

The CANLIT Project (1973-1981)

In Search of the National Reader

Introduction

The year 1972 marked the appearance of a groundbreaking collection of essays edited by cultural nationalists Robert Fulford, Abe Rotstein, and Dave Godfrey. Public attention was compelled by the book's directive title: *Read Canadian: A Book about Canadian Books*. In the face of an encroaching American culture, the contributors exhorted Canadians to support their own authors and publishing houses by purchasing and reading Canadian materials. The collected essays provided surveys of Canadian writing across a variety of genres and fields—history, political economy, sociology, and the arts, as well as literature—to display the creative and intellectual heritage of which their audience presumably was uninformed.¹ The collection concludes with a polemical chapter on the plight of Canadian publishing authored by Godfrey and publisher James Lorimer urging action and even guerrilla tactics: readers should cancel their Book-of-the-Month Club subscriptions and complain to school trustees about the Americanization of the curriculum; students should refuse to purchase course materials published by branch plants and start photocopying as an act of resistance.

The *Read Canadian* manifesto is a salutary reminder that the energetic and forward-looking new writing of the 1970s balanced precariously on a publishing industry in crisis, beset both by long-standing infrastructural problems and by new incursions from competitors to the south. This is perhaps most economically illustrated by the fact that in 1972, the year the collection appeared, 37% of the 1,700 books of English Canadian literature then in print *in Canada* were published by foreign-owned firms (Brotten [1975], *Lumber* 4). The decade had begun with the bellwether back-to-back

sales of two key Canadian publishers: educational publisher W. J. Gage to Scott Foresman of Chicago and then, even more dramatically, the Ryerson Press to McGraw-Hill of New York (MacSkimming 205-08; for the Ryerson sale see, especially, Parker). The shock of the sales impelled the formation of the Royal Commission on Book Publishing in Ontario, which reported at the end of 1972, recommending stronger support for Canada's publishers and booksellers. But the juggernaut—or so it seemed—of American control rolled on. In 1975, in a high-profile case, McClelland & Stewart lost an injunction trying to prevent the bookstore chain Coles from selling dumped US editions of popular Canadian works at bargain-basement prices. Threats were internal as well as external: in 1976 the religious right mobilized to ban the study of Margaret Laurence's *The Diviners* by grade thirteen students in Peterborough schools, and there were further book challenges elsewhere in the province. And censorship could be more subtle: writing in 1975, T. H. B. Symons noted that only 8% of university courses in English dealt in any substantial way with Canadian literature, and that the situation was considerably worse at the graduate level (Symons 1: 40-43). The recalcitrant universities seemed to stand for the colonized (and colonialist) mindset that the new generation of nationalists was determined to oppose.²

In hindsight, *Read Canadian* is an oddly optimistic book, with somewhat circular operating assumptions: familiarity with Canadian-authored materials can spark the development of a Canadian consciousness, leading to collective political action, which in turn will empower new and distinctively Canadian cultural forms. The volume's essays pay little attention to the readers themselves: who and where they were, their tastes and motivations, and how (or whether) they might have access to the books and periodicals judged crucial to their individual and collective well-being. Similarly, with the exception of one survey taken of Readers' Club of Canada members, the Royal Commission failed to generate readership research or to commission background briefs on the topic. But understanding the Canadian reader would become one of the key mandates of the CANLIT action-research group, which sprang into being in 1973, mobilized by a comment made by Michael Ondaatje, then teaching at Glendon College, York University, when he mentioned that Canadian writers had very little sense of the overall sales of Canadian literature (Brotten [1975], *Lumber* 1). Despite the nascent promotional efforts of publishers, the formation of trade councils, and the tallies of the Royal Commission, authors and publishers still were flying blind without understanding the specifics of their markets or the

motivations of their readers. CANLIT's immediate impetus was to fill this information gap, and it is the purpose of this essay to delineate how and why they attempted to do so, and to reconstruct the history of their further efforts to build a national readership for nationalist authors and publishers.

The Launch of CANLIT

Attempting a sales tabulation was the first project of the newly formed CANLIT group, whose founding members were York University students, several of whom were taking a course on "Canadian English" from the linguist Richard Handscombe. At the core was Delores Broten, a former editor of the Glendon student newspaper, and then a master's student writing a sociological study of English Canadian literary criticism. She handled the logistics of the project throughout its lifespan and her expertise and guidance were central. Gail Donald, Sandra Stewart, and Bob Waller also were founding members: Donald was writing a doctoral dissertation on Sara Jeannette Duncan; Stewart, also a Canadian literature specialist, had worked as a newspaper reporter before coming to York; Waller was a high-profile student journalist at the time (Request for Sustaining Grant, CLF).³ A funding grant application at the end of the year listed Ruth Cawker, Peter Birdsall, and Bartley Higgins, all students, among the core members: Cawker had worked as a researcher for the bookseller and publisher Mel Hurtig; Birdsall was a former researcher for the Canadian Radio-Television Commission (CRTC); Higgins had been a researcher with a community development organization (Contract Proposals, CLF). Margery Fee—now a former editor of *Canadian Literature*—was also actively involved. The project drew on other scholars when particular expertise was required and relied on the computing capabilities of the Institute for Behavioural Analysis at York. It recruited volunteers, researchers, and people with pedagogic expertise as needed, in addition to engaging high-profile supporters, often authors and publishers, who provided both moral and financial encouragement. In a retrospective of CANLIT's first three years, Broten noted that, although the core usually consisted of four members, some thirty people had been involved to that point (Broten, "CANLIT" 4). Given the extent of their publications, their nationalist stance, and the unusual or experimental nature of a number of their initiatives, CANLIT not surprisingly attracted media coverage in trade journals and in the mainstream press—in *Quill & Quire*, *This Magazine*, and *Books in Canada*, for example—and the columns authored by William French, cultural critic for *The Globe and Mail*, were crucial in raising public awareness of their work. Although

