

“HAS ANYONE HERE HEARD OF MARJORIE PICKTHALL?”

Discovering the Canadian Literary Landscape

Henry Kreisel

I CAUGHT MY FIRST GLIMPSE of Canada in May 1940 from the deck of the *Sobieski*, a Polish ship that was bringing hundreds of civilian internees and prisoners of war from England to Canada. The civilian internees, myself among them, were German and Austrian refugees who'd been interned by Britain after the Nazi conquest of France.

During the journey the *Sobieski* developed some engine trouble, was left behind by the convoy of which she was part, and eventually limped into harbour at St. John's, Newfoundland, for some emergency repairs.

We thronged the deck, glad to see a harbour, and wondering if we were going to disembark there. Newfoundland was not of course part of Confederation in 1940, but it was a British dependency. I was not sure at the time of its precise political status. I knew that it was close to Canada.

About Canada itself I had only the vaguest of notions. It was *terra incognita*, at most a large block of red in the atlas I used when I was a schoolboy in Austria. If I thought about Canada at all, I thought of it vaguely as a huge, but sparsely populated country, rich in natural resources, though I would have been hard-pressed to say what exactly these resources were.

Once, after the Nazi annexation of Austria in 1938, I was talking to a friend who knew everything. We were talking about possible countries we might escape to. He ruled out Canada, because it was virtually impossible to get a visa. Canada's doors were tightly shut. Perhaps that was just as well, he said, because Canada was a cultural backwater. There were no theatres or opera houses there, no serious music was played there, and there was no literature worth talking about. Canada was much worse than the United States, he said. The United States at least was a vigorous country, though quite barbaric. On this point I argued with him, for I had read a few American writers (Upton Sinclair, Whitman, Hemingway, Steinbeck), and thought quite highly of them. But since I knew absolutely nothing about Canada and had at the time no desire to find out, I accepted his superior knowledge.

And now here I was, without a visa, and under rather strange circumstances, looking up the steep, rocky cliffs at the city of St. John's and wondering what it was like to live there.

The *Sobieski* lay at anchor for a day or two, in the mouth of the harbour. We were not taken ashore, but during the day dozens of small boats came out from shore and circled the *Sobieski*, and the people in the boats called out to us as we stood on deck. Suddenly that large, abstract red mass on the school atlas became real for me, a human landscape.

Who were the people that lived there? What songs did they sing, what stories did they have to tell? As soon as I saw the people, it was impossible for me to believe that they had no music and no literature. My all-knowing friend must have been wrong.

We did not disembark in St. John's. Repairs completed, the *Sobieski* sailed on, into the Gulf of St. Lawrence, and then up the great river, a romantic landscape stretching away on both sides. So this, then, was Quebec, the French part of the vast unknown country. People along the shore saw us and occasionally they waved. Again I wondered what songs they sang and what stories they told.

At Quebec City we at last disembarked, boarded trains and began the long internment. For a year and a half (I passed my eighteenth and nineteenth birthdays there) I knew the country only from the confines of internment camps in Quebec and New Brunswick and came in contact only with the officials who administered the camps and with the members of the Veterans' Corps who guarded us.

With some of these guards I struck up something resembling a friendship. One of them, a short, somewhat rotund man asked me to write a letter for him, for writing, he said, did not come easy to him. So we sat down at the long table in the middle of the hut where my bed was, and he began to dictate the first of many letters I wrote for him. "Dear Wife," he said and stopped. Then slowly, hesitantly, he formulated some questions, about his wife's health, about what she was doing, whether she had heard from their daughter, from their sons. He had not much to report from where he was, he said. The food was good, the work not too hard, sometimes he was bored.

The word got around that I was good at writing letters and three or four other guards used my services. I found out where they came from, places and provinces I had never heard of, from Kenora in Ontario, from Gimli in Manitoba, from a small village on the Nova Scotia coast. The great red expanse on the map became humanized, though the letters I wrote revealed little of the Canadian psyche.

Once I asked one of the guards if he knew of any Canadian writers, but he looked perplexed.

So for eighteen months I lived in Canada and yet was not really in the country. We did get copies of the Fredericton newspaper, but one could not discover the presence of a literary life in the city or in the country from reading it.

