

THE OUTLOOK FOR CANADIAN LITERATURE

Desmond Pacey

FOR OVER A QUARTER OF A CENTURY now, I have been engaged intermittently in the task of publicly taking the pulse of Canadian literature. I am not quite so naive as to think that my activity in this regard has been of any particular help either to the patient or to the public, but it has been a source of innocent amusement for me, and at least I have the satisfaction of knowing that the patient is in rather better health than when my diagnosis began. This is a statement which not all doctors could make with equal assurance.

It was in December 1938 that I made my first and very tentative examination. I had a few months before arrived in Cambridge, England, as a Research Student in English Literature. Although I had only lived in Canada seven years, I had conceived a deep love for the country and a considerable although by no means profound admiration for its literature. I was annoyed to find that my fellow-students at Cambridge were not only ignorant of a Canadian literature, but pretended to believe that it did not exist. I therefore wrote, and published in *The Cambridge Review*, an article optimistically entitled "At Last — A Canadian Literature". There was no question mark after that title: it was an arrogant assertion, rather than a modest question, and the symptom, no doubt, of a youthful brashness which I have not even yet succeeded in eliminating from my personality.

The theme of that first article was that after a long period of derivativeness, Canadian literature was at last finding distinctive voices and distinctive modes of utterance. I based my case largely on the poetry of E. J. Pratt and the novels and stories of Morley Callaghan; both of these writers I had come to know

personally during my student days at the University of Toronto. The case was certainly not argued very cogently, for there were virtually no Canadian books available to me in Cambridge, and I had to write almost entirely from memory.

The reception of that article was not so enthusiastic as to determine me to play permanently the role, recently attributed to me by *The Times Literary Supplement*, of "the distinguished apologist for Canadian literature", and I might well have lost all interest in the subject had it not been for an incident in my early teaching career at Brandon College. The University of Manitoba at that time had a series of province-wide radio programmes known as "The University on the Air", and Brandon College had been assigned a group of these programmes with the sub-title "Manitoba Sketches". I was asked to do a fifteen-minute talk on "Manitoba in Literature", and as the only Manitoba author I had ever read was Frederick Philip Grove, I devoted the whole programme to his novels. One thing led to another: the editor of the *Manitoba Arts Review* asked me to develop the radio talk into an article; Dr. Lorne Pierce of the Ryerson Press read the article and asked me to expand it into a book; and so my career as a Canadian literary critic was launched.

When I began my study of Canadian literature, two much more distinguished men were also — quite unknown to me — making their first systematic examinations of it. I refer to the late E. K. Brown and to A. J. M. Smith, both of whom published very important books on the subject in 1943. As far as the *study* of Canadian literature is concerned, the decisive turning point in my opinion was the publication in that year of Brown's *On Canadian Poetry* and of Smith's *Book of Canadian Poetry*. Neither of these men could be charged with parochialism, narrow nationalism, or special pleading, since both, although of Canadian origin, had received their postgraduate training at great overseas universities and had taken up important posts in American universities — Brown at the University of Chicago, and Smith at Michigan State.

AT THAT TIME the study of Canadian literature was far from being academically respectable. A few universities included a small amount of Canadian writing in their literary courses, but there were no full-year undergraduate courses in the subject, still less any graduate courses, and still less any professors of English who made Canadian literature their specialty. The situation has changed radically in the past two decades, and it is changing so rapidly today

that one begins to wonder whether the pendulum may not swing too far. The number of students taking courses in Canadian literature in our universities is already large, and shows no sign of abating. There are approximately two hundred and sixty such students this year (1965-66) at U.N.B., and I am told that there are four hundred and fifty at the University of Western Ontario, well over a hundred at the University of Alberta, and over two hundred at the University of British Columbia. Even the University of Toronto, which in my day allowed us about two weeks for a hasty glimpse of Canadian literature at the end of a course rather misleadingly called "American and Canadian Literature", has recently initiated, I understand, a full undergraduate course in the subject.

Furthermore, the Americans, who have so assiduously cultivated English and American literature, are now looking for fresh fields to conquer — and many of them are looking over our border. An Institute of Canadian Studies was recently set up at the University of Vermont, and Canadian literature is being studied, usually in the larger context of the literature of the Commonwealth, at several other American universities, notably Texas and Pennsylvania. Another symptom of this growing American interest in our literature is the recent establishment of a Commonwealth Literature group in the Modern Language Association of America. This trend is sure to continue and accelerate.

