Atwood is dealing with. Indeed, when Jonathan Spence likens Atwood’s comments on the cultural relevance of “geology” and “weather” to his own attempts to link personal experience to “cosmic forces,” it is clear that he has missed her point (1522). But all three recognize Atwood’s method in the attention paid to daily life—as Demos calls them: the “how-to-store-parsnips” details of history (1529). Since Alias Grace represents a moment in Atwood’s lifelong conversation with Susanna Moodie, Canadian literary historians, and perhaps readers more generally, recognize where some of the detail comes from (see Hamill). Like the tricks of Jerome DuPont’s trade, the lamp and the veil, the writer uses detail to establish the credibility of what she calls fiction’s “plausible whoppers.” Interestingly enough, when Atwood uses this phrase, a phrase that captures the panel’s attention, she is comparing writers not to historians but to politicians. Unlike politicians, Atwood claims, writers “do not come with the usual props and backups” or “the graphs, the studies, the blue and red books, the Royal Commissions and omissions, and so forth” to sell an “otherwise bald and unconvincing tale” (1503).

As Burkhard Niederhoffer argues, such comments indicate that Atwood’s approach to history is generally pragmatic. “Any plot is a this followed by a that,” writes Atwood, “there must be change in a novel, and change can only take place over time, and this change can only have significance if either the character in the book—or, at the very least, the reader—can remember what came before” (1506). Describing her method, Atwood writes, “when there was a solid fact, I could not alter it” (1515) no matter how enticing the fictional prospects; “but,” she goes on, “in the parts left unexplained—the gaps left unfilled—I was free to invent” (1515). Yet, as Hunt points out, Atwood does not espouse, as Hunt describes it, “an explicit postmodernist stance that claims the culture has exhausted the potential of modernism and with it scientific standards of truth, the conviction that history can capture an objective reality, the belief that individual identity displays continuity over time, and so on” (1519). Rather, while maintaining an awareness of the structural similarities between historical and fictional forms, her refusal to clearly separate history and fiction may be seen as an indication not of a generic distinction but an
epistemological one, although Niederhoff does not think so. He argues that because Atwood is “less interested in the truth (or falsehood) value of historical and biographical reconstruction,” her interest is “pragmatic, not epistemological” (81–82). As evidence of a pragmatic approach, Niederhoff quotes the final section of the lecture in which Atwood states: “The past belongs to us, because we are the ones who need it” (1516; qtd. in Niederhoff 82).

Novelists do take a pragmatic approach to historical writing, mining it for those “how-to-store-parsnips” details, but their work also engages with how we know the past. Asking students to apply “the 5 Ws” of historical method to the AHR forum on Alias Grace presents the opportunity to teach historical methods of research and to consider the writer’s pragmatic choices while addressing epistemological questions. Once the students have determined what the debate is about and who is participating in it, they may be asked to imagine how the forum might have been constructed differently. What if certain Canadian historians had been on the panel? What if each of the participants represented a branch of relevant historiography? The debates in the historiography of the period are represented in a number of studies, including: Constance Backhouse’s Petticoats and Prejudice: Women and the Law in Nineteenth-Century Canada (1991), Elizabeth Jane Errington’s Wives and Mothers, School Mistresses and Scullery Maids: Working Women in Upper Canada, 1790–1840 (1995), Cecilia Morgan’s Public Men and Virtuous Women: The Gendered Languages of Religion and Politics in Upper Canada, 1791–1850 (1996), and Peter Oliver’s “Terror to Evil-Doers”: Prisons and Punishments in Nineteenth-Century Ontario (1998), to name a few. Learning about historiography informs the students’ reading of the novel. As an assignment, students might hold a round table or panel discussion mimicking the AHR panel. Presentations might include arguments concerning which historians would be invited to participate in such a panel and why, or analyses of the novel’s relationship to the historiography. Panel discussions combine the individual contribution of the seminar format and group work, thus modeling intellectual community. Ultimately, discussion of the historiography leads to interpretive questions about the novel: What is the representation of women in the novel? How is it constructed? When read in the contemporary context, what does it suggest about “women” by representing a nineteenth-century woman?
Rather than evaluate the historical accuracy of the historical fiction, the class would be encouraged to bring their knowledge to bear on the interpretation and to produce multiple readings of the text. As an example of such a reading, I demonstrate my own learning process with an interpretation of the novel’s domestication of Grace Marks. As Stephanie Lovelady argues of the “public/private distinction so fundamental to the novel, both in narrative and thematic terms” (36), “Grace gains a measure of freedom by conforming, both in terms of assimilation and by creating a conventional, domestically bound life for herself—in other words, by retreating as far as possible in both ethnic and gender terms into the private sphere” (58–59). As Lovelady argues, “it is an improvement, but not a triumph” (58).

