

# ON COMING TO BRITISH COLUMBIA

## *Some Personal & Literary Reflections*

*David Watmough*

**O**F ALL THE BANES AND BENISONS afforded by life in coastal British Columbia, the relative isolation is surely the greatest blessing that could befall a writer. This has certainly proved to be my own experience — over a period roughly commensurate with the life of *Canadian Literature* whose Jubilee we are currently celebrating.

In 1959, when I first saw Victoria and Vancouver, I was wholly ignorant of such matters. Indeed, all my initial responses to Vancouver, and by extension, British Columbia and Canada-over-the-Rockies, were quite negative. Coming immediately from the United States where I had arrived in 1952, I was unprepared for the residual puritanism I encountered. The only cheerful thing about Sundays was the name: otherwise it was no bars, no theatres, no restaurants. And I was to learn shortly thereafter, no internationally competitive literature, no important playwriting or serious composing. Yes, there was a slight painting activity, but that was characterized by being a pale and hesitant replica of an already wan watercolour tradition of nineteenth-century British genesis.

What did I find to like then? Or why the hell did I stay? My responses to those questions were not exactly original. I loved the beauty of the landscape, and from my natal Western European viewpoint, the weather represented a happy homecoming after years as a restless inhabitant of New York humidity and California climatic monotony. Here again, thank God, was the “gentle rain” of Portia which could be so happily twinned to mercy!

However, the flora and fauna were for the most part alien to me and as a writer for whom it has always been important to accurately invoke my natural environment, I immediately set myself the task of learning a new landscape by heart. It wasn't until 1973 that a book compiled by the Vancouver Natural History Society entitled *Nature West Coast: As seen in Lighthouse Park* appeared, but it immediately became my secular bible and I applied myself to the task of familiarizing myself with its contents in a detailed manner.

This establishment (or re-establishment, in my case) of roots in the sense emphasized by Simone Weil in her book *L'Enracinement* is something to which the geographic, social, and historical soil of Vancouver and its environs is peculiarly susceptible. For there is no heavy weight of history on a city only now celebrating its centenary; and in a climate which never shouts snow and ice and parching drought but only whispers rain, there is little problem in coming to terms for either the immigrant from east of the Fraser Valley, or east of the Atlantic Ocean. And for the writer who needs the silence and space of separation, the venue has an allure and an informing sense which I believe is both progressively and properly discernible in the subsequent literary expressions of those who have settled here.

Although the various *thralls* of literary fashion, common to all North American creative writing (but perhaps particularly with poetry) are to be evidenced in the coastal strip of British Columbia, my perception is that the orthodoxy is less intense here. Which, of course, in comparison with our more meteorologically dramatic neighbour to the south as an example, is hardly surprising. It has long amused me that media people, from comics to commentators, based in central Canada, will confidently speak of *Canadian* weather and thus climatically disenfranchise some million and three quarters Canadians of the Greater Vancouver and Vancouver Island areas.

But the error moves from geographic ignorance to cultural blindness as the arts of the coast deepen with time and accumulatively take on the colour and clime of the unique region sustaining them. That blindness, unfortunately, is prevalent across contemporary Canada but my confidence is that the steady evolution of literary patterns in B.C., and the deepening of roots, will make the divergences of expression facilely visible, even to a child, by the end of the century. Using the United States as example, we readily accept the literary ethos of The South or Nineteenth-Century New England, the mid-West idiom of a Sherwood Anderson or Sinclair Lewis, and the fictionally defined West of such as Wallace Stegner, John Steinbeck, and Walter van Tilburg Clark. However, we of the Canadian west coast are not yet as evolved as the American counterparts. We have, for just a little while longer, to relegate these promptings to the realm of the intangible and imprecise: just gut feelings, perhaps, for the close observer of our west coast writing, and the practitioner aware of these influences upon himself and his peers in both poetry and prose.

