

THE CANADIAN CLIMATE

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BECAUSE I WAS BORN AND RAISED in the United States and came to Canada for the first time when I was twenty-five and have now lived over half my life here, I should feel more self-consciously Canadian than a native of the country, more defensively Canadian, if you like. I have written a defensive essay for *The Globe and Mail* called "Canadian Enough," having to do with what I see as my right to be known as a Canadian writer. What really distinguishes me from native writers is my lack of defensiveness about Canada.

I was not raised to think that anything Canadian is second rate. I was, like most Americans, entirely ignorant of Canada. My geographic insight was limited to the certain knowledge that I lived in the greatest country on earth. Living in England and travelling in Europe shortly after World War II, I discovered large numbers of people who did not feel simple gratitude for America's having won the war and having provided the Marshall Plan for Europe's recovery. Nor were people generally convinced that the threat of world communism justified the purges McCarthy was initiating in the United States. I was asked a number of embarrassing cultural as well as political questions about the rights of native Indians and blacks, about the incarceration of Japanese Americans during the war.

When I returned to my own country, I didn't any longer feel at home there. The patriotism which required citizens to be proudly, blindly loyal seemed a peculiar American vice which I no longer shared. In England, though I had not been particularly welcomed as an American, I had been encouraged as a young writer, met with others like me to discuss work, talked with published writers who offered introductions to their publishers. In the States I was, because I hadn't published, dealt with as someone deluded, shut out of the jealously guarded, narrow professionalism of publishing. At the Stanford Writing School, where I expected to meet others like me, I found instead a focus on commercialism and negative competition. We were not being groomed for the long apprenticeship required of a writer but for another American dream: American writers spring onto the scene full grown, out of the head of Zeus, with best sellers as noisy as the atom bomb.

After teaching on the east coast for two years and saving enough money to take a year off for my own writing, I returned to California to visit my family and

incidentally took a trip north with a cousin who had never seen the redwoods. We drove as far as Vancouver only because an English friend of mine had been hired by U.B.C. and I thought I might scout out an apartment for him.

We arrived on a clear August day in 1956, and there before us was a city of human scale (the only two highrises were B.C. Hydro and the Vancouver Hotel) defined by thirty miles of accessible beaches and the mountains of the north shore rising abruptly into forest wilderness. As we drove along the tree-lined streets, seeing gardens as loved as English gardens, then out through the grant lands to a university on cliffs overlooking the sea, I kept wondering why nobody had ever told me of this place, so rarely beautiful, on a coast I'd known all my life. Until that day, that coast had ended for me at Seattle.

It was a good time in the city's history for its aspiring young. The university was expanding by thousands each year. The CBC was in a period of regional assertiveness. The first really professional selling gallery, The New Design, had just been established. From the beginning of my life in Vancouver there was work to do, marking papers and tutoring students for the U.B.C. English department, reading TV scripts for CBC, free-lance broadcasting. When I again needed a full-time job, I was Assistant Director of International House the year the new building was opened. Then I taught in the English department, for, though I had only an honours B.A. in English and a casual year's graduate work in England, the university needed more teachers than they could find for the hugely expanding enrollment. The four-month-long summer holidays gave me free time to get on with writing.

In those early years the McConnells hosted a writers' group where I met Bob Harlow, Phyllis Webb, Anne Marriott, and Marya Fiamengo. Bob Patchell, a producer for CBC, was also a member of that group and bought a story of mine he'd heard there for *Anthology*. The McConnells founded their own publishing house, Klanak Press, and brought out an anthology of our short stories, *Klanak Islands*.

A group of artists of all sorts gathered to form The Arts Club. I was on its first board of directors with Geof Massey, architect; Tak Tanabe, painter; and Alvin Balkind, director of New Design Gallery. When we rented a building in downtown Vancouver, even Lawren Harris, one of the Group of Seven painters, came down to help clean it up and redecorate it with us. Nearly all the painters belonged, John Korner, Jack Shadbolt, Gordon Smith. Arthur Erickson was a member and gave a wonderful lecture on the process of designing his legendary Comox house. The writers gave readings. I first heard Dorothy Livesay's poetry there. In the early days we didn't have the money which was later available to turn the Arts Club into a theatre club as well, but it gave us all a meeting place, provided us with a community of friends as well as an audience.

Though I published very little in my first half-dozen years in Vancouver, I felt supported by that community of artists. The university provided me with a living, but no university is a very good climate for a young writer since academics need to distinguish between "literature," so worthy of their devotion, and "creative writing," practiced by dabblers without Ph.D.'s or by themselves in semi-secret. Among other artists, my calling was considered neither silly nor pretentious but the hard, long, lonely work it was. We celebrated when any one of us had a show, a performance, a building, something published. And a remarkable number of us survived to take our places not only on the local and national scenes but to international accomplishments and recognition, far more than any people I had known in the States or England.

So for me Vancouver was a remarkably rich and nourishing place, and increasingly I felt I belonged there. More gradually I began to have a sense of British Columbia. As a university chaperone, I toured the province with the Players' Club, presenting Tennessee Williams' *Glass Menagerie* to places as isolated as Bralorne, the gold mining town, as far north as Smithers and Prince George, all through the Okanagan. We were billeted and entertained by local people. Still populated by immigrants, it was a west much younger than the western United States. In British Columbia a dozen cultures mingled uncertainly in towns, in small towns isolated by great reaches of wilderness, mountains, deserts, lakes, and rivers, and I felt the more a part of it because I was an immigrant, too.

