

WHEN DID IT ALL BEGIN?

THERE ARE TIMES these days when one wonders dazedly whether “Canadian literature” is fact or monstrous fantasm. A whole army of protagonists from Margaret Atwood to the editors of *Alive* have embraced its cause with varying degrees of militancy, to the extent, in the case of the *Alive* group, of offering themselves as martyrs to the cause of CanLit by defying the Guelph bylaws against selling papers in the streets. (Needless to say, if we do not go all the way with *Alive*’s views of what Canadian literature is or may become, we condemn, on general grounds of the freedom of speech and writing, any laws or by-laws that interfere with the free dissemination of the word — of any word!)

The teaching of Canadian literature courses in the universities has proliferated to such an extent that where, twenty years ago, a single teacher might be allowed to conduct one course at a university, now there are whole sections of English departments on many campuses which are devoted to what has become a sub-discipline of its own. *Canadian Literature* long stood in solitary isolation as the only journal dedicated to the criticism of Canadian books, but now it has become like the central trunk in a great banyan, with journals devoted to mere facets of Canadian writing (two already appearing on Canadian fiction and one announced on Canadian criticism) taking root around it. Publishers, of course, have welcomed the surge of interest in Canadian writers, and houses devoted specifically to publishing Canadian books have increased vastly, while popular magazines like *Maclean’s* and *Saturday Night* have bent to the wind of opinion.

I find myself reacting in two ways to such developments. The first of these, of course, is natural to a member of the relatively small group of people who worked in the field a decade and a half ago when *Canadian Literature* began to appear

(for this number celebrates the fifteenth anniversary of the first issue in August 1959). I find myself a little incredulous, wondering whether it is all real, whether it will last or somehow dissolve into that Shelleyan limbo where

faiths and empires gleam,
Like wrecks in a dissolving dream.

On reflection, I reach the conclusion that such fears themselves are insubstantial. The present self-conscious aspect of the Canadian literature movement will doubtless tone down into something less strident, but the movement itself represents a genuine mutation in the way our society views itself. On the less worthy level, one can point to the infrastructure of a literary world that has developed on the campuses, in the media, in the world of publishing, in the network of small presses and little magazines and poetry readings that makes a closely-knit literary ambience such as has never before existed in Canada. It is unlikely that this will easily be dismantled or that those who live within it will be quickly deflected from their present preoccupations. On the higher level, it is by now quite evident that Canadian writing has become not merely a distinctive form of literature in English, but also the verbal manifestation of a culture attaining maturity.

So, even if the cant of CanLit is likely to be forgotten as our literary maturity is prolonged into a tradition we take for granted, it is impossible to imagine that we will ever go back to the colonial attitude which assumes that the products of the classic European literatures — or of the imperial American literature — are necessarily better than our own. We shall continue to recognize that while there is a universal dimension of criticism within a language in which all works may be judged in relation to each other, there is also a particular one in which works can only be judged in accordance with their appropriateness to time and place. And so, if Shakespeare or Stendhal is complete in the sense of being good for all men at all times, there are certain books in any culture whose goodness indeed may be local in relevance yet in local terms may also be complete. There will no longer be any need for a Canadian to think himself provincial if he elects to take to that mythical desert island of the quiz-masters not only his Shakespeare and his *War and Peace* but also his A. J. M. Smith anthology.

But this brings me to my second reflection: that the general public mistakenly tends to see all this concern for Canadian literature as something new. Yet in reality it is new only to the academics and the media. To Canadian writers it is an old theme. Even before Confederation the Canada Firsters were speculating

on the proper concerns of a truly national literature, and I am reminded by a recent batch of reprints how consistently the idea of a distinctive body of Canadian writing, and the hope of a body of writers becoming economically free to express their country's nature and future, persisted through what we often think of nowadays as a dark age of mental enslavement to colonial impositions.

E. K. Brown's *On Canadian Poetry* (recently republished by the Tecumseh Press of Ottawa), not only contains Brown's remarkable analysis of Canadian literature and its problems at the crucial time of the mid-1940s — an analysis to which Margaret Atwood is clearly indebted in formulating her ideas on colonialism's effect on literature — but also reminds one of Charles G. D. Roberts and his dream of "starting a Canadian literature", and of Lampman's delight on reading *Orion* "that such work could be done by a Canadian, by a young man, one of ourselves," and of Lampman's own lecture in 1891 in which he declared that in the Canada of his time people were too busy to read with any discernment, but that the time would come when the country would develop "a literary market and a literary atmosphere."

One might expect such sentiments to be quoted by Brown as a critic seeking a form for the Canadian literature he prophetically saw taking shape around him; one might expect such remarks from poets who in verbal imagery stood in the same relation to an awakening Canadian consciousness as the Group of Seven did in visual imagery.

What I find more impressive is that other writers at the turn of the century with much less national inclinations were also concerned about literature in Canada. Three recent titles in the University of Toronto Press's Literature of Canada reprints are Robert Barr's *The Measure of the Rule*, Robert J. C. Stead's *The Homesteaders* and Frank Parker Day's *Rockbound*. Among them, there is no doubt that in literary terms *Rockbound* is the only real re-discovery: a strong novel of the harsh life of fishermen on the Atlantic coast, remarkably untrammelled by the stylistic affectations and moralistic fads that afflicted most Canadian fiction published before 1930. Stead's and Barr's novels, while they have an interest in terms of social and literary history, are hopelessly scarred by their times, and are hard books to read for their own sakes. One could apply very aptly to them some shrewd remarks about Canadian writing up to World War II which E. K. Brown makes as an aside in *On Canadian Poetry*:

Nothing is so difficult for a Canadian as to give a living presentment of a natural human individual. Canadian biographies never put before the reader a man in his habit as he walked and talked; they are the equivalent of marble busts. Canadian

novels are full of characters who are simply the *porte-parole* of their writers, or conventionally humorous nondescripts, or pale idealizations.

But that is not the point I am trying to make, which is that of these three novelists one, Frank Parker Day, was hailed by Archibald MacMechan for the specifically Canadian quality of his writing and for bringing true realism into Canadian literature, while both Stead and Barr went beyond presenting a recognizable Canadian tone in their novels to an explicitly expressed concern for the conditions under which Canadian writers worked and for the prospects of a Canadian literature. Barr's point of view was essentially economic, and his main argument in his long 1899 essay on "Literature in Canada" is summarized thus:

What chance has Canada then of raising a Walter Scott? I maintain that she has but very little chance, because she won't pay the money, and money is the root of all literature.

Somehow, he concludes, we must educate people to spend less of their money on booze and more on books. And Stead in 1931 wrote an essay in the "Origin and Trend of Canadian Literature" in which he found comfort in its amateur status, its surviving optimism, and its "lack of that emphasis on sex which is found in much of the current literature of both the United States and Great Britain." Stead also complained of the economic difficulties that prevented almost all Canadian writers of his time from living by their typewriters, forgetting that this was hardly consistent with his praise of their amateur attitude to writing.

These will doubtless — in 1974 — appear primitive viewpoints, but they do emphasize that, among writers at least, the matter of Canadian literature is not a new subject of discussion and concern. Indeed, it had been clearly there from the moment Canadians recognized themselves as Canadians, and that process began in the bitter lessons of 1812.

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