But my specific concern in these reflections is to delineate my own literary growth as it has been moulded by the decision to pitch my tent permanently in Kitsilano, the Vancouver neighbourhood which has been my home ever since I arrived in the city. It has been a growth that while being definitely influenced by the isolation from centralist pressures of fashion and the decisions of critics and

reviewers who are contingent upon the Great Lakes literary establishment, nevertheless has been both sharply formed and fed by certain literary structures much closer to home. For a variety of reasons — not least because I was never invited — I did not take the Creative Writing School/English Department route of many of my colleagues. This meant that I was forced to rely on such ancillary activities as literary journalism in both the print and electronic media to provide a livelihood as I pursued my fiction. In the 1960's this proved adequate. I could make a reasonable if not extravagant living from newspapers, magazines, and above all, from the CBC in both radio and TV. But by the end of that first decade which had seen my Canadian citizenship, my forging profound links with fellow writers and other artists, I could see that I had to make some hard decisions which would basically affect my life and — for me of paramount importance — the proper husbandry of what artistic talent I possessed.

**T**HE PRIMARY RESULT, at the subjective, personal level, of the first stirrings of that long-drawn process of centralization of Canadian culture as exemplified within the CBC, was my decision to look for a further source of income to sustain the fiction “habit.” And this I did by taking my individual chronicles of my ongoing protagonist, Davey Bryant, and make “monodramas” out of them by *performing* them in theatres or venues which at least had such theatrical appurtenances as lighting systems and some kind of stage on which I could place a music stand and thus perform (rather than merely read) my adapted and modified short stories, prose poems, or chapters. The initial result was not only a critical success but fiscally gratifying too. Within a year I had given over two hundred monodrama presentations, and by the third year more than thrice that number at venues across Canada, the United States, and in England and West Germany.

But the very success of the project was also the source of its lethal problems. To expand further I added the resources of a personal manager, and that in turn led to all the costly paraphernalia of publicity (pamphlets, posters, handbills, etc.), and very soon my writerly self was in acute danger of being swamped by a theatrical self which was as false to my being as it was uncongenial. To make matters worse, the cost of creating and promoting a slick theatrical package necessitated my spending more and more time “on the road.” Apart from the fact that I could see myself getting further and further into debt and having to move frenziedly for ever more bookings, I was denying myself the adequate amount of time at my desk to write. In fact it was that chafing restriction, plus the discomfort of endless travel to give performances, that finally determined my decision to call it quits. It is not without significance, I think, that it was only

after the period of presenting monodramas that I could experiment with the various other literary forms that I have subsequently used in the purveying of the life of Davey Bryant. For example, to come up with the linked chronicles I used in the structure of my quasi-novel, *No More into the Garden*.

I do not think it takes an excess of sanguinity to believe, as I now do, that the acquired craft of turning story into playscript for monodrama presentation, and then once more into the narrative of the short story or the sequential chronicle, provided me with a profound awareness of my own writing in unique degree — sentence by sentence, word by word. Not that the labelling, *per se*, is of any significance, speaking objectively. Then I think that our Creative Writing Schools do a disservice to literature in their dividing up of fiction into neat genre concepts and thus courses for students to take. Such appellations are, of course, practical and valuable for the scholar and critic, but it is too often a suffocation, or at least a manacle, for the creative writer.

