

# Canadian Literature?

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**E**edited by Norah Storey, the original *Oxford Companion to Canadian History and Literature* (published in 1967 and followed by a *Supplement* in 1973) can be seen as arising from the surge of nationalism generated by the Centennial. Any review of the latest edition of the *Companion*, the 1997 *Oxford Companion to Canadian Literature*, edited by Eugene Benson and William Toye, must take these origins into account and consider how the vision of Canadian culture proposed in the sixties has fared in the intervening thirty years. Despite the careful and frequently drawn-out processes that generally preceded the implementation of the numerous national symbols produced during the Centennial decade, all participated in the typically paradoxical nature of the symbol as both “an authoritative summary of faith or doctrine” and “an arbitrary or conventional sign” (*Merriam Webster’s Collegiate* 10th ed., emphases mine), and the *Companion* was (and is) no exception. Before commenting on the book, it may be useful to leaf through the contemporary issues of an influential and progressive magazine like the *Canadian Forum* to obtain a cursory sense of the cultural climate that produced the 1967 *Companion*. The exercise also helps to assess the capaciousness (or, more frequently, lack thereof) of the symbols we have inherited from those heady days.

Storey’s *Companion* was part of the archive-building that typically accompanies the institutionalization of nationalism. Encyclopedias, histories, and publication series were such inventories, as well as collections of archival documents and artifacts, not to mention the museums and libraries built to

house them. Mapping Canada was both a metaphorical and a real process. The *Forum* announced in 1964 that “[f]or the first time, Canada [had] been mapped on a scale of four miles to the inch,” thus producing more detailed mapping of the remote areas, “especially in the north” (itself an important national symbol), than had ever been available before. The magazine reported on the building of the \$12, 000, 000 National Library and Archives, and reviewed Carl Klinck’s *Literary History of Canada*, an undertaking as monumental in its own way as the *Companion*. The *Forum* ran advertisements by the Library of the University of British Columbia, inviting private collections to submit Canadiana (“exceptional collections only”) and by the Centennial Commission Publications Programme, “announc[ing] a programme of grants to authors and associations to encourage the production of publications on the occasion of the Centennial of Confederation.”

Aggressively bilingual, these projects presented themselves as inclusive, but it was clear from the start that some groups of Canadians were considered more equal than others. The *Forum* reported on the activities of Native people with some frequency, but it did so with, at best, dispassionate interest and, at worst, ill-disguised condescension. Contemporary university programmes are a good example of these attitudes. As their contribution to nation-building, universities across the country advertised curricula that reflect the boundary-crossing interdisciplinarity and democratic teaching methods idealized in the sixties. Proposed graduate seminars for 1969-70 at Sir George Williams University in Montreal (“the liveliest most subversive university on the continent” according to *Time*, Canadian ed.) included “Roots of European Revolutions,” “Comparative European Revolutions,” “The Chinese Revolution,” “The African in the Americas,” but only one seminar on Canada (“Metropolitanism in Nineteenth Century Canada”) and none on Aboriginal people. While Sir George Williams boasted programmes “keyed to individual needs with a minimum of bureaucratic specifications,” the University of Saskatchewan (Regina Campus) advertised its unique resources in 1967 by praising its location at the centre of “a natural laboratory for social research,” with access to “the hunting and fishing economy of Northern Indians and Métis [as well as] the urban centres of the South.” University officials clearly assumed that the inhabitants of these economies would be willing and welcoming research subjects, an attitude not too far removed from the one expressed in a brief notice eight years earlier that “[f]or the first time in Saskatchewan’s history, two treaty Indians

[had] been appointed as assistant Indian agents on Saskatchewan reserves.” The *Forum* assured readers that “[b]oth appointees [were] well-educated [and] expert agriculturists.”

Instances when Native people were running out of patience with their role as objectified bystanders in the national process caused barely a ruffle in the pages of the *Forum*. In 1961, one reads with some shock that the “Indians of the Oka Reserve . . . [were] appealing to the Joint Committee on Indian Affairs against the municipality of Oka, which assumed title through a private bill in the Quebec Legislature to the Indians’ common lands, and [planned] to make them into a golf course.” Native people “asked for the abolition of the Department of Indian Affairs, and the establishment of a commission of which some members should be Indian to judge Indian problems.” The famous blockade, approximately three decades later, provides eloquent commentary on just how readily these demands were met.

