Notice of the Final Oral Examination
for the Degree of Doctor of Philosophy

of

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MA (University of Calgary, 2015)
BA (University of British Columbia, 2004)

“Serious Play: Alden Nowlan, Leo Ferrari, Gwendolyn MacEwen, and their Flat Earth Society”

Department of English

Wednesday, May 12, 2021
9:30 A.M.
Conducted Virtually

Supervisory Committee:
Dr. Iain Higgins, Department of English, University of Victoria (Supervisor)
Dr. Eric Miller, Department of English, UVic (Member)
Heather Dean, Special Collections, UVic Libraries (Outside Member)

External Examiner:
Dr. Neil Besner, Department of English, University of Winnipeg

Chair of Oral Examination:
Dr. Bernie Pauly, School of Nursing, UVic

Dr. Stephen Evans, Acting Dean, Faculty of Graduate Studies
Abstract

*Serious Play* concerns the satirical Flat Earth Society (FES) founded at Fredericton, New Brunswick in November 1970. The dissertation’s successive chapters examine the lives and literary works of three understudied authors who held leadership positions in this critically unserious, fringe society: FES Symposiarch Alden Nowlan; the Society’s President Leo Ferrari; and its First Vice-President Gwendolyn MacEwen. Therefore, my project constitutes an act of recovery and reconstruction, bringing to light cultural work and literary connections that have largely faded from view. Chapters show how certain literary writings by Nowlan, Ferrari, or MacEwen directly relate to their involvement with FES, making the Society an important part of their cultural work rather than a mere entertainment, distraction, or hoax. These authors represent the local/regional inception of FES (Nowlan), its international influences and reach (Ferrari), and its Canadian context (MacEwen). Organized according to three jointly literary and geo-political layers, and drawing on little-known archival documents, each chapter records statements from the Society’s wider membership as they relate to Atlantic Canada, the international perspective, and Canada. Despite its aberrant and oppositional spirit, FES appeared within an identifiable cultural context and participated in a countercultural tradition that continues to this day. The Society’s surface lampoon embeds potent social critique and creative meaning. In other words, FES was not merely playful, nor merely serious, but interweaved these modes in a compelling way. Further, it invited contributions from members and applicants: seldom-seen interpretations of “Planoterrestrialism” by individuals from many walks of life and now housed in archives, primarily at the University of New Brunswick and University of Calgary. The participatory, humorous, and poetic nature of FES means that its unusual brand of Flat Earthism cannot be tied to any singular ideology, place, or literary tradition. It operates as an enigmatic, errant, itinerant, and underground non-ideology. Planoterrestrial thought is reflected in the playful poetic styles of Nowlan, Ferrari, and MacEwen: three Society members who were nonetheless serious authors and sincere in their role as cultural workers, their Flat Earth antics not excepted.