There are yet other signs that the study of Canadian literature has become academically respectable. One was the foundation in 1959 at the University of British Columbia of the magazine *Canadian Literature*, which, under the distinguished editorship of George Woodcock, has maintained a high standard of literary history, criticism and scholarship. Another was the publication earlier this year of *The Literary History of Canada*, a book of almost a thousand pages issued by the University of Toronto Press under the general editorship of Professor Carl F. Klinck. This book is important in itself, as it is the first truly comprehensive study of its subject; but it is perhaps even more important for the stimulus it is sure to provide for other, more specialized studies. Now that at last we can all see how vast the field is, before very long a host of busy miners will be sinking their exploratory shafts all over it.

For although much has been accomplished in the scholarly study of Canadian literature during the past quarter of a century, much more remains to be done. There are still no definitive studies of the main genres of Canadian literature — of the Canadian novel, Canadian poetry, Canadian essays, Canadian short stories. And there are still almost no good biographical and critical studies of individual authors, of Lampman, Carman, Roberts, Scott, Pratt or Leacock.

Another virtually unexplored area is that of Canadian travel literature, which if traced in detail from its origins, would provide us with much more information about our social, economic and cultural history. Among the most exciting chapters in *The Literary History* are those by David Galloway and Victor Hopwood which deal with the literature of Canadian exploration. They have opened up for us a whole new dimension of our writing, and extended by almost two centuries the depth of our literary tradition.

One corner of this area is the study of the reactions to the Canadian scene of such distinguished literary visitors as Captain Marryat, Charles Dickens, Matthew Arnold, Oscar Wilde, Rudyard Kipling and Rupert Brooke, and more recently of English writers such as Wyndham Lewis and J. B. Priestley. A study of the records they left of their impressions of Canada would help us to understand not only this country, but the country from which they came. A little over two years ago, Mr. Geoffrey Keynes was kind enough to let me look through his collection of the manuscript letters of Rupert Brooke, and to read and make notes on those which Brooke wrote from Canada. His sardonic and often supercilious remarks undoubtedly reflect the cultural poverty of our country at that time, but even more clearly they reveal the kind of upper-class English snobbery which made Englishmen in those early years of this century so suspect among us.

Another fruitful area of research is the reception which Canadian literature enjoyed (or suffered) in Great Britain. We speak glibly of the international reputations established by Haliburton, Parker, Roberts, Carman and Leacock, but no one has yet made a close study of the precise nature and extent of their reputations. I spent the academic year 1962-63 in Cambridge making a beginning on this study, and although all the evidence is not yet available I can offer a few tentative conclusions.

Firstly, we tend to exaggerate the overseas vogue of these authors. Haliburton was widely and enthusiastically reviewed in the British press, but in this respect he was a solitary exception. Gilbert Parker was never taken seriously as a novelist, and was judged quite rightly to be an entertainer rather than a serious artist; Roberts had almost no British recognition as a poet, and only a brief and fairly perfunctory one as a writer of prose nature sketches; Bliss Carman was the only Canadian poet to have his books regularly reviewed in the best literary periodicals of England, but he was always described as a minor poet and his vogue (if that is not too strong a word) lasted only for slightly over a decade; Leacock was always reviewed, but not with any great discernment.

To illustrate the ironies that turn up in such a study, let me cite the first Eng-

lish review of a Leacock book — his *Elements of Political Science* (1906) — in the course of which the reviewer in the *Athenaeum* accused Leacock of being unable to see a joke. Or take these sentences from the *Times Literary Supplement's* review of Leacock's *Literary Lapses* (1910):

These are slight American humorous sketches, on a great many subjects. . . . Mr. Leacock is not a subtle wit. He must be taken in small doses and hardly bears re-perusal. But a little of him in the right mood is very comforting.

Do they not catch perfectly the smug complacency of the British intelligentsia in 1910 — even to the failure, still only too prevalent in the United Kingdom, to differentiate between Canada and America? It is only fair to add, however, that by 1912, when *Sunshine Sketches of a Little Town* appeared, the *TLS* had discovered Mr. Leacock's Canadianism. The reviewer went to the other extreme: from patronizing Leacock as an American he switched to embracing him as a Britisher:

His real hard work . . . is distilling sunshine. This new book is full of it — the sunshine of humour, the thin keen sunshine of irony, the mellow evening sunshine of sentiment. Universal things like these are not intended merely to pamper the pride of Imperialism. Still, we cannot resist a secret joy in the fact that all the queer and crooked characters that flourish in maple-shaded Mariposa . . . are British-born.

