

Book Review

Skookum Wawa: Writings of the Canadian Northwest, edited by Gary Geddes. Toronto, Oxford University Press, 1975. Pp. 336, \$6.50.

Gary Geddes' new and impressive anthology, *Skookum Wawa*, is described in the subtitle as "Writings of the Canadian Northwest". It is not the happiest of descriptions, for in terms of the Canadian past the Northwest was the great and largely unknown land which stretched from the Red River to the Pacific, while in terms of the Canadian present the Northwest is the territory north of the 60th parallel whose capital is Yellowknife and whose writers are notably absent from this collection. *Skookum Wawa*, in fact, covers the territory west of the Continental Divide, including British Columbia and the Yukon Territory, and nowadays this is called Northwest only by Americans, who lump these parts of Canada with Alaska, Washington and Oregon into an area which in *continental* terms is indeed Northwest. But in terms of Canadian directions the *Skookum Wawa* country is westerly, and "Writings of the Canadian Far West" would have avoided the suggestion of deference to our southerly neighbours which the present subtitle projects.

Having launched a titular quibble, let me go on to say that *Skookum Wawa* is a sensitive collection which brings in most — if not quite all — the good writers who have worked in British Columbia, and which also suggests the immense vitalization of writing in the far west of Canada during the past twenty years. One can see this by comparing it with its most notable predecessor, the anthology R. E. Watters collected under the title *British Columbia: A Centennial Anthology* to celebrate the first of our several centennials, that of 1958. Watters compiled a large and very interesting book, but it gave us more from our past than our present, and this was largely because good writing was not being done in our region during the 1950s in anything like the profusion that has made the most recent decade so particularly exciting in its wealth of new and remarkable writers emerging west of the Rockies or finding their way here from other

Canadian regions or from abroad. The consequence was that Watters, an editor of primarily literary inclinations, found himself forced to include much that was purely historical in interest, so that, as it were, we had the body without the spirit, too much bread and too little wine. Some of the writers whom Gary Geddes has included in *Skookum Wawa* were indeed already present in the Watters anthology, e.g. Earle Birney and P. K. Page, Malcolm Lowry (who died in 1957), and Roderick Haig-Brown, Dorothy Livesay, Bruce Hutchison and a few others, and here and there Geddes has chosen a piece which Watters also used, such as Birney's perennially popular long poem, *David*. But Watters also nodded at times into using the kind of writing favoured in local chapters of the Canadian Authors' Association, and can hardly be blamed for having done so, since as late as the 1950s genteel raptures over the landscape were still a very characteristic genre on the west coast.

Skookum Wawa shows dramatically, in the higher quality and greater maturity of its contents, how greatly the far western literary scene has changed. There are very few pieces that strike one as too thin or ephemeral for anthology status, and one suspects that Geddes had difficulty not so much in finding material as in limiting his choice to fit his three-hundred-odd pages of text. His scope is wide; it includes poetry (the chief glory of the collection), short stories, essays, a whole one-act play (George Ryga's social shocker, *Indian*), and a radio documentary in verse (Dorothy Livesay's splendid poem for voices on the exile of the Japanese to the barren interior, *Call My People Home*). There are brief aphoristic statements by the historically famous (in Victoria, Sir John A. remarked, "The day was always in the afternoon"), and there are autobiographical and historical fragments chosen to give a flavour of place and past. The writers are not restricted to those of British Columbian origin or residence: Rudyard Kipling, Rupert Brooke and Stephen Leacock pop up with their comments, generally envious of those who do live in such magnificent settings. The classic travellers are there too, with passages from those narratives and journals which form the real beginning of a far western literature — David Thompson, Alexander Mackenzie and Simon Fraser, not to mention those indefatigable Victorian tourists, Milton and Cheadle.

There are enough representatives from the earlier decades — I have mentioned some of them above — to remind one that, certainly since the 1940s, British Columbia has harboured a very considerable proportion of Canada's leading writers, particularly if one adds other names like those of Ethel Wilson, Howard O'Hagan, Emily Carr and Phyllis Webb. But even more remarkable, to the extent that it gives a special tone to *Skookum*

Wawa, is the abundance of vital younger writers who were either unknown or had not even begun to write (some were still infants) when Watters compiled *British Columbia, a Centennial Anthology*.

With an appropriateness that was certainly not planned, *Skookum Wawa* begins with one of the fine poems of Pat Lowther, who was murdered, at the height of her poetic powers, just after the anthology appeared; this poem — “Coast Range” — and the other included poems by her show the skill and strength that were already making Lowther, by the time she died, one of the most skilful poets of the region. Consider the verbal felicity of “Octopus”, which I quote in full:

The octopus is beautifully
functional as an umbrella;
at rest a bag of rucked skin
sags like an empty scrotum
his jelled eyes sad and bored.

but taking flight: look
how lovely purposeful
in every part;
the jet vent smooth
as modern plumbing
the webbed pinwheel of tentacles
moving in perfect accord
like a machine dreamed
by Leonardo.