initially located at Glendon College, the project relocated to Peterborough early in 1975 when York no longer was able to supply space and support (although the connection to York was retained during the Peterborough years), and then moved, finally, to Victoria, with both relocations undertaken when key staffers moved for personal reasons.

The CANLIT group had a coherent set of principles, or so it appears from the outside and with hindsight: in actuality, these must have been forged through the ongoing debate, critique, and self-examination characteristic of left-wing cultural groups. Its purpose was to undertake action research, and its politics were decisively cultural nationalist and anti-imperialist. The group ran as a co-operative, and its projects were designed to feed research results back into the communities from which they were drawn, and to involve those research subjects and the wider public in the ongoing work of CANLIT. The members attempted, at least initially, to do work that was bicultural and comparativist, although very poor rates of return for survey materials sent to Quebec eventually required them to undertake more limited studies. The group depended upon the alphabet soup of employment and funding initiatives available in the 1970s: federally generated OFY (Opportunities for Youth) and LIP (Local Initiatives Programme) grants; support from the Canada Council, the Ontario Arts Council, and the Secretary of State; the enjoyment of charitable status for a period in the mid-1970s; and donations and gifts-in-kind from foundations and supporters. CANLIT remained in active existence for eight years, its history tracing an arc from a headily optimistic beginning in 1973 to dissolution in 1981, with the explicit recognition that its efforts, and those of compatriots engaged in parallel endeavours, had failed to stop the American takeover of Canada's cultural institutions, or even to change the education system very much. A final publication in 1980 contrasted the availability of Canadian literature in schools at that time to the situation as they had documented it eight years before, with disheartening results. "Because of the survey's negative results for promoters of Canadian literature, it is fitting that *Course Countdown 1973-1980* should be CANLIT's last publication" (Brotten et al. [1981], *Course Countdown* 1). CANLIT's publications are little-consulted now, but one contention of this article is that its studies and reports as well as the group's archived materials are valuable resources for scholars today.

The CANLIT Archives

As CANLIT prepared to relocate to Victoria in 1978, Brotten approached the University of Calgary Archives, which already, under Special Collections

head Apollonia Steele, was targeting Canadian authors' papers. The CANLIT collection, MsC 221, is composed of nine large boxes of material, and there is a very serviceable file-level finding aid. However, the fonds (henceforth CLF⁴) is more than the record of this one particular group since, taken in total, it provides detailed evidence of the print culture and "communications circuit" (in Robert Darnton's term) of English Canada throughout the 1970s, showing authors, publishers, publicists, booksellers, librarians, readers, reviewers, government agencies, and educational authorities in their highly interactive relationships. In one particularly intriguing letter, Margaret Atwood (writing on House of Anansi letterhead) offers the CANLIT collective both logistical advice for approaching publishers and detailed methodological suggestions for a survey then in the planning stages (Atwood, Letter; CLF). Donors were envisaged not only as providers of much-needed funding, but as the invested "constituency" for the research to be undertaken (Canadian Readership Survey prospectus [4], CLF). In short, the CANLIT material provides evidence of the high degree of interactivity among different sectors of the book trades and the book-using public during a crucial time in the development of Canadian letters, and, more generally, the ways in which the agents of print assume mutable and multiple roles.

The fonds is also valuable for literary historians and book historians wishing to undertake more focused studies. The CANLIT project began its publishers' survey project by identifying some nine hundred publishers and printers, and then winnowing down to those who published Canadian literature, defined as fiction, poetry, drama, children's literature, and literary criticism. There is book-by-book sales data for some 1,600 titles, provided by publishers across the country, both Canadian and foreign-owned, including small-press, basement, and "ethnic" presses, with an impressive level of detail, some publishers providing breakdowns over time for a hundred titles or more.⁵ (Scholars will need to use this material judiciously, as publishers provided the information with the expectation that results would be aggregated.) Further, the letters and marginalia that accompany the submitted sales figures are revealing as they range from the polite, informative, or humorous, to the hasty, opinionated, and (occasionally) irate, depending on the correspondent. Moreover, the files contain course syllabi and classroom exercises sent by teachers across the country, in addition to curriculum documents solicited from boards of education and provincial ministries, all useful for reconstructing the evolution of CanLit and

Can-content teaching. The voluminous correspondence between CANLIT and funding agencies, government bodies, foundations, and private sponsors illustrates the challenges of financing cultural projects even during the propitious post-Centennial years. While the raw readership surveys yielded less than one would have hoped in terms of commentary by respondents, and while the data printouts are now too fragile to be handled (even assuming they could provide information additional to that in the published reports), other materials in the CANLIT fonds fill in crucial details about their work on readership.

