

## BOOK REVIEW

Margot I. Duley. *Extraordinary Passages: The Life and Times of Margaret Iris Duley, Newfoundland's Pathbreaking Novelist*. St. John's: Memorial University Press, 2024. ISBN 978-1-990445-31-6

Margot Duley's *Extraordinary Passages: The Life and Times of Margaret Iris Duley, Newfoundland's Pathbreaking Novelist* is a thorough and detailed study of one of the most important voices in Newfoundland literature. But it is also more than that: *Extraordinary Passages* seeks to understand not just Margaret Duley's life and oeuvre, but also the larger world in which she lived.

It would be easy, as a family member—Margot I. Duley is Margaret Duley's niece—to paint Margaret Duley with a heroic brush; that is, to celebrate her strong contributions to Newfoundland literature, culture, and society while ignoring any possible limitations. But Duley is clear from the outset that she seeks a more complex reading of her famous aunt's life. The first sentence of the book, "It was not easy to become Margaret Iris Duley" (1), alludes to this. Right from the start, we are introduced to a formidable woman: a notable novelist who put the concerns of Newfoundlanders at the heart of her work, a feminist and suffragist who tackled challenging social issues in her work. Yet alongside this portrait, Duley also presents a woman resolutely committed to the imperial and colonial values of her class, community, and society, a positioning which resulted in, as Duley puts it, "stereotypical and racist" (8) representations of the people of Labrador. Duley's approach makes these varied and sometimes conflicting aspects of Margaret Duley's life visible for the reader, and the resulting biography is much stronger for it.

At over 400 pages, *Extraordinary Passages* is a hefty tome. Duley brings a historian's meticulous lens to her biographical project. Her approach is vast and encyclopedic, and sources include materials from a range of private and public archives from Canada and the UK, Margaret Duley's published and unpublished writing, newspaper records, interviews with friends and family, and even 78 RPM records. What this means is that the "times" appear, at least at the outset, to overwhelm the "life." Expecting a deep dive into biography, I found myself at first stymied by Duley's frequent digressions (for example, three pages dedicated to the life history of Margaret Duley's early childhood governess, who taught her for a single year). But this is Duley's point: to root Margaret Duley firmly within the world she knew. As I continued reading, I realized that the digressions are the heart of the story. In these sections, Duley is able to elaborate on concerns that might otherwise have remained less visible (the intersection of gender and class, for example, and the influence of settler colonialism not only on Margaret Duley's creative process but throughout Newfoundland more broadly speaking), and also to historically contextualize social issues that appear in Margaret Duley's novels (suffrage, extramarital relationships, divorce, and abortion, among others).

Given this, I wonder if the opening sentence that so drew me in is the *right* sentence: while it is evocative, it doesn't go nearly far enough to capture the breadth and depth of this work. Indeed, the frequent digressions are, in fact, the richest part of this biography. I would argue that this book is not the account of a single woman author, as the title suggests, but of Newfoundland (and of St. John's and the Avalon Peninsula in particular), with its women—and Margaret Duley more specifically—at its heart. *Extraordinary Passages* is a rich interrogation of complex relationships shaped by the politics of gender, class, and (less obviously, but still evident) race during a particularly pivotal period of Newfoundland history, from the Victorian era of Margaret Duley's birth through the struggle for women's suffrage, the two world wars, the Commission of Government, and Newfoundland's entry into Confederation with Canada. Of particular interest to me as a

reader are Duley's exploration of Margaret Duley's spiritual journey and her engagement with the taboo women's issues of abortion, extra-marital affairs, and divorce.

While Duley's historian's lens is strong, there is some tension between the historian's eye and the niece's "I." Perhaps this is to be expected; after all, Duley was not personally privy to the majority of her aunt's life. And yet, in the earlier sections of the book, she sometimes includes single sentences, often at the end of paragraphs, that seem to connect her life with that of her aunt. For example, in a section on notable suffragist and labour leader Julia Salter Earle, Duley writes, "Julia died in 1945, a year after I was born, but later Margaret took me to visit her family" (128). Why is this detail relevant to the broader story? Why did Duley include it? This sentence, and others like it, left me dissatisfied, as they tease at something that is never fleshed out. I wanted to know more: Why did the "I" matter at these points in particular? What did they mean? And that led to further questioning: What else could Duley have shared, if not about her aunt? Perhaps she might have included observations about her research process, or surprises she encountered along the way, or insights that challenged her own experiences and understandings of her aunt. I would also have liked to read more memories (though Duley does include several in the second-last chapter, "Reclaiming Newfoundland") and to understand why these were important to the biography. Duley indicates in the methodological note that prefaces *Extraordinary Passages* that her work is "informed by [her] direct knowledge of the author" and "therefore influenced by [her] memories of her vivid and complex personality and a general knowledge of her outlook and attitudes" (ix). Given this information, it would have been both relevant and interesting for Duley to weave her "I" much more overtly throughout the book. Further developing the "I" would have allowed Duley to ground both the relationship between herself and her famous literary aunt and the relationship between author and reader.

Nor am I entirely convinced by Duley's decision to "mine [Margaret Duley's] novels, short stories and speeches as biographical

sources” (ix). There is sometimes an uncomfortable slippage between Margaret Duley, woman and feminist, and Margaret Duley, author and creator. While it can certainly be said that one’s biography shapes one’s literary interests, it is much more challenging to assert these as fact, as Duley suggests, for example, in her reading of Margaret Duley’s *The Eyes of the Gull*: “These amusing interchanges reflect Margaret’s growing exasperation that Newfoundlanders were being unfairly judged and lectured at by outsiders” (182). Novelists write characters and narrators, and those characters and narrators may or may not reflect the experiences and/or opinions of the author; they may completely go against them. There are dangers with biographical readings of fiction, as Duley herself notes, pointing to what she observes as “fanciful” (190) biographical readings of Margaret Duley’s work that emerged during her own lifetime (190).

Nevertheless, what is abundantly evident is Duley’s absolute passion for and commitment to her subject. Her thorough and detailed research offers a vibrant portrait of the complexity of social relations in the first half of the twentieth century and through this book readers will learn not only about Margaret Duley, celebrated writer, but also about the social, political, cultural, and spiritual currents that shaped her life and work, and the complex intersections between gender, class, and race as they manifested themselves in early twentieth-century Newfoundland.

Sonja Boon  
Memorial University