

MARITIME CADENCES

NEW BRUNSWICK, Nova Scotia, and Prince Edward Island do not form a single society, except in the minds of outsiders. There is variety here, and personality, and idiosyncrasy. And when Alden Nowlan observes that it is only selective truth-telling that will produce such a generalization as “a Maritime school of writers”, we are warned forthrightly not to make regional universalities out of superficial likenesses. Newfoundland, moreover, though mentioned in this survey of Maritime literature, appears only briefly. However linked their traditions may be, Maritime and Newfoundland societies differ from each other; their roots go off in different directions, and the Atlantic geography they have in common has not contrived to equate their cultural horizons.

“The Maritimes” has its image in the rest of Canada: dour, demanding, rural without being pastoral, industrious without being profitable, the exporter of brains and the importer of money, everyone’s half-forgotten past and no-one’s future. When Fraser Sutherland writes of a provincial patriarchal world, easily sentimentalized and easily transformed into grotesquerie, he treads a careful line between this cheerfully inaccurate image, communicated in part by expatriate Maritimers themselves, and a glimpse of a different society — Canaan rather than Cain’s land, perhaps, but still dour — where “the religion of work, the cult of success, the fear of retribution” constitute a system of values that binds the native not unwillingly to his home. For Donald Cameron, the transplanted outsider, the task of trying to comprehend this tie, of discovering the mystery of the “Mysterious East”, is one of “trying to deduce a system of values from the gridwork of assumptions” in which Maritimers tell, and for three hundred years have been telling, their myths, stories, and superstitions. The region is rich in folklore and the spoken word, as Helen Creighton’s collections have admirably shown; the voices of Lawrence Doyle and Larry Gorman have helped to shape a popular literature there.

Even Thomas Chandler Haliburton's Sam Slick was conscious, in *Wise Saws*, that "if you read a book to a man, you set him to sleep . . . because . . . the language ain't common . . . [But] if you talk to him, he will sit up all night . . . because it's talk, the language of natur'." And Haliburton produced written talk. But to what end? Donald Cameron and Fraser Sutherland both speak of a "system of values" underlying the voices. Both are also conscious of the complexity of those values and of the problems that face the authors who engage themselves with them.

In Nova Scotia, Fraser Sutherland writes, Hugh MacLennan "would have been a Dalhousie professor. In Quebec he is a writer." This neat distinction not only points toward the sense of exile — whether from Scotland or New England, from a mythical Acadia or a time of moral order — which recurs so strongly as a Maritime motif; it also reiterates the cultural rivalries which have characterized Maritimes history. MacLennan himself, in conversation with Ronald Sutherland, disclaims the label "Maritimer", choosing "Nova Scotian" instead, only to fasten more closely upon Cape Breton Island with the laconic observation that Hali-gonians are a different people. Marjory Whitelaw's discussion of Thomas McCulloch further underlines the distinction between the Presbyterian Pictou Scots and Lord Dalhousie's Halifax Anglicans. And when Thomas Vincent examines the poetry of the two Massachusetts clerics, Henry Alline and Jacob Bailey, who emigrated to Nova Scotia after the American Revolution, he discovers more than just a contrast between two religious codes. For Bailey, Alline's pietistic, personal "New Light" movement represented an anarchic assault upon the authority of civilized institutions and universal (not to mention Tory) truths. What emerges from the contrast is a sense of the way in which loyalties divided: urban conservatism, whatever reforms it entertained, espoused the established order, whereas rural conservatism espoused an individual responsibility. The causes of minorities gave the rural writers the sensitivities of minorities; faithful to their own locale, they were just possibly politically more radical as well.

People's situations were not, however, as clearcut as this division implies. There is often a conflict between belief and social structure here, and the moral sensibilities that Andrew Thompson Seaman notes even in contemporary Maritime fiction are shaped in part by the reception that the society accords its artists. The Prince Edward Island that Lucy Maud Montgomery's Anne inhabits is scarcely the idyllic universe it has sometimes been made out to be; Frances Frazer points out that the Green Gables garden is constantly qualified by intrusive realities, and "Minegoo", the Micmac paradise, is a world of the past. Tom Marshall's discussion of Haliburton leads to his observation of "a pragmatic rather than reactionary conservatism, an ability to live with uncertainties and antagonistic philosophies, an awareness of shifting perspectives." Desmond Pacey, in one of his last essays, notes the ambiguities that attach themselves to the spiritual quests in the poetry

of Alfred Bailey. Fred Cogswell observes the shift that has taken place in Acadian poetry: simple faith in the Roman Catholic vision giving way to a more complex balance between personal and political aspirations. Malcolm Ross notes how, even among the Anglican Loyalists, the order of nature and the order of grace were separated. Finding a role was, for the artists facing such conditions, perhaps more of a challenge than finding a subject. It affected the literary forms they chose, the literary taste that would govern their language, the literary purpose which they framed. For literature was not divorced from society, and to be an artist was implicitly to have a social function.

The American satires of the Loyalist poets, and the journalistic sketches and essays which George Parker sees as more of a source of an indigenous tradition than either fiction or poetry, provide ready examples of certain responses to this situation. The contrast between Alline and Bailey provides another, and the work of Cape Breton's MacLennan and Minago's Milton Acorn amply demonstrates that the twentieth century has not put an end to literary social engagement. The engagement has not always proved artistic. Doug Fetherling shows how the younger Oliver Goldsmith's "The Rising Village", for all its historical pride of place, is hampered by its high style. George Parker points to Andrew Shiels' search for an appropriate poetic language. Frances Frazer notes the inconsistencies of the work of Basil King. Yet the literary endeavours of Maritime writers have had an effect beyond the Maritimes. They helped declare for Canada what every new society comes to recognize as the birthright it must learn to claim, the need — as Chinua Achebe writes of Nigeria — for its literature to "speak of a particular place, evolve out of the necessities of its history, past and current, and the aspirations and destinies of its people."

What helped Maritime writers shape their literary endeavours was the sense of community they enjoyed, a community to which Cameron, Cogswell, Pacey and Alfred Bailey have variously contributed; a community represented by the Howe-Haliburton relationship, by the journals, and by the taut connection between Halifax and Pictou; a community, as Malcolm Ross points out, like Roberts' and Carman's Fredericton, in which the interaction between Emerson's Massachusetts and Bishop Medley's Oxford allowed writers to discover the "congeniality" of the New Brunswick woods. The Church and the university both participated in the world of literature, and so, through the journals and the rhetoric of political commitment, did government. The institutions helped mould the independence of the place; through this came the independence of the people.

There may be no single Maritime school linking Goldsmith, Odell, Alline, Roberts, Carman, Acorn, and Nowlan, but crosscurrents there are in plenty. The influence of their communities on Canadian development, moreover, has far exceeded what their numbers might suggest. To study Maritime writing is not just to discover the myths and fears and philosophies and expectations of a parti-

cular locale, but also to find sources for much that modern Canadian literature celebrates and rejects. Listening closely to Maritime voices is like walking with ancestors; one hears so many echoes, so much of home.

W. H. NEW

THE BOIL

Alden Nowlan

Am I alone
 I wonder
in finding pleasure
in this,
 the thumb
and forefinger
rolling tight
 a corner of
the handkerchief,
 then
forcing the spear
of twisted cloth
 under
the ripe core
of the boil
in my own flesh,
 prying it
free,
 burning
the wound clean
with alcohol —
 now
at last
 master
rather than
 servant
of the pain.