

Book Reviews/Recensions

OFF OUR ROCKERS AND INTO TROUBLE, THE RAGING GRANNIES

Alison Acker and Betty Brightwell. (2004). Heritage House Publishing Company Ltd., Victoria, BC, 224 pages.

One hundred years ago, President Theodore Roosevelt coined the name "muckrakers" to designate those literary personalities who exposed corruption and unethical practices in the meatpacking, oil, railroad, and food industries. Although sometimes vilified as opportunists, those who raked around in the muck were ultimately responsible for major governmental reforms in these industries and paved the way for progressive legislation.

Contrasting Canada's own muckraking phenomena, *The Raging Grannies*, with their earlier American counterparts is a bit of a stretch, but this movement, which began in Victoria, BC in 1987, does have similar ends in mind: "We were out to shock....We would rattle the cages of all those who, we felt, were destroying our world: politicians, corporations, warmongers and wreckers of the environment" (p. xi).

Who are the Raging Grannies? As their name indicates, they are grandmothers who would go anywhere and do anything to focus attention on issues of their concern, whether by wearing outrageous clothes, writing outrageous poetry, or singing outrageous words with undisciplined voices. Indeed, after almost two decades of showmanship, the Grannies are not only national in scope, but have international counterparts.

True enough, one can call *Off Our Rockers and Into Trouble, The Raging Grannies* a history of this 17-year-old movement, but that would be too limiting a description. To be sure, their purpose is to gain our attention to their concerns, and they will delightfully employ any means to achieve publicity. If only public awareness were enough, but, as they candidly admit, it isn't. Are they then a failure? Definitely not, although perhaps it is still too early to tell. As outlandish as their means might be, they have been responsible for the creation of sixty chapters throughout Canada, the United States, Great Britain, and even Australia. There is a Grannies Without Borders chapter, while the Ottawa contingent, known as the Parliament Hill Mob, often manages to garner national attention, as they did in protest to the

Gulf War when they launched their own navy and registered the contingent under the Societies Act. And, as they say, "No, we're not running away and we're not armed, but we might be dangerous" (p. xiii). Indeed, just what Teddy Roosevelt said about his country's muckrakers.

What first brought the Grannies to life? The presence of American warships, presumably armed with nuclear weapons, docking at the Esquimalt Naval Base near Victoria, BC. A cartoon shows two younger gentlemen looking at a disheveled senior wearing clothes that no one ought to be caught dead in, carrying a placard with the words "raging granny" on it. The caption says, "She may look like somebody's granny, but she helped to chase the nuclear-powered aircraft carrier out of our harbour" (p. xv). So they did!

This delightfully witty and engaging book not only relates and details the varied political, economic, environmental, and reform-minded activities of the Grannies, but includes several of their uproarious songs, not to mention pictures of their garishly splendid outfits, topped by hats that were truly one of a kind. Thankfully, there are no pictures of the Grannies in one of their more recent bare breast protests. Nevertheless, despite the often farcical means to attain their ends, one might still appreciate their ends: "to inspire older women to be activists; to deal with survival issues; to get the message across with satiric songs; to court the media;...to be rabble rousers" (p. 4).

Indeed, these muckrakers of the highest order know no limits, whether targeting a nuclear destroyer, presenting teach-ins on the Balkan War, picketing the invasion of Iraq, protesting the dumping of raw sewage, or supplying food, soap, and bedding to the homeless. They gleefully admit, "we are very noisy, very argumentative and even rude to each other," and "if we had to describe our way of decision-making, we would have to call it anarchy" (167). Would-be applicants must demonstrate their seriousness and "have some record as activists."

The purpose of this book is to demonstrate the wider social role that can be played by grey power when a group of determined grannies set their minds on social and political activism. Is this a scholarly book? Probably not in the stuffiest academic sense, but it is a damn fun book to read, and it shows what lifelong learning means to some very dedicated women who learnt to use age as a means to an end. And, bless them, they are succeeding.

Alan David Aberbach
Continuing Studies, Simon Fraser University