A number of critics note that Atwood draws on Moodie’s account of her encounter with Grace Marks in the Toronto Asylum; indeed, Moodie’s depiction of Grace is one of the images the novel contests strongly. However, Atwood’s decision to locate the narrative present several years after her supposed meeting with Moodie is also “pragmatic,” offering a range of possibilities for characterization and plot development. At this point, Grace spends an increasing amount of time in the home of the governor performing the domestic function she had before the murders of Thomas Kinnear and Nancy Montgomery. This setting allows Grace to observe the ladies of the town and to be observed by them. It is through this relationship that Atwood is able to develop a characterization of Grace as an alluring figure in the public mind and to develop a critique of the distinction between respectability and depravity that Moodie’s account of Grace draws.

In the novel, Grace represents the labour sustaining the domestic sphere, but her domestication also serves to characterize her as an unlikely murderess—what intrigues the ladies also confounds the reader. Who is she? Is she an innocent, exploited servant, or a coolly calculating accomplice? Grace is characterized through her analysis of the standards of respectability the ladies represent when her voice parodies the women she overhears:

Oh imagine, I feel quite faint, they say, and You let that woman walk around loose in your house, you must have nerves of iron, my own would never stand it. (24)
These reform-minded ladies, like the Reverend Verringer, represent the stuffy, repressed Victorian sensibility everyone knows. The contrast between the apparently guileless but apparently guilty Grace and the other women is strong. The governor's wife, who "likes to horrify her acquaintances" with her scrapbook (27), is also compared to a cast of "other women": Simon's domineering mother, the suspicious Mrs. Quennell, the frivolous Lydia, the stolid Dora, and the ruined Rachel Humphreys. But, it is ultimately their attitude towards sex that Grace knows accounts for her own allure:

That is what really interests them—the gentlemen and the ladies both. They don't care if I killed anyone, I could have cut dozens of throats, it's only what they admire in a soldier, they'd scarcely blink. No: was I really a paramour, is their chief concern, and they don't even know themselves whether they want the answer to be no or yes. (28)

This domestic detail does more than accentuate the historical realism that allows the reader to suspend disbelief. It contributes to a view of Victorian women that has implications for contemporary women, a view based on dominant patterns in popular representation of the period. The reconstruction of Upper Canadian society here is based on the evidence presented in newspapers, but how closely sensational accounts matched the public's attitudes and tastes is hard to tell. Judith Knelman argues convincingly that the account in the Toronto Star that Atwood relied on for what she calls "a solid fact" was a "formulaic description derived from English newspaper accounts of women, especially young women, who were not intimidated by rituals of justice" (679). Knelman's point is not to criticize the novel for inaccuracy; rather, it is to demonstrate the literary conventions at work in reports of Grace's behaviour and thus highlight the necessity of interpretation in identifying and representing historical "facts." Similarly, those portions of the narrative set in the Kingston penitentiary tend to emphasize discipline and punishments, revealing the brutality of nineteenth-century penal institutions, but without the complexity provided by the historiography of crime and punishment in Upper Canada discussed below. Atwood reproduces a standard interpretation of women's lives in the past, one which is contested in studies by social historians, such as Cecilia Morgan, who study women in the period.
In *Public Men and Virtuous Women*, Morgan shows that the division of public and private spheres is not “simply a projection of feminist historians eager to find a paradigmatic framework for their research” (10) but that “separate spheres” was a metaphor, or more precisely a “tropes,” in nineteenth-century society. After studying what she calls the “stuff of public discourses”—newspapers, printed sermons, travel literature, pamphlets, biographies, and published reports—Morgan surveyed the historiography on Ontario, which she considers both “locality” and “part of a larger, transatlantic society” (6). In presenting her examination of the research, she shows how “tropes were not just intriguing literary devices but were instead strategies whereby relations of power were produced, organized, and maintained” (10) in order to settle and to facilitate the colonization of Native peoples. Acknowledging that the separate spheres paradigm has allowed women’s historians to discover much that was unknown about women, Morgan nevertheless demonstrates that “Upper Canadian society was more complex than these binary opposites might lead us to believe” (8). Morgan cautions the reader that we must attend to “the elements of struggle over language and discourse and that we must avoid the trap of seeing them as totalizing and all-powerful in themselves, impervious to counterclaims” (16, emphasis added).