CANLIT Publications

The CANLIT project also left behind a significant body of published material, issuing some twenty-five reports in all, often mimeographed but sometimes professionally printed, as well as regular Progress Report newsletters that were sent out to as many as eight hundred supporters (Brotten, Telephone interview). (A checklist of CANLIT publications is appended.) The project also generated copious amounts of print in other forms: postcards, posters, survey forms, data printouts, and reams of correspondence laboriously typed with carbon copies. While publications were issued in fairly large runs (2,000 copies of the 1976 publication *Contentions*, for example), the survival rate is low, and some occasional publications have not yet come to light. The publications may be divided roughly into three categories: first, research studies, primarily statistical, of book sales and the book publishing industry, as was the project's initial goal; second, surveys of teachers and studies of curricula, especially in the secondary sector, along with materials to support nationally minded Canadian teachers; and third, surveys of readers in an attempt to answer the question which the contributors to *Read Canadian* had begged—what makes a Canadian reader? While the third strand of their work is the focus of this study, I will begin with an overview of the publications, highlighting their utility for scholars of English Canadian literature, culture, and book history.

CANLIT's inaugural published report, *The Lumber Jack Report: English Canadian Literary Trade Book Publishers' Sales*, focuses on literary sales specifically, in response to Ondaatje's request, and tracks sales patterns for Canadian literature from 1963 to 1972. This report has especial value today for its wealth of information about the rapidly changing picture of CanLit production in a dynamic period, especially given the availability in the CANLIT fonds of the disaggregated figures and the correspondence

concerning the collection of sales data. The group undertook further studies of the industry (*Spying on the Book Trade* and *Who's(e) Who*), of the history of Canadian publishing (*Paper Phoenix* and its accompanying *Studies in the Book Trade*), and of censorship in schools and libraries (*Mind Wars*). Some other studies, less well-conceived, did not make it to publication: in 1973, for example, CANLIT canvassed members of the Canadian Booksellers' Association asking for their top-ten sellers in July, but this failed because the questionnaire was poorly designed and the booksellers considered summer sales unrepresentative (Report of the Bookstore Survey, CLF). *Briefs for the Book Trades* is an assembly of publishers' position papers, reports to standing committees, commissions, and interventions in the 1970s book trade wars, designed to demonstrate the initiatives that already had been undertaken. The CANLIT group was performing substantial work on behalf of (what we now would call) Canada's cultural industries, and its members were wont to complain that government bodies were more likely to poach their findings than to fund CANLIT research.

A second strand of CANLIT publications operated from the realization that schools had a crucial role to play in forming a resistant, critically minded citizenry, as well as a new generation of Canadian readers. *Course Countdown*, from 1974, details the sorry state of awareness of Canadian literature among secondary school teachers, and was followed the next year by a clearly needed *CANLIT Teachers' Crash Course*, which later was revised and reprinted. (The title is taken from an actual twelve-hour crash course taught by CANLIT members to North York-area teachers.) The collective continued to audit progress (or lack of progress) in the development of Canadian-focused curricula, with *Contentions: An Analysis of Canadian Literature Curricula* in 1976 and an updated *Course Countdown* in 1981, as well as a survey of visual arts instruction titled *Tunnel Vision*. It provided bibliographies of media materials that could complement CanLit teaching, a poster collection of Canadian authors, and ideas for classroom projects and assignments, most interestingly in *Antitoenailimagery*, which suggests research topics, many from a sociological or materialist angle, that could be undertaken by high school or university students.⁶ While the CANLIT project did not succeed in undertaking curricular studies that were binational or bicultural (the ongoing reorganization of the Quebec school system, from a parochial to a board model, was an additional impediment), the authors attempted to be representative and proactive in their selections of material for classroom use, and francophone works in translation,

“ethnic” writing, writing by women, and writing by and about First Nations/Inuit peoples feature prominently in their recommendations. They advocated the teaching of Canadian literature in ways that were relevant to young people, and often favoured iconoclastic and avant-garde writing over the social-realist classics. They also encouraged teachers to bring popular literature into the classroom, and argued for an interdisciplinary and, increasingly, a multimedia approach. Indeed, eventually they were less concerned with the teaching of works of Canadian literature than with giving Canadian students the language and cultural-literacy skills to be critical of American-generated media (thus the publication of a handbook on science fiction). As the group admitted in 1977 “At first we were concerned with the need for Canadian content, but we now realize that the substitution of George Ryga for Shakespeare is not the answer” (Donald et al. [1977], *Mix N’ Match II* 1). The CANLIT project overlapped with the work of other scholars in the post-secondary sector, contributing to the groundbreaking *Canadian Fiction: An Annotated Bibliography* (1976) by Margery Fee and Ruth Cawker, for which Gail Donald worked in an editorial capacity. It also collaborated on a companion volume to be edited by Cawker, “Canadian Poetry: An Annotated Bibliography,” which did not come to completion.

