

# CANADIAN LITERATURE

## *The First Ten Years*

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I FIND IT HARD to remember the time — only ten years ago, was it? — when “there was no literary magazine in Canada that devoted itself entirely to the discussion of writers and writing in this country.” There was, it is true, the annual survey of letters in Canada in the *University of Toronto Quarterly* and a few occasional academic papers or appreciative essays in the university quarterlies published at Toronto, Queen’s, and Dalhousie, and sometimes some livelier and more contemporary articles in *The Canadian Forum* or *The Tamarack Review*. But for something that could not only stimulate a lasting interest, satisfy curiosity, and at the same time demonstrate the interconnections between our writers and their writing on the one hand and the cultural, social and intellectual milieu on the other, we had to wait for a journal that could concentrate on the as yet hardly academically respectable “field” of Canadian letters and could do so in a broad, inclusive, unpedantic, many-sided way. When George Woodcock was invited by the University of British Columbia to edit the magazine he approached the task very deliberately as a professional writer rather than an academic critic, and while demanding always a certain quality of

style and cogency of argument he was careful to seek out a wide variety of points of view and to represent many schools of thought. The contributors to the magazine included academic critics, professional writers, poets, novelists, historians, publicists, journalists, people active in the theatre or the mass media, and perhaps a few plain amateurs or lovers of literature. The variety extended also from old well-established names to young practitioners of the new in poetry and criticism and to all the modes of criticism being practised today.

The magazine got off to an impressive start. Typography and design were excellent; print was clear and the margins wide. The contents of the first two issues set the pattern of variety and inclusiveness and announced a standard both of style and substance that it would be a challenge to maintain. Each number included a personal essay by an author on his own art and his literary aims written in a personal and familiar manner that seemed to underwrite its sincerity and authority. The writers were Roderick Haig-Brown and Ethel Wilson. Essays of this kind were to appear quite frequently in subsequent issues, not all of them as informal as these, but among them were

some as important as Hugh MacLennan's account of the composition of *The Watch that Ends the Night*, some letters of Frederick Philip Grove, edited by Professor Pacey, a translation of Malcolm Lowry's preface to a French edition of *Under the Volcano*, and, more recently, Wyndham Lewis's "On Canada" and his sketch of an unwritten historical novel set in the days of the French regime.

The first two numbers contained, of course, articles on poets and novelists — ancient and modern: on Duncan Campbell Scott and Ralph Connor; Major Richardson, A. M. Klein, as novelist, and Margaret Avison; on Gabrielle Roy and on French-Canadian poetry (in French), labelled here by Gilles Marcotte "*une poésie d'exil*". The writers (including the present one) were all academics — F. W. Watt, Desmond Pacey, Milton Wilson, and Hugo McPherson — and the pertinent liveliness and all-round good sense and intelligence of this group of essays alone reconfirmed my opinion that "Our best criticism, like our best poetry, today is in the hands of the 'university wits'."

The juxtaposition of critic and poet has often been fruitful, and for me, in spite of the brilliance and learning displayed in the seminal studies of Steinberg on Klein and Wilson on Avison, the gem of the first two issues was poet Eli Mandel's penetrating study of the criticism of Northrop Frye. In later issues a good many poets were to contribute criticism, some in papers as outstanding as Reaney's on Jay Macpherson, Louis Dudek's on Raymond Souster, Ralph Gustafson's on the New Wave, and George Bowering's on Reaney and Macpherson. Every one of these poets, however, holds an academic post and can be claimed as a "university wit."

One other portent — this in the first issue — was the turning over of Canadian books to well-equipped but unsuspecting English reviewers. Here George Woodcock was able to draw on some of his friends from his years in the literary circles of London during the thirties. Roy Fuller, now Professor of Poetry at Oxford, reviewed with candour, discrimination, and unpatronizing fairness books of verse by Irving Layton, John Glassco, and Ronald Bates. More recently Julian Symons, in a review of my Oxford anthology *Modern Canadian Verse*, presented a point of view that I found curious and very surprising, but which, coming from an experienced and completely honest English poet and editor, must be given the closest consideration. Symons wrote: "This collection contains a great deal of talented verse which . . . cannot be called parochial or narrowly nationalistic. . . . What Canadian poetry most lacks (and what Larkin, Lowell and some other writers by contrast have been able to use profitably) is a truly national style."