Related to the “canon” of university courses is that of books and authors. An investigation of the influence of book-reviewing on the establishment of a national literary canon would fill many pages, and some important critical work in that area has already been accomplished. I will briefly focus on two areas here where, once again, the *Forum* supplies excellent evidence. It was not until the publication of *The Cultural Contribution of the Other Ethnic Groups* (in volume four of the B&B Commission’s Report) that the writing of ethnic groups other than the English and the French received any major critical attention. References to authors of Asian origin were particularly scarce, and it is with a jolt of recognition that, in 1961, one happens on a notice about Wayson Choy, author of *The Jade Peony*. The piece reflects the systemic discrimination to which authors of his origin continued to be subjected (even if, in this case, it was possible to shift the blame to the United States) and it bears quoting in full:

Wayson Choy of Vancouver, who was born in Canada of Canadian parents, and whose short story “The Sound of Waves” won the Macmillan Prize, has been offered a permanent job with a U.S. publishing firm, but is unable to take it because the U.S. Immigration law sets a quota of 100 visas a year for aliens whose ancestry is attributable to peoples of the Asian-Pacific triangle. This quota is now filled for several years. Canadians of European origin with U.S. jobs awaiting them generally experience no difficulty in emigrating to the U.S.A.

It is revealing that, apart from mentioning the Macmillan Prize, the passage says nothing about Choy’s accomplishments as an author, that is to say,

he finds himself almost completely objectified as an “ethnic” writer who serves as an exemplar with which to explain certain immigration conundrums. As a result, Choy is rendered doubly invisible: first as a Canadian of Asian origin, second as a writer.

The liberal-minded *Forum* can barely suppress a snicker in its coverage of the trial over *Lady Chatterley’s Lover* (1959-1962) on charges of obscenity. Thus, the magazine has a great deal of fun reporting from Fort William in 1959 where, at the request of the mayor and the chief-of-police, “more than 700 copies [were burnt] in the incinerator of the city dump.” The mayor, it appeared, had “not yet had time to read her own copy of the novel.” But the *Forum* apparently perceived no irony in printing a review, by “H.T.K.”, of Adrienne Clarkson’s *A Lover More Condoling* (1968), in which men and women not adhering to specific normative behaviours were relegated to an invisibility as pronounced as that reserved for a writer of Wayson Choy’s background: “We cannot get much involved in the milieu of Mrs. Rainer, the attractive Canadian widow on a sojourn in France, partly because a world of women with scarcely the shadow of a child and with only one real man among their numerous fairy good friends, is unreal.” (In all fairness, it should also be reported that, in 1964, “H.T.K.” commended Margaret Laurence for “not skirt[ing] daintily around anything, including Hagar’s relations with her virile husband, described for a change from the woman’s point of view. This may be a first occasion for this sort of episode in a Canadian novel.”) One only needs to complement Kirkwood’s review of Clarkson’s book with Kildare Dobbs’ 1960 article, “Shocking Charges,” in which he reports with some scandal on a gay party, to get a sense of the true parameters of liberalism as practised by the *Forum*.

The editors of the most recent *Oxford Companion to Canadian Literature* (an update of the 1983 version, also edited by William Toye) faced the daunting task of producing a reference work which absorbed the extensive cultural and societal changes that Canada had undergone since the last edition and that, as we have seen, were incipient even during the period reflected in the first *Companion*. In a work which extensively relies on updating existing entries, the ghosts of the societal model informing the older book remain strongly present. The main entries on drama, fiction, poetry, criticism and on various sub-categories like essays, folklore, fantastic literature and science fiction, children’s literature, humour and satire all have substantial entries on material in both English and French, whereas others such

as exploration literature, travel literature, and nature writing have the addendum “in English,” presumably implying that it ought to have been followed by an entry on its French counterpart had one been available. The book continues to agonize over the definition of who qualifies as a Canadian writer, supplying lengthy entries on foreign writers on Canada in English and French. There is also much rumination, under the “novel” heading, about what qualifies as *Canadian* writing, given the preponderance of non-Canadian settings in recent publications.

In its efforts to account for the extraordinary diversity of Canadian cultural life that cannot be satisfactorily subsumed under the bicultural model, the very important entry on the novel duplicates, some changes notwithstanding, the extraordinarily complicated and confusing outline of the original. In addition to chronological subheadings, there are supplementary entries on “Other talents, other works: 1960-1982” and “Other novels: 1983-1996.” Each one of these is, in its turn, subdivided into a dizzying array of yet another set of headings, the former featuring 1. Experimental Fiction, 2. Fiction about and by minorities, 3. Satire, 4. the Novel of Childhood, 5. Women and Fiction, 6. Regional Fiction (with three subheadings), 7. Popular Fiction, while the latter relies on subjects like the End of Experimentalism, Eros and Illness, the New Generation and the Media, and Sensation.