After several months we managed to get some books sent into the camp. We could even request some titles. I asked for some Canadian books of fiction or of poetry. None was ever sent. When I inquired why, I was told that unless I could give the title of a particular book or the name of a specific author, it was impossible to fill my request. A classical Catch-22 situation! I didn't know any titles of Canadian books or the names of any Canadian writers, and so I couldn't get any books to find out. I asked one of the officers if he could help me. Officers, I thought, were supposed to be educated and might be expected to know something about their national literature. But I drew a blank. So I went back to reading European writers. In the camps, therefore, my quest to discover what Canadian writers might have to tell me about the people of the country I wanted to know ran into the sand.

WHEN I WAS AT LAST RELEASED from internment in November of 1941, I went to Toronto and enrolled in Harbord Collegiate to prepare myself for the Ontario grade XIII examinations. English was of course one of the major matriculation subjects. Now at last, I thought, I would learn something about Canadian literature, for surely in the last year of high school some of the major figures of the national literature would be studied.

That was certainly the case in the Austrian schools I knew. We studied some of the great German writers, but the important Austrian writers were studied as a matter of course. No one ever thought to question the fact that students should study the national literature.

To my surprise that was not the case in Ontario in 1941. When I looked at the reading list, I found an anthology of poetry, mainly British, Shakespeare's *Henry V*, and *Lorna Doone*, an interminable mid-nineteenth-century novel by R. D. Blackmore. I still sometimes wonder who decided to inflict this novel on the long-suffering students of Ontario and why.

Harbord Collegiate was known as a school with high academic standards, its students among the best in the province. But when I asked some of my new friends if they could recommend some Canadian books I might read, no one seemed able to tell me, and I was too busy trying to make up for four lost years of study and prepare myself for the final examinations to pursue the matter with any kind of urgency.

When we had finished at last with *Lorna Doone*, we began to read a few of the poems in the anthology. There were some narrative poems by Alfred Noyes and

John Masefield, a few lyric poems by Keats and Tennyson, sonnets by Shakespeare and Wordsworth, and a poem by Marjorie Pickthall.

I remember reading the poem before class and being quite taken by it. Its sad tone, its *Weltschmerz*, its vague religiosity appealed to my youthful, romantic sensibility.

When we began to study the poem in class, the teacher asked, "Has anyone here heard of Marjorie Pickthall?"

Silence. No one raised a hand. No one spoke.

"Well," he said, "she's a Canadian poetess. A very fine Canadian poetess. She has a great command of language. Listen to these cadences." And he read the poem, and read it very effectively.

For me it was an important moment. At last a figure had appeared in the literary landscape that had seemed quite empty and barren. The teacher told us a little about Marjorie Pickthall. She had been a rather fragile woman, and had died young in 1922. (That was the year I was born, and so I felt at once a connection between us!) He told us about the devastating blow her mother's death had been for her. It was all very touching. I could relate to her suffering. I believed that one could not be a poet without suffering. A teacher in Vienna had once told us that. Poets suffered more than other people, he had said, and that's why they were poets.

Marjorie Pickthall was thus the first Canadian literary voice I heard. I asked the teacher once after class why we didn't read any other Canadian writers. He seemed somewhat taken aback. No other student had evidently ever raised this point. He said something about Canada being a very young country that had not yet produced a significant literature. This was the first, but by no means the last time that I heard this curious line of reasoning.

But were there not at least some writers worth reading, I asked. He mentioned four names: Leacock, Haliburton, Carman, and Roberts.

I thanked him and wrote the names down.

I began to frequent Toronto bookstores, and there at last the literary landscape began to open up. Whenever I asked for some Canadian books I was directed to a little ghetto called "Canadiana." It seemed to me then, and still seems to me now, a curious practice of segregating our writers. But at least they were there. I began by reading Leacock and Haliburton because my teacher had recommended them, and read them with great enjoyment.

