

The Literature of Atlantic Canada

Marta Dvorak and Coral Ann Howells, guest editors

Atantic Canada has both regional definition and imaginative definition which far exceed its geographical location. It is a place of paradox: the stark beauty of primal rock and sea belies long-established intellectual pursuits and a literary tradition. Nova Scotia holds chronological primacy in the intellectual development of a nation, already producing books and magazines in the mid-eighteenth century when the rest of what is now Canada was largely unsettled by Europeans. Halifax was notably the site of Canada's first newspaper (1751), and as early as 1774 held the first performance of a play by an English Canadian author. (The shadows of history are long and bilingual in Nova Scotia; this theatrical performance was in fact preceded by another over 150 years earlier—Marc Lescarbot's *Le Theatre de Neptune* was produced aboard ship in Port Royal harbour in 1606.) The first Canadian university, the Anglican King's College (1802), preceded the founding of Montreal's McGill, Toronto's King's College, and Kingston's Queen's College. Atlantic writers have generated an extraordinary literary output from the nineteenth century on, with pathbreakers such as Thomas Haliburton and Thomas McCulloch, who blazed the trail for satirists like Mark Twain and Stephen Leacock. The region produced the first distinctive Canadian landscape poets: Archibald Lampman, Duncan Campbell Scott, Charles G.D. Roberts, Bliss Carman, and E.J. Pratt. The remarkable production never flagged throughout the twentieth century, with strong writing by Frank Parker Day, Charles Bruce, Ralph Connor, Thomas Raddall, Hugh MacLennan, Nellie McClung, L.M. Montgomery, Alden Nowlan, and Ernest Buckler.

Revaluations and reassessments often produce the unexpected, or much more than the expected. Looking closely into the literature of Atlantic Canada from the other side of the Atlantic and reading through the critical responses to it from a host of contributors reveal such a richness of social and cultural histories, such a multiplicity of voices speaking from so many different angles and in such a variety of literary modes that what is produced amounts to far more than a mapping of region. It is more like an archaeology of region, which both comprehends and exceeds any definition of regional specificity. For we read the literature of Atlantic Canada (as we read any other literature) for the writing, for the particular imaginative crafting of the raw materials of place, lived experience, social history, and folk memory into language and narrative. Of course, the East Coast is a geographical location marginalized from centres of political and economic power in Canada, yet it is against the dynamics of marginalization that Maritime writers have struggled, in the process creating a multifaceted yet distinctive literature. Significantly, Atlantic writers jostle one another on best-seller lists, and have not only been regularly short-listed for the country's top literary awards, but have also become an undeniable part of the international publishing trade. Atlantic Canada has provided compelling prose, drama, and poetry by writers such as David Adams Richards, Joan Clark, Alistair MacLeod, Wayne Johnston, Bernice Morgan, Helen Porter, Maxine Tynes, George Elliott Clarke, Rita Joe, David Woods, Lynn Coady, and most recently Michael Crummey and Lisa Moore, with their heterogeneous yet distinctive textures and flavours. This writing speaks out of many small communities with their own histories, legends, and traditions, their own fierce local loyalties, their own catalogues of deprivation and disaster, together with their own long memories, dreams, and aspirations.

Ann-Marie MacDonald, though she was born "away" (on a Canadian air force base in West Germany), has always, through her Scottish-Lebanese family affiliations, regarded Cape Breton Island as her spiritual home. At the beginning of *Fall on Your Knees*, she offers readers a glimpse of the layered history written onto one small part of the East Coast landscape. She opens her Cape Breton family saga with a marriage back in the 1880s between a young woman from Wreck Cove and a young man from Port Hood:

He promised her father he wouldn't take her far from home. He married her and took her to Egypt and that's where James was born. Egypt was a lonely place way on the other side of the island, in Inverness County.

To see those Old World place names so exotically relocated in New World space induces a geographical dizziness in readers, confronted as we are with the traces of a colonial settlement history. Haunted by ghostly presences, realistic landscape description begins to falter under the subversive influences of a more fantastic gothic topography. We find a similar example of realism teetering on the edge of fantasy and the surreal in George Elliott Clarke's poem "Halifax" (page 84), an ambiguous celebration of the sights and smells of the city which is not likely to make it into any tourist brochure:

Halifax is where *History* looms from garbage
Like a giant cannibal, quaffing piss and lye,

And the Public Gardens are Augean stables,
And statues are politicians all kneeling.

Such evocations of worlds elsewhere give the literature of Atlantic Canada an expansiveness which far exceeds its temporal and geographical location.

