

Canadian Bookman and the Origins of Modern Realism in English-Canadian Fiction

Canadian fiction was transformed with the emergence of a dynamic, experimental, and polemical modern-realist movement in the 1920s. Authors, critics, readers, and publishers of the period greeted this movement with marked enthusiasm, and heralded it as an indisputable and long-sought revolutionary break with outmoded aesthetics, including both romanticism, still the dominant mode of Canadian fiction in 1920, and the European nineteenth-century realism that had been exerting sporadic influence in Canada since about 1850. While the emergence of modern realism is among the most significant events in the early development of Canadian fiction, it has rarely been granted more than passing critical attention. This neglect may in part be the result of the uneven attention Canada's literary histories have paid to the two formative little magazines of the 1920s: *The Canadian Forum* and *Canadian Bookman*. While these literary histories often praise the *Forum* for its intellectual rigour and cosmopolitanism, the *Bookman* is almost always dismissed as uncritical and backward looking. Sandra Djwa argues, for example, that the *Forum* "provided the only forum for critical discussion of modernism in general," and "became the first modern Canadian magazine," regardless that it began publication a year after the *Bookman* (7, 9). Mary Vipond's "The Canadian Authors' Association in the 1920s: A Case Study in Cultural Nationalism" sums up the popular view of the relationship between these two journals, arguing that "the *Forum*, although committed to fostering Canadian culture, always insisted as well that they sponsored objective criticism," and that this contrasts with the "boosterism" of the CAA and its house organs, including the *Bookman* (74).

These and other critics are certainly correct to assert that the *Forum* played a central role in the development of modernist Canadian poetry. I wish, however, to challenge conventional appraisals of the *Canadian Bookman* and reveal that this eclectic little magazine was the site of a crucial and now forgotten debate about modern Canadian fiction. This debate indicates that the realist strain of Canadian fiction from the 1920s until after mid-century was not a belated, derivative, inconsistent, and largely insignificant response to nineteenth-century European and American movements. Rather, it was a spiritedly contested experimental and modern movement whose participants had coherent aesthetic principles and a strong belief that the form of realism they advocated was modernizing Canadian fiction. James Mulvihill, in “The ‘Canadian Bookman’ and Literary Nationalism,” contrasts the *Bookman* to the *Forum* and concludes that the former is “certainly . . . not a modernist organ” (51). Yet the debates in the *Bookman* of the 1920s reveal that Canada’s modern realists considered themselves part of the international phenomenon retrospectively termed modernism, and that, in Canada at least, literary modernism and realism are neither opposed nor conflicting aesthetics. Such a reconfiguration of literary aesthetics in interwar Canada accords with recent work by Glenn Willmott who, in *Unreal Country: Modernity in the Canadian Novel in English*, negotiates the labyrinth of “isms”—realism, romanticism, naturalism, modernism—that is early twentieth-century Canadian fiction, and reveals that the standard definitions of these loaded terms do not easily apply in the Canadian context. Most importantly, the *Bookman* debates of the 1920s about modern realism demand a new understanding of Canadian literary history. Contrary to most interpretations, the *Forum* was not the sole champion of new and experimental Canadian writing in the 1920s; the *Forum* advocated a “cosmopolitan” modernist poetry but ignored Canadian fiction. Even before the *Forum* began publication, contributors to *Canadian Bookman* concerned themselves with the creation of a modern-realist Canadian fiction that was contemporary, innovative, “homegrown,” with important affinities with international modernist forms.

Canadian Bookman published its first issue in January 1919 under the general editorship of B.K. Sandwell,¹ and appeared regularly until 1939—with the exception of a few issues that did not appear in 1937—when it merged with the official publication of the Canadian Authors Association, *The Canadian Author*, to form *The Canadian Author and Bookman*. Very shortly after its inception, the magazine became an object of derision for writers and critics who felt it exemplified and encouraged the worst tendencies in

Canadian writing.² The reprobation of the *Bookman* has been persistent, and seems to derive primarily from the fact that it was, for a very brief period from 1921-22, an official publication of the Canadian Authors Association, which was much maligned in the 1920s by the group of modernists clustered around *The Canadian Forum*.³ The CAA did not emerge as an organization devoted to the high and international critical standards that the *Forum* contributors sought, but rather as “a trades guild for Canadian writers, to protect them *vis-à-vis* the other interests involved in the publishing business . . .” (Vipond 69-70). When the *Bookman* became affiliated with the CAA, “the policy of the magazine was adapted to the needs of that essentially conservative and professional oriented organization, resorting in the twenties to a noisy boosterism that favoured quantity over quality and patriotism over literary worth. Deservedly or not, the reputation of both the Association and its house organs has suffered from this stigma ever since” (Francis 458). *Canadian Bookman*, a vocal, prolific, and visible supporter of Canadian publishers, became synonymous with the CAA and an easy mark for critics and writers with all sorts of complaints about Canadian writing: its low critical standards, nationalism, social conservatism, commercialization, regionalism, prudishness, ignorance of foreign writing, not to mention the proliferation of fiction by women. But, while the *Bookman* is “guilty” of all of these “affronts” to some degree, as Mulvihill suggests, many of these critics “had as their immediate target the Canadian Authors Association and to some extent the *Bookman* was simply caught in the crossfire” (51).⁴