By the end of the first year perhaps, certainly by the end of the second, it was clear that the high quality of the early numbers was to be maintained and the usefulness of the magazine as an index and critique of the literary and cultural life of the dominion had been established. It may be, as the editor suggested in his Introduction to *A Choice of Critics*, a selection of essays from *Canadian Literature* published in 1966, that part of its success was due to the fact that it appeared at a moment when Canadian writers, particularly poets and novelists, were entering upon a new phase of maturity and accomplishment. The circulation of their books — as well as that of

the writers of our past — was becoming much larger and more widely diffused through the inauguration by both commercial and academic publishers of several series of paperback reprints. The books our critics were writing about could now be obtained by everyone, easily and cheaply, and it became possible, almost for the first time, to conduct practical undergraduate courses in Canadian literature. And now a quarterly devoted exclusively to the *criticism* of letters in Canada and its impact upon the social and cultural milieu that formed it and that it expressed made it possible to draw together the thinking of all critics, scholars, creative writers, and thoughtful readers in a kind of continuing symposium that I for one have found extremely fruitful and immensely exciting.

This usefulness was assured and increased by a number of special features ranging from the annual bibliographical check lists of Canadian writing in French as well as English to poems that might be considered for any one of a variety of reasons to have some particular historical or critical relevance. Special issues devoted to writers of unusual significance — E. J. Pratt, Malcolm Lowry, A. M. Klein, and some of the poets — offered a balanced view of their contribution to our literature through the juxtaposition of essays by a number of scholars and critics.

The critical essays which make up the bulk of the material published in *Canadian Literature* fall into several categories: historical and contemporary; scholarly and informal; appreciative, critical, or controversial; general or particular. And almost every school of criticism has been represented: sociological, analytical, biographical, and psychological. . . . I break off as I begin to sound

like Polonius. Instead of generalities and classifications, let me cite some particular examples of success in different kinds of criticism. I am a compulsive anthologist, and perhaps the best way to do this will be to make my own "choice of critics" as a kind of supplement and sequel to George Woodcock's. There is such a wealth and variety of material to choose from that there is no need to take any of the essays Mr. Woodcock already had chosen, though I feel a pang at being denied such outstanding examples of mythopoeic criticism as the poet D. G. Jones's "The Sleeping Giant: The Un-created Conscience of the Race" and Warren Tallman's study of five modern Canadian novels, "The Wolf in the Snow." I would choose to represent this kind of imaginative theoretical criticism (which demands for its success, however, sensitivity, learning, practical experience and taste) Paul West's "Eros and Epic: Aspects of Canadian Poetry" — a remarkably useful document because it presents a general view of what is unique and traditional in our poetry seen through the eyes of a young English poet and writer who spent a number of years at Memorial University in Newfoundland and took the opportunity to examine our literature from a new, unbiassed but not unsympathetic point of view.

As examples of more conventional but even more essential criticism I would choose, as a kind of general introduction to the state of letters in Canada now, Desmond Pacey's "The Outlook for Canadian Literature" in no. 36; Professor F. W. Watt's study of left-wing political magazines in the twenties and thirties — though this is available also in the monumental *Literary History of Canada*; and Ronald Sutherland's two long and

thoughtful studies of the French/English dialogue in Quebec as seen in the poetry and fiction of the two languages: "Twin Solitudes" in no. 21 and "The Body Odour of Race" in no. 37.

The essays by Professors Watt and Sutherland are concerned primarily with the social and political aspects of literature. These have always been close to the centre of George Woodcock's editorial intention and practice. The economic conditions under which professional writers must work and their relations with publishers, editors, the public, and the law have been dealt with *passim* in editorials, articles, discussions, and symposia. One of the most practically valuable issues (no. 33 on "Publishing in Canada") featured answers to a questionnaire sent to authors, publishers, editors, and critics, among them Hugh MacLennan, Roderick Haig-Brown, Earle Birney, Robert Fulford, Arnold Edinborough, Kildare Dobbs, and Professor Carl Klinck. Mr. John Gray, of Macmillan's, and a bookseller, Mr. W. J. Duthie, gave the point of view of their respective callings. Their authoritative essays were followed by John Robert Colombo's youthfully enthusiastic account of his adventures in the publishing game. In the same issue was the first of two informative and completely objective (non-critical rather than uncritical) research jobs by Wynne Francis on the part played in the development of Canadian poetry since the forties by the small independent presses. The second, a complementary study of the little mags, followed in the next issue.<sup>1</sup>