In the fall of 1942 I enrolled in the honours course in English Language and Literature at the University of Toronto. Now at last, I thought, I would be able to get a systematic overview of the national literature, for one of the first-year courses was "American and Canadian Literature." It was, alas, a misleading description. The Canadian part of the course consisted of three or four lectures

at the end of the academic year. These lectures were given by Claude Bissell. They were very good lectures, but there was not very much that he could do in three or four hours. R. J. McGillivray taught the American material. When I saw the reading list for the course, I expressed my disappointment because there was so little Canadian material on the list. McGillivray said that if I was interested, I could write a major term paper on a Canadian writer. He suggested A. M. Klein, who had recently published *Hath Not A Jew*, and whose background was similar to mine. So the very first term paper I wrote at the University of Toronto was on a Canadian poet. It was a great experience for me. For the first time I heard a modern Canadian voice and began to wean myself away from the poetic vocabulary of the Romantics and Victorians. Klein's was also the first urban-Jewish voice I heard, and this was very important for my own development as a writer. Through Klein I came to A. J. M. Smith and F. R. Scott and the other poets whose work appeared in *New Provinces*.

Most of my fellow students were not much interested in Canadian literature, or were at best defensive about it. Canadian writers were never "as good as" any number of British or American writers. This always seemed to me a ludicrous way of arguing, because the proposition was based on totally wrong premises.

When I went to school in Austria nobody ever said that Grillparzer, say, or Stifter was not as good as Goethe and Schiller and therefore we needn't study them. We studied Austrian writers because they had important things to say about the country. Then why shouldn't Canadian students study Canadian writers who might have important and interesting things to say about Canada? The image I got after listening to some of my friends was that of a literary foot race, where Shakespeare always came in first, followed by Milton and Chaucer, and one or two thoroughbred British classic writers; after them came two or three American writers, and, then, bringing up the rear (always the rear), came two or three Canadian writers, destined to be forever last.

At the same time there were writers at the University of Toronto who were much admired by students and professors alike. E. J. Pratt was at Victoria College and Philip Child was at Trinity. Northrop Frye at Victoria was beginning to exercise his extraordinary influence, and Marshall McLuhan was beginning his explorations at St. Michael's College. Many people were telling me about Earle Birney, who had recently published *David and Other Poems*, but who had left to join the army just before I arrived on the scene. The stories I heard made him seem a dashing and exciting figure, and when I finally got to know him, in Vancouver in 1950, he lived up to his legend. There were also professors like Norman Endicott, not himself a creative writer, who were tremendously interested in the creative work of their students and offered constant encouragement and help.

So I found a paradoxical situation: a defensive, hesitant attitude towards Canadian literature as manifested in its relegation to the bottom of the official curriculum on the one hand, and encouragement and a desire to foster that literature on the other hand. As an outsider I found all this strange, because the little that I found time to read of Canadian literature seemed to me very interesting indeed, and nothing to apologize about. The literary landscape was in fact much richer than I would ever have expected it to be.

IN 1943 I MET ROBERT WEAVER and James Reaney. Up to now Canada had been for me the confines of internment camps, and then the two big cities — Toronto and Montreal. The rest of the country barely existed in my consciousness. Reaney, both in his inimitable conversation and in the evocative things he wrote, introduced me to the world of small-town Ontario, and Weaver, who was more interested in prose than in poetry, introduced me to modern Canadian fiction. It was Weaver who told me about Morley Callaghan and Philip Grove and got me to read some of their novels, and it was Weaver who told me about a new writer, Hugh MacLennan, who'd published his first novel a couple of years earlier, and lent me a copy of *Barometer Rising*. Weaver didn't have much money, but he always managed to buy books, or else he got review copies.

Weaver also knew a lot of literary gossip, and I found it absorbing to listen to his stories, as I still do whenever I see him. He made the literary landscape come alive. He also knew some of the writers who were writing for the CBC, people like Lister Sinclair and Len Peterson, and he introduced me to them.

Once he told me that Philip Grove usually came to the public library on College Street on Wednesdays and always sat in the same seat, in the rear of the reading room. So I went down to the library one Wednesday, and behold, there indeed was Grove, dressed in a very old-fashioned suit, and wearing a high, starched shirt collar, sitting very erect, reading and occasionally making a note. I watched him for a while, trying to make up my mind whether I should go up and talk to him. I'd just read *Fruits of the Earth* and I tried to think of something I might say to him about it. In the end, I didn't do it and just walked away without speaking to him.

