

ONTARIO CULTURE AND — WHAT?

James Reaney

SOME YEARS AGO, I started teaching a graduate course called Ontario Literature and Culture. The usual response to this at the time was, “Ontario Literature and what?” “For we have very little of that around here,” seemed to be the attitude expressed by this remark, “thank you.” But, of course, we are knee deep in our culture even if it prides itself on not being one! If brought back to visit his old hunting grounds, an Attiwandaron tribesman would immediately notice the new gods we worship — among them, the flush toilet,¹ the ritual spraying of expensive poisons every spring, the human sacrifice to the car, the cenotaphic expression in every town, city and village of even more spectacular sacrifices off in Europe somewhere, and the carefully tuned banality of coliseum movies and brutally loud music. A few months ago, a television news broadcast at my mother-in-law’s brought many elements of our culture into focus, elements listed above. Someone in the suburbs of London, Ontario had tried to burn down their new house. In full colour with music the camera lingered over the bathroom where gasoline, the new sacrament, had started it all. The French Empire colour scheme of lavender trimmed with gold now had disturbing and desacralizing stripes of dreck piled randomly over it. From thousands of invisible viewers you could hear a chorus of shocked “tsktsk’s.” So perhaps my adding “and Culture” was my admission that what literature we had wasn’t taking effect, did not express what it should powerfully enough, had failed to see much of our real life in Ontario. So I had evidently wanted to hurry up things a bit by raiding other disciplines — sociology, geography, local history, fine art, McLuhan and Innis, folklore, and even just hunting local graffiti or snowmen made by the local children. Because, potentially, all of Ontario life is subject matter for artists, only they must hurry up or the banality may freeze?

Things are changing though. For example, it used to be that that sphinx of cities, Toronto, had almost no literary reflector. With Paris or London, you can point to Balzac and Dickens. All I could find for Toronto was a sociological study called *Crestwood Heights*, still an excellent novel only lacking some foreground figures and a hero. But novelists have now sprung up: with its subways like pastel

chutes, *Edible Woman* was the breakthrough. There's even an historical study by a cousin of Ernest Thompson Seton which explains Spadina Avenue in terms of its original inheritance and real estate history. Above Bloor Street, the "i" in "Spadina" is soft; below it is hard. I stress the fact that this historian is related to the man who wrote *Two Little Savages* because that novel starts off with its sensitive hero going crazy in a place called Bonner-ton, and what I did not realize at the age of eight when I read this very essential Ontario book was that Bonner-ton is a pseudonym for the mean little Toronto of the nineties. Somewhere in it, further blinding flashes!, the hero explains to his mother that the reason he threw a stone at the bird at Niagara Falls was that — *he loved it*. Now we're getting somewhere. Alice Boissonneau, the author of *Eileen McCullough*, a penetrating study of Toronto's West End in the thirties-forties, once reminded me that not very long ago when you came in from a walk parental figures would ask: "What'd you see?" And you would reply — oh — a killdeer, a weasel, a butterfly. "Did you kill it?" Many in the know would agree that *that* is the essential voice of our Ontario,² that and the boy's reply to his mother's question. I'm sure that even our Attiwandaron tribesman would agree that technology aside, nothing much has changed from his supposedly violent and primitively inarticulate time.

I have just mentioned a local bird — no, a national bird — the killdeer, and this brings me immediately to a basic problem with not only Ontarians, but also Canadians. No one knows our birds, despite the vogue of birdwatching and the prevalence of nature study in schools. When, in 1959, I wrote a play called *The Killdeer*, audience members representing most of the provinces kept asking me, "What's a killdeer?" Now the killdeer is not just a pasture or wilderness bird. It nests on beaches and in fields, but it also nests on the gravelled roofs of downtown buildings, and I have heard its distinctive and haunting "killdeer" cry on campus grounds in Halifax, Kingston, Winnipeg, and Vancouver. At the time, my feeling was that if I had polled these audience members with an abstract word such as "predestination" they would have done quite a good job of identifying that vulture. But a wonderful plover bird³ all over the place with its thrilling cry? No. No one has bothered teaching them about anything so concrete and useful to poetry and drama as the name of wild birds. Los Angeles with its condors has lifted us too far above the tree line for such earthly knowledge. In a way killdeer, tree, and weed identification is what my course is all about. I happen to believe that if you don't know the weed that grows at your doorstep — knotweed — or the grass that grows in cemeteries — orchard or poverty grass — or the name of the tree outside your window, then you're not rooted in your environment. Books such as *Two Little Savages* or *Surfacing* are about the way such knowledge heals a nervous breakdown, something I think our society is quite unconsciously experi-