Whatever the value of these often overstated and persistently echoed criticisms of the *Bookman* as a whole, a small group of the magazine’s most serious and thoughtful contributors directed Canada’s nationalistic impulse in a more serious and literary direction and changed the course of Canadian literary development profoundly. They advanced a new modern-realist fiction that in just about every way imaginable was unlike the romantic, conservative and uncritical forms of fiction that the magazine is infamous for endorsing. They considered modern realism to be fully engaged in the contemporary moment, socially conscious and often progressive, frequently anti-nationalistic and critical of accepted “values,” technically radical by Canadian standards of the period, profoundly concerned with human psychology, and as thematically modern as any but the most radical works of high modernism. A series of articles published in the *Bookman* in the 1920s spoke in the language of the manifesto as they established a sense of urgency about Canada’s need for modern writing and offered initial definitions of the

new modern realism and its characteristics. This effort was reflected in many of the book reviews that the *Bookman* printed from the early 1920s through to its amalgamation with *The Canadian Author* in 1939. Although the essential works of modern-realist fiction would not be published in the *Bookman* (which published very little creative work), the magazine's series of manifestos for a modern realism would have a wide-ranging and formative impact on Canadian literature for decades to come.⁵

The *Bookman's* unsigned prospectus, which appeared near the beginning of the inaugural January 1919 issue, revealed that the magazine considered itself a revolutionary force in Canadian literature, and sought to oppose status-quo literary values with a new, modern form of realistic writing. Like other innovative modes of expression, including most of the movements that collectively make up literary modernism, modern realism began with a manifesto, or a "testimony of a historical present tense spoken in the impassioned voice of its participants. The manifesto declares a position; the manifesto refuses dialogue or discussion; the manifesto fosters antagonism and scorns conciliation. It is univocal, unilateral, single-minded" (Lyon 9). The *Bookman's* first manifesto, "The New Era," firmly establishes the magazine in the "historical present" and declares boldly that "[t]he first issue of the new *Canadian Bookman* appears at a moment which happens also to mark the beginning of a new era in the history of mankind, and, very particularly, in the history of Canada" (1). It demonstrates the "antagonism" of the modernist manifesto, clearly refusing any "conciliation" between the obsolete past and the new era it is initiating: "we stand today, along with the other great nations of a purified world, at the beginning of a new era which will certainly be vastly different from both the era of force and the era of materialism which preceded it" (1). While the prospectus is certainly making reference to the sense of a new national era dawning in the wake of the Great War, it defines this era specifically in cultural and literary terms, and places the *Bookman* by implication at the centre of a Canadian literary coming-of-age that will contrast favourably with a materialistic era that culminated in war: "it will be in one respect an era of ideas, an era of profound and general thought . . . [I]f this era is to be an era of ideas, it follows that it is also to be an era of books, since books are the one great medium through which ideas of [sic] communicated and perpetuated. . . . The *Canadian Bookman* itself is one of the phenomena of the new era" (1). This sense of the arrival of a "new era" is found everywhere in the pages of the magazine: it is the only magazine of the 1920s to regularly publish reviews of new works of Canadian

fiction, it speaks out on most of the pressing cultural issues of the day, and it shows a strong interest in the social and political development of Canada.

The *Bookman's* prospectus also “declares a position” in support of a new form of modern writing worthy of this “new era”: the new books will not be “the merely sentimental, narcotic, idea-less books, miscalled books of the imagination, which have formed the literary food of too many of us who did not wish to be bothered with ideas” (1). While this first manifesto would not define the new writing specifically in terms of the modern realism it would shortly advocate, it hinted at the nature of this new fiction and called for

real books, containing real ideas about the important things of life, whether expressed in the form of fiction, or of religion, or of philosophy, or of poetry, or of history, or of science in the broader and deeper sense of the word. It was this conviction, of the coming of an era of ideas and of books, which was strong in the minds of the founders of the new *Canadian Bookman* and which led them to select the present as an appropriate time. (1)

The leap from a call for “real books” and “real ideas about the important things of life” to demanding a literary realism up to the task of exploring the modern world was subsequently made in short order, and over the next few months and years numerous authors and critics weighed in on the subject, defining and refining the modern-realist form. These contributors—including Frederick Philip Grove, Raymond Knister, Robert J.C. Stead, Lorne Pierce, Lawren Harris, Georges Bugnet, Beaumont S. Cornell, Marcus Adeney, Lionel Stevenson, among others—were diverse in their writerly and ideological dispositions. While all of them advocated a modern form of Canadian realism, they were not wholly in agreement about its specific aims or aesthetic properties, and the spirited disagreement that often enlivened their exchanges suggests that the *Bookman* of the period was a site of ideological and aesthetic contestation in the best modernist sense.

