

## Remembering 1993

I forgot *Amnesia*.

This time last year, writing about 1992 publications, I omitted mentioning Douglas Cooper's fascinating novel *Amnesia*, perhaps because (like the French-language works of Nancy Huston, recognized in 1993 with the Governor-General's Award) it was published first outside Canada. This possibility does not so much raise serious questions about the relevance of national boundaries to criticism as it comments on the difficulty (even in an age of "free" trade and mass communications) of keeping up with interesting publications wherever they appear. The bias of information networks always intervenes.

Lately, there's been a kind of bureaucratic barrier also set up which promises to do an even more active disservice to Canadian readers. The *Globe and Mail* reported in February 1994 on the power over books that the Mulroney government of the 1980s (casually? or was it with deliberate intent?) granted to customs officers; a six-week training course in Rigaud, Quebec, including one afternoon on obscenity-recognition, constitutes (says the *Globe*) all the qualifications that that government thought necessary for the job of literary classification. Now, *in practice*, all kinds of books—textbooks, classics, children's books—are being barred at the border, often on the basis of a "keyword" in their title, but always in the name of decency. But there's another obstructive practice going on, too. By current regulations, if a foreign publisher sends a "gratis" review book to a Canadian journal at a Canadian university—even a book by a

Canadian author, and sent “on spec”—the journal must pay a fee to a customs broker (the minimum cost I’ve been quoted is \$18.00) or else Canada Customs charges the university a fine of \$100.00. (Yes, I think this is absurd, but that’s the way it’s been explained to me.) Academic journals, of course, don’t have this kind of money, and generally have to refuse the package if they can before the broker gets his or her hands on it: not something an unsuspecting recipient can readily know about in advance. The consequence is not to raise the profile of Canadian-based publications but to limit access to print-based information. The consequence of limited access to information is ignorance, and greater susceptibility to bureaucratic manipulation. It seems that this is what is meant by “free trade” in action.

Perhaps the Canadian public’s resistance to being so controlled is what led to the massive electoral rejection of Mulroney’s party in 1993 (though it’s cautionary to observe that the replacement government has not yet found it necessary to revise the customs act). Perhaps this resistance also explains the number of times that a figure called Mulroney and the divisive politics that many came to associate with the politician of this name surfaced as a literary motif in 1993 publications. Wilfred Watson’s *The Baie Comeau Angel and Other Stories* might be the most forthright satire of these political presumptions; Bill Bissett’s *th last photo uv th human soul* most explicitly names the clichés of the age. Frank Davey’s biography of Kim Campbell (the real-life Mulroney’s real-life successor) as a politician who re-enacted the iconographic image of Anne of Green Gables might also be read in this connection; and so (more bleakly) might Timothy Findley’s horrific novel *Headhunter*, which (by means of a *Heart of Darkness* paradigm) openly confronts the social underworld of the 1990s. In Findley’s telling of it, this underworld has come almost to demoralize the Canada he wants to love, because this contemporary Canada has become so used to public schizophrenia, institutional child abuse, snuff-film pornography, urban violence, and psychological manipulation and maltreatment, *that it is politically unwilling to recognize its own part in this decay*. Given its graphic nature, it’s hard to “like” *Headhunter*, but not hard to see its social relevance; newspapers daily tell of the kinds of event that Findley has combined into narrative form. And even the passive voice in which so much of this narrative is written seems, on reflection, to epitomize the institutional mindset it criticizes; in fearsome, fearful times, it asks, who will take responsibility? Who will even recognize that the responsibility is theirs?

