Inside Gold Mountain

It's become a commonplace of critical asides in Canada to point to Frank Scott's critique of E.J. Pratt's version of the CPR railway construction— "Where are the coolies in your poem, Ned?"—and then to rush to the text of *Towards the Last Spike* to point out that Pratt mentioned them after all. But it's fundamentally an inadequate aside, for it's not just the *mention* that matters. Questions of recognition and marginalization recurrently depend on the manipulation of power, and no simple *mention* of an entire group of people will grant them an effective voice within the structure of a society that privileges others. Peoples of East and Southeast Asian origin—Chinese, Japanese, Korean, Philippine, Malaysian, Thai and more—have been part of Canadian culture since at least the 1870s, when the railway and the gold rush attracted workers to *Gum-shan*: "Gold Mountain...North." It's long since time that Canadian criticism should pay their cultural contributions more than passing attention.

But it's important, too, to remember that "East Asian" is scarcely an adequate term of cultural analysis. The Cantonese culture that has long been re-established in Canada differs in many ways—spoken language, for one—from the Mandarin cultures of Mainland China, Taiwan, and Singapore, all of which have more recently become influential in Canada. Other differentiations are obvious: Japanese, Korean, Philippine histories are not the same as each other, and have sometimes even been in conflict with each other, and with China. Malay and Indonesian societies differ

again, not just because of ethnic origin and geography but also because of the influence of Islam in Southeast Asia, as opposed to Shinto, Christianity, and official atheism elsewhere. Cultural variety may in fact be one reason that Canadian criticism has avoided this subject; another is likely the racism that has permeated so many "Eurocentric" versions of the Canadian Identity. Even in ostensibly cool academic retrospect, it's hard to read calmly all those 1920s diatribes against Opium Dens, Tongs, White Slavery, and the Yellow Peril, the clichés of popcult propaganda that characterized the politics and the literature of the first half of the twentieth century; yet it's also necessary to address the sources of this history of racism—the egocentricity, the fear, the bias of education, the residual animosities of international war—in order to oppose social clichés in the present.

Some writers have concerned themselves with precisely this change in attitude and expectation: Dorothy Livesay, in *Call My People Home*; Daphne Marlatt, in her memoir of Penang, where she spent her childhood, and in her evocation of World War II prejudices in *Steveston*; David Suzuki, both in his scientific and in his social commentaries; and the several historians who have examined the course of racial prejudice, its social basis and its institutionalized forms—historians such as Anthony Chan, Peter Ward, Ken Adachi, Patricia Roy, James Morton. Edgar Wickberg's *From China to Canada* (1982) collects essays by a number of writers on such subjects as immigration patterns, cultural accomplishment, social organization, and legislative exclusion. Yet the early twentieth-century political decision to deny "Asians" the vote in Canada (a decision that took effect for several decades) still stands as a powerful indictment of "Eurocentric" Canadian social policy—as does the early resistance (on the part of many labour leaders) to any Asian immigration, the longstanding official refusal of family immigration, and the easy political assumption in 1941 that ethnic origin took precedence over social commitment when it came to deciding the "patriotism" of Japanese-Canadians. Some writers such as Joy Kogawa have, for their part, radically opposed the stereotypes of wartime, and in both poetry and fiction have called for redress and reconciliation—an enterprise in which Roy Miki's essays and Muriel Kitagawa's diaries are also engaged. More plainly, they have also insisted that everyone—power groups included—pay attention to the human consequences of bureaucratic arrogance and cultural generalization.

But that there are many more writers to be listened to is apparent from

such anthologies as Bennett Lee and Jim Wong-Chu's *Many-Mouthed Birds*, and Gerry Shikatani's *Paper Doors*, and from the scores of poems and stories that appear annually in all parts of the country. Names such as "Onoto Watanna" might well seem to have disappeared into the recesses of literary history; but names such as Kevin Irie, Gloria Sawai, Evelyn Lau, Paul Yee, and Sky Lee are just beginning to attract literary notice, and words such as *Nisei*, *Gum-shan*, and *feng shui* are no longer unfamiliar in the Canadian vocabulary. Ying Chen's 1993 novel *Les lettres chinoises* confirms that fra-cophone Quebec writing is experiencing parallel changes. Contemporary non-Asian writers, moreover, have drawn extensively on Chinese and Japanese culture for settings, symbols, characters, and political motifs—from Marilyn Bowering's *To All Appearances a Lady*, Ann Ireland's *A Certain Mr. Takahashi*, Gary Geddes's *The Terracotta Army*, and Steven Heighton's *The Flight Path of the Emperor* to the poems of Robert Bringhurst, plays by Ken Mitchell, stories by Marilyn Eisenstadt (in *Coming Attractions 92*), and a range of references to Mao Tse-Tung, the defence of Hong Kong, the Great Wall, Vietnam, and Norman Bethune.

For many years, the conventional image of Asians in Canada permitted Asian characters only pidgin English (or French) and peripheral occupations as launderers, fruiterers, and corner-cafe cooks; but many among the real-life communities sought other kinds of recognition. Older Chinese immigrants in B.C. used the phrase *yap-kong* ("to go into the mines") to mean *to move into the Interior*; metaphorically, it suggests that they identified with Canada ("Gold Mountain"), wanted to be able to contribute to its development, and wanted also to be accepted as a natural (as opposed to an exotic) part of the Canadian community. This is not to say there has been no sympathy. One of Gabrielle Roy's stories asks, with concern, about its central character, "Where are you going, Sam Lee Wong?" One of Ethel Wilson's stories depicts a Chinese-Canadian taxi-driver as a necessary guide. But human sympathy can sometimes still function as a barrier, expressing solidarity at one remove; sometimes it is an act that conceptualizes itself as generosity rather than as a tacit declaration of identity—because fundamentally it assumes that the norms of the cultural "inside" will never change. But they do change. And, in Canada, they are changing.

From mission literature to children's literature, from travel writing to theatre and film: Asian-Canadian literary connections cross all genres, and this issue of *Canadian Literature* can scarcely do more than provide another set

of "mentions." The writers assembled here, however, have not been content with casual asides; they have undertaken cogent analyses of literary expression, social expectation, and personal experience. In a decade when immigration patterns are changing to highlight the Asian components of Canadian culture, Canadian readers have a renewed opportunity to take account of the exclusions that have marked their history, the processes of social change, and the multiple sources of their current cultural heritage.

W.N.