Although the *Bookman's* 1919 prospectus might be called a manifesto for a new and distinct literature, the magazine is best read as a series of small manifestos that, in their totality, offer a passionate and persistent call for a Canadian modern realism, enumerate its characteristics, and offer critical commentary on the first exemplary creative works as they emerged across Canada in the 1920s.⁶ The enthusiastic and urgent spirit of the prospectus would carry on unabated in virtually every aspect of the *Bookman* until the arrival of the 1930s and the scaling back both of nationalistic pride in Canada in general, and in the size and format of the magazine itself. While this enthusiasm would often translate into the celebratory attitudes and

expressions mentioned earlier, it would also lead a number of individuals, in numerous articles published in the magazine, to turn their attention seriously to the task of determining exactly what was wrong with Canadian literature, and what writers and critics needed to do to bring it into the modern era. Their solution, in short, was for writers to engage the contemporary world with their fiction, and for critics to advocate a new realist aesthetic against what would prove to be considerable odds.

The first significant *Bookman* article to follow the prospectus and call for a modern realism was J.M. Gibbon's "The Coming Canadian Novel," published in July 1919. Gibbon, after praising both English and American literature for veracious "observation of contemporary or recent life," laments the lack of a similar quality in Canadian fiction, revealing that, from the start, there were important *Bookman* critics interested in looking judiciously at the national literature and directing it toward realism: "the novel should realistically reflect contemporary life. . . . There has been no memorable picture in fiction of either Montreal or Toronto, for instance, although Montreal has a population almost as large as Boston, and Toronto is no mean city" (13-14). The premise of Gibbon's article is relatively straightforward, and he states concretely what many of the anticipators of Canadian modern realism had been saying in approximate terms all along. But the shifting of focus to the "contemporary" setting distinguishes this new attitude from that of many earlier writers who believed that while Canadian writing ought to be about Canada, this writing could as easily be romantic as realist. Gibbon also suggests that the new realism will render the contemporary Canadian subject matter in a style of writing that is both creative and documentary: "wherever in the modern world there is activity, there is the creative and imaginative reporter" (14-15). Gibbon even anticipates the proliferation of Canadian social-realist novels of the 1930s and 1940s—including Callaghan's *Such Is My Beloved*, *They Shall Inherit the Earth*, *More Joy in Heaven*, Irene Baird's *Waste Heritage*, and Gwethalyn Graham's *Earth and High Heaven*—when he argues that the new realism ought to reflect a contemporary environment because of its social importance: "the host of English realists from Dickens to the present day are such creative reporters, voicing the problems and the spirit of a century of social turmoil and upheaval" (15). It is important to emphasize that Gibbon is *not* acting as a "booster" of the Canadian fiction that already exists: he advocates a new, modern fiction that he hopes will emerge. His discussion, in fact, laments the absence of a flourishing modern realism in Canadian literature: "the Englishman who looked for a representative picture

of Canadian life in the Canadian novel would be disappointed” (14). Gibbon echoes the revolutionary tone of the *Bookman*'s prospectus, and frames his own article as a manifesto, by closing with a prophetic summons for modern realists to appear on the Canadian literary scene and describe the contemporary Canadian “spirit” as Gorki and Balzac did for Russia and France in their own periods: “Canada is still waiting—but will not have to wait long—for her prophet—or more likely her group of prophets who shall interpret her many-sided, but always vigorous, life to her own people and to the Nations who have accepted her as Come of Age” (15). Gibbon's article, though still cloaked in the rhetoric of romantic nationalism and celebration of the Canadian spirit, takes the important step of redirecting the “boosterish” impulse away from an uncritical celebration of Canadian literature as it is, toward a confident and enthusiastic advocacy of what it might be, should the modern-realist moment come to pass. Interestingly, Gibbon is also looking beyond Canada's borders for modern influences, much as the *Forum* contributors who assailed the *Bookman* were doing at the same period in their discussions of the new Canadian poetry.

