

TASTING THE CASTALIAN WATERS

THE DAY IS LONG PAST when Desmond Pacey's pioneer *Creative Writing in Canada* was virtually our only readily available guide to writing in Canada, past and present. Now there is not only the *Literary History of Canada*, shortly to be reprinted in revised and expanded form, but also a variety of less substantial but not always less ambitious books that seek to give us an overview of the Canadian Literary scene. Sometimes the approach has been thematic, and this has usually involved a limitation in the comprehensiveness of the survey, since the books and writers discussed are chosen to exemplify the author's thesis about the dominant trends of Canadian writing and the dominant preoccupations of Canadian writers. Thus books like Margaret Atwood's *Survival*, D. G. Jones' *Butterfly on Rock*, and their lesser imitators, in spite of brilliant insights into individual works and writers, and even groups of writers, provide highly distorted views of Canadian literature if one takes them as pictures of the whole. They are maps that show only certain roads, and not all the main towns.

The other kind of survey is inevitably circumscribed by considerations of space; even the *Literary History*, for all its bulk, is forced to deal summarily with many writers and can only sketchily fulfil the critical as distinct from the historical function. When the *Literary History* was published, Northrop Frye put in the plea for a critical handbook of the same dimensions, similarly written by many hands, but so far as I know this major survey never passed beyond the stage of suggestion, and until it does we must rely on the second group of general literary surveys that have been appearing in recent years, small in size and aimed largely

at the increased public for compendia of potted information and evaluation that has been created by the expansion of Canadian literature classes in universities and secondary schools.

Atwood's *Survival* started off as such a guide, but, perhaps fortunately, was led by its author's obsessions into becoming something less practically useful (not the best of cribs, certainly) and more intellectually exciting. Among the books that have kept to the original plan of presenting the whole field in ready form have been Elizabeth Waterston's *Survey* and Clara Thomas's *Our Nature — Our Voices*, both reviewed in past issues of *Canadian Literature*, and Frank Davey's newly published *From There to Here* (Press Porcépic, \$4.95), which is described as "A Guide to English-Canadian Literature since 1960". In fact, Davey's book was planned as a sequel to Clara Thomas's book (and is announced very unobtrusively on the cover as "Our Nature — Our Voices II"), but the economic adventures of the original Publisher, New Press, and the pilgrimage of Dave Godfrey from publishing house to publishing house, resulted in its eventual issue by Press Porcépic in a quite different format from the original volume.

All these changes in imprint and design are just as well, since Davey's approach is radically different from Thomas's. It is — with no thought of posing any hierarchy of values — the difference between the academic and the literary. Both Clara Thomas and Elizabeth Waterston are essentially teachers-who-write; they show an understanding of and often an intuitive sympathy with the authors they discuss, but there is still not the same kind of involvement — negative or positive — that one encounters when the situation is reversed and a writer-who-teaches does the job of introducing other writers. Nobody has reacted to their books in the way people react to *Survival* and are likely to react to Davey's *From There to Here*.

When one considers the limitations Davey seems happily to have accepted, *From There to Here* is something of a *tour de force*. Other poet-critics like Atwood and Jones, by adopting the thematic approach, have been able to group the books they consider into large sweeping essays, each dealing with an aspect of the main theme. Davey, recognizing that other aspects of their work differentiate writers more than themes unite them, has chosen to write a brief but penetrating critical essay on each of sixty writers (with George Bowering stepping in to discuss Davey himself). Davey is a poet with sharply defined views of his craft, but his attitude towards criticism is remarkably open; he refuses to be governed by fashion, and thus, while his judgments may at times seem idiosyncratic, they can rarely be dismissed as prejudices. He shows the weaknesses of a

writer like Leonard Cohen, for example, without diminishing his true value (as against his inflated public status); he devotes careful attention to writers like Daphne Marlatt and Gerry Gilbert who have perhaps not received their meed of attention, and if he does not persuade us to accept his valuation of them, at least he induces us to read them more carefully; he writes acerbically where (as in the case of Graeme Gibson) he detects a reputation that has been built on scanty real performance; at times, as in the case of Mordecai Richler, he omits with stark justice a writer who has, after all, voluntarily absented himself. There are some Davey criteria I find hard to accept — his polarity of life and anti-life for example — and I am puzzled by some of the conclusions he has reached on this basis: e.g. that P. K. Page is one of the “anti-lifers”. Still, this is the best short survey of a comprehensive kind we have had of contemporary Canadian writing, and it is undoubtedly so because Davey is *involved* in the deep and real sense of being a critic and a poet, of being at once part of the world of which he writes and capable of standing outside it.

NEVERTHELESS, poet-critic though he is, Davey is also an academic, and so, at a rough count, are or have been more than half the sixty writers he discusses. It is a lower proportion, I suspect, than it might have been ten years ago, but it is still higher than one is likely to find in countries which have developed a real infrastructure of publishing and literary journalism, and it represents a situation that gives writers at least an interim interest in universities and in what happens to them. (After all, perhaps half the literary journals of Canada, including *Canadian Literature*, would not have existed unless universities had sponsored them and given them at least a modest financial patronage.)