The interpretation of separate spheres as a “totalizing discourse,” rather than as a “tropes,” leads to a view of nineteenth-century womanhood that does not allow for the counter-discursive and resistant acts of women that Morgan discovers. Atwood carefully constructs images of the Victorian period, including attitudes towards domestic service, religion, and respectability, in order to maintain Grace’s alias and to facilitate her fictional empowerment. Indeed, Herb Wyile argues that while Grace is presented with the choice of ignorance or insanity, “[t]he structure of *Alias Grace*, however, allows for the consideration (and subversive dissection) of these alternatives and for the restoration to Grace—through her skillful, compelling, and ultimately ambiguous narrative—of a sense of agency and power” (80). Grace serves as a figure whose lack of power depends on a historical location where her class and gender make her highly vulnerable to exploitation and mistreatment. The representation of a historical figure such as Grace Marks based on this trope would seem to support the view of women fabricated through it; moreover, it inscribes, if not naturalizes through temporal distance, the powerlessness of women like her. Thus,
Alias Grace also enacts the "progressive narrative of liberation from oppressive gender norms" that Misao Dean observes in literary criticism of nineteenth-century women's writing in Practising Femininity. In her study, Dean demonstrates that "[t]he assumption underlying these readings is that while women were oppressed in the past, they have been and are struggling as active agents to free themselves, and that representations of women thus become progressively more free and accurate as literature progresses from the nineteenth to the twentieth century" (5). With the help of Dean's argument and the historiography discussed, I would argue that Atwood's historical realism does not merely "fill in the gaps"; rather, it presents an interpretation of women's history by reproducing separate spheres in fictional form. Placing the novel, and the historical research on which it is based, in the context of historiography illustrates the way writers construct fictional worlds that offer interpretations of the past that conform with their views on the present.

This is the sort of critique that studying literature and historiography together can draw from a class, one of many readings that might be produced when the work of historians is considered alongside historical fiction. To read Alias Grace through a postcolonial view of Canadian history then means treating the period as a colonial period and the society as one defined by imperial interests rather than as a nascent nation preparing the way to Confederation. Postcolonial studies comparing histories and historical figures across the empire further help to understand nineteenth-century Canada as part of the British empire either by examining the historiography that contextualizes and takes such a comparative approach, like Cecilia Morgan's, or by incorporating historical research on primary sources. In my own research, I am bringing together two subjects in Atwood's writing which have yet to be explicitly related to each other: the historical lectures in Strange Things: The Malevolent North in Canadian Literature and the historical fiction in Alias Grace. In both, Atwood reconstructs historical lives. While Grace Marks emerges from the shadows of historical representation to become the heroine of a novel, Sir John Franklin, the ill-fated explorer whose story is well-known, serves as a target in Strange Things. These two figures, the failed hero and the condemned woman, share a historical context. Indeed, Grace was imprisoned only two years before Franklin set out on his last expedition. But it is more than the coincidence of their lives that bears reflection. Franklin's term as governor
of Van Diemen’s Land and his writing on the subject of convict women indicates dominant ways of seeing and dealing with women like Grace Marks in colonial settings. Franklin’s report on the state of convict women in Van Diemen’s Land, his correspondence, and some of the newspaper reports of the time support the historical detail in the novel. As part of the imperial context, these two people lived in societies structured around similar systems, ideas, and values, especially with regard to social reform.