Good as it is, “Octopus” is only one of the many remarkable poems by younger British Columbians that stud the pages of *Skookum Wawa*. There is no space to quote others in detail, but at least the names of the more notable poets should be mentioned, since they are also the names of poets already recognized as of national significance: George Bowering, Sid Marty, Andreas Schroeder, J. Michael Yates, Susan Musgrave, John Newlove, Frank Davey, Pat Lane, Tom Wayman, Florence McNeil, Bill Bisset, Joy Kogawa, Gary Geddes himself. I doubt if any region of Canada, except Québec with its different culture and its greater population, could produce a better list of regionally oriented but nationally recognized poets, or, for that matter, a better regional anthology.

Having said so much on the quality and range of *Skookum Wawa*, let me discuss what I see as its limitations. Some are matters of selection, and might have been avoided with a little thought. The most important, however, is a limitation of general approach that may well be dependent on the editor’s own view of a regional literature.

To begin with the lesser points. First, while fragments from historical and autobiographical writings have been included, there are only a couple of fragments of larger fictions, such as novels and novellas. I know the objections that can be raised to excerpting from novels — the argument that the wider sense is lost — but almost every long work of fiction has scenes that stand as set pieces, giving an idea of the writer and his time and place, and one would have welcomed more of such pieces in *Skookum Wawa*. As it is, excellent far western writers who have worked mainly in longer fiction, such as Audrey Thomas, Sheila Watson, Jane Rule and Robert Harlow, have gone entirely unrepresented.

Then there is the matter of illustrations. Artists in recent years have been deeply influenced by the physical settings of the Canadian far west, and also to a great extent by its historic and prehistoric past. Yet, though there are some good photographs in *Skookum Wawa*, one is impressed by its scantiness in terms of visual art: one Emily Carr and a couple of drawings by the pre-Raphaelite William G. R. Hind who arrived at the time of the Cariboo Gold Rush! A great deal might have been added to *Skookum Wawa* to illuminate the shared preoccupations of the various arts in far western Canada if prints, drawings or paintings by artists like Jack Shadbolt, Mollie Bobak, Don Jarvis, Gordon Smith, John Koerner, Alistair Bell, Robert Steele and some younger British Columbian painters had been included, for in the best of their works one senses a lyrical joy in the place, coupled with an ironic and sometimes tragic view of the times, that are very similar to the dominant preoccupations of their writer contemporaries.

As for the particular choices by which Geddes represents his writers, on the whole he has picked well, but there are a few decisions which I find hard to understand. Birney's *David*, as Birney himself would agree, has been far too often used as the show example of his work, and if a long poem by him was needed (as it probably was in view of his stature), surely it would have been better to have included that superb work of his later period, "November Walk near False Creek Mouth", perhaps the finest poem ever written with Vancouver as its muse. And it is especially unfortunate that Lowry as prose writer should be represented by a couple of the duller pages of *Under the Volcano*, when *Hear Us O Lord from Heaven Thy* and *October Ferry to Gabriola* contained such a wealth of material concerned with the experience of living on Canada's Pacific coast.

There remains what seems to me the major limitation of the anthology, a limitation that appears to arise from the editor's own geohistorical

orientation. A sentence from Pat Lowther's opening poem expresses succinctly the dominant attitude:

The land is what's left
after the failure
of every kind of metaphor.

Skookum Wawa is an anthology of literature, and usually of very good literature, but it is literature chosen to create a portrait of a region and a society; if I were teaching a course in cultural geography or in local history, I would certainly use it. Nor can one say that what it presents is entirely untrue of the literary tradition of far western Canada. One of the most significant inclinations of poets here in recent years has been to leave the mythopoeic and thematic preoccupations of earlier decades and to concentrate more directly on the land with its historic echoes; surprisingly often, even when they are talking of the physical extremes of mountain or subArctic life, they are producing landscapes with figures, and of these *Skookum Wawa* gives us an eloquent abundance. Nobody reading the collection is likely to be left unaware of how writers in British Columbia and the Yukon react to their setting or the past it contains.

But while the preoccupation with landscape and with a brief but colourful local history is a true and dominant element in far western literature, it is by no means the whole truth. A great proportion of the writing done in British Columbia, and especially in verse and fiction, is personal and introspective, and of this there is little in *Skookum Wawa*. This means that many writers of the region — P. K. Page and Phyllis Webb and Marya Fiamengo come immediately to mind — are unrepresented in areas which are deeply characteristic of them. Surely this is a major shortcoming in a collection meant to display a regional culture in all its creative complexity, particularly when one remembers that the very reason why so many writers have chosen to remain and work this side of the Divide, rather than hastening to the literary metropolis beyond it, has been that here they have found something of the peace and detachment that are needed for personal and introspective writing. But this is only to lament what is missing from *Skookum Wawa*; one is still appreciative of the riches already presented by a collection which projects the far west as a unique environment sheltering a unique society.

Vancouver

GEORGE WOODCOCK