

SELF-CONSCIOUS CANADIANS

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SEE NATIONAL self-consciousness first manifesting itself in Canadian fiction some thirty or thirty-five years ago, with its strongest initial expression in Hugh MacLennan's *Barometer Rising* (1941). Fiction prior to this time was on the whole unconcerned about the separateness of a Canadian identity or other Canadian issues, for writers like Stead, Ostenso, and Grove were more or less preoccupied with variations of the "roughing it in the bush" theme. It was the pioneer or rural virtues, rather than anything exclusively Canadian, which constituted their fictional themes and in this respect they were closer in spirit to rural romantics like Willa Cather than to succeeding generations of Canadian realists and nationalists. These writers were at the end of a tradition rather than at the beginning, and the decade of the thirties marks a kind of watershed between such derivative forms of fiction as the historical romance and regional idyll and the newer aesthetics associated with the emergence of realism and nationalism in Canada. Some fifty years previous to this time, William Dean Howells had offered a formula which has through the years lost none of its relevance: "I would have our American novelists," he intoned on that occasion, "be as American as they unconsciously can." The implications of this statement are of course twofold: first, that a novelist cannot write outside of his own experiences or milieu, and second, that he must at the same time take his environment for granted in order that his experiences can be translated into a larger pattern or meaning. He must be "American" or "Russian" or "Canadian" — that is, conscious of his environment and tradition — in the selection of his material, but in its execution he must drop this consciousness and transform the regional or national raw material into a form which reflects aesthetic sincerity and universal significance.

Howell's prescription was particularly appropriate for the novelist of an emerging literary tradition, such as that in Canada at the end of the thirties.

For in his haste to discard his derivative image, the Canadian novelist stood in danger of assuming new poses which could prove equally crippling: that of becoming a spokesman for Canada or a celebrator of her new identity, of becoming therefore an essayist and propagandist rather than a novelist and artist. Or alternatively, depending on his degree of scepticism, sophistication, cynicism, or despair, he could become an angry young man towards things Canadian, and deliberately set out to satirize or attack the whole business, as though Canadianism doesn't matter anyway. Both of these approaches reflect a self-consciousness towards Canada, and on the whole it is not until the last decade or so that novelists have been able to shake this burden, and leave Canada, as it were, alone, or simply take it for granted. Perhaps Canadian novelists have for a long time simply reflected the national obsession with explaining Canada to all and sundry, and tended to view things Canadian with a myopic vision; but it is when this concern superimposes itself upon, or even replaces, the legitimate aesthetic elements of fiction, that the trait of self-conscious Canadianism becomes fictionally damaging.

In terms of content, a large number of Canadian novelists — in particular, Hugh MacLennan, Ethel Wilson, Sinclair Ross, Robertson Davies — have been very Canadian in respect to character, setting, and event, and they have reached out not only into their own varied experiences, but into national traditions and history for intrinsically interesting material. But frequently, they have not been able to leave well enough alone: they have felt compelled to alternate passages of sensitive and perceptive writing with variant choruses of "O Canada" as though to reassure the reader that Canada is important enough to write about in the first place. This obligation to explain Canada was activated by Hugh MacLennan, not only in the "Forewords" to his first two novels, but also in an important article in the *Saturday Review of Literature* in 1946, where he said: "Canada may be respected, but no outsider feels it necessary for survival to understand the country. It is the Canadian writer's job to make his country interesting, to make it dramatic, and to show its intrinsic beauty and importance." And Edmund Wilson, who has been condescending on more than one occasion towards Canadian literature, echoed these sentiments some twenty years later when he celebrated MacLennan as a "writer strongly to be recommended to anyone who wants to understand Canada."