This is one of the questions Cooper's *Amnesia* asks as well, and so does Margaret Atwood's brilliantly readable *The Robber Bride*. Cooper's novel does an Ancient Mariner turn, with a character stopping a bridegroom on his wedding day so that his own nightmare story might be told: it is a tale of a dysfunctional family adrift in a maze—children die in bizarre circumstances; one is drawn to charismatic, enigmatic evil; only amnesia protects the teller (and listener) from drowning in the sewers of reality. *The Robber Bride* is in some ways no less dour in concept, though much more linear in form—and funny. Atwood's title bride is an inversion of one of the Grimms' fairytales; the novel uses this allusion (and deliberately adapts a lot of the conventions of Harlequin romance as well) to tell of women's (as well as men's) active involvement with evil. Only when they admit to their connection can they deal with it—or “her,” in this case, as evil (unpredictable, uncontrolled by easy categories, marvellously attuned to weakness and desire, and metaphorically rendered as an auto-immune disease) is embodied in the character of Zenia. The three other central figures (a successful stockbroker named Roz, a new-age crystal-and-pure-food enthusiast who now goes by the name of Charis, and a history professor named Antonia, whose abilities range from mirror-writing to a detailed academic knowledge about war) lead the narrative to reflect on subjects that range from the Cathars to conservation. The technique of the novel, full of extended, mordantly selective flashbacks, combines the modern costume-Gothic with politically-charged satire. The resulting narrative insists on the necessity of memory—which turns out to be different from “history.” That's the point.

David Scott's *Ontario Place Names* and Robert Prévost's *Montréal: A History* provide a couple of familiar access routes to the world of “history”: the gazetteer and the documentary survey. Perhaps quixotically, however, I looked in Scott's book for a guide to Alice Munro—I found “Maitland” (after Sir Peregrine Maitland, Lt.-Gov., 1818-1828), but not the earlier “Meneseteung”; and while “Berlin” is there to antedate “Kitchener,” there's no sense of the first-syllable stress in pronunciation. There are human stories behind gazetteers, in other words, and conditions of relationship and power that affect and underlie the documentary surface of official record. “Fiction” in whatever genre and social history—are forms that remember these stories differently. They differ from “fact,” and so counter the politics of superficiality, through a variety of literary strategies. Richard Outram's sometimes witty lyrics in *Mogul Recollected*, for example, tell of a circus ele-

phant that drowned in a ship fire off the coast of New Brunswick in 1836; the sequence as a whole is a Noah's Ark critique, a tale of death and remembrance, cruelty and revelation. Anne Chislett's play *Yankee Notions* again reconstructs Susanna Moodie's relation to the war of 1837. Jane Urquhart's earnest *Away* and Graeme Gibson's inventive *Gentleman Death* both dip enterprisingly into the past to illuminate the present, the one as immigrant saga, the other as psychological metaphor; David Adams Richards' *For Those Who Hunt the Wounded Down* tells quietly and inexorably of the violence that swings back from the past to disrupt the present (though it also records the persistence of love); and in *Christopher Columbus Answers All Charges*, Mark Giacomelli and Yuri Rabinsky construct a reply to current history by assembling the ostensible diary fragments and reflections of the now-much-maligned "discoverer" of the Americas: "I have brought you a New World," Columbus muses finally, "and I forgive you all." He forgives, perhaps as much as anything else, the modern fondness for exclusive binaries and the modern eagerness to appear politically correct.

"Fictions" that are cast as personal memoir offer a variant form of this will to find meaning in the passing of time. These are epistemological claims, literary works that use the past as a trope to shape the acceptability of knowledge. George McWhirter's lyric sequence *A Staircase For All Souls: The British Columbia Suite* displays a wonderful eye for images in the wet west coast woods, the whole poem crafted to suggest the cadences of creativity, in poetry and in life. Harold Rhenisch's *Out of the Interior: The Lost Country* crafts evocatively a set of glimpses of an immigrant Okanagan boyhood, claiming adult space as it reshapes boyhood time. Also set in British Columbia, Peter Trower's *Grogan's Cafe* recreates the life of a 19-year-old awkwardly discovering sex and independence in a logging camp (the vocabulary of the logging industry is accurate and apt). Evelyn Lau's *Fresh Girls and Other Stories* details a less enfranchising sexual past, in laconic tales of massage parlours and hypodermic needles. Gavin Scott's *Memory Trace*, Hugh Hood's *Be Sure to Close Your Eyes*, Dennis Lee's sexually-charged *Riffs*, Richard Teleky's *Goodnight, Sweetheart*, Karen Connelly's *This Brighter Prison*: memory is the structuring device in all of these books, resulting in varying degrees of guilt, consternation, illumination, and freedom. Farther afield, Ven Begamudré's *Van de Graaf Days* tells of a boy educated in India as well as in Canada. Bill Schermbrucker's *Motortherapy* uses the automobile as a unifying image in a linked series of stories about Kenya, Canada,

