

“Or Shall a More Enlarged View Prevail?”

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In 1839, Thomas Chandler Haliburton wrote seven letters to the *Times*, all in response to Lord Durham’s *Report*. The letters were, as historian A. G. Bailey puts it, “written at white heat,” and indeed the author’s anger leaps off the page even now. Among the suggestions that Haliburton found particularly preposterous was the proposal that a “Central Legislature” modeled on the American Congress should be instituted, with the purpose of “deliberat[ing] upon all external matters; also to regulate the army and navy, the post-office, the coinage, the judiciary, the commerce with foreign nations, and the wild lands.” In typically salty language, Haliburton pooh-poohs each of these portfolios in turn, but he is particularly sarcastic about the difficulties he anticipates in arranging the meetings of such a “Central Legislature”:

Are the French Canadians, the Papineaus, and the Vigers, to put on their snow-shoes, and travel through several hundred miles of trackless forest to Halifax? Or are the “able, intelligent, and respectable projectors” of Nova Scotia to concede the post of honour to Quebec, to harness up their moose and reindeer, and speed over the untrodden snow to the capital? It is true there are no hotels on the road; but there would be not a few *ins* in the lakes; and such would be the harmony of these travelling legislators, that the *outs* would not quarrel for their places.

Finally, he has some vitriolic things to say about the putative meeting-place, that is, the capital: “shall it be the small island in the Tamawaska

Lake, in the heart of the forest, between the lower and upper provinces, or shall a more enlarged view prevail? Shall we regard the convenience of succeeding generations, and place it in the desert, midway between the Pacific and Atlantic?" The problem envisaged by Haliburton has, of course, since been solved by the establishment of Ottawa, although he accurately predicted some of the wrangling that preceded it.

Haliburton's vivid translation of political dogma into concrete terms has, however, more extended echoes. Every period of nationalist fervour in Canadian history appears to have come with elaborate journeys deliberately organized to follow the tracks of those who first explored the length and breadth of the country, both to pay homage to their accomplishments, and to illustrate how much more effective communication has become in the meantime—the difficulties of the territory being such that, in the resulting publications, arduous expedition and the relative comforts of tourism often exist side by side. The titles alone occasionally read like small epics.

Viscount Milton's *The Northwest Passage by Land: Being the Narrative of an Expedition from the Atlantic to the Pacific, undertaken with the View of Exploring a Route across the Continent to British Columbia through British Territory, by one of the Northern Passes* (1865), for example, coincided with Confederation, while the building of the railway produced George Munro Grant's *Ocean to Ocean: Sandford Fleming's Expedition through Canada in 1872* (1873), followed a decade later by Fleming's *England and Canada: A Summer Tour between Old and New Westminster* (1884).

In 1967: *The Last Good Year* (1997), Pierre Berton describes several such journeys undertaken as patriotic mnemonics on the occasion of the Centennial. In addition to "a 3,283-mile trek by paddle and portage" following "the historic voyageur route from the headwaters of the North Saskatchewan to Montreal," projects included a re-enactment of Laura Secord's walk from Queenston to Beaver Dams, a hike by the citizens of Galt to Guelph to celebrate its founder's birthday, a duplication of the march of William Lyon Mackenzie's rebels from Lloydtown to Toronto, and another of the "Loyalist trek from Edmundston, New Brunswick, to Notre-Dame-du-Portage on the St. Lawrence," as well as "a one-thousand-mile, forty-five-day canoe trip [by fourteen Nova Scotia Micmacs] from Cape Breton to Montreal to relive an 1894 treaty signing between their people and the Quebec Iroquois." The latter was pointedly undertaken in a spirit that challenged the definition of historical chronology and of "nationhood" advanced by the organizers of the Centennial.

Not all of these journeys have written records to go with them, other than the ones provided by newspaper reports, but there were also efforts to lend literary cachet to such undertakings by employing well-known writers to write about their travels in different parts of Canada. Macmillan of Canada launched a series entitled "The Traveller's Canada," with Robert Kroetsch's *Alberta* and Edward McCourt's *Saskatchewan* as inaugural volumes, followed by Harold Horwood on Newfoundland, Michael Collie on New Brunswick, Scott Young on Manitoba, Paul St. Pierre on British Columbia, and Edward McCourt on the Northwest Territories and the Yukon. (So far, I have been unable to locate volumes on Ontario and Quebec, omissions that fuel the suspicion that "The Traveller's Canada" was preoccupied with the "outlying regions," that is, everyone except Ontario and Quebec.) Judging from Eli Mandel's review of the first two volumes in the *University of Toronto Quarterly*, these books were received with muted enthusiasm because, as he probably rightly suspected, a series organized by province was less conceived as travel-writing than as federalist propaganda. "Our provinces are political, not geographical entities," Mandel concludes, and the diffuse mixture of historical, sociological, topographical, and ecological detail presented in the volumes did not convince him otherwise. Kroetsch's *Alberta* was reissued by NeWest Press in 1993, with a new chapter ("Alberta, Twenty-Five Years after *Alberta*"), an afterword by Rudy Wiebe, and a photo essay by Harry Savage, but in general the series appears to have dropped out of sight fairly soon. However, the volumes still deserve some attention because they shed an interesting light on the intersections of the factual and the fictional in authors like Kroetsch and McCourt, on the impressive knowledge of local culture these two bring to their task, and finally on the ways in which, at their best, the narratives superimpose imaginative versions of the provinces on the political ones.