Researching Readers

The third strand of publications comes from the collective’s work on readership, which may well be the most innovative aspect of its research. Throughout the 1970s the group undertook several surveys and studies designed to create a multi-dimensional picture of Canadian readers in their classed, gendered, and regional specificities. CANLIT wanted to know about book access, reading frequency, library use, the relationship of reading to other activities, and genre preferences—in short, what made Canadian readers tick. While the surveys sometimes were poorly designed and response rates were uneven, and geographically restricted to Ontario for the most part, they may well have been the most ambitious attempt to generate qualitative information about English Canadian readers in the mid-twentieth-century period.

In undertaking its imaginative and sometimes iconoclastic studies of Canadian readers and reading practices, the CANLIT collective assumed that such research was vital to Canadian publishing. This idea was not entirely new, of course—public opinion firms, newspapers, and even the publishing conglomerate Maclean-Hunter were collecting information on

readership demographics at mid-century (see Murray and Rotundo)—but the CANLIT surveys were unique in trying to ascertain the readership of specifically *literary* materials. And the alternative politics of CANLIT allowed it to approach the task of surveying in a way that differed markedly from governmental or commercial groups. However, at the outset little was available by way of usable models: trade surveys, as a rule, were fairly restricted in focus and quantitative in nature; the Dominion Bureau of Statistics had collected information on readership through its Library Survey primarily; and the detailed report on European reading habits prepared by R. E. M. van den Brink, to which the group referred, had drawn upon substantial research already undertaken. CANLIT would need to develop a methodology by trial and error. It began by undertaking an “exploratory man-in-the-street survey” (Wheatcroft [1975], *Something* 6) of one hundred blue-collar and pink-collar workers in the Kitchener-Waterloo area, and of one hundred professionals in Toronto, enlisting Don Willmott, a York University sociologist, as an advisor. It developed a two-page questionnaire to be administered on the spot, usually door-to-door, by CANLIT canvassers, with questions designed to be somewhat open-ended, so that the surveyors could explain the intent or follow through. (Some interviewees did not understand what was meant by “media,” for example, a problem corrected in future surveys.) The interviewers asked about reading preferences, other leisure-time activities (including radio listening and television viewing), and access to books and other print materials. However, a number of the responses for Kitchener-Waterloo halt before the tenth and final question, which is about library use (perhaps reflecting the early orientation of the CANLIT project to the publishing trade, or perhaps indicating the waning patience of interviewees with the surveyor on their doorstep), and the library-use question was not included in the Toronto forms.

While the surveys did not generate enough usable results to be published, this pilot project let the researchers iron out some methodological kinks. They gained a sense of the difficulties in generating anecdotal or reflective responses, and of undertaking cross-class research. (Some interviewees reacted to questions about class as intrusive, or showed a divergent, or aspirational, understanding of class categories; many factory workers and most respondents who self-identified as professionals identified as “middle class.”) However, the survey responses did generate some interesting results and, most significantly, alerted the CANLIT researchers to the fact that variability of book access was a key concern. In a follow-up report to

Opportunities for Youth administrators, Broten emphasized that, although unpublished, the study was groundbreaking because “the only other readers’ survey conducted before to our knowledge (of book, not magazine readers) was that prepared for the . . . Readers’ Club [of Canada] by Peter Martin Associates,” and this, she noted, had an obvious middle-class bias (Report on the Readership Survey, CLF). (The Readers’ Club survey, used by the Royal Commission, had very good rates of return but surveys had been distributed only to Club subscribers.) In a holograph addition to the typescript draft, she adds a salient conclusion:

Most importantly, the [CANLIT] Readership Survey seems to confirm the view held by the Royal Commission and pointed out, from another perspective, by our Publishers survey: that both Canadian publishers and Canadian readers—especially those in lower-class areas outside our major cities—suffer at the hands of an inefficient book distribution system.

While Broten was referring to availability of mass-market paperbacks, the conclusion was more general: poor sales of Canadian materials were not simply the result of lack of awareness, or of interest, or of disposable income.

The CANLIT Readership Survey was followed in 1975 by a deliberately experimental project, “Something for Nothing,” which aimed to expose readers to Canadian materials and to assess their responses. This later study was also (if more obliquely) intended to measure the national consciousness of the sample readers, with upbeat reasoning that ran as follows: if “there does exist in Canada a significant number of people who have removed the vestiges of cultural colonialism . . . and who feel frustrated because they do not have sufficient access to Canadian books,” then this would provide an “immediate rationale” for financial relief for Canada’s publishing industries (Wheatcroft [1975], *Something* 4-5). CANLIT elicited the assistance of Canadian publishers—including General, Hurtig, and McClelland & Stewart—by offering to feed back their findings, and the publishers responded with alacrity but with somewhat miscellaneous donations. In the end, more than four hundred paperback books, donated by a dozen publishers, were distributed along with a questionnaire in six demographically distinct areas of Toronto’s Don Valley riding, an area that encompassed then-working-class Cabbagetown as well as prosperous Rosedale (“Something for Nothing.” Survey Returns, CLF). CANLIT researchers left approximately half of the books (with postage-paid surveys) in kiosks in community centres, and distributed the rest door-to-door. However, contrary to their expectation that the project would return something for something, CANLIT researchers received only

