

thank Marjory Whitelaw for undertaking this task. *The Dalhousie Journals* is already on the best seller list and this should encourage others to embark on similar ventures.

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**Random Descent.** KATHERINE GOVIER. Toronto: Macmillan of Canada, 1979.  
228 p. ISBN 0 7705 1719 6 \$12.95.

Genealogy has been with us a long time, and in French Canada, especially, has enjoyed a vogue, perhaps now in decline, as a prime component of individual and national identity. Though other preoccupations now fuel the passions of our nationalists, genealogy is still an important part of the private consciousness of Canadians, as the volume of inquiries of this sort to our Archives will attest. The "Roots" phenomenon has, of course, revived interest in family history and given it again a higher sense of drama and purpose. Katherine Govier's novel *Random Descent* hangs on a genealogical framework, but neither sanctifies the family nor whiggishly charts its triumph over social oppression. Govier's exploration of family roots celebrates a simple gossipy curiosity and quiet sense of possession.

Govier gives us a number of interesting characters whose lives are essential to the family's history; the one closest to the reader is Jennifer Beecham (Anderson), a woman in her mid-twenties in the late 1970's, and about to be divorced. Jennifer has harboured a peculiar curiosity about the family and its secrets since childhood. It is not surprising, then, that when she sets out to re-direct her life, she makes one more definitive effort to put the whole story together. She drives to California to visit her paternal grandparents and quizzes them. What she finds out is presented by the author as a pleasing rambling narrative that meanders back and forth in time and space, moving ever westward from England to Vancouver and finally south to California.

Jennifer uncovers the history of a family whose fortunes declined in England and took root in Canada in the first decade of the twentieth century in the prairie West—boom years before the Depression. Faces, names, postcards, photographs, mannerisms, memories are all part of Jennifer's jumbled inheritance. These bits of evidence reveal a gradual accumulation of deals and gambles, successful and not, endless voyages—at sea, by train and car on land—all set against the history of the West, but not attempting to make prolonged comment on it. Not for a moment do we lose sight of the actors in the story.

By keeping the focus on the random bits that the family itself thought of as its history, Govier gives us a rich fabric indeed. And, perhaps a little too readily, the most forcefully presented symbol in the book is an extravagant needlepoint Davenport created by the *doyenne* of the family in her old age early in the century. Great great great Grandmother Submitta's handiwork is illustrated with a vine of roses that twist and bloom into the faces or her progeny in generations not yet born. The davenport passes from hand to hand until it reaches Jennifer near the end of the novel: as the last chapter closes the young woman mystically comes upon the square bonneted old lady (she would have been 169) putting the finishing stitches on her masterpiece. Govier comes close to saying that Jennifer and the Davenport are much the same thing. But not quite. The novel's complex structure, low-key mood and impressionistic ending never allow anything that simple to emerge as the answer to Jennifer's inquiry.

Jennifer's inheritance is a surprising one. She uncovers secret after secret, the drinking, infidelity and suicide whose meaning in her own life is not assessed, and rightly so. When

she makes her decisions about the course of her life, she will be informed by her knowledge of the breadth of experience in the lives of her forebears.

Govier does not write only about the women in the family. She speaks kindly but realistically about the relationships between men and women, and succeeds particularly well with the character of Jennifer's paternal grandfather, Chas Beecham, the roving prairie small businessman who ends up in California. Yet clearly the author is closer to the psychological substance of the women in the novel, their loneliness and vulnerability in and out of marriage, the sexual confusion and dreamy expectations that characterized their ideas in the past, and the breezy self-awareness of the modern woman. There are lighter moments as well, especially in courtship.

Govier does not suggest that modern mores have necessarily improved women's inner lives. All of the women in the book, including Jennifer, forge relationships with their men that seem filled with begrudged understandings, are dishonest or incomplete. None of the women, except Submitta and the widowed great grandmother Catherin, are unambiguously strong, but it is a sexless, stoney kind of strength which, happily, the younger women don't share. What they do share is a kind of spunky but yielding independence, and even if Govier doesn't celebrate the new woman of the 1970's, she gives us a sense of the wealth of options that are part of her estate. The genealogical approach allows her to chart the lives of women, without excluding the men, and compare the changing contours of their lives from generation to generation.

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**Collecting Old Photographs.** MARGARET HALLER. New York: Arco Publishing Co., © 1978. xiii, 264 p. ill. ports. ISBN 0 668 04244 3 \$12.50.

**Collecting Photographs. A Guide to the New Art Boom.** LANDT and LISL DENNIS. New York: E.P. Dutton, 1977. xii, 244 p. ill. ISBN 0 87690 236 0 \$12.95.

Archivists whose duties include acquiring and caring for photographs are aware that the interest in collecting photographs has increased dramatically in the past decade. Ten years ago most institutions in this country paid no special attention to the medium and serious private collectors were very few. Now there are numerous private galleries and collectors across Canada and a flood of them in the United States. This increased interest has resulted in an inevitable climb in prices. While archivists are not in the business of private collecting, it is both wise and professional to be aware of price changes, new discoveries and currents of interest which affect our ability to make intelligent decisions on new acquisitions and to evaluate our collections accurately. A number of books have appeared in the last few years to guide fledgling collectors through the maze of photographers, photographic processes and factors affecting the value of photographs. *Collecting Old Photographs* and *Collecting Photographs: A Guide to the New Art Boom* are two of the most recent additions to this growing shelf of guides and they are vastly different in quality.

Margaret Haller's *Collecting Old Photographs* is by far the weaker on almost all counts. Although the title implies that the book is about "old" photographs, nowhere does she define either the term or its age limit. To complicate matters, she includes a section on twentieth century photographers which she admits is a grab-bag and lists people who are active contemporaries. Unfortunately the book contains little interpretive information and three-quarters of its length is no more than a mediocre dictionary of terms, names and processes relating to photography.