For my examples of literary criticism dealing with social or economic backgrounds I would choose none of these, however — mainly because pieces of a

more general application are available in abundance — among them two or three essays that would be outstanding in any context. One of these is Thelma McCormack's "Writers and the Mass Media" in the Spring 1964 issue, a well-reasoned and fully informed essay that comes to grips with the McLuhan syndrome with a refreshing firmness and coolness. Another is Paul West's fashionably titled "Pastoral with Ostriches and Mocking Birds." This is a carefully thought-out attack on the ineffectual games played by Canadian intellectuals and aesthetes resulting in sterile conformity and false optimism. The ideas expressed by J.-C. Falardeau in his Plaunt Memorial Lecture at Carleton University and by Northrop Frye in *By Liberal Things* are considered in some detail and the paper concludes with a spirited defence of the humanities in education. While asserting that it is "a mistake to think the study of Swift or Johnson is less relevant than the study of Orwell or Snow" he has praise for the adventurous modern like Layton



or Town. And finally I should be tempted by Professor R. L. McDougall's (also fashionably titled) "The Dodo and the Cruising Auk", a witty controversial exposé of what the author believes to be the enervating effect of academicism and their upper-middle-class origin upon many of the established writers and critics. Along with this I should have to include Professor Earle Birney's sharp rejoinder that followed a couple of issues later. While unable to deny the possession of a well-earned Ph.D. or many years as a university teacher, Birney indignantly refused to be labelled anything but proletarian.

When we come to the section of my hypothetical anthology devoted, like Mr. Woodcock's, to "Some Writers" I feel some classification of the material is necessary. I shall content myself with listing my own personal choice among the essays in each of the groups I distinguish. First there are the historical studies of writers of the past, most of them presenting a fresh point of view or attempting a new evaluation or rediscovering an author unjustly neglected or forgotten. The novels of Major Richardson, the poetry and politics of Charles Mair, the writings of the fur-traders and explorers, and the nature books of Ernest Thompson Seton have all been the subject of investigation by such accomplished scholars as Professors Pacey, Shrive, Daniells, Hopwood, and S. E. Read. From among these I would choose V. G. Hopwood's long overdue appreciation of David Thompson in the Autumn 1968 issue; Norman Shrive's account of the career and reputation of the once popular Indian authoress, Pauline Johnson, in "What Happened to Pauline?" in no. 13 — though an earlier, more informal essay

by Ethel Wilson on the Victorian miss who was a poetess rather than a poet has great charm; and finally an unusual paper on Isabella Valancy Crawford by J. B. Ower — unusual, and particularly valuable, because it is devoted largely to a close reading of one of the most intriguing of Miss Crawford's shorter poems "The Canoe".

But it is in the papers on the literature of the last twenty years or so that the greatest variety and distinction is found. Here I would cite first as tops in cogency and usefulness the three long definitive surveys by George Woodcock of the literary development of the novelists Morley Callaghan and Hugh MacLennan and the poet Irving Layton. The first two are in *A Choice of Critics*, but I am well content with the more recent Layton piece, "A Grab at Proteus", surely the most just and most discriminating of the many efforts to separate the gold from the dross in Layton's astonishing output. Even Mr. Layton liked it.

Some of the best articles on particular writers appeared in special issues devoted to an examination of their work from a number of viewpoints. The numbers devoted to A. M. Klein, Malcolm Lowry, E. J. Pratt, and to some of the other poets, have been especially valuable to students and general readers alike. From these I would want to single out Vincent Sharman's questioning of the accepted view of the orthodoxy of Pratt's religious convictions in "Illusion and Atonement — E. J. Pratt and Christianity"; Robert Heilman's placing of *Under the Volcano* in the perspective of modern European novelists, particularly the Thomas Mann of *Dr. Faustus*, in "The Possessed Artist and the Ailing Soul"; and from the wealth of material on A. M. Klein I find

it hard to choose among the essays of Steinberg, Waddington, Livesay, and the young Kingston poet T. A. Marshall. I believe I should settle for the last, a well-worked-out analysis of Klein's Jewish themes entitled "Theorems Made Flesh."