Drifting in and out of these only superficially comprehensive headings are conflicting notions of what constitutes mainstream society and what does not, as well as the dawning realization that what was once labelled “minority writing” is now at the top of the heap. Books by Michael Ondaatje, Rohinton Mistry, and M.G. Vassanji show up under “Novels in English, 1983-1996,” accompanied by an assessment in which the words “Canada” and “Canadian” are repeated like a mantra as if to ward off doubts that this is really the category where they belong: “. . . the tendency for novelists born outside Canada—such as Selvadurai, Rohinton MISTRY, and M.G. VASSANJI—to write Canadian novels (which win Canadian prizes) but yet *not* write about Canada, has encouraged us to rethink our understanding of what it means to call something a Canadian text, to interrogate our assumptions about Canadian national identity and its relation to Canadian culture.”

Wayson Choy who, together with Sky Lee and Hiromi Goto, features in “Novels 1983-1996,” makes a re-appearance as a gay writer under “Other novels: 1983-1996.” Neither Goto nor Choy has a separate entry; Sky Lee has a brief one. Ondaatje also shows up again under “Other novels: 1983-1996,”

where he is criticized for abandoning the experimentalism of his earlier works for the commercialism of *The English Patient*. His newly-acquired mainstream status serves him well in the *Companion*, however: in addition to the discussions already mentioned, there are substantial separate entries under Ondaatje's name and the title of *The English Patient*, not to mention Ondaatje's inclusion in the essay on poetry. The most conspicuous absence, considering the extraordinary quality and success of Asian-Canadian writing in recent years, is that of a comprehensive separate entry on the subject. The piece on "South-Asian Canadian literature" is useful but much too limited in scope to do justice to the subject. (The imbalance becomes particularly clear if this entry is compared to the five double-columns on Ukrainian-Canadian literature, one of the very few pieces in the *Companion* to treat a particular type of ethnic writing with some seriousness).

Another example of how the *Companion* struggles with earlier cultural models may be seen in its treatment of Sinclair Ross and his novel *As For Me and My House*, one of the most canonized works in Canadian literature. The entry under the title of the book rehearses the major traditional approaches that have been applied to the book, ranging from social realism to narrativity. The piece on Sinclair Ross (by the same author) refers to the recurrent theme of "psychological strain, especially between husbands and wives" in Ross's oeuvre and alludes to "the provisionality of all truths" in *As For Me and My House*, but fails to incorporate any discussion that might result from a work mentioned in the bibliography, Keath Fraser's 1997 *As For Me and My Body* which "argues for a reconsideration of Ross's work in the light of his homosexuality and personal sexual history." In the entry on "Novels in English 1940 to 1960," *As For Me and My House* also remains firmly entrenched in the tradition of prairie realism while finding itself unfavourably compared to W.O. Mitchell's works for failing to communicate "the ethnic variety of [its] prairie town." One has to go to the entry on "gay literature" for an alternative view on the book. Aware of the mainstream status of Ross's novel, Robert K. Martin applies some caution in reading the book against the traditional grain ("It may seem odd to classify [it] as gay fiction"), but his assured references to international literary models in support of his conclusions here and elsewhere in the essay make Martin's article one of the most persuasive and sophisticated in the *Companion*.

If the presentation of ethnic and gay writing remains riddled with contradictions and loose ends, there is little such hesitancy in the massive coverage

of Native writing (both subject and author headings) throughout the *Companion*. It is true that *The Ecstasy of Rita Joe* receives a separate heading whereas a book as complex as *Green Grass, Running Water* does not, and that Beatrice Culleton is unaccountably not given a separate entry, but in general it becomes overwhelmingly apparent that Native writing has become mainstream academic business. Much of it is steered by Native writers, critics, and publishers, as the *Companion* makes amply clear, but the effect remains ambivalent. Comparing the entries, virtually all by the same (non-Native) author, in the *Companion* with a specialized reference work like the *Encyclopedia of North American Indians*, edited by Frederick E. Hoxie, many of whose contributors were “tribal elders, scholars, and activists” of Aboriginal origin, one wonders if the framework of the *Companion* does not also make for cultural appropriation on a not inconsiderable scale. Thus, the entry on Aboriginal legends and tales explains the incompatibility of European and Aboriginal concepts of time, place, and identity, but itself favours (as an encyclopedic project presumably must) the very methodological framework it also criticizes. The treatment of Native writing in the *Companion* in fact deserves separate commentary which we hope to provide in a future issue of *Canadian Literature*.

The new *Oxford Companion to Canadian Literature* offers enough food for thought to fill several doctoral dissertations. It is an important document precisely because, in its omissions, redundancies, and contradictions, it goes about the exercise of defining Canadian literature with a sense of tentativeness which, if the oxymoron may be forgiven, is positively postmodern.

