

OF QUEBEC, LATELY

AS A TITLE, "The Arts in Canada — The Last Fifty Years" has something of the sound of doomsday about it. And in these days of economic pressure on the arts — compounded, perhaps, by the kinds of political turmoil that Hugh MacLennan so ably evokes in his new novel *Voices in Time* — one might be forgiven for reading the title so dyspeptically. In fact it is celebratory and retrospective rather than gloomily prophetic, and is the title given to the *University of Toronto Quarterly's* fiftieth anniversary issue (also published separately as volume 261 in the University of Toronto Press' University Paperbook series). It thus offers a public occasion to congratulate the editors, past and present, for having sustained the quality of the journal over several decades, and for continuing to serve Canadian society by continuing to serve and celebrate the life of the mind.

There are more specific ways in which the *Quarterly* has engaged with Canadian literature: in the occasional article, either directly on a literary text or more often on cultural background; in the dauntingly inclusive notices which appear in its annual "Letters in Canada" survey; and, of course, in an issue like "The Arts in Canada." This issue includes survey articles by George Woodcock on anglophone non-fiction in Canada since 1930, by Jacques Allard on all aspects of book production in Quebec, and by Northrop Frye on progress in the arts; it also includes a number of more personal commentaries: Michèle Lalonde's "Petit Testament," explaining why, in poetry, "la prose est indécente et l'humeur subversif," and Gratien Gélinas's professional "credo." I found the most arresting articles to be among this latter group: for example, Hugh MacLennan's autobiographical account of changes affecting opportunities for writers to publish, changes in the nature of fiction between 1930 and 1980, and changes in the economics of publishing — a commentary which reads almost like a footnote to *Voices in Time*. Robertson Davies writes barbed reflections on the differences between creation and performance, between comedy and commerce, between national theatrical heritage and national dramatic limits; Ralph Gustafson's piece is a pyrotechnic revelation

of poetic process, which incidentally attacks the conventional view of Canada as a land of inferior people terrorized by their own landscape; Godfrey Ridout's account of fifty years of Canadian music comes with the disarming subtitle "Good Lord, I Was There for All of Them!" And Gérard Bessette's partly autobiographical, partly historical, partly polemical commentary on Quebec fiction manages at once to trace lines of development, draw attention to a large number of writers (many of them still unknown in translation), and make fine discriminations among them.

"Attention must be paid . . .," one thinks, passively, after commentaries like these. But who pays attention, actively? Who makes the works, so many unknown, widely available to readers? And who reads? As part of a postscript to "The Arts in Canada," W. J. Keith and Ben-Zion Shek record various phases of the history of their journal, and Shek writes: "One of the most significant aspects of the annual 'Letters in Canada' feature . . . has been its treatment of publications in French. Indeed, the journal has presented the longest continuous yearly review of francophone letters in the country, dating back to 1937." He adds:

In his first review [Felix] Walter . . . took issue with the historian A. R. M. Lower who, in an article entitled 'In Unknown Quebec,' published in October 1936, had given short shrift to Quebec letters. Walter wrote: 'Far from agreeing with this writing-down of the merits of French-Canadian literature, it seems to me that, from the turn of the century at any rate, French-Canadian novelists, poets and critics have been marching steadily away from the 'romantic,' the 'tepid' and the 'stylistic. . . .'

With time, of course, perspectives change. It is now possible to see that the "romantic" was not so much left behind as reinvented by Quebec writers, that francophone writing in Canada is anything but tepid, and that critical fashion has once more claimed "stylistic" as a term of praise rather than a term of censure. After the Quiet Revolution, the October Crisis, the Referendum Debates, and the Montreal Olympics, it might even be impossible to write a satisfactory article called "In Unknown Quebec" any more. But despite an active government programme in support of translation, and despite a certain academic interest in Roch Carrier, Hubert Aquin, and Marie-Claire Blais, francophone *writers* still remain largely unknown in anglophone Canada. And because anglophones do not appreciate the significance that many Québécois attach to particular writers — Langevin is familiar as the author of books studied at school, Vigneault as a political *chanteur*, Ferron as the cultural mythographer, Aquin as an intellectual symbol (one of the buildings at l'Université du Québec à Montréal is called Pavillon Hubert-Aquin) — the social dimensions of Québécois culture remain at least still unfamiliar outside the province.