While the Centennial "travels" described in Berton's book derived authority from their historical antecedents, "The Traveller's Canada" uses literary models for the same purpose. Particularly extensive are the ones evoked by Edward McCourt, who seems to have started a small industry of travel-writing, producing not only the two volumes mentioned above, but also the description of a trip across Canada trying out the newly completed Trans-Canada Highway, in *The Road Across Canada* (1965), once again published by Macmillan. To illustrate the comfort in which he and his wife were able to travel from Newfoundland to Vancouver thanks to the new road, McCourt begins by naming his adventurous predecessors, Thomas Wilby

(“an excellent Englishman”) who published *A Motor Tour Through Canada* in 1912, Percy Gomery from Vancouver who produced *A Motor Scamper* ‘*Cross Canada* eight years later, and finally the photographer Ed Flickenger who completed the run in a well-publicized forty-day journey from Halifax to Vancouver in 1925 under the sponsorship of an automobile firm. From the beginning, McCourt calls upon classic travel-writers and classic authors in general to legitimize his undertaking, and the sheer number of such allusions makes one suspicious that he thought of the whole thing as a trifle crude and in need of literary enhancement. In Newfoundland, he cites Boswell and Johnson; in Nova Scotia, he is reminded of something that Charles Dudley Warner, “Mark Twain’s collaborator in *The Gilded Age*,” had to say about Baddeck; at Green Gables, he thinks of the Brontës’ Haworth as the “only . . . other shrine so crowded with devotees”; John Buchan briefly appears when the story of “Greenmantle, the Kakabeka maiden” is rehearsed near Fort William; Boswell and Johnson appear yet again when the drive through Manitoba reminds the McCourts of an earlier tour through the Scottish Highlands; Edgar Allan Poe, Rudyard Kipling, and Rupert Brooke make an appearance in the other two prairie provinces. Vancouver, finally, seems to defy literary comparison because it strikes the author as “in some respects a monstrous creation,” and one that he appears in great haste to leave behind. On English Bay, where “the worlds of modern sheltered urban man and axe-wielding pioneer reach across a century and touch one another,” Mc Court observes with an almost perceptible shudder how “[e]lderly ladies and gentlemen impeccably dressed in costumes vaguely reminiscent of Edwardian days stroll along the promenade morning and afternoon,” and “invalids and the very old from rest-homes near by sit in wheel-chairs and stare with dim eyes at the ships in the bay.”

McCourt does also mention Canadian authors and artists along the way (E.J. Pratt, Fred Cogswell, Hugh MacLennan, the Group of Seven), but they rarely fulfill the ritualistic function of the British and American authors he cites. Indeed, in the one location where the work of a Canadian author appears to have single-handedly created the mnemonic of a place, he permits himself an extravagant outburst against Lucy Maud Montgomery:

Let us not begrudge Lucy Maud Montgomery the uncritical adulation of thousands of youngsters and grown-ups. She was sentimental, she violated all the rules of plausibility, her knowledge of human nature was superficial, she had no philosophy, and, naively believing that God’s in His heaven all’s right with the world, no tragic view of life. But she possessed the power—beside which more sophisticated literary talents are as inconsequential vapours—to breathe life into

the people of her imaginings; and in *Anne of Green Gables* she created a character who has become a part of North American folklore.

However, his own efforts to seek a more sophisticated route to the *genius loci* of Saskatchewan met with a critical response that, ironically, duplicates his fastidious recoiling from the popular and the naive. In his review of McCourt's *Saskatchewan*, Eli Mandel is seriously irritated by McCourt's determination to mythologize his province as a latter-day Samarkand and Troy, but as a native of Estevan and therefore a connoisseur of "the *real* Saskatchewan," he is particularly annoyed by McCourt's determination to make the place into a lush pastoral: "A man might do worse,' McCourt remarks, 'than retire to Maple Creek and grow hollyhocks.' He might, but I can't imagine what it would be."

Mandel's wit makes, I think, an apt conclusion for reflections that began with an account of Haliburton's testy response to the presumptions of his own age. Much remains to be done in the research of Canadian travel-writing in general, and in "national" cross-country travel in particular, which did not always fulfill the kind of mandate its sponsors had in mind and required adjustments in title, selection of material, and explanatory prefaces and post-scripts to make it "work." Solange Chaput-Rolland's *Mon Pays, le Québec ou le Canada?* (1966) deserves a close look in this regard, as does Eugène Cloutier's *Le Canada sans passeport: regard libre sur un pays en quête de sa réalité* (1967)—but that's enough material for another editorial.