In the period of Grace Marks’s incarceration, according to Peter Oliver, the punishments Atwood’s Grace describes, particularly whipping and the silent system, were regularly practised and the liberties taken by both matrons and keepers are well documented. However, the Reverend Verringer’s speech concerning the “notoriously corrupt” Warden Smith takes on a different significance when considered in the political context provided in Oliver’s study “Terror to Evil-Doers.” In 1849, Smith was removed as warden after being found guilty of a number of charges from mismanagement to cruelty by a commission led by George Brown. Oliver states that “[t]he commission’s verdict on the Smith administration stands today as the conventional wisdom about early Canadian penal administration” (139). In a detailed study of the published reports, minute books, and other documents relating to the Kingston Penitentiary, including the Brown Commission of 1849, and without attempting to exonerate Smith, Oliver reconstructs the political and bureaucratic structures and hypocrisy that led to the administration’s demise: “They provide a portrait of a warden whose reformist recommendations were rebuffed year after year by an indifferent government that had only two ideas about the provincial penitentiary, the need for harsh punishments and economical administration” (171). To ensure the latter, the prisoners’ labour was contracted out to provide revenue or used to sustain the prison and expand it. As the foundation of industrial prisons in the late nineteenth century would seem to attest, labour was considered beneficial in the reformation of criminals; however, this seems to have been far from the minds of the governing elite, and, Oliver argues, in their eagerness to blame the warden personally, the commission failed to address the structural problems that would continue to grow until exposed in the Archambault Commission in 1938 (185, 193). When Reverend Verringer pronounces sentence on the warden, not only does he confirm “conventional wisdom” about the penitentiary but he also aligns himself with an established elite, one that would hang Warden Smith out to dry.
The Franklins were part of a very similar colonial society in Van Diemen’s Land. Throughout his brief period as governor, Franklin proposed policies that were deeply influenced by the Christian Social Reform movement with its emphasis on promoting moral and spiritual health; for example, he advocated employment and education for men as well as women convicts. References to vice and depravity were more than Victorian moral panic, as several documents of the period suggest precautions to prevent attacks on the women both in the factories and on board ship. In his *A Confidential Despatch from Sir John Franklin on Female Convicts* (1843), Franklin describes the use of watch-houses to lodge convicts as an improvement by which “the great evils to which women were exposed formerly in travelling under the escort of constables to or from the factories are in some degrees remedied” (24). Throughout his report, Franklin refers to the various forms of corruption among the local officials and the dangers they presented to the future of the colony. It would be easy to dismiss Franklin’s final report on women convicts as an apology for his own failures and a parting salvo against his political enemies were it not for the recurrence of the problems and issues he raises in the correspondence of the officials who were to follow him. Three years later, his successor would voice similar concerns. Records suggest that the description of the allegedly false pregnancy of Grace Marks might be read, not as a sign of mental instability or duplicity, as it often has been, but as evidence that rape was a common danger for women in detention.

