

# How Anarchist is *Canadian Literature*?

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In November, we celebrated the 100th anniversary of the year of our founding editor's birth (see [canlit.ca](http://canlit.ca) for more). Of course, George Woodcock's life work consisted of far more than putting out seventy-three issues of a quarterly critical journal between 1959 and 1977. Alan Twigg's remarks at the celebration focused on the remarkable success of the non-profit aid organizations founded by him and his wife Inge, for example. What interests me here, however, is how the journal is still shaped by his commitments. Somehow, I just never get around to reading all the back issues of the journal. What I'm basing my remarks on, then, is what has come down to me from working as an associate editor and editor, and reading here and there about its history.

W. H. New, Woodcock's successor, spoke at the celebration about how Woodcock wrote every day, pounding away on a typewriter. He was a professional rather than a scholarly writer, a British "man of letters" (Potter 153). He never got a degree, refusing his grandfather's offer to send him to Cambridge because it was conditional on his becoming an Anglican clergyman (Fetherling 7). These facts explain the journal's dedication to a general as well as an academic readership. Woodcock's first editorial made this position clear:

Proust's Madame Verdurin thought that the ideal hospitality was that which restricted itself to the exclusiveness of the "little clan." *Canadian Literature* seeks to establish no clan, little or large. It will not adopt a narrowly academic approach, nor will it try to restrict its pages to any school of criticism or any class of writers.

It is published by a university, but many of its present and future contributors live and work outside academic circles, and long may they continue to do so, for the independent men and women of letters are the solid core of any mature literature.

Despite his public persona as a slightly rumpled, tweedy academic, Woodcock was an anarchist, a pacifist anarchist, I hasten to add, rather than the stereotypical bomb-thrower. It is sometimes difficult to see how this perspective might still affect the journal. His experience as an editor came from founding and editing *Now*, a literary magazine that ran from 1940 to 1947, in its heyday selling as many as 3000 copies, mostly from London newsstands. It was intended for “young writers and . . . writers who went against the grain of the times: pacifists, anarchists, dissident socialists” (qtd. in Fetherling 23). Through this journal, he became connected to a group of like-minded writers, most famously George Orwell, about whom he wrote in *A Crystal Spirit* (1966). One of Woodcock’s most translated and important books is *Anarchism: A History of Libertarian Ideas and Movements*, published by Penguin in 1963. Anarchism is characterized by a “denial of rigid ideology, bureaucracy and hierarchy,” a stance which makes it resilient in the face of change (Fetherling 100). This explains Woodcock’s refusal to found a clan. He came to see anarchism not as an attainable political goal so much as a philosophical perspective, “a restorative doctrine, telling us that the means by which we can create a free society are already there in the manifestations of mutual aid existing in the world around us” (qtd. in Fetherling 98-100). Journals, with their dependence on volunteer labour, can be seen as nodes in such a network of mutual aid in thinking about important intellectual and cultural issues.

Woodcock’s optimistic belief in the ability of human beings to help each other without the intervention of the state explains his editorial stance—“unflappable and infinitely patient helper”—and his practice, as George Fetherling describes it:

He was not the sort of editor, a kind he himself must have encountered on scores of occasions, who dismissed outside ideas out of hand, believing that only those generated in-house could contribute to the realization of some secret overall design, which only the editor was in a position to see and understand. On the contrary, a rejection by Woodcock almost always carried with it an assignment to do something else instead, while an acceptance was an implicit solicitation for further ideas. (93)

I certainly experienced this tradition when my first submission to *Canadian Literature* was kindly rejected by Bill New, not because of any weakness in the argument, apparently, but because the journal had just published another

similar article on the same topic. (Of course, when I read it, I realized it was a much better article than mine, alas.) From reading old files of letters stashed under my desk with a view to culling, I also realize that a myth of a giant backlog was constructed to turn back material that didn't meet the standards without hurt feelings. Of course, some might see this as cowardly dodging, but many submissions we get are from graduate students, for whom even the gentlest of rejections is a blow and who have a lifetime of writing ahead of them. Not surprisingly, Woodcock's maxim was, "Nurture the positive trends" (Ward 204).

Woodcock's anarchism, then, explains the journal's eclecticism and its policy of editorial openness. However, the journal's title did limit its range to writing on Canadian literary matters. As Bill New said at the celebration, in the early days, some wits described the journal's name as an oxymoron. But it has also been seen as an answer to a question put by the Massey Report of 1951: "IS THERE A NATIONAL LITERATURE?" (qtd. in Potter 222-23). Although time has certainly answered this question affirmatively, Woodcock did not share the anxious nationalism that impelled the question, as his 1972 article "A Plea for the Anti-Nation" makes clear. In fact, Woodcock's anarchism was seen as near treasonous by some nationalists, notably Robin Mathews, who successfully campaigned for a Canadians-first hiring policy at Canadian universities. For him, American professors such as Warren Tallman (whose influential essay "Wolf in the Snow" appeared in issues five and six of the journal) were corrupting the young by exposing them to American ideas and attitudes. These young were exemplified by the student poets who founded and published in *TISH* (1961-69), including Frank Davey, George Bowering, Fred Wah, and Daphne Marlatt. For the Marxist Mathews, "anarchist" was a synonym for "American individualist imperialist" (see Dart). At least Woodcock could not be accused of being American, since he was born in Winnipeg (his family returned to England while he was still an infant). It is fair to say that his political and literary attitudes were formed in Britain, well before he returned to Canada aged thirty-six, but he made an odd sort of imperialist, since he spent World War II as a conscientious objector, dividing his time between working on the land and writing.