encing. And, of course, at colleges you get quite a lot of useful knowledge about laurels, myrtles, and nightingales, but no takers for the local ugly ducklings — knotweed, poverty grass, and killdeers. In the early days of the course, when a published one was still available, a partial solution was to ask students to make a leaf album, often with accompanying quotations from our writers. Perhaps afraid of climbing trees, some delegated this project to their spouses. Well, someone in the family knew their leaf-shapes. You may ask, “What difference does this really make?”

My answer would be to take a look at a story in Alice Munro’s *Who Do You Think You Are?* called “Wild Swans.” In this story, a young girl travels from Wingham near Lake Huron to Toronto on Lake Ontario for the first time in her life. She goes by a train in a journey that involves sweeping across the Southwestern Ontario peninsula, up over the Niagara Escarpment, and so, hugging Lake Ontario, to Union Station where her stepmother has warned her about white slavers. The white slaver strikes earlier than she expected though, for beside Rose there sits down a man claiming to be a minister — “Lake Erie . . . wild swans.” About this time, the girl also notices that just at the escarpment the trees subtly change to a richer leaf texture and a different kind of bark surface. As she notices this, her life changes since now for the first time she is intimately touched by a man — “Lake Erie . . . minister . . . wild swans.” Physiography, psychology, physiology all meet. Rose has reached several kinds of escarpments at once. And she makes the appearance of things in the Ontario landscape help her as they, it used to be thought, were intended to by being useful symbols, soothing referents. Our consumer culture couldn’t care less about the delicate nuances I have been describing, and its money-making “rites of passage” stories avoid leaf textures if they can. At the other end of the Escarpment from Rose, aggregate companies threaten to turn Grey County into one big gravel pit. We live in a world where Kentuckians wake up to find that their birthplace is now a strip mine, a monster which, I once read in a book on Ohio, has completely done away with several of that state’s counties. Technology with its ignorance of what topsoil and Quaker farmhouses could mean is the enemy of the course I am talking about. Your intimate surroundings do matter very much be they pastel chutes or silvery bark, and I am happy to find Atwood and Munro apparently on my side.

Alice Munro’s husband is a professional geographer, and one of her early stories — “Walker Brothers Cowboy” — makes deft use of a father who knows his physiography. He explains to his daughter how glaciers formed Lake Huron; we sense later on that these glaciers haven’t stopped forming people’s lives. One of the essential handbooks for my course happens to be Chapman and Putnam’s *Physiography of Southern Ontario*, and this is so because when I first taught at

the University of Manitoba I met two geographers who really changed my imaginative life — John Warkentin and the late Fred Watts. They could explain something I was having a great deal of trouble with in 1979 — the Manitoba landscape. The authors of the above-named book had been their teachers, and they were expanding their teachers' insights into Ontario landforms and cultural effects on same in the direction of the quite different Red River Valley world. Field patterns, farm yards, houses, fences, the presence of an imported Ontario landscape in Manitoba,⁴ Mennonite house-barns, the presence of an imported mediaeval Russian landscape in Manitoba — all these matters make you happier for thinking about them. I had already started bicycling around my own county at home with a government map in my carrier — one inch to three miles, and now, in Manitoba, I started bicycling up and down the banks of the Red River. Naturally this results in students trying the same sort of thing just to see what impressions are to be had. Beyond this, however, I encourage my students to pay attention to the way geographers, particularly physiographers, *write*. When it came out, Chapman and Putnam's *Physiography of Southern Ontario* was a better written book than most Ontario novels. This comes, I like to think, not from their trying to write well, but from trying to organize their subject as clearly and knowledgeably as possible. They spent all their summers driving all over Ontario, down *every* road evidently. Then they simply ran their observations through the rather attractive jargon of physiography; this jargon was invented by an Ulsterman who used Gaelic words — *kames*, *eskers* — for landshapes. As well, these gentlemen were not afraid to voice their own personal feelings from time to time at a particular lonely set of farmhouses, or a particularly fine set of well kept schoolyards. Similarly, Chaucer ran his human landscape forms through the hopper of planetary influences, and Atwood and Munro — perhaps you can guess some of the speculations that arise in my seminars about *possible* relationships between our writers and our geographers.