ten percent of the distributed questionnaires (i.e., forty-two) in return. The results would have been difficult to compare in any event, since the donated books were miscellaneous, and heavily reflective of the backlist of McClelland & Stewart. Popular books by authors such as Max Braithwaite and Farley Mowat were handed out along with books by James DeMille and Catharine Parr Traill: one suspects that target readers preferred Brian Conacher's *So You Want to Be a Hockey Player* to Wyndham Lewis's *Self Condemned*. While the somewhat random nature of the distributed books reflects the haphazard state of CANLIT's resources, it also is evidence of their flattening assumption that Canadian literature, no matter the form, genre, or time period, could speak to readers in a distinctive way.

The report writers of "Something for Nothing" did their best to squeeze results from the small sample, and the group learned a lesson from the overly cumbersome procedure. More importantly, the project helped to strengthen the collective's working relationships with Canadian publishers, to which they conscientiously relayed the meagre results in painstaking and sometimes tactful detail (carefully relaying to Oberon one reader's disgusted description of George Bowering's *Flycatcher* as "filthy," and providing publishers with copious comments). The survey also helped the group to achieve broader recognition, and Jack McClelland, initially skeptical of the project although in the end supportive of it, could see its public relations merit (McClelland, CLF). That same year, McClelland & Stewart gave away paperbacks in Toronto and in Saskatoon as a promotional stunt (King 284-85), and the following year Jack McClelland returned to Saskatoon to hand out free books with a seven-question survey. While the Saskatoon survey also failed to yield much by way of results, the McClelland & Stewart promotions coordinator thought the exercise demonstrated "that it *was* possible to excite the book buyers of Saskatoon" (Drinkwater, CLF).

The 1976 survey that resulted in *The Canadian Reader I: Peterborough and Area* was the most extensive and the most successful, although the eventual project fell short of what originally was planned. As initially envisaged, "Documentary History of Literacy in a Small Ontario City" would

focus on 5 areas: schools, libraries, bookstores, local publications, and the state of literacy as understood by local employers. . . . The research, through a search of historical documents . . . newspapers, and conversations, will trace the creation, growth, and change in reading patterns from 1825 to 1975. (Attachment, CLF)

Turned down by a number of granting agencies, despite well-prepared applications for this large-scale and historically based study, the collective

turned elsewhere, although the two thousand dollars they attracted, even supplemented by sales of CANLIT publications, fell far short of the \$38,000 budgeted for the more ambitious study. More than sixty individuals and organizations provided support, including Margaret Atwood, Pierre Berton, June Callwood, Eugene Forsey, Edgar Z. Friedenberg, Stanley Knowles, Farley Mowat, Christina Newman, and Tom Symons, along with a number of public libraries, almost twenty publishing houses, and even the New Zealand Book Council. At the core of the scaled-down study was a random sampling of two thousand adults in Peterborough (where CANLIT then was located) in August 1976, using a hefty 6½-page questionnaire. This survey had a 20% rate of return—a decent figure, although some potential respondents might have been deterred by the conscientious but perhaps intrusive demographic information gathering, which included questions about religion, political party affiliation, and sociability (visits taken and visitors to the home). Unsurprisingly, well-educated adults were over-represented among the respondents, and two-thirds of the returns were from women; interestingly, more than 250 respondents also mailed back a postcard asking to be sent the eventual report. *The Canadian Reader I* makes the most of the study sample, with a well-inflected crunching of the available data, and a respectful attention to the comments of the respondents who sometimes are quoted verbatim, their spelling and grammar retained. The report highlights the declining popularity of reading as a leisure-time activity, and of the gendered differences in newspaper and monograph reading preferences. It also offers a more surprising finding, that while book-reading frequency seemed to correlate with educational levels, book purchasing itself did not, at least for this particular population. “Gossip,” or word of mouth, was the primary source for book information among the respondents, they learned. And the awareness of Canadian content was lower than the CANLIT collective could have imagined: not only were many respondents indifferent to the national origin of the books that they read, but many could not distinguish Canadian from American materials in the first place, or mistook one for the other. “The large proportion of respondents who could not or would not discern Canadian content clearly shows the extent of alienation and colonialism” (55), the CANLIT authors concluded.