To give MacLennan his due, it is only fair to point out that his fictional celebration of Canada's characteristics did reflect the feelings of Canadians at large, and it is this fidelity to national sentiment that causes us on one level to

rank MacLennan with those other disseminators of Canadiana: *MacLean's*, the CBC, the National Film Board. Many of us recall the authorized "school editions" of *Barometer Rising* and *Two Solitudes* which reflect the official stamp of approval upon MacLennan's powers of cultural fertilization. When we read his novels today — aside from *Each Man's Son* and *The Watch that Ends the Night* — we in a sense stand amazed at how much he got away with, at how far beyond his expository "forewords" he carried his lecture method. In the first chapter alone of *Barometer Rising*, for example, we learn about the geological history of the Halifax peninsula, that the Narrows is "one of the most vital stretches of water in the world," and that the Citadel was "considered a symbol and bastion of the British Empire." Later we learn that Halifax is a terminus of the world's longest railway, that the Labrador winds cross the estuary of the St. Lawrence on their way to the Gulf Stream, and that when it is night-time in Nova Scotia it is noon in British Columbia.

These facts in themselves, of course, fulfil part of the implications of Howell's dictum, and perhaps they do help outsiders as well as Canadians understand Canada's "intrinsic beauty and importance". But according to MacLennan — and it is MacLennan the novelist we judge here — these are the thoughts which arise in the consciousness of his characters at times of unquestionably strong emotional crises. Neil Macrae entertains his complicated geological observations while he is furtively seeking anonymity upon his return to Halifax; Angus Murray reflects upon Halifax as a railway terminus mere moments before he proposes marriage to Penny, and unless in some Bergmanian symbolic manner he equates his sexual prowess with a thrusting CNR locomotive, the reader will quibble over the disparity of these two ideas. And near the end of the novel Penny is aching and throbbing for some reassurance of Neil's love, but all she receives from him is this violent outburst: "I tell you, if Canada ever gets to understand what her job in this world really is — well, unless she does, she'll never be a nation at all." Understandably, Penny "made no answer, but continued to stare into the darkness."

It would be gratifying to be able to read these passages as parody, but this device implies a level of artistic sophistication, of critical observation, and a sense of humour in which at that period of Canada's development seemed to be singularly lacking. Regrettably, we must read them for what they are: examples of an obtrusive injection of ideas that belong to MacLennan the essayist, artistic flaws which the many fine passages in his early work do not sufficiently compensate for. When MacLennan does indulge in a genuine sense of humour, as in *Each*

Man's Son, this awkward and self-conscious pose disappears, and one can only wish that he had exploited this rarely used talent more frequently.

When MacLennan *unconsciously* evokes the character of Canada's vastness or wilderness, as he does in the canoe trip episode in *The Watch that Ends the Night*, he ranks with the best of our novelists. And more to the point, character is not sacrificed: Martell's reactions are rightfully only those which we would expect a young boy in his situation to experience — fear, sickness, a revulsion at what he had seen, and finally, when the full impact of his aloneness had struck him, a genuine sobbing and crying out for his mother. And all along, the atmosphere of the New Brunswick wilderness is unmistakable; MacLennan's unconscious Canadianism here makes this episode one of the most finely sustained passages in all his fiction. In his *Barometer Rising*, he couldn't even let twelve-year old boys be boys, as it were, but had to invest them with amazing powers of generalization, as when he has Robbie Wain view the departure of the *SS Olympic* in terms of an experience which, we are to believe, "crystallized all the impressions he had formed of the past few years, what he had seen and read and what he imagined the purpose of the world to be. The purpose of the world was doing things, and doing them better than the other fellow."