Once more I elected to live the west coast isolation and returned gladly to the restrictions of the desk. However, this only proved possible in the light of reduced local markets from the CBC and the lesser fees for mere readings after negotiated fees for full-blown performances, by the subsidy of a domestic partner to handle such basics as food, rent, and transportation. I have more than once wondered if the overall picture of cultural Canada will ever include the nature and amount of subsidization that is yielded from the partners of the creative artists who compose it. Perhaps a requisite statue to *The Unknown Subsidiser*, faceless and genderless, should adorn our downtown squares and civic parks. . . . Of course, the coming to a new place to live and create, even granted a familiar type of climate and the freedom from the imposition of alien fashions, doesn't guarantee a growth and perfecting of one's work. In many respects I came to west coast Canada with a literary *signature* evolved and with a style already set. And one of the costs, perhaps for me the most important one as a writer, is to have come to Canada when the *a priori* constituents of my style and voice were the bases of an irritation which native-born Canadians simply had to throw off in order to quicken the tempo of cultural expression and find their own appropriate stances and voices. As it happens I do not discern any signs whatsoever of there being such in any uniquely Canadian way. The literary emancipation I have observed all about me since I entered Canada as an immigrant has taken place in the cast of a *North American* sensibility and a *North American* literary language. I have heard, of course, of those maple leaf nationalists who scream otherwise. But I remain unconvinced. There is no third dialect between British and American English which affords Canadians their own literary oxygen.

But I digress. What I wish to stress is that although I happily pay the price of being a British immigrant writer living in contemporary Canada I am by no

means blind to the cost or fail to see it working continuously in my professional life. Let me elaborate. There was a time, for several years in fact, when I confused my Canadian enthusiasm with my British literary background and, indeed, discounted the latter. The west coast isolation may well have compounded the fact. It was not until I made an LP album in Toronto of three of my monodramas under the heading of *Pictures from a Dying Landscape* which strove to wed my voice to my Cornish texts that I think the seeds of my proper self-awareness as a *New Canadian* were effectively planted.

Had I been a poet then the problem — if such it is — would never have arisen. For the divergence between British and North American poetry is so great today that we might just as well be talking about two languages as disparate as Spanish and Italian. And the harsh corollary of that is the poet writing in the British idiom has little chance of publication or developing a serious reputation in this country or the U.S.A.

In the summer of 1981 I was talking to the Australian-born poet Peter Porter who has made London his home since the 1950's. Discussing this matter of poetic idioms for the various English-speaking countries he flatly took the view that, essentially, no one community is slightly interested in another at this juncture. That just as neither he, nor Larkin, nor Redgrove would command much interest or enthusiasm in Canada, nor would our contemporary poetic luminaries rate high in the United Kingdom. For better or worse, the several English-language cultures nurture a poetry that shares only the words themselves.

The situation is less dramatic in prose but exists in some significant degree. What it boils down to, I think, is the very *raison d'être* of English creative language at this point in time. If it is the honed communication of experience, ideas, and spirit of place, then the current North American style (within which, of course, exist the personal signatures of individual literary artists) admirably fulfils that function and aesthetic. But with the British idiom, the aesthetic goal is more a balance of semantic communication with modal sound and a word-play which often appears as prolix if that British attitude towards words as sound and ikon doesn't receive special acceptance. It is an attitude which stems from a culture which is primarily literary rather than visual and the difference is underscored in every television street interview from London, New York, or Toronto.

The distinction is also indicated in alliteration and a thirst for synonym and breadth of vocabulary which are perceived as desirable aims in the conveyance of literary image or within the general fabric of story-telling. It marks the difference between the tales of an Ethel Wilson (who had that British tradition to draw upon), a V. S. Pritchett, and a Nadine Gordimer, on the one hand, and a John Cheever, an Alice Munro, and a Mordecai Richler on the other.

The trouble is that while we have a ready awareness of our spoken differences

in terms of accent and employed rhythms — as immediate example I think of the Carson McCullers title: *Ballad of the Sad Café*, which can hardly be rendered aloud with British stresses, or at least not as a satisfactory title — the written, i.e., *silent*, word, is more elusive. So that I only gradually grew aware that my prose fiction tended to find favour with those whose inner ear detected, and more important, appreciated, that approach of mine which was determined, I suspect, before I was in my Cornish teens.