There are journals to which one can go for instruction, though they are not widely available on magazine racks: *Ellipse*, *Liberté*, *Québec/Amérique*, *Voix et*

Images, Livres et auteurs québécois, Ecritures françaises, Les Lettres québécoises. Since it began in 1959, *Canadian Literature*, too, has attempted to take account of Canadian writing in French as well as that in English. But many writers still remain undistributed, unstocked, unread, and unknown in the reading community at large. The results of the translation programme may well already be altering this state of affairs, but general awareness depends more on mass market paperback distribution than on the simple availability of a translated text, whatever its quality. I was reminded of this fact a few years ago, at a public symposium in the late 1970's, when it became clear that the only Quebec novelists who were widely known were Gabrielle Roy and Roger Lemelin. These writers were familiar because they had appeared in McClelland & Stewart's New Canadian Library. (Which demonstrates the utility and importance of this series, despite its limitations; the uncertainty of the future of the series is therefore cause for concern.) But the point about the familiarity of Roy and Lemelin had another dimension. Many of the people who were acquainted with these two writers felt, whether consciously or unconsciously, that such an acquaintance made them familiar with the entire spectrum of Quebec fiction. Somehow Roy and Lemelin — and increasingly Roy alone, despite her Manitoba roots — came to represent all that was modern about Quebec society, all that was true about Quebec lifestyles, all that was innovative about francophone literature. Clearly, Gabrielle Roy's accomplishment is substantial, and her modernism continues to develop; but it is not all-inclusive. Nor does it any longer serve to see foremost in her work — or to accept as the most recent development in Quebec writing — a rejection of the rural expectations and clerical biases of an earlier time. That was a stage of the 1940's and 1950's. More recent writing has accommodated itself to the rural past and the clerical presence; it has focussed more directly and politically than before on the plight of women and the possibility of independence; it has shaped the fable into a high political art, and has probed the passionate and often amoral recesses of emotional behaviour.

The 1960's and 1970's saw a great many talented writers change the textures of fiction in Quebec. To say that the work of Gérard Bessette, Yves Thériault, and André Langevin constitutes a kind of transition into the new idiom is not to diminish its contemporaneity; to call Victor-Lévy Beaulieu, Michel Tremblay, Louky Bersianik, and Nicole Brossard currently the most experimental does not deny them the traditional role of artists: to elucidate the human condition. In between lie various territories: the subterranean worlds of Hubert Aquin and Marie-Claire Blais, the comic worlds of Roch Carrier and Jacques Ferron, the verifiable worlds of Jacques Godbout and Anne Hébert, the singularly stylized worlds of André Major, Jacques Benoit, Réjean Ducharme, and Jacques Poulin. These and other writers have already accomplished much, have already devised works that are stylistically sure and psychologically exploratory. They will appeal

to different tastes, and will affect other writers, in Quebec and outside it, separately. But we should also remind ourselves of the obvious: that fifty years from now, another retrospective on the arts in Canada may well be looking back to this time, reflecting on the individual talents and on the collective burst of literary energy which in these decades in Quebec have contributed so remarkably and so variously to the national heritage.

W.N.

EDGES:

Douglas Barbour

& how they edge closer in
 sight in
 situ
 here
 the long white stretch of beach below
 the grey rocks
 seas edge
 grey & glittering
 metallic

edge
 the sun in clouds the clouds
 edging in
 over that edgy
 ranging glitter
 & beside me
 standing on edge
 1 great green tree
 i touch .

the edge .