That is not to say that his British experience always applied well to Canada. The community of "independent men and women of letters" that Woodcock referred to so positively in his first editorial never got a secure toehold in Canada, colonized as it always has been by cheap book and magazine publications imported from the US and the UK. Woodcock himself relied

on his British agents and connections for much of his income (he was paid a half-salary for editing the journal after 1966). Competing in the literary market in Canada—a small population spread over a large distance—has always meant competing with the best of writing from the US and Britain. (Quebec's experience with French publications has been similar.) Now major publishers such as Vancouver's Douglas & McIntyre are going out of business and Canadian bookshops are closing as the result of e-publishing and internet book sales. The result of this ongoing economic stress has been an unfortunate narrowing of perspectives on literature in Canada and the resort to simplistic forms of nationalism as a marketing strategy.

Dependence on state subsidies, the solution found to the problem of a structurally feeble cultural sector by the Massey Report, has become a normal state of affairs for most Canadian cultural producers. For an anarchist, this situation is at best a necessary evil. And given the federal government has announced that it will soon cut all support for international Canadian studies programs, in place for the past forty years, we will soon have to see how mutual support works instead. In *Strange Bedfellows: The State and the Arts in Canada* (1983), Woodcock points to the continuing poverty of most artists, noting two dangers of their reliance even on the small amount of state support they got. The first was “of the arts becoming increasingly the servants of the state” and the other “of artists becoming victims of the profit motive” (18-19). He points out that the apparent neutrality of arm's-length peer review becomes a problem when bureaucrats choose “safe” establishment figures as the reviewers. Are the peers really peers or are they conservative gatekeepers? And how can writers and other artists devote themselves to their art when they have access only to scarce competitive grants? He proposes several solutions that do not involve providing grants up front (as the Canada Council does), but that reward writers for what they have written (the Public Lending Right, based on the number of works held in libraries); artists for what they have created (*droit de suite*, or a share of profits made on sales of works after the first one); and purchase assistance (for the purchase of papers and works of art by libraries and other state-supported institutions). Notably, one of the aid associations he and his wife founded supports young writers in need (Fetherling 199). In other words, Woodcock kept a sharp eye on the state hand that fed artists and their projects, even though, as a pacifist, he did not bite it. But a constant concern about where bureaucratic “reason” might lead animated his writing about how best to sustain the arts and intellectual life.

In one of my editorials, “Beyond Boomer Nationalism” (*Canadian Literature* 206), I considered the idea that the name of the journal might have moved from manifesto to straitjacket. The straitjacket is the idea that the modifier “Canadian” entails that all articles will focus on what makes Canadian literature distinctive, rather than seeing the word “Canadian” more neutrally—at least in the first instance—as simply meaning literature written by Canadians. I have received at least one peer review report that noted that the Canadian novel under consideration could well have been replaced by a similar British or an American novel—and that therefore, the article wasn’t suitable for *Canadian Literature*. Woodcock certainly didn’t see things this way. If we rely on a nationalist framework to limit our selections, the journal is in trouble because this approach—however valid—excludes many others, particularly the formal and theoretical ones. This is the point of Frank Davey’s “Surviving the Paraphrase,” published in *Canadian Literature* in 1976. This broad perspective, although it shouldn’t mean critical airbrushing of the relevant local, regional, and national context, releases authors from being seen from only one point of view, one that incessantly asks, “How Canadian are they?”

Nowadays, the journal is no longer the only or even the most obvious outlet for many articles about Canadian writers. This is a welcome development since Canadian writers are also world writers, whose concerns are relevant to many different audiences. Woodcock’s Britishness—anarchist or not—gave him a broad perspective that was, in 1959, prescient. But his anarchist interests in the local and in pacifism led to a focus on Indigenous peoples and pacifist religious groups that were unusual at the time for most Canadians—witness his *Ravens and Prophets: An Account of Journeys in British Columbia, Alaska, and Alberta* (1952), his and Ivan Avakumovic’s *The Doukhobors* (1968), and his *Gabriel Dumont: The Metis Chief and His Lost World* (1975). Interestingly, Rudy Wiebe, a Mennonite, was another to pursue such interests in pacifism and in small self-sufficient peoples early on, at a time when the focus of most media ignored the history of the colonization of Indigenous peoples while locking into a Cold War patriotism. Anarchism can be seen as an antidote to the blind spots of a nationalist—or indeed, of any narrow perspective.