This latter finding motivated the follow-up study *The Canadian Reader II: High School Canadian Literature Students*, based on one thousand questionnaires distributed in high school Canadian literature classes in May 1977, across eight provinces.⁷ This study was also intended to complement

a more restricted survey, of CanLit teaching in the Atlantic provinces, just published by George Crawford for the Canadian Council of Teachers of English. To how great a degree were Canadian literature courses raising the awareness of their students? Students in this case were asked not only about leisure-time reading and print access, but also specifically about their knowledge of Canadian books and their attitude to Canadian literature courses. Based on more than six hundred responses—clearly, filling in forms was mandatory in at least some schools—this study is the most qualitative in nature of the CANLIT surveys, requiring discursive as well as statistical analysis given the generous amounts of commentary provided by the refreshingly opinionated young respondents. The resulting report presents an aggregated readership profile, although the authors acknowledged that the results were too slim, and too geographically dispersed, to allow much by way of conclusion. More usefully, the responses of the students generated suggestions for making Canadian literature courses more appealing. One student had queried why CanLit had to mean “poverty stricken farmers on the snow-swept prairies” (32); others worried about a CanLit boosterism that seemed too similar to American jingoism; others wondered why Canadian works could not be taught in an international context. While *The Canadian Reader II* was not published until 1978, its more immediate effect was on the reports *Mix ‘N’ Match I: Ideas for Canadian (Literary) Studies*, and *Mix ‘N’ Match II: Reprise*, which devised suggestions for integrating the study of Canadian literature with world literatures, avant-garde writing, popular genres, and other cultural forms including music. Much of CANLIT’s efforts would go into curriculum design, and into providing classroom supports for teachers, during the final years of the group’s existence.

Conclusion

While the CANLIT group disbanded with a disheartening sense of the futility of its efforts, it also must have been foundering under the weight of its compendious research mandate: to develop an analytical understanding of Canadian authorship, publishing, marketing, purchasing, reading, and teaching, within the rapidly changing context of the international book trade and cultural industries. Other groups, with stronger resources, had come into being over the course of the decade to take up the work. An Independent Publishers’ Association was formed in the wake of the Ryerson Press sale to represent Canadian-controlled rather than branch-plant publishers (MacSkimming 197-200); the Writers’ Union of Canada

had undertaken an energetic lobbying campaign to bring CanLit into the classroom, and was developing resource guides for teachers; a Canadian Book Information Centre and the new publication *Books in Canada* raised awareness of Canadian titles (to cite only some examples). Statistics Canada had attached a separate “Reading Habits” Survey of Leisure Time Activities to its monthly Labour Force survey of February 1978, which went to some 17,600 Canadians aged fifteen and older. With an 80% return rate, this represented a gold mine of data for educators and members of the book trades.⁸ A preliminary paper by James Lorimer using this material led to a commission by the Association of Canadian Publishers for a longer study, with funding from the Publishing Development Program of the federal Department of Communication. The result was the massive 1983 report (by Lorimer in conjunction with statistician Susan Shaw) titled *Book Reading in Canada: The Audience, the Marketplace, and the Distribution System for Trade Books in English Canada*. While the coincidence of this publication with the disbanding of the CANLIT group forces comparison between the more restricted and exploratory nature of the CANLIT surveys and Lorimer’s detailed and comprehensive study, it is interesting to observe how Lorimer’s goals echo those of the CANLIT group at its foundation: “While publishers and authors know how many copies are sold of individual book titles,” Lorimer writes, “no one has known how many Canadians read books, what share of their reading is Canadian-authored titles, how they find out about the books they read or where their books are obtained” (xxx).

From the perspective of readership research, the CANLIT project itself is equally as significant as any of its reports, representing a methodologically and politically avant-garde attempt to tease out information about specifically Canadian reading practices and motivations; to generate qualitative and anecdotal responses pertaining to book access and the reading experience as well as the particular materials read; and to make the case for the Canadian reader as a vital part of (what we now would conceptualize as) the communications circuit. With hindsight, it is possible to discern some limitations in approach that hampered its research: the dependence on Canadian book publishers for support caused an over-focus on monograph reading in its studies (as opposed to gauging awareness of CanLit through newspapers, magazines, performances, radio broadcasts, and television dramatizations, for example). The desire to serve its core constituency—authors and publishers devoted to the development of a new Canadian literature—caused a further focus on certain modes and genres at

the expense of other literary forms, even the belletristic ones of biography, autobiography, the essay, and historical writing. This categorical problem, of separating CanLit from other varieties of print Canadiana, created a shortfall in the ability of the CANLIT group to capture the attitudes of its respondents, who often listed non-fiction titles—by Peter Newman, Farley Mowat, and (especially) Pierre Berton, for example—as the most-recently-read book, and who indicated that Canadian content was more likely to influence their selection of non-fiction than of fiction. While CANLIT's intent was to be demographically inclusive, the reports tell us most about the reading experiences of Ontarians with relatively favourable conditions for book access. The limited and somewhat haphazard nature of its funding, the need to learn on the job in the absence of suitable models, and a somewhat Maoist tendency to publicly shared self-criticism meant that the surveys were restricted in scope and the reports could appear amateurish, at least to some reviewers.

But the CANLIT project was unique in its attempts to ascertain the psycho-political mindset of readers and the role of reading in the formation of an anti-colonialist consciousness. To use the terms from Margaret Atwood's *Survival*, so resonant in 1973, its participants wished to know whether and how reading could effect the transition from unaware victimhood to a creative ex-victim position. Looking back from a distance of more than forty years at a seeming effusion of cultural nationalism, what is most striking is the substantial disjunction between the activities of authoring and publishing, and the activity of reading, in the early-to-mid-1970s. That the one sector, despite logistical challenges, was vibrantly active, while the other was more cautious and constricted, was evident at the time to CANLIT researchers, just as it was apparent to the compilers of *Read Canadian*, although this gap may have become somewhat occluded over time. When the CANLIT researchers surveyed professional-class Torontonians in 1975 (Survey forms, CLF) and asked interviewees to name the most recent Canadian book that they had read, fully 29% of respondents could not come up with a title, or mentioned a book that was, seemingly unbeknownst to them, by a British or American author.

