

A SHAPING CONTEXT

IN MANY WAYS, INTELLECTUAL HISTORY can be seen as a series of articulate relationships between a people, its place, its time, and its institutions. By “institutions” I mean a variety of structures. People are who they are partly because of their church and their school, their form of government and their banking system, the holidays they celebrate and the newspapers they read. And they are who they are in Canada in large part because of the various roles of the Roman Catholic orders, Ryerson’s Methodism, and the Anglicanism of Bishop Medley and Bishop Strachan; because of Joseph Howe’s and Goldwin Smith’s and René Lévesque’s journalism; because of the nineteenth-century influence of Queen’s University, Laval, McGill, Dalhousie, and the University of Toronto; because of systems that allow into existence things like Royal Commissions, Legal Aid, labour unions, and Letters to the Editor. Through such channels we have been trained, sometimes constrained (certainly, as John Porter pointed out some years ago in the *Vertical Mosaic*, they helped stratify Canadian society and organize levels of power); at the same time we use the freedom of expression that they have led us to desire as touchstones of other values as well.

“Place” and “time” refer to equally varied concepts — not just to locale and contemporaneity but also to more general attitudes toward the nature and functions of space and tradition. “Space” involves a sense of relationship — whether hemispheric or personal — which in turn constitutes one of the chief elements in people’s intellectual preference for centralized and hierarchical or regional and diversified systems of order. Attitudes toward “home” and “here” punctuate postcolonial as well as colonial writing, linking place with political allegiance. A sense of place affects government, therefore, through definitions of cultural “unity” and notions concerning the virtues of regional and ethnic variation. It affects economics, through principles of land ownership (the private home, the CPR grant, the church estates). It affects many of the principles of design in art and architecture. It affects communications theory, transportation means, and the identification (as in Innis and McLuhan) of transport with communication

in a spatial age. A sense of space also affects ecological attitude: Malcolm Lowry, for example, identified an idea of “wilderness” with Canada’s true soul; land was to enjoy rather than develop. In an entirely different context (a 1978 book from Arno Press entitled *Ernest Thompson Seton: Man in Nature and the Progressive Era 1880-1915*), John Wadland charts the functional disparities between technological aspirations and biological necessities, and the organizational and philosophical ones between Seton’s pantheistic “Woodcraft Indians” and the institutionally more successful Boy Scout Movement of America. Being in and on and of the landscape differs widely from being owner over it, and in the rational basis for this distinction lies much of the history of twentieth-century Canadian social change, industrial growth, American connection, and literary concern.

“Time,” clearly, is involved in such change. To extrapolate its meaning to involve “tradition” is to see its involvement also in various institutional survivals and in matters like Canada’s regional-central dispute. Linear notions of tradition tend to define culture centrally and singly: a frame of mind which Creighton, Grant, Frye, and Abbé Groulx all enunciate, though separately and differently. Alternative notions of tradition — brachiate, perhaps, or discontinuous, or multi-nuclear — emphasize disparities and simultaneities instead, as in Eli Mandel’s *doppelgänger* poems, or Robert Kroetsch’s *Seed Catalogue*, or possibly Marshall McLuhan’s *Understanding Media*. Tied with this distinction is yet another: between public polity and private belief, public myth and private ritual. To grow within a culture does not necessarily mean to accept it wholly, nor does it mean to reject another utterly. And from this ambivalence derive still further connections between a nation’s art and a nation’s minds.

One must guard against easy generalizations about a national imagination, for there are many elements that go into the making of public traditions, and as many more that impel how people think and act privately. No truly creative writer serves only the state. No truly creative thinker draws ideas only from within a national boundary. And in Canada — which has inherited so many institutions, modified so many others, been further shaped as it deliberately leaves its borders open to immigration, transportation, and the free exchange of ideas and information — no claim that intellectual history is a purely national phenomenon could ever be satisfactorily countenanced. English, French, and American educators (and educations) have had their impact; Montalembert, Disraeli, Emerson, and Arnold, as well as Garneau, Macdonald, Haliburton, and Aubert de Gaspé, influenced Canada’s nineteenth-century experience. And the Canadian pantheon manages to include Greek muses, Norse gods, Christian saints, Jewish sages, Jung, Marx, Darwin, Freud, English travellers, American engineers, Shakespeare, Dickens, Voltaire, Locke, and Dewey. As well as Gandhi, Mohammed, Fanon, and Lao Tzu. The point is that people read widely, following their own minds along paths that others might or might not follow. Traditions constantly reconnect

and coalesce. And asking where ideas come from is consequently a question destined never to be answered with crisp finality.

