

PLAYING FAVOURITES

IT HAPPENS sometimes — and recently it has happened quite often — that there are Canadian-published books which appeal to the editor of *Canadian Literature*; which should be brought to the attention of readers; but which for some reason (because they are reprints, because they are on the frontiers of literature proper, because they are translations of foreign texts having some bearing on Canada) cannot find a place in our beleaguered review columns yet really deserve more than a tiny mention in the back pages of the journal. So, for once — and doubtless it will not be the only time — the editorial is being devoted to a group of such books that caught our eye and fancy.

Of foreign texts with a bearing on Canada, undoubtedly the most venerable are the Icelandic sagas which tell of the first European discovery of Newfoundland. A translation of these sagas was published in England by Penguins in 1965, under the title of *The Vinland Sagas*, but now George Johnston — whose other self is the splendid poetic ironist — has added to his renderings from the Icelandic a version of *The Greenlanders' Saga* (Oberon, \$7.95), done with appropriate starkness and accompanied by a good brief introduction which discusses the background to the saga and the historical problems it arouses.

Among reprints one is of special interest to *Canadian Literature*. Faithful readers will remember the fine series of cuts which George Kuthan made to decorate this journal from our beginnings in 1959 to his death in 1966. Now Hurtig Publishers has reprinted his erotic sequence, *Aphrodite's Cup* which he himself published privately in 1964) in a handsome limited edition of 1,000 copies at \$35.00. There is an introduction by William McConnell, who has not done his research well, for he fails to record Kuthan's work for *Canadian Literature*, which produced the longest and most versatile of all his series of designs, undoubtedly one of the major tasks of his last decade.

Talk of erotica leads one to another reprint of a book with a long underground and (in this case) pseudonymous existence. In 1960 Olympia Press in Paris published a sado-masochistic novel entitled *The English Governess*, by a certain Miles Underwood. Underwood's real identity has long been known; he was John Glassco, who once proudly remarked that he was as much a "pornographer" as a poet. Now, as *Harriet Marwood, Governess*, the book surfaces — after curious vicissitudes of underground and pirated publication — into the Canadian paperback market (General Publishing, \$2.95). Elegant it is, a high product of the late decadence, written in accurate, ironic prose. But pornography, one realizes, is a relative question, and aphrodisiac though *Harriet Marwood, Governess* may have been to the generation that first enjoyed it, it is likely to register low on the 1970's porn-scale. But hold on to your copy. The 1980's are coming. And in the meantime enjoy another facet of our most versatile classicist, John Glassco.

A reprint of a vastly different kind is Charles Heavysege's *Saul and Selected Poems* (University of Toronto Press, paper \$7.95, cloth \$19.50), published in the Literature of Canada reprint series and introduced by Sandra Djwa. Heavysege is a kind of super-Grove in poetry, endowed with a rough power, but so lacking in a real sense of craft that almost everything he does is fumbled and intolerably prolix. This is why his narrative poem *Jezebel*, which occupies only 30 pages out of the 373 in this volume is — in my view — by far his most successful work, maintaining its intensity almost the whole way through, and marked by an urgency which may have been no more than the knowledge that the *New Dominion Monthly*, where it was published, would not take a longer poem. Unfortunately — I emphasize the adverb — 328 pages of this Heavysege collection are taken up by the sprawling mass of *Saul*, surely the most wordy play ever written, full of anachronisms and comic infelicities, and defeating itself dramatically by the tedious complexities of its action. There is indeed a core of true drama in *Saul*, and this was discovered by Peter Haworth, who rendered it down into a two-hour radio script (about a quarter of its present length) and came out with a play that might not have been stageable, but which — like many other closet tragedies — worked well in sound alone, under Norman Newton's CBC direction.

It is a pity that Peter Howarth's condensation of *Saul* has not been published, for I suspect we treat our early Canadian writers with a mawkish excess of reverence. (How patently absurd it is, for instance, of Sandra Djwa to talk of *Saul* as a "major" play!) Poor old Heavysege, after all, never had the advantage of sound advice, never encountered a good editor, never found a sympathetic but critical audience, never met anyone to teach him the dramatic craft, never had a producer willing to put his play on (as Norman Newton eventually did) provided it was licked into shape and proportion. If he had made such encounters, doubtless we would now be reading a very different *Saul*, so why not give him posthumously the advantages he never enjoyed when he was alive? This is not

really a protest against the present volume, which should exist, as it is, for the few students of Canadian writing who wish to see the text of *Saul* in all its enormity. But I hope that one day Heavysage's obvious qualities — exemplified in the thin poet who lived within the fat poetaster we encounter in this volume — will be brought to a wider and a less patient public than the academic one, through the publication of Peter Haworth's excellent condensations of *Saul* and *Count Filippo*. Some such academically irreverent treatment of a few other early Canadian writers could show us at least their potential virtues, what they might have been if only they had lived in a real literary world instead of a remote cultural colony.

Out on the ultimate verge of literary interest, since it is no piece of fine writing and does not pretend to the authority of history, is *René* by Peter Desbarats (McClelland & Stewart, \$10.00), a current study of Lévesque and his role in Québec politics; its interest for us lies in the light it throws on the political and intellectual background that produced not only Québec's (and perhaps Canada's) Man of Destiny but also a great deal of recent Canadian poetry and fiction in the French language. With luck, we shall be able to call it Canadian for a long time.

Finally I come to a very special class of books for which the only appropriate title is *Colombiana*. John Robert Colombo has shown his virtuosity as a poet, as an editor, as a translator from languages he does not always speak. But all these not inconsiderable achievements now fade before the image of Colombo as the industrious collector and arranger of facts. We already had, two years ago, *Colombo's Canadian Quotations*. It is now followed by *Colombo's Concise Canadian Quotations* (Hurtig, \$4.95), which is not merely a condensation of the original volume, since a quarter of the quotations are quite new, garnered since the appearance of *Canadian Quotations*; the main advantage of the new volume is the portability conferred by its smaller size. At the same time, from Oxford University Press there appears a much more massive reference volume, *Colombo's Canadian References* (\$14.95), which is really a small Canadian encyclopedia. I once described Colombo as an "assiduous impresario of novelty", and that aspect of him comes out in the *Canadian References*, as it does in both forms of the *Canadian Quotations*, which are marked though not marred by the idiosyncracies of his personal interests and tastes. But then, all the great reference books have been idiosyncratic, from Johnson's dictionary down to the celebrated 11th edition of the *Britannica*. And as a desk text for convenient dipping, *Colombo's Canadian References* holds a serviceable finger in the dam of information until such time as Hurtig's too-long delayed Canadian encyclopedia is funded by the Canada Council, which has been incomprehensibly punctilious and dilatory in supporting such a greatly needed compendium of Canadian information.

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