While Gibbon defines Canadian modern realism largely in terms of its documentary properties, other 1920s contributors to the *Bookman* would define this aesthetic in more complex and exacting terms. One of the first Canadian critics to argue that the new writing in Canada ought to do more than simply and accurately reflect a Canadian environment or society was Beaumont S. Cornell, writing in “The Essential Training of the Novelist,” which appeared in June 1921. Cornell, himself the author of two novels of the period—*Renaissance* (1922) and a realist novel set in Ontario, *Lantern Marsh* (1923)—vigorously argues that the new writing in Canada must supplement its documentary impulse with philosophical and psychological interpretation. Cornell argues that literature ought “to be an exponent of life's meaning,” and that this requires a movement beyond “the boring, even distressing, facts of actual existence” (46). Cornell concedes that the novel is essentially a realistic form of expression—“[t]he novel is tied up inseparably with actuality. It is the next thing to reality because it is always an estimate of human life”—but adds that higher forms of literature require a “subjective” interpretation of the world to supplement an “objective” rendering of reality:

The noblest intention of fiction, then, is to interpret life; and since this requires much more than a skilful pen, the essential training of the novelist begins when he commences to observe life reflectively. . . . He must appraise, compare, judge, select, emphasize—in short interpret . . . for he is dealing with the great objective

reality. . . . It is not sufficient that he should be a reporter, standing aloof, coldly observing the pageant of existence. . . . (46)

While Cornell's argument that literature ought to strive to be "subjective" appears unnecessary, even foolish, by contemporary critical standards, his suggestion that "objective" writing is already, in 1921, becoming the default style for modern Canadian writing—the *Bookman* had already praised the realism of novels by Robert J.C. Stead, Douglas Durkin, and Arthur Stringer—gives a clear indication of the quick pace of change in Canadian literary circles of the period. More importantly, Cornell is beginning to define the "modern" component of Canadian realism. Contrary to a popular interpretation, Canadian writers of the 1920s were not engaged in the unproblematic transplantation of a nineteenth-century realist aesthetic into a Canadian milieu. While more precise definitions of the modern and interpretive component of realism would be articulated by later critics, Cornell is, however dimly, highlighting a problem with nineteenth-century realism that led to some of the more experimental high-modernist techniques. While neither Cornell's article nor his own novels explicitly advocate or exhibit the subjective techniques of modernist innovation—which include multiple and unreliable narration, stream of consciousness, and a psychological emphasis—his argument problematizes realism in the Canadian context, and demands that it do more than document and reflect. And the discomfort that Cornell expresses with writing that is "engaged simply in 'holding up the mirror to nature'" is loudly echoed in the writings of the important modern realists who would follow and explore this problem much more rigorously and exhaustively.

A more precise definition of the new modern realism and its characteristics would begin to take shape with the publication of Adrian MacDonald's article, "English Realism to a Canadian," in September 1922. MacDonald draws some important contrasts between Canadian realism, and the form and spirit of realism in the European, or essentially English, traditions. MacDonald's musings on the English novel touch upon a number of concepts of relevance to the development of modern realism in Canada. The most crucial of these observations is that, on some level at least, the new modern realism is essentially incompatible with an idealistic nationalism. In reviewing his selection of European high-realist fictions, MacDonald remarks that these novels "recount not the vain successes of men, but their failures," and that "[a]ll this dismal sense of failure is quite foreign to the optimistic spirit of our dominion. We Canadians are born with the

conviction that . . . there are no limits to what we may accomplish” (234). Building upon Gibbon’s assertion that the new modern realism ought to explore primarily the contemporary world, MacDonald suggests that to do just this will mean extending the scope of the Canadian novel beyond those areas of life, contemporary or otherwise, that can be easily idealized, idylized, and celebrated. This would be the realization behind an essential shift in the mindset of Canadian writers as modern realism began to proliferate in the later 1920s and 1930s. One need only compare romantic prairie novels written in the 1910s and early 1920s—Stead’s *The Homesteaders* (1916) or Ethel Chapman’s *God’s Green Country* (1922), for example—to their bleaker, more famous, “prairie-realist” counterparts, published later, to find evidence of a shift in writerly disposition.