When I was interviewed for the position of editor, one question I was asked was how I planned “to put my mark” on the journal. Even then I realized that the days of a solo editor “marking” a journal were severely constrained by peer review on the one hand and critical fashion on the other. The main ways for editors to improve and broaden journal contributions

are encouraging submissions from good scholars, choosing the most expert peer reviewers, and putting in a lot of copy-editing time. (This work is the “added value” that means online self-publishing is unlikely to replace journals, whether electronic or print.) The journal always had an informal peer-review process, generally using the expertise in-house or at UBC; by the time Eva-Marie Kröller took over as editor in 1995, one major funder, the Social Sciences and Humanities Research Council of Canada (SSHRC), had begun to press for more formal processes. As Laura Potter points out, “The peer-review process challenged *Canadian Literature*’s longstanding commitment to a general readership” (155). Where this commitment most obviously continues is in the publication of poems in every issue, in the woodcuts by George Kuthan that adorn its open spaces, in the publication of interviews and author’s accounts of their craft along with scholarly articles, and in the online book reviews.

Reflecting the ways in which articles now are disseminated electronically, SSHRC has recently shifted from funding journals based on numbers of subscribers and good management to funding them specifically for publishing peer-reviewed scholarly articles, reflecting this agency’s mandate to fund scholarly research. In order to get the same amount of funding as in the past, we have had to increase the number of articles we publish from twenty to twenty-four a year, which entails either accepting more from the same submission pool (and lowering standards) or getting more submissions. The latter choice (the only one possible!) has required us to market our journal not only to subscribers (general readers or not), but also to researchers. One way we have worked to do this is with an electronic submissions system. But thinking of Woodcock, I realize that, in fact, we have revised our procedures to suit SSHRC. And SSHRC bases its procedures primarily on social science models, where the solo article is the chief currency. However, the humanities are “book cultures,” which embody a slower and less presentist form of scholarship. What SSHRC has left in our hands—at least for now—is the definition of an article (which is why some interviews and “writer’s craft” pieces are now peer-reviewed) and who reviews what. SSHRC doesn’t really care whether we publish poems or reviews (although the latter are the lifeblood of a book culture), since all they are funding is peer-reviewed scholarly articles.

Some might argue that this focus on peer-reviewed articles is a good thing. Lorraine Weir’s criticism of the journal in 1986 was that it supported what she called “Kerrisdale values,” values that failed to challenge the

complacency of its readers. She talks of “*Can.Lit.*’s problem of split identity: on the one hand, a magazine for anyone interested in Canadian culture; on the other, an academic journal funded by a university and publishing essays almost exclusively by academics” (5-6). Her view was that general readers were well-served by magazines; what was needed, she felt, were more specialized academic journals. The journal’s commitment to general readers entailed a failure to present theoretically sophisticated articles that of necessity used difficult language: “Neither Leavis nor Orwell (nor, for that matter, Matthew Arnold) is adequate any longer to the task of dealing competently with the complexities of contemporary theoretical and literary debate. Adherence to Kerrisdale values and neo-Aristotelian essay conventions render the writer singularly unfitted to the task of thinking about contemporary writing in Canada or anywhere else” (3). Laurie Ricou, then the Associate Editor, replies, “No, I think the split or multiple identity is what is needed. Now, especially, when we recognize that ‘there isn’t *one*,’ that Canadian literature and theory are plural” (6). Weir had, in fact, given a nod to Woodcock’s politics, saying that the journal had been “founded to counter” dominant values. However, I think she misses Woodcock’s mistrust of the limitations that her embrace of theory might entail, which is reflected in his desire to involve non-specialist general readers and creative writers in the life of the journal from the outset. Certainly this debate (held over one hundred issues ago) raises questions about where theory has travelled and whether *Canadian Literature* has attracted theoretically sophisticated articles. One way of judging this might be by reading *From a Speaking Place: Writings from the First Fifty Years of Canadian Literature* (Ronsdale, 2009), an anthology of the journal’s best and most representative writing. However, I have a few more points to make about how we have recently come to appreciate *Canadian Literature*’s eclectic—anarchist—tradition.

When we put most of our back issues up for free download on our website in 2009, we could tell that many people were accessing them from many countries whose libraries did not hold print or electronic subscriptions (yes, we have fans in Burkina Faso). Unfortunately, we can’t tell what these readers make of the material they download. We decided that the journal should do more to promote these issues, still a record of the history of Canadian literature and still useful in understanding it. We are now developing *CanLit Guides*, a teaching and learning resource that is aimed at first- and second-year students in Canadian literature courses. Funded by UBC’s Teaching and Learning Enhancement Fund, the guides draw heavily on

the poetry published in these issues, as well as directing students to critical articles, sometimes to several articles with differing viewpoints. Without the consistently eclectic approach of the journal, this project would be considerably less practical. We have one guide online that Laura Moss, one of our associate editors, and Mike Borkent, one of our graduate researchers, have been testing out in classrooms last term, to very positive response. I think that Woodcock would have been pleased that someone in Burkina Faso might be reading the journal without charge, but also pleased that what once might have been seen as dead issues are now being revitalized for a new purpose, one that allows us to continue international outreach despite cuts to state support for the development of international curriculum in Canadian literature. The guides are at [canlitguides.com](http://canlitguides.com).

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