The fiction, poetry, and drama featured in this issue has all been written over the past 80 years, representing only a fraction of the strong literary tradition that has existed in Atlantic Canada since the middle of the eighteenth century. Though the francophone minority component of Acadian culture is featured in a commentary on France Daigle, the emphasis here is almost exclusively on writing in English. Valuable supplement may be found in this journal's recent issue on Francophone Writing Outside Quebec (187, Winter 2005).

Frank Parker Day's novel *Rockbound*, winner of the CBC's Canada Reads contest in 2005, has enjoyed a resurrection nearly 80 years after its publication in 1928. The literature of Atlantic Canada has featured prominently since this popular competition began in 2001: in the first year George Elliott Clarke's *Whylah Falls* was the runner-up to Michael Ondaatje's *In the Skin of a Lion*, and Wayne Johnston's *The Colony of Unrequited Dreams* was the winner in 2003. (See Laura Moss' Editorial in *Canadian Literature* 182). In "Revisiting *Rockbound*: The Evolution of a Novel," Gwendolyn Davies traces the novel's development from its genesis in an unpublished short story through its five manuscript versions to its New York publication, an event which drew down on Day the wrath of the inhabitants of Nova Scotia's South Shore. They felt he had betrayed them by exhibiting them as a kind of freak show, converting their ex-centricity into eccentricity for outsiders'

entertainment. Ironically, if it was Day's meticulous realism which so offended the locals, that same quality has made his novel "the most perfect regional expression of antimodernist naturalism and essentialism" for readers ever since. However, as Davies shows, Day's fictional discourse was rather more conflicted than the term "antimodernist" suggests, for Day wrote with the double vision of an insider who had moved away—studying in Oxford and Berlin, and becoming President of Union College in Schenectady, New York. Indeed, from this distance it is possible to see in the novel many of the characteristics associated with a high modernist text like Joyce's *Ulysses*, for Day never lets his readers forget the epic quality of his young hero's struggle with Destiny as realism resonates against biblical and classical myths. By his constant allusions to Chaucer and Shakespeare's *Tempest*, Day firmly situates his narrative of the harsh life of a Maritime fishing community within the English literary tradition while he ends with a Lawrentian visionary moment where realistic description of rocky Barren Island dissolves into the contours of a medieval painting.

George Elliott Clarke's essay on Anna Minerva Henderson rescues a pioneer African Canadian modernist poet from near oblivion. His method of "reading *blackly*," which combines biography, history, and close attention to writing, unveils Henderson's African Canadian identity under her (almost) "raceless and genderless" poetic discourse. A Black woman from New Brunswick, who worked as a civil servant in Ottawa during the period covering the two World Wars before publishing her chapbook *The Citadel* in Canada's Centennial Year, Henderson adopted a persona which subsumed race under a colour-blind British and regional identity. However, as Clarke argues, such tactics of disguise were common to women writers of the Harlem Renaissance (and also to modernist women writers in general; as Virginia Woolf remarked, "Anon was usually a woman.") Race and gender are elided in Henderson's poems scattered through little magazines in the 1930s, and even those collected in *The Citadel* situate themselves within an English literary tradition from Shakespeare to the Modernists. It takes an ear attuned to a different idiom to identify the Black subtext in her poetry; Clarke's essay enacts a fascinating process of unearthing an embedded black consciousness.

Clarke's own memorializing of his Afro-Canadian heritage is the subject of Katherine Larson's essay on *Beatrice Chancy*. She offers a new perspective

on historiographic metafiction (or, in this case, metadrama) with her formal analysis of Clarke's use of the "paratext" in his historical verse drama probing slavery in early nineteenth century Nova Scotia. For Larson, "paratext" becomes the key to exploring the role of the author and the function of Clarke's multiple intertexts. Her critical account is responsive to his dialogues with Nova Scotian slave history and more widely with histories of oppression and resistance, from his sixteenth century Italian tragic heroine Beatrice Cenci to violence in the present day. By placing a strong emphasis on the resonance of Clarke's poetic language, Larson demonstrates the uniqueness of Clarke's political commitment in giving voice to the "resistance of people at the margins."

Claire Omhovère's "Roots and Routes in a Selection of Stories by Alistair MacLeod" looks at other histories embedded in the Maritime landscape, exploring MacLeod's distinctive rhetoric of place as he reconfigures the tropes of home and exile. MacLeod's Cape Breton fishing and mining communities were established in the eighteenth century by Scottish settlers fleeing after the Highland Clearances, and his stories are filled with the echoes of Gaelic traditions and legends transmitted through speech, storytelling and fragments of song: the refrain of "Home" blurs the boundaries between the Island and the Highlands. Like *Rockbound*, these stories are grounded in an unmistakably regional context, though their rhetorical strategies exert a contradictory pressure against sentimental regionalism toward wider geographical and imaginary spaces. Cape Breton is never depicted by MacLeod as an isolated secluded haven; on the contrary, as Omhovère shows, its position on the edge of the Atlantic confirms it as an exposed site of arrivals and exchanges, a place of cultural interaction between different ethnic communities with competing but complementary claims to the land.