MacDonald’s 1922 article would also enumerate some of the characteristics of modern realism, or, as he called it, “the method of the new school” (235). Not surprisingly, a prominent feature of this “method” would be the high-realist’s assertion that a writer ought “to be exact in detail” (235). MacDonald also identifies the fictional representation of a “deep sense of the ineffectiveness of man” (234), again emphasizing the need for fiction to cast off its romantic and idealistic sensibilities in a manner reminiscent of European and American Naturalists—Zola, Ibsen, Strindberg, Hardy, Dreiser, Norris, and Crane. On the subject of style, MacDonald advocates a “simple, idiomatic, carefully wrought English” (234), which is the one feature that perhaps most immediately distinguishes Canadian modern-realist fiction, both from its European high-realist counterparts and from most of the very few pre-1920s fictions written in Canada that gesture toward a realist aesthetic, most notably Duncan Campbell Scott’s *In the Village of Viger* (1896), Ralph Connor’s *The Man From Glengarry* (1901), and Sara Jeannette Duncan’s *The Imperialist* (1904). A related aspect of style advocated by MacDonald, and one that would become an almost ubiquitous feature of modern-realist fiction, is a form of narrative “objectivity,” at least insofar as this concept is synonymous with an author’s attempt to “avoid the appearance of over-conscious artistry” (234) and to support an “appeal to the scientific spirit” (235). MacDonald also defined the new modern realism as having an instructive purpose: “The novel is no longer to be looked upon as the mere amusement of an idle hour, but its covers are to be opened with minds alert for revelations of new truths.” He argues that it ought to be actively involved in “criticizing our existing institutions” (235). Such an impulse underlies the didacticism in many social-realist novels in Canada. The most enigmatic

characteristic identified by MacDonald was “psychological realism,” though this feature would also rise to prominence in the modern-realist novel and would be one of the chief characteristics distinguishing the early modern-realist fictions of Raymond Knister from the more romantic works that preceded them (235). Finally, MacDonald left no doubt that he believed this new realism ought to be pursued by Canadian writers, and he recalls the earlier manifestos published in the *Bookman* with his assertion that “[a]ny Canadian with a taste for letters will soon find himself reacting favourably to the art of these stories . . . his staple food in the way of fiction will henceforth be novels flavoured with the spirit of realism” (235).

Lorne Pierce would champion the emerging realism from the conservative angle in “Canadian Literature and the National Ideal,” which appeared in the *Bookman* in September 1925. Pierce’s celebratory tone in praise of the new trend in Canadian literature is easily detectable, and he reveals that in a few short years modern realism has moved beyond its initial phase: “We have happily left behind the times when Canadian literature was supposed to ape the themes and methods of England, and also those hectic days when the proper attitude towards our new school of native letters was one of sheer rhapsody, as noisy as it was uncritical” (143). Among the features of the new writing that elicit Pierce’s approval, and, in his view, follow naturally from our “National Ideal,” is “Realism,” which among other things is defined as follows: “everything crystal clear, and ‘facts-is-facts’” (144). Pierce’s conservative credentials in both the social and literary realm are evident: he was an influential and long-serving editor of Ryerson Press, a Methodist and later United Church minister, and his landmark anthology, *Our Canadian Literature: Representative Prose and Verse* (1922), co-edited with Albert Durrant Watson, had only recently revealed in its preface an “insistence upon the physical and ethical quality of men and women” (xiv), and offered a view of literature in which “[t]he actual poet is he who presents reality in the beautiful garments of revealing art” (xvii). Displaying his conservative biases in his *Bookman* article, Pierce praises Canadian realism because, despite its proliferation as a literary form, “we have escaped sex, psycho-analysis, and morbid ventures into the dim unknown” (144). And, like many of the other critics who openly advocated a new realism in the pages of the *Bookman*, Pierce would phrase his call for this new literature in the language of the manifesto: “We are at the very beginning of things—not the end. For the rest we need . . . Utter fidelity to the truth . . . A determination to be ourselves” (144). Of course, Pierce’s most conservative comments reveal that he was not

advocating the same kind of realism as were most other critics of the day. But they are testimony that the new realism was being noticed by all segments of the Canadian literary world by the mid-1920s. Certainly, modern realism owes some of its success and proliferation as a form because it appealed both to the more radical, innovative segments of the Canadian literary community, who saw it as a modern form that reflected and commented upon a contemporary society in transition, and to a conservative segment of the literary world, that included Lorne Pierce and much of the membership of the Canadian Authors Association, which, except in the very few cases in which “realist” and “sexually explicit” could be conceived as synonymous, felt that realism was an unthreatening form. The conservatives also were attracted to the new realism because it had the potential to offer morally inoffensive sketches of small, local environments: as Vipond writes, “[f]or them, the real roots of the English-Canadian identity lay in its rural and small town past” (73). Furthermore, with its purported fidelity to facts, truth, and scientific principles, realism could be made to seem an antidote to the amoral, relativistic, experimental high-modernist fiction that was making its presence felt through reviews of foreign works in both the *Bookman* and *The Canadian Forum* in the 1920s.