The above quotation reflects another element of self-conscious Canadianism that weakens MacLennan's fiction — his tendency to moralize or find a purpose in incidents which by themselves do not normally carry this kind of burden. Thus, Roddie is not allowed to watch ships because he liked watching ships, but because it gave him a sense of purpose. The local girls, similarly, let themselves be ravished by the sailors not, presumably, because they enjoyed it, but because they had "no better place to be," and even the idleness or laziness of the aimless soldiers and dockworkers was not just good old-fashioned sloth, but "seemed to have a purpose, as though it were also part of the war." And in the only scene in this novel where MacLennan even gets close to a description of physical love, both Geoffrey Wain and Evelyn, at the height of their somewhat sophomoric love play, are moralizing to themselves about the reasons they enjoy making love. Here, as in the affair between Kathleen and Dennis Morey in *Two Solitudes* and between Bruce Fraser and Marcia in *The Precipice*, MacLennan cannot shake the Puritanical element of Canadianism which seeks to hide sexuality behind a cloak of moral rationalizing. This manifestation of lingering Puritanism is not of course exclusively a Canadian trait, but it is remarkably well preserved in Canada, and other novelists than MacLennan have come to grief over it — even some, as we well know, who sing of the orgasm loud and clear.

I have perhaps dwelt unduly and unfairly upon Hugh MacLennan, but he seems to me to represent the best and the worst of the fictionally possible worlds of Canada. If his artistry had matched his undeniably sincere feeling for Canada so that he could have exploited an unconscious Canadianism rather than a self-conscious one, more fiction of the quality of *The Watch that Ends the Night* or *Each Man's Son* would undoubtedly have been produced.

A STEP TOWARDS this experiential-artistic fusion was taken by Ethel Wilson who, like MacLennan, invests her fiction with a strong sense of moral and social purpose. Little interested in novelistic fads and experimentation, she sees the Canadian writer achieving stature slowly — “like the strong slow movement of water or glaciers,” as she expressed it once. Like MacLennan, too, she is fond of authorial intrusion, and occasional preaching, but is more consistently interested in character than in idea. Her exploitation of things Canadian reflects this priority, and though it is not uniformly successful, it does tie in organically with development of character much more frequently than in MacLennan. Thus in *Swamp Angel*, one of the prevailing patterns is that of flight and movement — away from crowds, restrictions and stultifying forces, and towards liberation and self-fulfillment. Mrs. Wilson’s superimposing of this pattern against a map of B.C., as it were, is on the whole effective, because the physical routes that Maggie Lloyd follows in her quest — the circuitous journey from Vancouver to New Westminster, the bus trip up the Fraser, Similkameen, and Thompson valleys — do not simply spell out a lesson in geography. They represent both a literal and metaphorical journey up-stream, to a clear source or beginning, as it were, where Maggie can take stock of her life and begin anew. Though we do learn some geography and some history in this novel, we are not too often aesthetically offended for in the process we learn much about the character of Maggie and of the new people in the midst of whom she is starting her new life.

But on occasion Mrs. Wilson, too, adopts the tone and technique of an essayist, and appears to be explaining Canadian facts to the reader more interested in Canada than in fiction, and we lose for a moment all credibility in Maggie, as in this scene, where her bus is approaching Lytton :

Maggie opened a map upon her knee. What will it mean, all this country? . . . The very strange beauty of this country through which she passed disturbed Maggie, and projected her vision where her feet could not follow, northwards —

never southwards — but north beyond the Bonaparte, and beyond the Nechako and the Fraser, on and on until she should reach the Nation River and the Parsnip River and the Peace River, the Turnagain and the Liard, and north again to the endless space west of the MacKenzie River, to the Arctic Ocean. What a land!

We are pulling for Maggie here — and for Ethel Wilson — but we balk at this rhapsodic evoking of Canada's vastness being engendered by a map, a Greyhound bus, and Lytton, British Columbia. We realize that in her odyssey Maggie moves into an understanding of her position in the world — her relationship with human beings, with animals, with the land, and perhaps even with the cosmos itself. But these relationships are handled much more convincingly in those scenes where Maggie is confronted directly with experience: fishing in the Similkameen, watching the flights of geese or the fight between the eagle and the osprey, her sudden observing of the fawn and the kitten, her awareness of the sky and stars on her first night out of Vancouver. Here the elements of the world — or of Canada, if you like — are inseparable from the character and feelings of Maggie. In her finest passages, Ethel Wilson demonstrates how effectively the principles of artistic selection and economy can operate when such extra-literary considerations as being a spokesman for Canada are ignored.