Alexander MacLeod's essay on *The Colony of Unrequited Dreams* examines the history and geography of Newfoundland refigured in historiographic metafiction, though once again there are tensions—this time between the realism of much regional writing and a postmodern skepticism toward the grand narratives of history. As MacLeod argues, Johnston's novel is both regional and postmodern, for although the history of Joey Smallwood's career may be reinvented and fictionalized, the geographical realities of Newfoundland's climate and landscape remain implacable forces that shape

the psyches of the protagonists and the collective history of the province. Harking back to *Rockbound*, the environment once again represents the force of destiny against which the hero's quest must be measured. MacLeod's essay is an example of the new regionalist criticism with its recognition of the complexities of writing region within the spaces of fiction; he shows how Johnston embeds a very traditional concept of geographical determinism within a postmodern historical novel.

Herb Wyile situates his analysis of Lynn Coady's *Strange Heaven* within the critical debate around concepts of literary regionalism, a debate in which he has been an authoritative voice since the early 1990s. His emphasis here is on Coady's engagement with the cultural politics of region and gender as she reconfigures the traditional tropes of Maritime fiction by exposing the uncomfortable realities of life for a girl growing up in a small town in Cape Breton. This is a regional novel that parodies conventional assumptions about the regional literature of Atlantic Canada, and Wyile adapts Danielle Fuller's critical term "strategic regionalism" to analyze the fictional strategies through which Coady challenges sentimentalized constructions of the "Home Place" as a refuge from the threats of urbanization and modernity. Not only does she adopt an insider's ironic perspective on the idea of an authentic folk culture, but she also parodies outsiders' misconceptions about these socially marginalized communities. Coady's rebuttal of the curious gaze of the tourist or the visitor from Ontario or the US is not quite so gothically staged as Mort Ransen's Cape Breton film *Margaret's Museum* (1995), but her dark comedy just as successfully deconstructs the regional idyll of popular imagination. We hear a similar challenge to sentimentalism, this time from a novelist's point of view, in the conversation between Joan Clark and Danielle Fuller, which took place just before *An Audience of Chairs* was published. With her powerful mix of realism, fantasy, myth, and zany humour, Clark shows her Maritime affiliations, though it is her wry comment on the recent shift from obscurity to celebrity enjoyed by Atlantic Canadian writing which unmistakably marks her as an insider. "We were largely overlooked . . . for so long that we had nowhere to go except up."

Best known for his brilliant first novel *The Mountain and the Valley*, Ernest Buckler also wrote dozens of stories, short fictions, and prose poems that began appearing in Canadian and American magazines in the 1940s. Set in

the farming communities of the Annapolis Valley, these pieces, by a writer farmer who grew up in a bookless society but went on to earn a graduate degree in philosophy, often blur the borders between high art and popular culture. Often celebratory and sensuously romantic, Buckler's modernist writings engage in age-old concerns such as childhood, social bonding, and commitment, or the collision of values. "The Line Fence" printed here in its original version for the first time, partakes in the Nova Scotian oral storytelling tradition of the Tall Tale, which was first developed by Thomas Chandler Haliburton. Understated, filled with brilliantly idiomatic dialogue, and apparently as unhurried as its protagonists, it shares the irony and humour which characterize that genre, but it also transcends the genre through its serious ethical and social comment on community relations deftly woven into the story structure.

In her commentary on Acadian novelist France Daigle, Cécilia Francis explores a subtly different approach to the cultural politics of region and the challenge of marginality, for here the margin becomes the space for imaginative regeneration. In her two recent novels, Daigle is writing about Moncton, New Brunswick, though these are postmodern urban novels where social realism is filtered through the prism of art and dream, creating a fictive reality, a kind of imaginative blueprint for a revitalized Acadian cultural community, a collective enterprise confidently affirming its difference.

Regions are simultaneously distinctive and "traditionally; subordinate" as Herb Wyile and Jeannette Lynes have suggested. This sampler of writing from Atlantic Canada demonstrates that the ex-centric position can be transformed from a weakness into strength as these artists continue to "ride a rolling wave."

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This is the first issue of Canadian Literature to have been edited by European-based scholars, and hence should be seen as celebration and acknowledgement of the growing internationalization of Canadian literary studies. I am grateful to Marta Dvorak and Coral Ann Howells both for the imaginative devotion which they brought to developing and producing this issue, and for their own extensive contributions to Canadian studies. LR