Most of these and other initial *Bookman* articles discuss modern realism in passionate but relatively general terms. They communicate why a new Canadian fiction is needed and offer an overview of the immediate characteristics of the new realism they advocate. While these articles obviously consider the new realism to be “modern,” not all of them discuss it in a manner that immediately or obviously suggests its affinities with other forms of modernist literature. Of course, exact boundaries between realisms and modernisms are difficult to draw in any literary tradition, and the Canadian tradition provides no exception. “What makes Canadian realism ‘modern’?” is a question that most Canadian critics of the early twentieth century rarely asked and almost never answered directly. Probably, the new modern realism was so unlike the Canadian fiction that preceded it that critics and writers felt no need to question its essential modernity. From a contemporary perspective, however, it appears problematic that Canadians were writing modern realism while dissimilar forms of modernism were being written in other countries. Were Canadians ignorant of modernism? Did they see their modern realism as a national branch or regional application of international modernism? Were such issues of any interest to writers of the period? Certainly, modern realism in Canada is to a degree a hybrid

genre that incorporates techniques commonly associated with both high realism and high modernism, while remaining distinct from both. The literary-historical time line further complicates distinctions—modern realism’s rise to preeminence in Canadian prose fiction in the 1920s occurs at a time when the European and American realist traditions had been all but eclipsed by a new generation of innovative high-modernist authors. And a majority of Canadian critics and writers appears not to have perceived that a shift to modernism, in radical terms, was taking place in any literary tradition, Canadian or foreign.

Other articles printed in the *Bookman* of the 1920s begin to answer these questions by articulating what made the new realism “modern,” and how it was related to the literatures of other nations. The most articulate and incisive, and certainly one of the most prolific, critics of the new modern realism was Lionel Stevenson. Best known for his critical work *Appraisals of Canadian Literature* (1926), Stevenson was a frequent contributor to the *Bookman* in the mid-1920s, and his articles enumerate many of the key characteristics of modern realism. In “The Fatal Gift,” published in the *Bookman* in 1923, Stevenson would echo many of his contemporaries with a call for a more refined and immediate use of language in literature:

The man who undertakes to write to-day has too many words at his command. Impressive words and whole glib phrases are stored profusely in his memory and transfer themselves thence on to paper with scarcely an effort of the intellect . . . If our language is to be vitalized, it must first be condensed. (236)

Here, Stevenson draws an important contrast between the modern-realist novel and both the European novel of the nineteenth century, and the early twentieth-century Canadian novel. The form of writing that Stevenson favours contrasts with the verbose, philosophical, expansive novels of George Eliot, Dickens, Thackeray, or Canada’s Sara Jeannette Duncan. Stevenson argues for a language that exhibits “extreme simplicity. Every word is brief and entirely familiar; not a phrase is distorted or far-fetched” (235). The sort of unencumbered, direct writing that Stevenson advocates here is not unlike the less-experimental strain of modernist prose—perhaps best exemplified by writers such as Ernest Hemingway, Jean Rhys, Robert McAlmon, and Sherwood Anderson—that would have an important impact on so many Canadian writers, including Knister, Callaghan, and to a lesser extent MacLennan.

Stevenson believed this new style, and the realism that it both reflected and facilitated, to be inarguably modern. In “The Outlook for Canadian Fiction,”

which was published in the *Bookman* in July 1924, Stevenson concedes “the most beautiful prose written in Canada” to the romantic novelists writing around the turn of the century (158). The modern writing, or “new impulse,” he celebrates involves a rejection of “beautiful” words in favour of a “harshness that is loosely termed realism” (158). The new, and even revolutionary, direct style Stevenson endorses involves more than a refinement of language; it involves an exacting and realistic treatment of its subject matter: “the tradition is no longer satisfactory. Almost without exception, the note-worthy new novels show a determined effort toward more serious treatment of life” (158). The realist aesthetic, then, is both new and experimental, but Stevenson is hardly celebrating experiment for its own sake. To him, and to so many Canadian writers and critics of the period who expressed similar views less articulately, realism was both new and very familiar, and as such it embodied a complex but workable contradiction. Modern realism represented an unmistakable break from the literary style that preceded it. Yet it did so by offering a representation, not of the new and uncharted high-modernist terrain of the unconscious, or of the obscure and *outré*, or of the spiritual and symbolic, but rather of something that was very well-known, albeit under-represented to Canadian writers: the familiar, actual conditions of Canadian life.

