

The Lady Lumberjack: an annotated collection of Dorothea Mitchell's writings Edited by Michel S. Beaulieu and Ronald N. Harpelle

Cheryl Desroches

Volume 98, Number 2, Fall 2006

URI: <https://id.erudit.org/iderudit/1065833ar>

DOI: <https://doi.org/10.7202/1065833ar>

[See table of contents](#)

Publisher(s)

The Ontario Historical Society

ISSN

0030-2953 (print)

2371-4654 (digital)

[Explore this journal](#)

Cite this review

Desroches, C. (2006). Review of [*The Lady Lumberjack: an annotated collection of Dorothea Mitchell's writings* Edited by Michel S. Beaulieu and Ronald N. Harpelle]. *Ontario History*, 98(2), 261–263. <https://doi.org/10.7202/1065833ar>

ting for me on first encounter. ... For the [spiritualist] group, however, the phenomenon was totally appropriate as they easily identified each new [spirit] entity as a well-known personality.” (p. xiii)

McMullin’s focus on central Canada provides a fuller picture of the transnational spiritualist movement and the psychical researchers associated with it. As a movement largely indifferent to national borders, the Canadians relied heavily on outside resources. Though McMullin indicates that some Canadians did develop mediumistic abilities, they did not tend to publicize their abilities beyond their home circles due, largely, McMullin suggests, to the conservative character of the mainline Canadian churches and their resistance to such phenomena. McMullin breaks with much of the scholarship in his refusal to make a sharp distinction between spiritualists, who sought religious insight into the afterlife, and psychical researchers, who investigated psychic phenomena. Viewing this distinction as artificial, he examines a range of individuals and groups for whom the séance was a central institution.

McMullin’s most important contribution, however, arises from his use of methods derived from folklore studies to investigate the séances as oral performances. This approach, sparked by listening to the audiotapes, allows him to interpret the séances as a form of performance art. To really understand them within the context of the family and communities that hosted them, it is necessary, he argues, to move beyond the “séance notes” (the transcriptions of content) to the séance as performative process. As such, the séance room can be viewed as “a place of ongoing revelation.” (p. 224) The oral nature of the process – its “emphasis on teaching and lecturing rather than writing and reflecting” – explains its “lack of consistent theological content.” (p. 225) In the end McMullin suggests that the vision of spiritualists late in the nineteenth century and early in the twentieth has much in common with the virtual realities imagined by some contemporary science fiction writers. (p. 226)

Ann Taves
University of California, Santa Barbara

The Lady Lumberjack:

an annotated collection of Dorothea Mitchell's writings

Edited by Michel S. Beaulieu and Ronald N. Harpelle. Thunder Bay: Northern and Regional Studies Series, Vol. 12, Centre for Northern Studies, Lakehead University, 2005. xviii + 145 pp. \$23.39 softcover. ISBN 1-895939-26-7. ISSN 1183-6857.

Dorothea Mitchell (1877-1976) was one of many sturdy, spirited adventurers who undertook the trek from England to Canada at the start of the twentieth century. In 1904 she landed in Halifax

and gradually made her way to Hamilton, Toronto, and eventually the rugged regions of Northwestern Ontario. Michel Beaulieu and Ronald Harpelle utilize a number of Mitchell’s works to provide a much-needed first-hand female perspective of the pioneer experience. Because she wrote about her extraordinary life in such matter-of-fact terms, however, her contributions to the feminist movement (and to literature more generally) has been overlooked in the broader his-

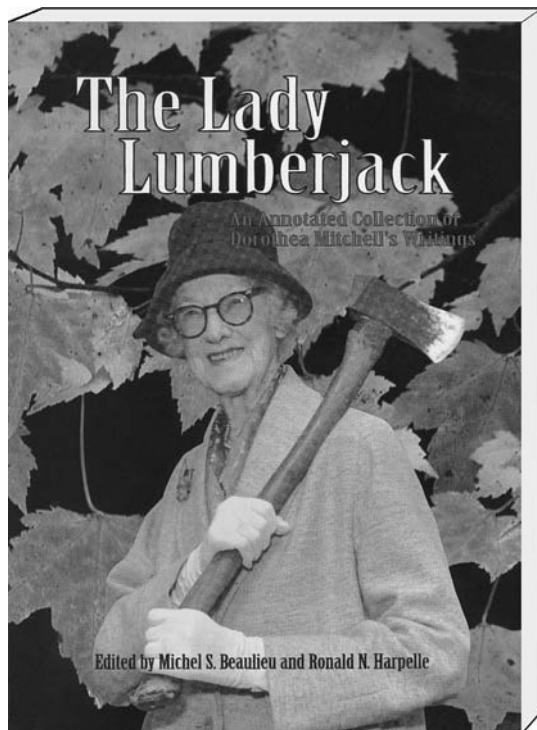
torical record. The work of Beaulieu and Harpelle does much to correct this oversight.