In her retrospective of the first three years of CANLIT's work, Broten humorously conjectured how the project might be remembered in the future: in an inter-office memo in a publishing house in the 1990s, or a scholarly paper in far-off 2050, or an MA thesis from the year 2000. The author of the fantasy thesis notes the strangely bifurcated situation

of the early 1970s, where the upsurge of nationalism, confined as it was to the “sphere of personal action” of authors and teachers, could not take hold at an “institutional level.” “This cultural schizophrenia,” writes the future scholar, “is documented in the obscure reports of CANLIT, a research group of which [little is] known” (Brotten, “CANLIT” 4). In our equally contradictory historical moment, when many Canadian authors enjoy worldwide reputations, when readers scramble to secure the latest Canada Reads selections, when McClelland & Stewart is owned outright by Bertelsmann, and when students may well go through high school without ever encountering a work of Canadian writing, it is useful to look back at these earlier expositions of the literary field in Canada, and CANLIT’s urgent appeal to secure—to institutionalize—Canada’s cultures.

Appendix A

Chronological List of CANLIT Publications

Note: locations are given when publicly available copies are rare or unique.

Note: no copies have been located for *Progress Reports* 1, 2, 6 through 13, or after 14 (if any).

1974

Stewart, Sandra. *Course Countdown: A Quantitative Study of Canadian Literature in the Nation’s Secondary Schools*. Toronto, CANLIT, 1974.

1975

Barnhart, R. B., et al. *CANLIT Teacher’s Crash Course*. Peterborough, CANLIT, c. 1975.

Brotten, Delores. *The Lumber Jack Report: English Canadian Literary Trade Book Publishers’ Sales 1963-1972*. Peterborough, CANLIT, 1975.

“CANLIT posters”: “Printed on light blue cardboard with white lettering, the slogans read: Who in their right mind would read a CANADIAN book; Try a book adventure; and, When you read a CANADIAN book you read about yourself” (*Progress Report* #5). [No copies located]

Progress Report, 3. Toronto, CANLIT, 1975.

Progress Report #4: *July 1975*. Peterborough, CANLIT, 1975. [Copy CLF Box 3 File 1, used as scrap paper]

Progress Report #5: *December 1975*. Peterborough, CANLIT, 1975. [Copy CLF Box 5 File 1]

Wheatcroft, Les. *Something for Nothing: An Experimental Book Exposure Programme*. Peterborough, CANLIT, 1975.

1976

Brotten, Delores, and Gail Donald. *Contentions: An Analysis of Canadian Literature Curricula*. Peterborough, CANLIT, 1976. [Copies York University Scott and Frost Libraries]

CANLIT Poster Collection 1976

Title: Collection of posters relating to various Canadian authors including Earle Birney,

Gratien Gélinas, Margaret Laurence, Hugh MacLennan, and E. J. Pratt. 1976. 5 posters; col.; 60 x 45 cm. [University of Guelph McLaughlin Library]

1977

Birdsall, Peter. *Tunnel Vision: Looking at Art Education in English Canadian High Schools*. Peterborough, CANLIT, 1977.

Brotten, Delores, and Peter Birdsall. *The Canadian Reader I: Peterborough and Area*. Peterborough, CANLIT, 1977.

Donald, Gail. *Media Materials: A Can.Lit. Collection*. Peterborough, CANLIT, c. 1977.

Donald, Gail, Delores Brotten, and Peter Birdsall. *Mix 'N' Match I: Ideas for Canadian (Literary) Studies*. Peterborough, CANLIT, 1977. [Title variant: also catalogued as *Mix 'N' Match*]

—. *Mix 'N' Match II: Reprise*. Peterborough, CANLIT, 1977. [No copies located on public deposit in Canada]

Lizee, Simon, Myrtle Ebert, and Violet Lefebvre. *Oh Can(you see)ada! Can. Lit. for Junior High School Students*. Peterborough, CANLIT, 1977. [Copy Trent University Library]

1978

Birdsall, Peter, and Delores Brotten. *Mind War: Book Censorship in English Canada*. Victoria, CANLIT, 1978.

Birdsall, Peter, Delores Brotten, and Gail Donald. *Antitoenailimagery: Research Projects in Canadian Literature*. Peterborough, CANLIT, 1978.

Brotten, Delores, and Peter Birdsall. *A Science Fiction Teaching Guide*. Peterborough, CANLIT, 1978.

Brotten, Delores, Peter Birdsall, and Gail Donald. *The Canadian Reader II: High School Canadian Literature Students*. Peterborough, CANLIT, 1978.

Spying on the Book Trade. Mini-report no. 3 [sic], Victoria, CANLIT, 1978.