In his enigmatic 1927 article, “Is Canadian Poetry Modern?” Stevenson takes his call for a national literature to a new level, and in the process offers a view of what makes Canadian realism modern that is broadly in line with the working definitions of other critics and writers. Stevenson begins by showing contempt for the most experimental high-modernist writings: speaking of Gertrude Stein’s work, he remarks, “In such cases ‘modernity’ consists in a startling extreme of a current fashion, sweeping into temporary notoriety by ostentatious novelty, making an almost physical assault on the sensibilities of the reader” (195). Modernity, to Stevenson, is not located in the experimental, or technical features of a literary work. Yet modernity is an essential and desirable feature of literature: “modernity is the essential characteristic which distinguishes true and permanent literature from mere word-spinning” (195). Where, then, can the essence of a text’s modernity be located if not in its technical aspects? Stevenson offers his answer in terms that provide the central tenet of a definition of Canadian modern realism: he insists upon drawing a distinction between “genuine modernity and revolutionary innovation” (196). He argues that modern writers are involved with

fully interpreting the actual vital spirit of their times, free of outworn conventions and yet avoiding all self-conscious affectation of revolt; their eyes turned neither

toward the past nor toward the future, but . . . absorbed in the entertaining spectacle of life around them, and their transference of that life into art was immortal because the spark of actual life was in it. . . . there is nothing apologetic or experimental or defiant in the attitude of the true modernists . . . the satisfying effect of utter reality . . . results from the author's complete identification with the immediate subject matter. (196)

Realism, in Stevenson's view, is modern when it is engaged in capturing its contemporary spirit to the fullest degree possible, and this is a revolutionary act: "[d]irect identification with the spirit of any age means necessarily a severance from moribund traditions, even though they are still observed by the majority" (196). Yet literary experiment and technical innovation are neither characteristic nor atypical of the modern; a modern literature is involved in a representation of its contemporary environment by whatever technical means necessary. This view, although rarely articulated by the earliest critics of modern realism, would appear to have been very widely held in Stevenson's day, judging by the number of modern-realist authors that do exactly as Stevenson advocates, and the number of later critics and writers who say more or less the same thing.

Stevenson's observations begin to explain why Canadian realists believed they were creating a modern literature in the 1920s at the same time that high-modernist experiments in the literary magazines seemed, from a contemporary perspective, to be contradicting them. It also begins to explain why so many of the experimental techniques that Canadian writers of the period attempt—Grove's temporal shifts in *The Master of the Mill*, Knister's eclectic handling of multiple points of view in his short stories, the direct "reportage" method of Baird and Callaghan, MacLennan's "kaleidoscopic" technique from his unpublished first novel, and Martha Ostenso's cinematographic realism in *Wild Geese*—do not closely resemble related techniques in high-modernist fictions. The Canadian modern realists are not being self-consciously experimental; they are being modern in the sense that they are attempting to represent their contemporary environment, and for the most ambitious of these writers, this activity leads them to employ new forms that might best be viewed as complementing this realism, rather than dimly reflecting high-modernist methods.

The legacy of the *Canadian Bookman* of the 1920s comprises mainly these and other articles that advocate and define the new modern realism. The *Bookman's* role in our literary history is crucial: it provided a vital forum where writers and critics could articulate the purposes and tenets of their new aesthetic. Without such a forum, it is difficult to imagine how so many literary

figures of the day might have reached (or discovered) a near-consensus about the essential modernity of their realist form. The *Bookman* invites critics to view Canada's early twentieth-century realism, not as a dim reflection of foreign realisms, but rather as a particular national application of an international and cosmopolitan sensibility, as a loosely coherent pan-national movement that is Canada's contribution to the international collection of movements and aesthetics that constitutes literary modernism. In light of the *Bookman's* definition and advocacy of modern realism, critics might reexamine the problematic aesthetics of both canonical and marginal writers of the period: Irene Baird, Bertram Brooker, Morley Callaghan, Ethel Chapman, Philip Child, Douglas Durkin, Wilfrid Eggleston, Hubert Evans, Hugh Garner, Gwethalyn Graham, Frederick Philip Grove, Raymond Knister, Vera Lysenko, Hugh MacLennan, Joyce Marshall, Edward McCourt, Thomas Murtha, Martha Ostenso, Len Peterson, Sinclair Ross, Jessie Georgina Sime, Robert J.C. Stead, A.M. Stephen, Arthur Stringer, and Christine Van Der Mark, among others. Furthermore, the neglect of the *Canadian Bookman* and its advocacy of modern realism has had a significant impact on conceptions of Canadian literature as a whole. If Canada's modern realism did not arise from an aesthetic debate that involved numerous writers and critics, then it becomes possible to view early twentieth-century authors through a popular stereotype, and they become isolated, idiosyncratic, and ignorant of the work of other writers from Canada and beyond. If the realism of Canada's writers is not a deliberate aesthetic choice, it becomes possible to locate its origins in deterministic geographical forces that override individual artistic agency with an inescapable mimetic realism. Without a modern-realist fiction that grows out of a national debate, in a national magazine, with creative advocates from all parts of Canada, realism can seem an inevitable mode for writers engaged in regionalist projects; in the regionalist paradigm, realism is associated with mimesis and rural representation, and ceases to be a cosmopolitan and modern, even experimental, form of writing. The *Canadian Bookman* and its debate about modern realism invite a reexamination of some of the fundamental conceptions of Canada's literary development, and the suppositions at the foundation of many of Canada's enduring critical practices.