In her discussion of quilting in *Alias Grace*, Margaret Rogerson refers to another aspect of the context shared by these historical figures when she notes that, “[i]n the nineteenth century, the activity of piecing together tiny scraps of fabric to make aesthetically harmonious and useful products was recognized in the areas of medical and social rehabilitation” (6) and cites Fry’s introduction of needlework and knitting to Newgate’s female prisoners as an application of this theory. As a devoted follower of the Social Reform movement, Lady Franklin corresponded with Elizabeth Fry and shared many of her views. As she worked to implement these ideas in Van Diemen’s Land, the popular press accused her of meddling and chided Franklin for being governed by a woman. Like the respectable ladies who gather in the parlour in *Alias Grace*, Jane Franklin’s social conscience was shaped by gender and class essentialism and Christian paternalism, but she and other women like her were also susceptible to gender discrimination.
In her lecture “Concerning Franklin and his Gallant Crew,” Atwood abridges Franklin’s life story by describing only his most famous and final mission, the failed attempt to navigate the Northwest Passage. After introducing the subject by telling her Oxford audience that, in Canada, the word “Franklin” means disaster and referring to the “Franklin fiasco,” she minces no words: “the truth was—according to Native sources anyway—that the man was always somewhat of a fool, and had on previous occasions ignored local advice and gone places he'd been told not to” (14). As in the reconstructed life of Grace Marks, the fiction implies a narrative of development from a time when Europeans foolishly discounted the advice of indigenous people—as if no one would dream of doing that today—to the present. Of course, Atwood’s purpose is to entertain her audience while demonstrating the longevity and tenacity of the Franklin myth, which is quite different from writing a biography of the man or a history of Arctic navigation. However, what she presents as the “bare bones” of the story, in which, for example, Jane Franklin is only mentioned for offering a reward to the person who found her lost husband, is already a normative account derived from literary representation and presented as myth. Such representations are questioned when students are encouraged to engage with the documentary records regarding the Franklins as well as the historiography on convict women. This questioning opens the novel to complex readings while undermining the implied narrative of progress and presenting the colonial period as imperial rather than proto-national. It asks them to “think postcolonial.”

The postcolonial view of Canadian historical fiction takes into account the imperial context, including historiography, and raises questions about implied narratives of progress in the history. For the nationalist historian, “revisionism” means forgetting “our” shared past, our cultural inheritance, the story of our nation. In a review of Patrick J. Geary’s *The Myth of Nations*, R.I. Moore argues that the “legacy of historiography no more passes as an unopened parcel from generation to generation than that of ‘national inheritance’ itself” (5), and consequently, the particular combination of pride and prejudice that constitutes the myth of national origin “need not have been selected for survival, or combined together so noxiously” (5). The failure of modern historiography, according to Moore, is not that historians have believed in the history of nations as originary
narrative “but that they failed to prevent others from doing so” (5). To this end, it is the social historians, including Timothy J. Stanley, Cecilia Morgan, and Peter Oliver, not the self-styled nationalists, who have much to teach us about the historical contexts for historical fiction written today, including how to develop postcolonial pedagogy.

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NOTES

1. Appropriately, much of the criticism on *Alias Grace* also draws on Linda Hutcheon’s work on the postmodern. For example, categorizing *Alias Grace* as historiographic metafiction, Hilde Staels argues that Atwood subverts both the historical novel and detective story. Burkhard Niederhoff qualifies the use of the term *postmodern* with the statement that the “[self-reflexive] aspect does not take the form of narratorial comment or digression. Instead, it is contained in a separate plot line. . . . Reflexion is bound up in action” (72).

2. In a similar vein, Lynn Hunt ponders her students’ tendency to call any book a “novel,” and muses: “Has the distinction between history and fiction . . . vanished among the young?” (1517). It is not that students are unaware of their place in history; even if they may not have explanatory narratives for specific periods. In my experience, students are aware that they are living in and subject to an era of globalization. Many are resistant to it; some are anti-globalization activists.

3. As Cynthia Sugars reminded me after the presentation of the conference paper on which this article is based, the Bronfman lecture was created, in part, to celebrate national culture, and the intended audience may have influenced the lecture’s emphasis. Indeed, Arwood’s Clarendon lectures were similarly nationalistic.

4. Some critical discussions of *Alias Grace* have focused on Arwood’s use of the domestic as a device. For instance, Margaret Rogerson expertly deconstructs the use of quilt-making as a private female discourse and “metaphor for the
literary artefact.” Cristie March explores the signifying use of clothing and other objects.

5. Hilde Staels ventures that this obvious allusion to Freud’s Dora, a patient who resisted analysis as Grace resists Simon’s investigations, provides an anachronistic psychoanalytic context for the narrative.

6. The truth claim here is authorized by “Native sources” even though Rae and McClintock consulted Inuit, and Franklin travelled with Chipewyan on his 1819-22 and 1825-26 expeditions.

7. In the discussion following my conference presentation, Wendy Roy rightly noted that, in the novel, Grace refers to the Empire when she mentions the riots in Cawnpore (25). Such references help to establish the reality effect in the novel.

WORKS CITED