In 1944 Weaver, Reaney, the late Robert Sawyer, and I thought that we should get together once or twice a month to discuss modern literature and perhaps read from our own writings. So we launched what we called The Modern Letters Club. Weaver arranged for places where we could hold our meetings, usually in the common room of one of the residences. It was all very informal. We never had a constitution, or by-laws, or anything resembling an organization. Word got around and we usually had twenty or thirty people at our gatherings. These were always

lively. People could read anything they liked — poetry, fiction, dramatic sketches, or critical articles. Some professors showed up, too; Norman Endicott quite frequently, Northrop Frye and Barker Fairley occasionally, but they never imposed their presence on us.

I used to look forward to our meetings because we all had the feeling that we belonged to a community and that literature was the most important activity in the world. The debates went on until we were told to leave, and the talk continued out in the street and in coffee shops near the campus. We never published a journal ourselves, but quite a few of the pieces first read at our meetings found their way into print.

For two or three years the club was going very strong. Then the meetings became less frequent, the atmosphere was less electric, and so we just stopped. In 1947 and 1948 most of the original members graduated and drifted apart.

In the fall of 1947 I got a job at the University of Alberta, and at last the immense part of the country that was still *terra incognita* for me became real.

I discovered to my surprise that even though Edmonton was a much smaller city than Toronto and the University of Alberta much smaller than the University of Toronto, there was a lively regard for literature. W. G. Hardy, who had written some very successful historical novels, was in the Department of Classics, and F. M. Salter, my colleague in the English department, had for some years been giving a course in creative writing that had become famous. In the spring of 1947, W. O. Mitchell, one of Slater's prize students, had published *Who Has Seen The Wind*. Many other writers, among them Christine van der Mark and later Rudy Wiebe, were his students. I myself showed him a draft of *The Rich Man*, and he was very helpful and very encouraging.

Salter was a Maritimer and he talked enthusiastically about the writers of Atlantic Canada, and so illuminated for me another part of the literary landscape. It was also Slater who also introduced me to the work of the writers of the West, to people like Robert Stead and Martha Ostenso, and Sinclair Ross.

And yet, when after two years or so I asked my senior colleagues why we didn't offer a course in Canadian literature, the paradoxical attitude I had first encountered in Toronto surfaced again. Canada was a young country, there was not sufficient material for a full-year course, our literature wasn't yet quite good enough.

To my image of the literary foot race I now added the image of a town crier, or a CBC announcer, calling out one day, "Hurrah! The great day has at last dawned! Canadian literature is now good enough to be taught in our schools and universities!"

One man at least was already doing it in 1947. Desmond Pacey, a New Zealander, was offering a full course in Canadian literature at the University of New

Brunswick, but Pacey was at that time regarded as something of an academic maverick. Yet increasingly, graduate students were writing theses on Canadian literature, but it was not until the 1960's that formal courses in our own literature became standard offerings in our universities.

My own discovery of the terrain was at last completed in 1950 when I went to British Columbia for the first time and met Earle Birney and Roy Daniells, and through them Alice and William McConnell, who in turn introduced me to Ethel Wilson and to Dorothy Livesay and to Marya Fiamengo.

The great landscape was full of life, full of interesting writers. There was one great gap. Quebecois writers remained shadowy for me, and it was not until the mid-1960's that I began to read them.

In the 1950's Wilfred and Sheila Watson came to Edmonton and became the inspiration for many aspiring writers. They were marvellous friends. Eli Mandel, Robin Mathews, and Henry Beissel became my colleagues and my friends. Robert Kroetsch and Rudy Wiebe were students here and became my friends.

The 1960's brought a wonderful outburst of literary activity. It was no longer possible to keep abreast of everything that was going on. The old attitudes lingered on. In 1961, the late Douglas Grant, then editor of *The University of Toronto Quarterly*, asked me how long I thought *Canadian Literature* could keep going. He thought the material for articles would soon run out. And from time to time some of the older cultural pundits bemoan the fact that few Canadian writers have truly international reputations. I am always tempted to ask how many Dutch or Yugoslav or Brazilian writers they can name.

The young writers I know are fortunately not much bothered by this kind of soul-searching. They know who they are, they know where they are, and many of them are puzzled by Frye's famous question, "Where is here?"

As for me, I could hardly have imagined when I caught my first glimpse of Canada in May of 1940 how marvellous the voyage of discovery would be.