IT TOOK LONGER FOR ME to have a sense of Canada as a country. When I travelled, I went either south to see my family and friends or to Europe which went on offering me insights into art, history, my own experience. My first published novel, *Desert of the Heart*, was first accepted by Macmillan of Canada. In the early 1960's it was still nearly unheard of for a novel to be published in Canada alone. Mine was accepted on the condition that I find either an American or English publisher to share the costs. Since the book was set in Nevada, it seemed sensible to look for an American publisher. Nearly two years later, when it had been rejected by twenty American firms, I took the manuscript to England where it was accepted by Secker and Warburg, the first publisher to see it. When the book came out and was reviewed across Canada as well as in England, I felt welcomed by the country as I had not been by my own, which took yet another year to publish the book to a silence so familiar to first novels there.

If I hadn't been living in Canada, my long apprenticeship might never have come to an end. Yet the native Canadian writers all around me were more often

bitter at the lack of opportunity in Canada, the necessity of commanding a market either in England or the States before they could be heard here. They felt cut off from the rich markets to the south, claiming that American publishers weren't interested in Canadian material. My own experience made me think that American publishers weren't interested in American material either but only in success; for, once I'd been published in England and Canada, American magazine editors began to accept my work. They didn't seem to me prejudiced against Canadian settings, only against unknown writers.

Redbook once asked me to name the city a thousand miles from Seattle from which one of my characters was driving and suggested Winnipeg. Winnipeg? The city a thousand miles away from Seattle is San Francisco, but *Redbook* thought of me as Canadian and therefore chose Winnipeg. After my initial surprise, I happily concurred.

When I exchanged my envied and disliked American citizenship for Canadian, I did not take on the defensive bitterness that seemed to be a Canadian birth-right. At first I felt modestly guilty when I travelled in Europe, enjoying a friendly welcome I hadn't received as an ugly American. Though living in Canada had changed me, had given me a sense of citizenship I'd never felt in the States, I knew that I had not really become someone else. It helped me to remember that one set of my great-grandparents had gone from Nova Scotia to northern California to settle. I was named for that great-grandmother. I had personal roots to claim in Canada.

I had never applied for an American grant. Educated in the west, I had a notion that without any connection with the eastern establishment, I had no chance of success. I had to apply four times for a Canada Council grant before I was given one, but it was extended for another remarkable year during which I could continue to confirm myself as a professional writer and serve my craft with the intensity of attention that is essential for its maturing.

I have since served on juries for Canada Council. Though women and westerners are not fairly represented either on juries or as successful candidates, it is a quite remarkably good system for supporting artists in Canada. Canada Council is not a patriarchal charity as some of the big American foundations seem to me. It is an organization susceptible to change and improvement.

The Writers' Union of Canada is another institution envied by Americans who are just now trying to organize their own. It's very unlikely that any agent of their government will be willing, as the Canada Council is, to pay the travel expenses of every member of the Writers' Union to attend annual general meetings in or near Toronto or Ottawa. As a result of being able to meet once a year, members from the most remote regions of the country have an opportunity to be active members and don't feel that the organization is really for the benefit of

the eastern establishment only. Also it gives them a yearly opportunity to call on their own publishers, on book stores. Though most of us care about our increasing lobbying force on issues like copyright laws, pay for public use of books in libraries, and rely on the Union to help us with contract disputes with publishers, to organize reading tours, it is our sense of professional community which is most important to us.

Publishing, like all other business, is suffering hard times. For perhaps ten years, aided by substantial grants from the government, publishers were able to accept Canadian books for the Canadian market without having to seek publishers in either England or the States. Now again Canadian writers are having to find other markets for their books to be published in Canada at all. My last two books have not had Canadian publishers because the only one interested wanted international rights without having the staff to handle the distribution problems of that larger market. I have also had to go to the States to find publishers willing to reprint my books and keep them in print for the growing academic market for them, both in Canada and the United States.

Canadian publishers haven't yet taken full advantage of the remarkable changes taking place both in Canadian schools and universities which now for the first time are offering a variety of courses in Canadian literature. Imitating the establishment publishers in the States, they are trying to sell books like cottage cheese, the hardbacks stamped "Best read within six months," the paperbacks, "Good for six weeks," thereby losing the entire academic market, for the books are out of print before there is time to put them on reading lists, and it often takes years before they are reprinted. We have too few small presses staffed well enough to serve their own backlists as well as they should. In the States, where small presses have to depend on sales rather than grants to survive, both writers and readers are at present better served.

Nevertheless, my American reprints are noticed in the Canadian media. Though too few books written by Canadians are reviewed in newspapers and magazines, we have better radio coverage than any American writer can hope for. Though we don't have much TV coverage for selling books, CBC is commissioning scripts for both radio and TV adaptation of stories and novels. The extra income as well as the increased audience has helped a number of us to stay at our desks.

Very few artists in any country ever make a handsome living, and even fewer of those who do make a lasting contribution to their cultures. Canada, with all its real limitations, most severe of which is its inferiority complex, is a remarkably good place to begin a writing career. It also has a greater opportunity than many other countries to distinguish between those books which are something like cottage cheese and those which are important as part of our heritage. Canada is

still able to design institutions on a human scale. We are increasingly supportive of our gifted young. We are growing in our awareness of the strength of our own literature. Courses in Canadian literature are now being offered in universities all over the world.

Most writers are defensive about any label that has a potential for limiting their audience, whether it is “woman,” “black,” “academic,” “regional,” “popular,” or “lesbian.” Unlike some writers, I like the label “Canadian.” I chose it, feel at home with it, and know it travels very well in the world.