When we turn from the serious fiction of MacLennan and Wilson to the gentle satire of Robertson Davies, the shift in tone delights us, and on the whole there is a satisfactory fusion of Canadian experience and artistic vision. In a sense, Davies stands mid-way between the serious celebrators of Canadianism and those who deny it altogether, and he has the best of two worlds, as it were. He can proceed with his accurate shooting of sitting Canadian ducks, but one senses that he doesn't really want to destroy them. His heart is ultimately in Salterton, much as Sinclair Lewis's was in Gopher Prairie, and like his American counterpart, Davies gets mileage out of his satire chiefly the first time round, for it fails to expand or please significantly on subsequent readings. It is seldom intellectually realized, and depends for its effect in large part on an in-group recognition, on a kind of select snobbery and superiority. In a passage in *Leaven of Malice*, for example, Davies has that crusty old organist, Humphrey Cobbler, expound facetiously on the importance of Canadian music:

"But this is authentic Canadiana," said Cobbler, "a suite of dances, composed in this very city in 1879 and dedicated to the Marchioness of Lorne. Title: *The Fur Suite*. I've played the *Mink Schottische*. I can give you the *Beaver Mazurka*, the

Lynx Lancers, the *Chinchilla Polka* or the *Ermine Redowa*. Every one of them recreates the loyal gaiety of Victorian Canada.”

This particular outburst adds very little to the dramatic dimensions of the situation under way at the moment, and stands indeed as a rather obvious intrusion. Gloster Ridley and Miss Vyner, the two main protagonists of this scene, dislike music of all sorts, not merely Canadian music, so all we can really credit Davies with here is a rather crude and superficial opinion of Canadian culture, which earns the reader’s snicker rather than his genuine laughter. Much better handled in this same novel is the question of Canadian literature, from Rumball’s prose epic, *The Plain That Broke the Plough*, to Solly Bridgetower’s foray into Heavysege and Amcan:

“Was Heavysege, in the truest sense, a Canadian writer? . . . Set your minds at rest. Who but a Canadian could have written Saul’s speech? Does not Jehoidah behave like a Canadian when he refuses to cheer when his neighbours are watching him? Is it not typically Canadian of Heavysege’s Hebrews that they take exception to Saul’s ‘raging in a public place’? Is it not Canadian self-control that David displays when, instead of making a noisy fuss he ‘lets his spittle fall upon his beard, and scrabbles on the door-post’? Friends, these are the first evidences of the action of our climate and our temperament upon the native drama.”

Nevertheless, even in this passage, there is a self-conscious Canadianism at work, in the fact that Davies elects to satirize a poet who on the whole has no supporters in Canada or elsewhere. And by supporting Davies all the way in his view on Heavysege, we are up to a point seduced into accepting as well his views on Canadian character.

In *A Mixture of Frailties*, where the satirical tone is much more subdued, the intrusion of self-conscious Canadianism doesn’t work nearly as satisfactorily. The general ironic pattern works well throughout this novel, where we see the culturally deprived Canadian, Monica Gall, becoming the recipient of a trust fund, achieving a high cultural level in England, and thus ironically being liberated by the most narrow-minded of the old Salterton residents. Davies in this novel tries to be quite casual and off-handish about the Canadian element, and is quite successful in his depiction of Monica in her confrontation with various segments of English society. But on a number of occasions he lapses into an obvious awareness of the stereotypes of the Canadian character, as in this pointed remark about Monica: “She was perfectly happy, for she knew that she had done well, and (true Canadian that she was) she could enjoy her treat because she had earned it.” This gratuitous dragging in of a facet of the Canadian puritan character tells

us more about Davies than about Monica, for up to this point in her education abroad, Monica had not revealed any significant reliance upon this trait.