It is this that makes us look with some interest beyond the strict bounds of literary criticism to books on the present state of universities, particularly when they are written by men whose academic interests are primarily directed to literature, like Claude Bissell, or who obviously understand, like Cyril S. Belshaw, that the creative artist has special problems in an academic setting.

In *Halfway Up Parnassus* (University of Toronto Press, \$12.50), Bissell presents an autobiographically tinged history of his involvement as student, teacher, administrator, with the University of Toronto. It begins in — and sometimes lapses back into — that peculiar in-group facetiousness of tone which so often passes for wit in an academic setting and which embarrasses the outsider as much as the boyish rituals of service clubs. But soon — and for most of his book — Bissell is quite seriously concerned with the kind of problems that in

recent decades have plagued the administration of large modern universities. In the end one may remain convinced that the only reasonable solution for the problems of the multiversity is dismantling and decentralization, but in the process of reading *Halfway Up Parnassus* one at least gains some sympathy for the predicament of a sensible and sympathetic man caught in the kind of strait between the Scylla of an antiquated authoritarian structure and the Charybdis of a sometimes totalitarian student opposition into which the times have led so many academics.

Cyril S. Belshaw, whose *Towers Besieged* (McClelland & Stewart, \$5.95) is descriptively subtitled "The Dilemma of the Creative University"), has had his share of university administration, though on a humbler level than Claude Bissell's, but in his book he sheds his immediate loyalties and antagonisms and attempts to stand outside and sketch the picture of a university that will be creative in the sense that it takes as primary aim the engendering in its members, "students and faculty alike, an ability to ask and formulate questions *linked with generalized knowledge*, and to use evidence, logic and intuitive judgment to provide answers."

To use "evidence, logic and intuitive judgment": that is not, even if the questions and answers may be shaped differently, very far from the processes which writers follow, and it brings one back to the recognition that, though pedantry is the enemy of creation, there is — ideally considered — much in common between the literary world and the academic world. Who of us would not relish the opportunity to visit through time-travel some place like Plato's grove or Epicurus' garden, where the discussion of knowledge was truly disinterested and concerned neither with hopes of employment nor calculations of tenure? One may not accept all Belshaw's propositions in his very personal vision of what a university should be like (and space prevents us from doing more than suggest to readers that they study the book themselves), but there is stimulation in his insistence on creativity as the principal criterion for judging a university, and in his admission that, even so, there are kinds of creativity which the best academy constrains and which must therefore be developed outside its bounds.

THE AUTOBIOGRAPHY, like the travel narrative, is a genre rarely well practiced in Canada. We are not lacking — it is true — in memoirs, and especially in the memoirs of politicians, but these rarely attain the combination of ironic detachment and passionate involvement that characterizes the true autobiography, as it characterizes the true travel book. In *The Siren Years*

(Macmillan, \$11.95) — which bears the subtitle of “A Canadian Diplomat Abroad 1937-1945” — Charles Ritchie presents not a formal autobiography, but a journal kept during those years when the second World War passed from inevitability into actuality. But keeping a journal suggests a willingness for what one writes to be read by others, and — even if only half-consciously — every diarist shapes his notes for those unknown but longed-for violators of his privacy. So we might define the journal as an autobiography contemporary with the event, and the autobiography as a journal after the event.

But how many journals ever reach us as they were written down in the heat of the moment's feeling? Certainly *The Siren Years*, in which Charles Ritchie tells — more as an aesthete than as a diplomat — of his experiences in a long-past London, gives the feeling that it has been long and lovingly polished; nothing changed perhaps, but everything burnished in preparation for the sun of public attention to shine upon it. And worth burnishing it all is. I knew intimately and remember nostalgically that war-threatened and war-battered London of which Ritchie writes; I experienced it on a socially lower level perhaps — cheaper restaurants, daughters of the world revolution rather than ballet girls, and Charlotte Street rather than High Bloomsbury — but it retains in my mind the very sense of a magical world threatened by the forces of darkness, and every day presenting its jewels of experience in the midst of horror, that Ritchie transmits. We shall never look on that London again — Ritchie or I or thousands like us — but one is grateful to have it brought back with such love and care, such polished prose and discreet embellishment.

In certain Foreign Services, literary excellence is a tradition. It has been so among the French since Stendhal languished as Consul in Civita Vecchia; I remember the pleasure of encountering the poet Octavio Paz as Mexican Ambassador in Delhi; Britain had its Harold Nicholson. Canada has had Douglas Le Pan and R. A. D. Ford, and Ritchie, though he has left until retirement the pleasure of releasing *The Siren Years*, with its sharp and piquant vignettes of revered Canadians like Vincent Massey as well as of English mandarins like Elizabeth Bowen, is of their company. It might do a vast amount for Canadian foreign relations, and much for the content of Canadian books, if we were to extend the process and offer poets and novelists semi-sinecures in Canadian missions abroad rather than sequestering them, as we too often do, in the concrete towers of Canadian campuses.

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