

Two Samples from the 2021 Dissertation, *Serious Play*

First Paragraph

A late-night party at the home of author Alden Nowlan in Fredericton, New Brunswick witnessed the launch of the—or rather a—Flat Earth Society on 8 November 1970. By making farcical declarations about the shape of our planet, the Society went on to attract media coverage and more than one-hundred dues-paying members, some of them well-known writers. This dissertation presents three participating authors in the Fredericton -headquartered Flat Earth Society (hereafter, FES): its co-founder and Symposiarch Alden Nowlan (1933-83), co-founder and President Leo Ferrari (1927- 2010), and Vice-President Gwendolyn MacEwen (1941-87). All three deserve more attention from readers and critics than they have received in the present century. Although they posed as cranks with their Flat Earther personas, their playful association of the 1970s was grounded in taking a principled stand against intellectual conformity. They used the idea of a Flat Earth in multiple ways: as an open-ended metaphor, to code cultural critique, and for broad satire, dark comedy, and imaginative exploration. Therefore, I argue that Nowlan, Ferrari, and MacEwen’s FES hijinks fall within the scope of their careers as serious authors, as shown through both pointed and subtle similarities across their FES writings and professional publications. François Le Lionnais, one-time regent of the *Collège de 'Pataphysique* and co-founder of the Oulipo (short for *Ouvroir de Littérature Potentielle*) group of writers, anticipated this thesis. Writing in the 1960s, he claimed that “when they are the work of poets, entertainments, pranks, and hoaxes still fall within the domain of poetry” (Hugill 108). Stooping to take a close look at FES, then, may prove to be a useful way to reclaim, reevaluate, and promote the work of Nowlan, Ferrari, and MacEwen, especially given contemporary curiosity about the persistence of Flat Earth ideas.

Dr. David Eso

Last Paragraph: page 370

I hope that my sampling of uncommonly potent FES correspondence will inspire future pilgrimages to the archival sites that made the present study possible. Here, we learned that Nowlan wisely invited MacEwen's participation in the Society he based on a willfully wrong-headed belief. MacEwen then imported his ironic Maritime Flat Earthish-ism onto the shaky ground of her imaginative world and literary career. "I'll Write You from Atlantis" further showed that the creativity and eloquence exhibited by relatively anonymous people sometimes measures up to the words of celebrated poets, say a MacEwen or McFadden. Uncovering insightful and laughter-inducing expressions by members previously unknown to me proved a bitter-sweet pursuit. Because the Society's active period occurred in the newly historical 1970s, Internet searches for names of correspondents frequently turned up recent obituaries that give rare testimony to lives lived mostly out of public view. Some may glance at their FES scribblings and foolishly dismiss the authors as a deplorable lot of Flat Earthers. Now that all is said and done, one may not wish to identify as such but might think twice, at least, before using the term. That is my practical lesson from exposure to the material, the thinking, the poems. Unsorting Society records in my own way proved the only possible course for this scavenger to scramble across such steep terrain and into the half-light of understanding. Research in archival reading rooms felt strangely confusing and exciting, more so than in books or online. Some days it was a bit like being at a busy party on a November night in a little place. No one's talking right to you for the moment. Then, you think you pick out some outrageous statement coming from the corner by the stereo system, where a man in square glasses flips through crates of records and laughs so loud at the ceiling that everyone can hear him. You squint at mostly illegible handwriting from across the smoky room. A woman blows in from the kitchen wearing a silly

Dr. David Eso

hat and holding three drinks. You strain to overhear amid the hubbub and merrymaking of people starting to feel quite rosy and quite doomed and so if not letting loose altogether, then just a touch.

Thank for reading! The entire essay, housed on the University of Victoria's dissertation repository, can be accessed via the following link:

<https://dspace.library.uvic.ca/handle/1828/13006?show=full>