A more serious intrusion is the unbelievable though superficially funny scene with the McCorkills from Medicine Hat who invite Monica out for a "real Canadian meal" in their temporary Wimbledon home. Here Davies pulls out all the stops, but the satire falls flat: Lorne McCorkill wears a sweatshirt with the name of a Canadian university blazoned on it, he has painted all the woodwork with "real Canadian rubber-base paint," he repeats profundities like "that's swell," and offers Monica a real drink called a Canadian lyric made up of course of lemon juice and maple syrup. If the whole episode is intended as an anti-American satire, then the implication is that no Canadian would behave so boorishly, which is a kind of self-conscious superiority on Davies' part; if it is intended as an anti-Canadian satire, then the McCorkills fail to emerge as anything except caricatures, and the description of the furnishings of their "Canadian" home reads very much like an inferior *Babbitt*. Artistically the whole episode fails, for its tone is significantly different from that sustained during most of Monica's English sojourn, and it seems to have been put in merely to remind us that in Davies' view, real Canadians, whether in Salterton, Wimbledon, or Medicine Hat, all suffer from a permanent form of provincialism. Perhaps the major problem in this novel is that of the inconsistency of tone, for at times one isn't sure whether Davies offers his remarks facetiously or seriously, as, for example, when Monica — in Paris, and by this point a very sophisticated Monica — suffers a sudden pang of homesickness when she sees a fur in a display window with the sign "Canada furs." In his earlier novels, *Leaven of Malice* and *Temper-Tost*, which are more thoroughly satirical, this inconsistency doesn't occur, and the self-conscious Canadianism in those works at least contributes consistently to the prevailing tone.

WHAT STRIKES the reader of Hugh MacLennan, of Ethel Wilson, and of Robertson Davies, is a kind of predictability of content: the scenes, the characters, the actions, all frequently reflect the stereotype, and one rarely experiences that delight of the unexpected which is the mark of a truly original novelist. It seems at times that the stock devices employed merely reinforce the uncritical and incomplete view held of Canada by many outsiders — a land of snow, of wheat fields, of mounties, of vast empty spaces. One can easily see where the poet John Robert Colombo got his material for his satirical "Recipe

for a Canadian Novel," published in *The Atlantic* in 1964. This poem lists the ingredients for a novel — one mountie, an Eskimo, one Indian, a small-town whore, a Montreal Jew, and a boy with a dying pet — and concludes with instructions on how to serve it up:

Drain, bring to a simmer
but avoid a boil.
Pour, place in oven, bake.

Slice in pieces, or leave whole.
Serves nineteen million
When cold.

But in a very real sense this poem was written after the fact, for even at the time of its publication it was almost as dated as the works it satirized. By the mid-sixties, much had happened in Canadian fiction, and a new artistic maturity had emerged in writers like Mordecai Richler, Brian Moore, Leonard Cohen and Margaret Laurence. In some ways, the element of self-conscious Canadianism shifted during the sixties from content to style, and certainly from affirmation to negation or denial. The difference between Davies' satire of sacred Canadian cows and Richler's, for example, in *The Incomparable Atuk*, reflects this difference, for Richler is much angrier at what he considers to be Canadian faults than Davies is. The only novel where on the surface he appears to be consciously Canadian is his tour de force *The Incomparable Atuk*, but I think it is misleading to see this book as an ordinary satire on things Canadian. For in an unmistakable way, it simply fulfills the warning contained in the epigraph from Richard Rovere: "Cut off from American junk, Canada would have to produce her own," and I suggest that perhaps Richler with tongue in cheek set out to provide one of the first contributions to this genre. In terms of content, I see it as too obvious to be taken any other way, for predictably, such stock objects of satires as the RCMP, Moose Jaw, and Diefenbaker are given the usual treatment, and perhaps the only genuinely refreshing sally is the inability of Canada's "darling" Bette Dolan to see her sexual insatiability as anything other than an extension of the Y's keep-fit programme. In many ways the book is consciously Canadian in that it stands as a deliberate satire on Canadian satire, and while it is not consistently junk, it is far inferior to his other Canadian based novels, all of which reflect an aesthetic detachment in their effective exploitation of the Canadian scene.