The editors divide *Lady Lumberjack* into four parts: an introduction, a biographical sketch, and two distinct groupings of Mitchell's writing. The first set focuses on a piece entitled "Just when does a writing career start?" in which Mitchell briefly discusses her early foray into the craft which began when she was only a teenager. This set also includes by far the most important piece in the entire collection, a reprint of her original lady lumberjack monograph of 1968. Here Mitchell provides an account of her time in Hamilton, then in Silver Mountain in 1909, and subsequently Port Arthur, beginning in 1921. The fluctuations of the Canadian economy serve as backdrop and impetus to her self-proclaimed necessity for choosing masculine jobs in

those years, spanning two world wars and the Great Depression. If she found living in the woods at times inconvenient, she would have laughed at the thought of herself as soft. "Lady Lumberjack" (the title given the chapter in the 2005 book) is laden with evidence of Mitchell's ability to defy notions, typical of the era, of appropriate female behaviour. She was a postmaster, a sawmill proprietor, and was recognized by the Ontario government as the first single female homesteader in Ontario. From running a company to rebuilding after a fire, Mitchell's experiences fostered a strong belief that women were capable of anything men could do.

The recollection of particular events that stood out in Mitchell's life comprises the second cluster of her writings. In "Pegasus my First Love" she discusses her many antics with her first automobile. Car and owner at times seemed to share similar traits – minds of their own and propensity for stubbornness. In addition, both were highly unpredictable, as one very precarious slide down a steep muddy slope revealed. Scholars such as Julie Wosk and Virginia Scharff provide an understanding of the relationship between women and cars, and Mitchell's tales of her escapades and near misses with Pegasus affirm their views. Pegasus represented not only freedom and independence to Mitchell, but also fearlessness and humour. Her free spirit is most evident in this chapter.

"A Spinster Homesteads" and "The Family Arrives" reflect Mitchell's appreciation of female kinship and bonding and her various strategies to retain economic freedom and independence in her private life. Clearly her foremost commitment was to survival for herself and those she loved, and she was the main source of support for her mother and sister who had emigrated from England to join her.



In "The Later Years" and following chapters, time spent as a volunteer involved in charity work, making movies, and supporting the war effort situate Mitchell as a strong role model. Historians often have identified Susanna Moodie or Catherine Parr Traill as advocates for women's rights, but Beaulieu and Harpelle argue emphatically that Mitchell's contributions are equally important.

Mitchell's description of her life in the rugged backwoods of Canada is in large part a primary resource, demonstrating how women, feeling strongly the need to further themselves, nevertheless often did so inadvertently. Working alongside burly men appears to have been as natural to her as returning to work after severing two of her fingers on a circular saw. In one section she describes a meeting with "a big swarthy stranger" who told her outright, "[I] don't do business with woman." In the end Mitchell appears to get the better of him, as she does with many others, proving herself to be a shrewd match at business and almost any other task.

I could have wished that Beaulieu and Harpelle had more fully illuminated the themes evident in Mitchell's writing. On more than one occasion she attributes her adult behaviour to earlier childhood experiences in India, yet we learn almost nothing about her background there. Beaulieu does briefly note that the family's move there from England resulted in a shift from middle to upper class, but unfortunately he does not properly explain the circumstances. The absence of insights into the Mitchell family's social and economic position makes it difficult to position Dorothea firmly within the broader analysis of women's history and Canadian development. While that is not the editors' objective, Mitchell herself alludes

to social, political, and economic conditions as mitigating factors all through her work. Providing some discussion of each of the numerous pictures in the book would have been helpful.

Taken as a whole, *Lady Lumberjack* is as entertaining as it is insightful. Dorothea Mitchell was a gifted writer, her prose at times resembling that of Pulitzer Prize winner Annie Proulx. In all likelihood readers will find themselves missing Mitchell long after they have finished reading the book. This unassuming woman captivates one with her humorous shenanigans while, at the same time, astounding one with her no-nonsense approach to everyday matters typically considered the liberty of men. *Lady Lumberjack* is a serious contribution to women's history, with huge potential to inform novice and seasoned academics alike. Mitchell's writings are ripe with examples of emerging ethnic and racial tensions, national pride and shifting gender roles. Such broader themes need only to be teased from the pages. Beaulieu and Harpelle have ably shown the numerous ways in which Dorothea Mitchell stood as a symbol for all that women could achieve.

Cheryl Desroches
Queen's University

Bibliography:

- Mitchell, Dorothea. *Lady Lumberjack*. Vancouver: Mitchell Press, 1968.
- Proulx, Annie. *The Shipping News*. New York: Scribner, 1993.
- Scharff, Virginia. *Taking the Wheel: Women and the Coming of the Motor Age*. Toronto: The Free Press, 1991.
- Wosk, Julie. *Women and the Machine: Representations from the Spinning Wheel to the Electronic Age*. Baltimore: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 2001.