NOTES

- 1 B.K. Sandwell was a journalist and McGill University lecturer, and would become one of the founders of the Canadian Authors Association, and a contributor of informal essays on Canadian culture to *Saturday Night*, which he edited from 1932-51.

- 2 An unsigned opening editorial published in *The Canadian Forum* in May 1921 criticized the *Bookman*: “Bad reviewing and cheap advertising of literature are just as injurious to high ideals as bad legislation and they are harder to control” (230). A.J.M. Smith expressed his negative opinion of the *Bookman* poignantly in a 1927 letter to Raymond Knister: “it seems to me that before Canada can have a modern and individual literature our critical standards must be thoroughly overhauled and some counter irritant provided to offset the traditional gentility of journals like *The Canadian Bookman* [sic] . . . which [is] vitiating public taste and distorting literary values” (Burke, “Some Annotated Letters” 122).
- 3 The *Bookman* was not initially affiliated with any organization. After the founding of the CAA in 1921, the *Bookman* served as its official organ from June 1921 to December 1922, after which Sandwell resigned his editorship, and the *Bookman* and the CAA severed official ties. The size and substance of the magazine remained fairly constant from 1923 to the early 1930s, when issues of the magazine became less frequent and substantial. As Mulvihill writes, “By the mid 1930s a typical number might consist of little more than a lead article followed by sundry short book notices and perhaps some ads. . . . In 1937, frequency became irregular and several numbers simply failed to appear” (57). A brief attempt to restore the magazine to its former glory began in 1938 and continued until lack of support meant the cancellation of the journal after the final issue of Oct./Nov. 1939.
- 4 For a discussion of 1920s debates about literary values see Vipond and Harrington.
- 5 E.L. Bobak captures the sense in which realism emerged in the 1920s as a coherent and rebellious movement by suggesting that it met with considerable resistance from a conservative literary culture: “[o]pposition to realism was often extreme” (86). Bobak does not define this movement and considers Canada’s realism fundamentally derivative, and proposes that it was transplanted belatedly from abroad: “Realism, an ideal medium for the objective reporting of social phenomena, had still not made its way into Canadian fiction in the early decades of the twentieth century. . . . Even today in Canada, the nineteenth-century realists are exerting fresh influences” (85-86). T.D. MacLulich has looked more closely than any other critic to date at many of the primary sources on realism that have gone unnoticed. He argues that “[t]here are several reasons why modernism took a long time to make its influence felt on Canadian fiction” (88). MacLulich acknowledges the significant place of the *Canadian Bookman* in 1920s literary culture, but suggests that it “defended the milder forms of realistic fiction” (91). While he does draw an important link between “the movement towards realism” and “the arrival of modernism in Canadian fiction,” he still positions these forces in adversarial roles, and suggests that Canadian “realism” impeded the arrival of foreign “modernism” to Canada: “our first generation of modernist writers did not venture very far into the more experimental regions of modernist technique. . . . modernism came into Canadian fiction in . . . a tentative and unspectacular fashion” (88-89).
- 6 There are about three dozen “core” modern-realist novels—including Knister’s *White Narcissus* (1929), Ostenso’s *Wild Geese* (1925), Grove’s *Fruits of the Earth* (1933), Callaghan’s *They Shall Inherit the Earth* (1935), and MacLennan’s *Two Solitudes* (1945), to name only the most famous works by the most prominent authors. There are several dozen additional novels that, while not wholly “modern-realist,” can be counted as part of the movement. These include multi-generic works that blend modern realism with other modes, including romance (e.g. Stead’s *The Homesteaders* [1916]), satire (e.g. MacBeth’s *The Land of Afternoon* [1924]), and socialist realism (e.g. Allan’s *This Time a Better Earth* [1939]). There are also, among these peripheral modern-realist works, a number of novels that are significant to the movement mainly because they anticipate later modern-realist

works—e.g. Stringer's prairie trilogy (1915-22)—or demonstrate modern-realist writers working in closely related modes—e.g. MacLennan's unpublished modernist novels of the 1930s. I am not suggesting that all of Canada's early twentieth-century realists participated in or were even immediately aware of the debate about modern realism in the *Bookman*. While many writers of the period clearly were, including Knister, Grove, and Callaghan, the debate is perhaps most significant for what it indicates generally about writerly attitudes to realism, and the relation of modernism to realism in Canadian fiction.

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