Fiction of the 1960's on the whole moved away from self-conscious Canadian-

ism in terms of content, but there was a manifestation of this trait in matters of style. Richler and Cohen emerge here as two of the relatively few novelists who have made major contributions in this area, and on the whole their works avoid the awkwardness, triteness, and straining for effect that so frequently characterize our fictional experimenters. Self-consciousness in this area manifests itself in the organization of structural elements, in diction, in narrative techniques; as much in excessive profanity, for example, as in excessive reticence, as much in over-playing sexuality as in underplaying it and two of the more dreadful examples of these qualities are found in Scott Symons' *Place D'Armes* and Robert Hunter's *Erebus*. Symons uses all kinds of gimmicks in his work, the journal form, typographical variation, a flippant biography, photographs, marginalia, and so on. And almost at random, we can open the book and find such outbursts as "the Roundhead Methodist All-Canadian Good-boy", or "I, the proffered Anglo-Canadian carré . . .," and "I grimly realize that *his* is the new Canadian caste I fight . . . the half castes. The half-asses. . ."; in short, he gives us what Paul West accused some poets of giving us, "a torrent of self-conscious flippancy". He substitutes typographical license for form, and a collection of sophomoric anti-Canadian outbursts for content; I can't really argue with the blurb on the dust jacket which states that "*Place D'Armes* is at once a first novel, a meticulously tangled diary, an insanely indiscreet autobiography, an existential Canadian allegory, a book of illicit imagination. . . ." With all that going for you, one is tempted to ask, why bother to write good fiction? At any rate, this book represents a very self-conscious attempt to be experimental, daring, iconoclastic, irreverent, funny, and its total effect is one of annoyance rather than curiosity, intrigue, or delight.

Hunter in *Erebus* offends us in another way in his very self-conscious attempt to prove that Canada's Puritan heritage of sexual reticence will disappear if one offers up a sufficient amount of filth and vulgarity in its place. Perhaps his chief problem is simply that he can't write, that he has no sense of language or metaphor, that he lacks imagination and a sense of humour, and that he has no compassion for his characters. He then tries to compensate for all these deficiencies by using a kind of shock treatment, by implying for example, that if one four-letter word or sexual scene works well, then ten of these, as it were, will work ten times as well. Again, as in Symons, the effect is boredom and at times even embarrassment, not at his lack of reticence, but at his lack of invention. His kind of self-consciousness is as destructive fictionally as any other kind, and

it is of course a debatable point whether Hunter's sweaty sexual encounters are preferable to MacLennan's glandless performances.

Here I have perhaps set up straw men who are easy to destroy, for I don't think that as novelists Symons or Hunter are taken seriously by very many readers. But they do, I suggest, reflect a tendency that is everywhere apparent today, a tendency to substitute superficial rebellion for fundamental thought, clichéd gesture for meaningful act, violent noise for a discriminating sense of texture, and formal gimmickry for organic form. Again, these tendencies are not peculiarly or exclusively Canadian, but they are manifestations of a self-consciousness that has severely affected the quality of recent Canadian fiction.

I do not suggest that the elimination of self-conscious Canadianism will make a bad writer a good writer, but I do suggest that it will help make a good writer a better writer. Perhaps it is a matter of recognizing that many of the constituents of what we see as Canadianism are really part of larger frameworks: of humanism, of spirituality, of materialism, of one ideology or another. And artistically, the psychological manifestations of these impulses in character are more convincingly presentable than are the traits of a national identity. Sociological self-consciousness produces a negative literature, as Robert McDougall pointed out some years ago, and his observations on contemporary fictional developments have a special relevance to the question of where Canadian fiction should go. "The probing of man's consciousness and conscience at the expense of external social reference," he argued, "has been increasingly the mark of fiction in the western world over the past fifty years." Though Canada has lagged behind in this respect, much significant activity has been going on in this area during the past decade, and I would predict that the kind of Canadianism that one hears shouted about on all sides in our sociological world will have increasingly less viability in our literary world.