Two or three critiques on more or less important contemporary poets and novelists have appeared in every issue — the editor seems to have a genius for matching the critic, expositor, or appreciator to his subject. I am thinking, to give some examples, of the work of Helen Sonthoff on Phyllis Webb, of Peter Stevens on Raymond Knister, Louis Dudek on Raymond Souster, or Naim Kattan and J.-G. Pilon on some of the French novelists and poets. Again it must seem invidious to make a choice, but I shall select two: an essay on a French poet and one on an English novelist. Each is an outstanding example of criticism that uncovers the significance of what has been overlooked, either in the work itself or in its social and psychological sources and impacts. These are Jean le Moyne's essay in no. 28, "Saint-Denys-Garneau's Testimony to his Time" (translated by Philip Stratford), and D. O. Spettigue's informative and brilliant study of the literary career of Ernest Buckler entitled "The Way it Was" in no. 32.

I am assuming world enough and time, plenty of money, and perfect freedom, so I can represent also some of the special features that have contributed much to the magazine's interest and usefulness. Among these I would cite the essays and reviews written in French — not enough of these, I think, to reflect the true biculturalism of Canada, but the substance has been inclusive and the quality good. In addition to Kattan, Pilon, and Jean le Moyne, the critics have included Gérard



Tougas, Gérard Bessette, Jean-Charles Falardeau, Gilles Marcotte, Adrien Thério, and others; and many, though by no means all, of the leading poets and novelists who write in French have received the attention they deserve. Another of the services *Canadian Literature* has provided for the entertainment and instruction of its readers has been a number of controversial engagements and a number of (usually) well-deserved castigations. I am thinking of Ralph Gustafson's craftsmanly distaste for the verse of the New Wave school, Louis Dudek's review article labelled "Touncing the Younger Poets", Frank Davey's dismissal of Layton's *Periods of the Moon*, and John Peter's much earlier denunciation of the academicism of Robert Finch. George Bowering, Lionel Kearns, and Frank Davey, however, have spoken well in defence of the new schools, and the air of lively debate that enlivens the reviews of recent poetry is all to the good. Another debate, not unconnected with the reception of the youngest poetry, was the full and very knowledgeable discussion of the teaching of creative writing in the universities in Robert Harlow's "Bastard Bohemia: Creative Writing in

the Universities" in no. 27 and Warren Tallman's rejoinder two issues later, "Creative Writing: Reality and Myth."

The most unusual and by no means the least interesting feature of the magazine has been the inclusion from time to time of poems or verses. These ranged from F. R. Scott's translation of a descriptive poem written by Marc Lescarbot at Port Royal in 1609 and John Glassco's of Louis Riel's bitter address to Sir John A. Macdonald to unpublished poems of Malcolm Lowry, a couple of short lyrics by myself, some Found Poems of Frank Scott, and an experimental verse manifesto by Wilfred Watson.

I cannot bring this survey to a close without a tribute to the editor himself and to his two learned and lively colleagues, Donald Stephens and W. H. New, whose articles, reviews, and occasional editorials have been invariably of the highest standard. It is to George Woodcock, however, that I think the great success of the magazine must be

mainly due. His dedication to his task and the skill with which he has carried it out derive from a lifetime's experience as a man of letters and an active participant in the political and moral life of his time. This has been quite explicitly declared in the editorials he wrote for most of the issues, but it has found active and practical expression in the firmness and direction with which he fixed and maintained the course of the magazine during this first ten years. In the Introduction to *A Choice of Critics* he stated his purpose. It was to avoid the sterile, the foregone, and the established, and to seek with a kind of "eclectic detachment" for excellence through freedom. "My own approach as a critic," he wrote, "has always been that of the professional rather than the academic: an eclecticism which accepts as valid any method that may throw light on the intentions of an author and on the nature and quality of his achievement. This has led me to welcome any critical essay whose arguments seem well supported and well presented: the unacademic but naturally informed attitude of the practising writer as well as the more systematic attitude of the scholarly critic whose insights spring from the accumulation of knowledge."

That George Woodcock has succeeded for the past ten years in bringing these two streams of knowledge about literature together in a single national journal is an achievement for which all Canadians ought to be grateful.

<sup>1</sup>To appreciate the catholicity of the editor's choices and the variety of approach in the magazine's critical articles the reader is recommended to compare, with Mrs. Francis' essay, Ethel Wilson's warmly personal appreciation of Alan Crawley and his influential Vancouver poetry magazine *Contemporary Verse*. Both are good, but in very different ways.