This is in no way to deny other factors in a writer's prose — extending all the way from just plain good or bad writing to those subjective factors which appeal to one reader and not to another. But my personal coming to terms with a further isolation than my British Columbian geographical one was an important if painful step in my overall accommodation to a niche in the west coast literary scene. But the realization and acceptance of that fact led me to a further awareness which has finally afforded me a confidence which I doubt I might ever have had had I not chosen to make Vancouver my own deeply felt, personal territory. It is an awareness of the sheer *literariness* of the goal I pursue in my Davey Bryant chronicles which, in their aggregate, I hope will add up to a panoramic "novel" of one man and his century: his private history against the backdrop of the public one.

LIVING IN A PLACE where the salal is a screen, the arbutus a visual caress and the mountains a protection, I have learned to ask myself only one question with every page. Can this be immediately translated to the screens of film or television? If so, and to the degree that it is so, I have failed the ultimate literary vision. The word-play, the verbal juxtaposition, the apportionment of adjective and adverb, the pursuit of the truly apt word from the riches of choice our language uniquely affords — these are my most fervent and exhilarating concerns. But here lie treacherous waters. An exceptionally high doctrine over verbal texture and deliberate richness of vocabulary can all too easily lead to an artificiality and self-consciousness so heavy that it can submerge the sense in the writing. Even the pursuance of what in a Dylan Thomas was often called "a poetic prose," that is an honouring of words for their own sake, invariably has a marked cost in terms of readers. I have learned from my mail as well as critical commentary upon my work that it relies for its appeal on a very restricted kind of public. And here again I am grateful for that intensive experience I have had in public reading which taught me to liberate the word from the page, to create a performance and thus reach a further audience. For I am convinced that for every *reader* an author has a potential *listener* and one of the most signal and encouraging signs of our Canadian literary growth has been in this particular

area. When I arrived in Canada the ability of women, particularly, to deliver their poetry (none offered prose) was abysmal. Generations of Scots-puritan teaching that young girls should either be mute or soft-voiced as testament to their femininity and sexual purity resulted in an array of female poets who either whispered their words or self-consciously preached them in a sonorous, parsonical fashion that was as monotonous as it was irritating. Indeed, this great blasphemy against the spoken word has still not been entirely banished from the land. I still hear women poets who should leave their poetry to the vocal imaginations of others. There are more than enough men who are equally awful, but correspondingly, there are fewer men in current Canada comparable in poetic or prose talent to the distaff contingent. That, of course, has nothing to do with women's liberation or sexist balancing but a plain observation. It may well be otherwise tomorrow.

When the cultural self-confidence which erupted across the whole country in the 1960's reached these western shores it did not seem to Cornish-influenced me to express itself in any strong regional intensity but, taking the United States as rôle model, was generally content to express North American experience through Canadian voices. Only gradually did the sense of specific place start to seep into narrative. And here I am certainly not referring to a peppering of prose with topographical data. I mean the effective use of place as backdrop to character or gesture, and the impact of place as an objective informant of the people one creates and the moods evoked. This process is quite different from the utilization of place-as-mood for the purposes of a Sinclair Ross in *As For Me and My House*, or the Canada-based novels of Margaret Laurence or Richler's Montreal-based Jewish cosmos. But mood in such cases is more palpable than place. What is now beginning to develop is the *concretization* of literary place in Canada which is more comparable to a Hardy's Wessex or *Les Landes* of a François Mauriac.

The British Columbia I inhabit is particularly susceptible to this manner of literary regionalism, and the city of Vancouver distinctive enough to give urban reinforcement to the geo-meteorological world of the coastal belt. Free of the grip of a centralist conception and the oppressive paraphernalia of irrelevant cultural "capitals," I perceive the steady evolution of a fiction, even of a poetry, which is quintessentially *of its place* and only "Canadian" in that it is no part of the United States. If labels are a necessary clarification then second-century British Columbia might be likened to the relation of Wales or the Celtic West to the rest of the United Kingdom. The Brittany or Provence, if you like, of metropolitan France. If that is so, then at a personal creative level with my Cornish-Celtic background, I have perhaps not journeyed artistically very far at all from that other beautiful and distinctive land of my upbringing and literary shaping.