youth, and coming to terms with the world. Margaret Gibson's *Sweet Poison* presents a woman at a critical point in her life, as she faces up to her own psyche, coping elliptically with guilt, bewilderment, betrayal, and madness as parts of a recuperating self. Audrey Thomas's rich prose in *Graven Images*, one of the most effectively crafted novels of the year, is both funny and desolating as it details a woman writer's encounter with her past, her ambitions, and her aged mother. And Carole Shields, in *The Stone Diaries*, tells a more linear family saga involving the USA and Canada; mixing conventional and fragmentary forms, the novel hinges on one woman's memories, and on the failure of anyone else ever understanding the implications of that woman's cosseted images and casual phrases, souvenirs as they must be of privately understood relationships rather than of publicly verifiable phenomena.

The desire to remember how other people or another time saw the world and said their say about it also underlies the industry of reprints, collections, travel narratives, and academic handbooks; this industry allows people in the present both to praise and to criticize, to take from the past what seems valuable in the present and to understand why other perspectives seem alien, unacceptable, unproductive, or counter-creative. Take travel books, for example. David Solway's *The Anatomy of Arcadia* hints by its title at what the modern traveller hopes to find in Greece. The reprint of George Woodcock's *Ravens and Prophets* (a now-historical discovery of Native B.C. history) reveals how recently middleclassness became a social norm. Karen Connelly's *Touch the Dragon* (an apprentice work, for all the critical praise it attracted) is a teenager's discovery of Thailand and time—perhaps a recognition of the power of difference if not quite yet a recognition of the limits of independence.

Autobiographies fall into a similar stance, with style sometimes at war with self-indulgence: Farley Mowat's *Born Naked* claims to reclaim a Saskatchewan childhood, Al Purdy's *Reaching for the Beaufort Sea* traces the emergence of a vernacular voice, Clark Blaise's "postmodern autobiography" *I Had a Father* reflects on himself by reconstructing the paradigms of quest and loss in his restless father's life, and John Mills's splendidly unconventional account of an often deeply unhappy life—*Thank Your Mother for the Rabbits*—reclaims an earlier wartime, often with humour, often edging memoir with social critique.

Sometimes picture books are also records of the past, as in *Algonquin: The Park and Its People*, by Donald Standfield and Liz Lundell, which con-

tains excellent historical photos, or in Pierre Berton's *Picture Book of Niagara Falls*, amply illustrated in colour, which contrasts the images of the sublime and the picturesque with those of tourism and power, and so constitutes a kind of short history of icons of taste as well as being a coffee-table guide to popular culture.

Selections and reprints worth reading, among the publications of 1993, include bp Nichol's *Truth: A Book of Fictions*, foregrounding the referentiality/non-referentiality debate in literature; Daphne Marlatt's *Ghost Works* (three prose pieces); Howard O'Hagan's *Trees Are Lonely Company* (stories and some other material); Basil Johnston's *Tales of the Anishinaubae*; Margaret Laurence's Somali translations, *A Tree for Poverty*; and books of stories by Norman Levine and John Metcalf, and new and selected poems by Erin Mouré, Michael Harris, Brian Brett, George Jonas, Tom Wayman, and especially John Newlove, whose *Apology for Absence* is a reminder of the strengths of poetic craft and a demonstration of the power of visual detail. Lorraine McMullen and Sandra Campbell, editing *Aspiring Women* (one of a series devoted to reclaiming the short stories of women writers), draw attention to the liveliness of writing in the late 19th century. Carl Ballstadt and others edited *Letters of Love and Duty: The Correspondence of Susanna and John Moodie*, lending a private side to the public persona of *Roughing It in the Bush*; and Cynthia Sugars produced a fine edition of *The Letters of Conrad Aiken and Malcolm Lowry 1929-1954*. Joyce Marshall's *Any Time at All and Other Stories* is a new selection of this wonderful but underrated writer's work, with an afterword by Timothy Findley, one of several reprints in the New Canadian Library (another is a fresh selection for the 1990s from the work of Stephen Leacock, called *My Financial Career and Other Follies*). And both Ramsay Cook's edition of *The Voyages of Jacques Cartier*, with useful notes, and Germaine Warkentin's *Canadian Exploration Literature*, a lively anthology of selections from the writings of the land explorers, with a thoughtful introduction and instructive notes, add insights into the conditions of contact between peoples and systems of ideas.