SINCE I AM NOW IN DANGER of teaching you the whole course, I will now only sketch in the remaining extradisciplinary layers which eventually have poems and novels written in Ontario placed on top of them. Grace Campbell's *Thorn Apple Tree*, or Atwood's *Surfacing*, or John Richardson's *Westbrook, the Outlaw* look somehow different if you have read Selwyn Dewdney's *Indian Rock Paintings*, delivered a paper on the Culture of Glengarry County, or re-established the satirical Reform attitude to that so-called father of his settlement, Colonel Talbot. Also, if you have a forties map of Toronto, so does

Avison's "The Local and the Lakefront"; so do the early poems of Christopher Dewdney if you have listened to an account of London, Ontario's Coves district.

Indian studies: how can Wallace Stevens say, completely overlooking those who gave his state its name, that "we never had a mythology in Connecticut"? Since it seems unfair to exterminate them while stealing their myths, perhaps he is wise. Still, Jehova came to Ontario like a rapacious Elizabethan settler to Ireland. Surely you have to know who were the gods of your country before your arrival.

History: since an Ontario resident invented the word "pre-history" you would think that we might have solved the problem of telling our mere *story*; however, there is as yet to my knowledge not a book for grown-ups that professes to give a clear account of our province's life from beginning till now.⁵ And this, despite the fact that a poet, Margaret Avison, has beautifully shown the way with her school text, *The History of Ontario*. As the years go by, my students seem to think that the problems are not insufficiently funded research, but literary and psychic blocks. Is it that we don't think we're worth a story?⁶ Perhaps it was this shyness that caused one of our premiers, Mitchell Hepburn, to close down the archives of the province. The closure caused no great popular outcry.

Thinkers: in particular, Richard Maurice Bucke, Harold Innis, and David Willson, the heretic Quaker. Philosophy journals in Ontario ignore these men and murmur instead about the Scottish Kantians at Queen's.

Painters: David Milne writes as well as he paints, and Bucke's theosophy has a great deal to do with the look of Lawren Harris' abstracts as well as his earlier landscapes.

People: most graduate students know only their peers and the famous dead. Asked to interview a professional trapper, a botanist who collects stories about his township's seven idiots, or an old woman who once ran a ferry on the Sydenham River, they have been known to tremble in fear — at first.

Now we are ready — for what?

As I have implied, if the course were just Ontario literature, you would be missing a big echo chamber which we have now given you blueprints for. What are the resonances? Certainly not those of a Québécois-like Renaissance. The Bible still remains the best guide to our minds, and such poets as Rilke, Spenser, or Olson are apt to mean more to our poets than Crawford or Willson, or Lampman, and rightly so. Nevertheless, the student may have seen one of the most unpopular and misunderstood Canadian provinces as a big poem rather than an elusive mystery or an exercise in materialism. If the reader can see this as desirable, it would certainly to my mind justify this rather curious course I have in the last fifteen years so enjoyed teaching, and in the last few weeks, up in the Middlesex Memorial Tower, also, however briefly, enjoyed describing.

NOTES

- ¹ “The bathroom is the most important room in the house” is an Ontario saying.
- ² Another Ontario folk saying is that particularly in photographs, Ontario people never touch each other.
- ³ What does Archibald Lampman mean by “shore-larks”?
- ⁴ As in Robert C. Stead’s *Grain*.
- ⁵ It may be that the province is physically too big. Students discovered that John A. Macdonald wanted the prairies to have the Lakehead harbours. But, no, our greedy premier, Oliver Mowat, too foxy for the Manitoba lawyers, pushed us west as far as Kenora.
- ⁶ Royce McGillivray has written a fantasy history of Ontario, parodying the local histories. Perhaps after this uninhibited account, he could attempt the untried.