1979

Birdsall, Peter, et al. *CANLIT Crash Course, Revised*. Victoria, CANLIT, c. 1979.

Birdsall, Peter, and Delores Brotten. *Who's(e) Who: The English Canadian Literary Scene*. Victoria, CANLIT, 1979. [Copy University of Toronto Robarts Library]

Briefs from the Book Trade in the '70s. Mini-report no. 2 [sic], Victoria, CANLIT, 1979.

1980

Brotten, Delores, and Peter Birdsall. *Paper Phoenix: A History of Book Publishing in English Canada*. Victoria, CANLIT, 1980.

—. *Studies in the Book Trade*. Victoria, CANLIT, 1980. [Note: this is the companion bibliography to *Paper Phoenix*]

Donald, Gail. *Media Materials: A Can.Lit. Collection*. 2nd rev. ed. Victoria, CANLIT, 1980.

1981

Brotten, Delores, Sandra Stewart, and Judy Robinson. *Course Countdown 1973-1980: Canadian Literature in English Canadian High Schools*. Victoria, CANLIT, 1981.

Progress Report #14. Victoria, CANLIT, 1979. [Copy courtesy Margery Fee. No copies identified in public deposits. Final Progress Report?]

[Undated] Published Prospectuses

Canadian Poetry: An Annotated Bibliography. s.l., [CANLIT?], 197- [Note: 3 leaves. Toronto Reference Library]

- CANLIT Book Exposure Programme*. Toronto, CANLIT, 197- [Note: 2 leaves. Toronto Reference Library? Source AMICUS but not located at TRL]
- The lumber jack report*. s.l., [CANLIT], 197- [Note: 1 leaf. Copy courtesy Margery Fee. No copies identified in public deposits]
- Prospectus for Canadian Fiction: An Annotated Bibliography*. s.l., [CANLIT?], 197- [Note: 6 leaves. Toronto Reference Library]

Associated Publication

- Fee, Margery, and Ruth Cawker, editors. *Canadian Fiction: An Annotated Bibliography*. Peter Martin Associates, 1976.

Appendix B

Selected materials from CANLIT fonds, MsC 221, Archives and Special Collections, University of Calgary [CLF]

- Attachment in letter from Robert M. Kennedy to Delores Broten. 26 May 1976, CLF, Box 5, File 1.
- Atwood, Margaret. Letter from Margaret Atwood to CANLIT. 17 July 1974, CLF, Box 3, File 4.
- Canadian Readership Survey prospectus. CLF, Box 4, File 3.
- Contract Proposals. CLF, Box 2, File 1.
- Drinkwater, Suzanne. Letter from Suzanne Drinkwater to Peter Birdsall. 4 May 1976, CLF, Box 4, File 1.
- McClelland, Jack. Letter from Jack McClelland to Delores Broten. 13 Feb. 1975, CLF, Box 4, File 8.
- Report of the Bookstore Survey. CLF, Box 1, File 4.
- Report on the Readership Survey. CLF, Box 5, File 4.
- Request for Sustaining Grant. CLF, Box 5, File 1.
- Something for Nothing. Survey Returns. CLF, Box 4, File 9.
- Survey forms. CLF, Box 5, File 4.

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NOTES

- 1 Fulford was (and remains) a cultural journalist and reviewer; Rotstein co-founded the Committee for an Independent Canada; Godfrey was then a founder of House of Anansi as well as an author. A note on nomenclature: to avoid anachronism I will use the term “Canadian” as cultural nationalists of the period would have done (but which we now would inflect by hyphenation).
- 2 There were other crucial developments: 1971, Sara Bannerman writes, represented the “end of an era” in copyright agreements, with copyright now negotiated as part of larger trade deals (190); and in 1971 McClelland & Stewart was so financially overextended that Jack McClelland announced his intention to sell (MacSkimming 141-43; 147-49).
- 3 Broten became a journalist and now is active in the environmental movement in BC. Donald was until recently the manager of CBC English Radio Archives; Stewart also became a journalist; Waller was a producer at CBC’s *The National* and active in the Canadian Media Guild.
- 4 Items referenced in this article from the CANLIT fonds can be found in Appendix B. To avoid duplication, CANLIT sources that appear in the appendices have not been listed again in the Works Cited.
- 5 According to Broten (Telephone interview), this extensive study was, in the end, made possible by Statistics Canada, which paid for the data processing in return for access to the raw sales figures. Broten also recalled laborious efforts to obtain the figures in the first place. McClelland & Stewart, citing lack of personnel, invited CANLIT members to comb through its sales records, on index cards filed in boxes and stored in a safe.
- 6 The catchy title is taken from a well-known essay by William Gass. According to Greig Henderson, a line from Malcolm Lowry’s *Under the Volcano* provided the point of departure for Gass’ essay “In Terms of the Toenail.”
- 7 The raw forms for this study are not included in the CANLIT fonds, presumably because the respondents, though anonymous, were mostly underage.
- 8 Also in 1978, an Ontario Reading Survey tested the impact of the Half-Back reading incentive program, and *Weekend Magazine* commissioned a telephone survey, of one thousand urbanites, about their reading tastes (Murray and Rotundo 458).

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