Some of these reprinted writers were also the subject of critical enquiry in 1993. Margery Fee's *Silence Made Visible: Howard O'Hagan and "Tay John,"* for example, collects notes, interviews, and commentary, and is a valuable resource book for the study of O'Hagan's novel—a work that contemporary readers have found more immediate than did readers at the time of its first publication. Irene Niechoda's *A Sourcery for Books 1 and 2 of bp*

Nichol's *The Martyrology* is another valuable book, an exhaustive map of the routes of transformation that took Nichol from experience into poetry. D.M.R. Bentley's account of a 1790s travel writer named Isaac Weld, with reference to Canadian poetry of the sublime, is one of the most illuminating and interesting essays collected in James Noonan's *Biography and Autobiography*. Marian Scholtmeijer, writing on animal victims, and Tom Wayman, writing on the culture of work, also produced, from less conventional vantage points, commentaries on the assumptions of culture. Manina Jones—one of several writers who contributed essays on Canadian poets and poetry to W.H. New's *Inside the Poem*—also produced a volume called *That Art of Difference: 'Documentary-Collage' and English-Canadian Writing*, which establishes her as one of the leading current critics on Canadian poetry. Picking up where Livesay, Scobie, and others left off, Jones examines the work of Marlatt and others, examining the “aesthetics of interruption” and contact zones between writer and reader. Simone Vauthier brilliantly reads the texts and contexts of several short story writers—Blaise, Thomas, Rooke, among others—in *Reverberations: Explorations in the Canadian Short Story*. Unevenness, however, marked a number of reference works of 1993—ECW Press published the excellent *CWTW Poetry Series*, volumes 8 and 10, but also some inconsistent guides to individual works and writers; the articles in Irena Makaryk's useful *Encyclopedia of Contemporary Literary Theory* are divided by subject (on “schools,” such as Frankfurt, formalism, and poscolonialism; “individuals,” such as Kierkegaard, Frye, and Toril Moi; and “terms,” such as aporia, patriarchy, and universal), the last section being the most consistently useful; and the best of the essays on criticism that Caroline Bayard collected in *100 Years of Critical Solitudes* (its title premise indicates the foreordained limits on its conclusions, unfortunately) is likely the one written by Barbara Godard.

On a different front, a number of writers took imperial relations either as their subject or as their metaphor of past and present inequities. J. Edward Chamberlin's *Come Back to Me My Language*, on language and colonialism in the Caribbean (though with relatively little analysis of poetic practice), examines the politics of language in the contact zones of cultural borderlands, and traces ways in which the “imperial” language has variously been used by West Indian poets, and also reiterated, challenged, destabilized, and reinvented. Robert H. MacDonald's *Sons of the Empire*:

*The Frontier and the Boy Scout Movement 1890-1918* takes up this motif in a more familiar milieu, arguing that “*Scouting for Boys* ... presented the frontier life both as an adventure and as a discipline, an escape from the enervating, feminine atmosphere of the home to a place where pure masculinity could be shaped.” (The language of exploration often embodied this sentiment.) MacDonald’s book goes on to analyze these imperial attitudes and the semiotics of uniform and speech; Sharon Nelson’s poems in *Grasping Men’s Metaphors* in a sense take up the premise of this Baden-Powell rhetoric in the way they distance modern women from the men-as-boys stereotype. Julia Emberley’s *Thresholds of Difference*, on postcolonial theory and Native women’s writings, applies the imperial metaphor in a feminist context. Fiona Sparrow’s *Into Africa with Margaret Laurence* also takes up the imperial question—apparently equating Laurence’s great sensitivity to Africa with an empirical freedom from the mindset of empire. But despite her sensitivity and knowledge, Laurence used language in a way that marked her as a cultural outsider to Africa. This doesn’t make her any less accomplished as a writer; it does mean that she wrote *from a perspective*, and that this perspective was informed, even to the degree that she questioned convention, by the politics of her time and place. When Frank Davey, in *Post-National Arguments*, argues that Canada is a “semiotic field,” he has something of this same sense of the politics of representation in mind. It isn’t that readers should not think of nation and literature in the same breath, but that they should be able to distinguish between the value of political aspirations and the political function of words.

There were, of course, numerous books published in 1993 that didn’t fall neatly into a “memory” category, and my highly subjective list of English-language books I found interesting from the year would not be complete without naming some of them: the Edvard Munch poems in Don Coles’ *Forests of the Medieval World*, the prose-poems about sexuality in Christopher Dewdney’s *The Secular Grail*, Bill Gaston’s stories called *North of Jesus’ Beans* (their effect created by cadence and sentence control), stories by Barbara Parkin, Hannah Grant, and Gayla Reid (all collected in Douglas Glover and Maggie Helwig’s *Coming Attractions* 93), Steven Heighton’s stories (published in *Malahat Review*, for example), and Judith Fitzgerald’s love poems in *Habit of Blues*. There were other noteworthy short story writers as well: Mavis Gallant for one, whose new stories return to the Montreal of the 1930s as well as hover in Paris. Carol Windley’s *Visible Light* (mostly



told in muted tones, as is, for example, “Moths,” about thwarted communications in marriage) and Caroline Adderson’s *Bad Imaginings* (with its extraordinary range of techniques, subjects, and points of view) introduce two especially fine fiction writers. And with two new books, Thomas King reconfirms his position as one of the most engaging and culturally provocative writers of the decade.

King’s *One Good Story, That One* is a story collection that includes some familiar favourites—“The One About Coyote Going West,” “Joe the Painter and the Deer Island Massacre”—along with less familiar works such as “Trap Lines,” an evocative account of the elliptical expressions of love between father and son. *Green Grass, Running Water*, however, is a novel that in many ways reiterates the year’s dominant motif: the need for a faithful cultural memory. About a contemporary Native man’s relation with his very up-to-date community, the novel is a comic *tour de force* in which cultural conventions fall into disarray before stability is restored. But what kind of stability? Not the old stereotypes, for this has been a tale in which trickster figures named Robinson Crusoe and Ishmael and the Lone Ranger (the imperial rhetoric can name their names but not govern their function, permitting their “identities” to be as subversive as they like) wander away from a Western mental institution, commenting instructively on life, literature, the pursuit of happiness, and peaceful good government *until they choose to return* and the narrative jaunts to a close.

Social history seldom conforms as entertainingly with fiction as one might wish; literary closure, in any event, is an agreeable hypothesis more than it has ever functioned as an historical conclusion. It is hard, therefore, to imagine why bureaucratic institutions repeatedly behave as though they had possession of a fixed truth, or finite solutions to social needs. It’s as though they find amnesia the easiest way to deal with the stress of uncertainty or change. But while a willed amnesia can be a route to equanimity, and a cautious amnesia can be the catalyst of forgiveness, a casual amnesia can have dangerous consequences, in politics and in art: and it’s something that writers, at least, have recognized. The need to imagine alternatives, the need to champion access to information—the need, in short, *to remember to remember* that alternatives have existed and can again exist—it is this need that Canadian writing in 1993 repeatedly and often eloquently voiced. w.n.