Still, people do write and do exchange ideas, and there is ample justification for seeing in the ideas and beliefs and social movements of any time a context for literature. Who is Ralph Connor without his Presbyterianism? or Mazo de la Roche without her conservative imperialism? Understanding Charles Mair and *Pour la Patrie* requires an understanding of the Canada First Movement and Catholic nationalism; reading Dennis Lee and Jay MacPherson requires an appreciation of George Grant and Northrop Frye. Behind Jacques Ferron lies *parti pris*, and behind *parti pris* lies *Cité libre* as well. For Leacock there is Veblen; for Atwood there is Simone de Beauvoir; for Nichol there is McLuhan; for McLuhan there is Innis. And so on. We know that aesthetic values emerge from cultural values; analyzing and explaining the connections can lead us to an illumination both of a nation's intellectual heritage and the dimensions of its art. We also know that these values may well express only the set of mind of a particular group; hence it is also worth questioning the viability of such ideas as well as their literary impact, for we are jostled then into analyzing the depth of bias and the validity of axioms — such as the almost doctrinal environmentalism that surfaces in Canada — that have variously influenced artists' and historians' imaginations, critics' methodologies, and mythmakers' presuppositions.

When we examine ideas and attitudes, therefore, we are doing more than just cataloguing historical "facts"; we are engaging ourselves with the "fictions" of belief which as a society we have accepted — *despite* historical facts as often as because of them. Works like Carl Berger's *The Writing of Canadian History* (University of Toronto Press) and Serge Gagnon's *Le Québec et ses Historiens* (Les Presses de l'Université Laval) do more, then, than just itemize historiographical accomplishments; they also make clear the intellectual horizons that govern the shape of each generation's sense of itself and its potential. In this context it is perhaps worth reminding ourselves that Canada's potential was not always regarded as great. For Edward Gibbon Wakefield, one of Lord Durham's aides, a colony was in 1829 an uncivilized and even uncivilizable phenomenon — a notion which of course depended upon an assumption of the perfectibility (and the Englishness) of civilization. By the phrase "a new people," he wrote in *A Letter from Sydney*,

We mean . . . a people like what the Canadians will be, and the United States' Americans are — a people who, though they continually increase in number, make no progress in the art of living; who, in respect to wealth, knowledge, skill, taste, and whatever belongs to civilization, have degenerated from their ancestors; who are precluded from acquiring wealth except by the labour of slaves; whose education, though universal, stops before the age of puberty, and thus becomes, if not an evil, at least a dangerous thing, instead of the greatest good; who, ever on the

move, are unable to bring anything to perfection; whose opinions are only violent and false prejudices, the necessary fruit of ignorance; whose character is a compound of vanity, bigotry, obstinacy, and hatred most comprehensive, including whatever does not meet their own pinched notions of right; and who delight in a forced equality, not equality before the law only, but equality against nature and truth; an equality which, to keep the balance always even, rewards the mean rather than the great, and gives more honour to the vile than to the noble. . . . We mean, in two words, a people who become rotten before they are ripe.

The subjects Wakefield deemed worthy of notice — nature, economics, education, social equality, justice — are among those which have continued to preoccupy analysts of national life. But if we now believe that as Canadians we have an intellectual and cultural future, that is in large part due to the development over many decades of an intellectual and cultural past.

To examine the work of a selected group of clerics, historians, journalists, and teachers — from Ryerson to Groulx, Montalembert to Creighton, Smith to Woodcock, and Watson to Grant and Frye — is not, of course, to exhaust Canadian intellectual history or to clarify all of its connections with literature. There are other figures worthy of enquiry: among them Howe, Alline, Garneau, Hardin, Phillips Thompson, Agnes Macphail, Deacon, Sandwell, Vallières, and Frère Untel. There are other events and groups and movements: Imperial Federation, the Temperance league, *parti pris*, and ethnic fundamentalism; labour organizations, the Couchiching conferences, and journals like *Canadian Forum* and *Liberté*. There are other approaches to the study, and all the external influences to be explored. Focussing even briefly, however, on the flux of ideas in Canada, makes us aware of the solid social background that Canadian literature draws upon, and some of the processes, too, that continue to lead to the changing and shaping of a diverse culture.

W.H.N.

THE NIGHT COUNTRY

Alfred G. Bailey

The night enveloped lakes and
 hillocks of the broken country,
 night noises under their feet or
 somewhere in the shadowed nearness
 that seemed to brush their cheeks,
 to rise and sigh like a great
 breathing of the sky and earth.