

FREEDOM TO CHOOSE

“I DARE SAY, OUR LIVES will be Pindaric,” writes self-satisfied Ed Rivers towards the close of *The History of Emily Montague*. And after penning several more cheerful apothegms, he realizes what his friend Bell Fermor would likely interrupt to say: “Cela est bien dit, mon cher Rivers, mais il faut cultiver notre jardin.” All our lives have been tempered by these two attitudes: the categorizing impulses of the idealistic optimist have recurrently met the dampening realities of the pragmatic ironist. We have grown, individually and as a state, and we find ourselves with each new experience deciding whether to be “liberal” or “conservative” in our reaction to it: to embrace and accept or to reject and deny, to aspire towards a prospect or to hold to an accomplishment, to live for the certainties of possession or to live for the dreams of future and past.

There are, of course, “liberals” and “conservatives” of both persuasions, which suggests that the way we see problems (as propositions requiring and supporting *either/or* answers) is less an article of belief than a habit of mind. Unfortunately such habits have lately affected more than just the persons who have them. Certain brands of nationalism, for example, must be held suspect precisely because the habits of mind that produced them are insupportable. The Blimpish English academic who refuses to read or recognize American scholarship on the grounds of its national origin has long been a figure of ridicule. How much more ridiculous must be any efforts on the part of Canadians to limit the scope of their own lives — and yet how many efforts lately there have been! Why is it that so many people should wish to deprive themselves of any positive encounter with possibility?

Consider the question of further immigration into an immigrant society. To read the newspapers is to encounter outcries against it, both plaintive and vitriolic. Yet often these are based on the fear and ignorance that combine to equate

“Nation” with “Purity of Racial Stock,” which in multicultural Canada must always seem an absurd notion. The desire to maintain the status quo — whether in language, economics, religion, or politics — compounds the problems. What, for example, does one make of the outcry of the landed immigrant against further immigration? The only answer is another question: in what magic year did Canada stop allowing other alternatives? Clearly the place would *not* have been culturally the richer for *refusing* to allow Leacock, Layton, Skvorecky, or others to come, let alone the parents and grandparents of other generations of writers and readers and literary laymen. Adhering to the values of the past has many virtues. Trying to transform the present into a measure of security is an understandable human impulse. But closing the border against the future is patently blind.

Closing the border against information can be equally debilitating. Nothing appears to protect a provincial society better — yet in actuality strengthens both the limiting biases of its provincialism and the autocratic potential of its government — than ignorance. Yet only ignorance is served if we or anyone else were to deny ourselves the freedom to choose among options and the freedom to know about even those events and ideas and developments that we choose in the long run to reject. The CRTC must therefore not be allowed to cut off information from elsewhere — hence to control both the amount of information receivable and the perspective that will then inevitably be brought to information — in the name of resolving an economic problem. “Either/or” will not do.

There are other pressures currently affecting literature — and through literature the fabric and potential of Canadian life. There are citizens who cannot distinguish between satire and slander, and who would seek legal restriction placed over the art of cartooning. There are citizens who identify state support for publishing with state control over ideas and expressions, who would require that art serve the dictates of the state rather than the aspirations of the individual heart and mind and the commitments of the private conscience. There is a passive assumption that all is right with the world, and that all that is right will automatically continue to be so. But all will not be well if there is no reflection, no discussion, no privacy, and no choice. The garden that others in hope have cultivated can quickly in neglect dry out.

This is one of the reasons that the twin arts of journalism — reflecting and reporting — are so important to cultural continuation. They provide us with public and private avenues for enquiring into self and society, and some of the cultivation that our mental and social gardens require. The letter-writer, the diary-keeper, and the newspaper journalist alike weigh the “facts” they perceive against the “truths” they know; they try to be faithful to both, and in the personal balance they achieve between reflection and report they develop their individual styles. One we will find to be reliably objective, another to be enjoyably and

deliberately subjective; one will be passionate, another neutral; one analytic, another discursive, still others satiric, argumentative, witty, and emotionally compelling. No single one is more valuable than another and all are necessary to us. What we fundamentally appreciate are the respective values of information, enquiry, and individuality itself. If we close the borders of the mind we will put a stop to instruction as well as to imagination and invention, and if we do that we will begin to wither. If our culture warrants our watchful trust, then our writers also deserve the freedom of their own tradition: which is to say, a freedom born of options — a freedom to choose for themselves and to follow their own minds.

In *The Other Side of Hugh MacLennan* (Macmillan), Elspeth Cameron's admirable selection from among MacLennan's "essays old and new," we can follow not only the development of a fine essayist but also watch how a responsible writer tests his own imagination and intellect. Ranging in subject and tone, MacLennan's writings draw us repeatedly into contact with his world: into understanding how the mind and the world connect. "I think of a man," he writes, "whose temperament compels him to involve himself in his time, to live with his antennae naked to the stimuli of his time because he belongs to it." He describes himself, of course, the writer *engagé*. Idealist and ironist at once, he also describes the challenge of remaining free in an age when private choice and public policy collide.

W.H.N.

A HOUSE WITH A TOWER

Anne Szumigalski

the Celt within
 who likes to stand up and sing
 ecstatic and undulating songs
 is the one who opens my mouth
 and lets the lies out
 they buzz like a hum of flies
 their flight fills the air