Such little ironies are frequent. Early in 1929 two interesting but admittedly imperfect novels by Canadians appeared in England — Frederick Philip Grove's *Our Daily Bread* and Raymond Knister's *White Narcissus*. If they had been reviewed seriously and sympathetically in such an influential English weekly as the *New Statesman and Nation*, their authors might have been decisively encouraged and a basis might have been laid for their English reputations. Instead, it was their bad luck to fall into the hands of that supercilious and bad-tempered old Etonian, Cyril Connolly, who was given eleven novels to review *en masse* on the eve of leaving for a Spanish holiday. Bliethely he dashed off a review of which these are the relevant portions:

Our Daily Bread and *White Narcissus* are Canadian novels. One is soft-boiled and the other hard. The publishers are to be congratulated on starting a line in colonial fiction with 'a country which has produced remarkably few novelists of a thoughtful quality.' One is a wistful little love-story, mildly sophisticated, the other a typical family epic in the American style. The idea is refreshing; there must surely be many more colonies in which the necessary condition, quoted

above, will apply. Meanwhile Canada is behind Jamaica, which has quite a good novelist within it, and a coloured expatriate outside.

. . . These books have finished this reviewer — more than he could do for them — and tomorrow they will be left in a hotel or dropped in the equable Adour, while he makes his way still fleeing from simple people and those who write about them, towards the mountains of Aragon.

Three years later Raymond Knister was to die, possibly by suicide, certainly in despair.

THE SECOND CONCLUSION I would draw from my study of the reception of Canadian literature in England is that our cultural image there is largely a function of our political reputation. When England was most Empire-conscious, in the period from 1890 to 1918, there were a good many favourable discussions of Canadian writers and of Canadian literature generally. As Canada gradually asserted its independence in the nineteen-twenties and thirties, the English interest in us proportionately declined. Our contribution to the Allied effort in World War II again stimulated some interest in our literature, but as we have once again asserted our independent role the interest has waned. Only recently, when there has been some revival of imperial sentiment in the terms of a Commonwealth cultural entente, has there been a revival of interest on a modest and tentative scale. But in spite of all the improved systems of communication in our time, Englishmen as a whole are still ignorant of what Canada is really like. The supreme example of this is the *Times Literary Supplement* reviewer of Robertson Davies' and Tyrone Guthrie's book about the Stratford Shakespearian Festival, *Twice have the Trumpets Sounded*. Referring to that Ontario theatrical venture, the reviewer wrote, "Mr. Guthrie did not patronize his prairie public. . . ."

But I may seem to be in danger of confining the outlook for Canadian literature to the outlook for the academic study of Canadian literature. I do not mean to imply that the health of Canadian literature depends upon the amount of academic critical scrutiny it is given, but this is nevertheless symptomatic of a wider, more general interest in what our writers produce.

When he wrote *On Canadian Poetry* in 1943, E. K. Brown began with a chapter which is a classic statement of the difficulties which had traditionally plagued Canadian literature until that time. If we consider his statement, and see to what extent conditions have improved in the twenty-odd intervening years,

I think you will agree that the outlook for Canadian literature is much more hopeful today than it was a generation ago.

Brown begins by asserting, somewhat defensively, that "there is a Canadian literature, often rising to effects of great beauty, but it has stirred little interest outside Canada. . . . Canadian books may occasionally have had a mild impact outside Canada; Canadian literature has had none." It would be idle to pretend that there has been a really radical improvement in this respect. To the authors of international reputation whom Brown mentions — Haliburton, Roberts, Parker, Connor, Montgomery, Service, Leacock, Mazo de la Roche and Morley Callaghan — we may now add the names of Ethel Wilson, Mordecai Richler, James Reaney, Norman Levine, Margaret Laurence and (somewhat dubiously, since they are not clearly Canadian) Brian Moore and Malcolm Lowry. But it is still true to say that these writers are known rather as individuals than as parts of a specifically Canadian tradition. For reasons which I have mentioned, interest in our national literature, as a distinctive part of the literature of the Commonwealth, is growing and will continue to grow, but I do not believe that the growth will be as rapid or as far-reaching as we might like it to become. Why should the British or Americans — our most likely outside readers — devote much of their attention to our literature, when they already have so much of their own? Canada is simply not yet an important enough figure on the world's stage to command that kind of interest. The United States is now so powerful that the British feel they must seek to understand her, but an understanding of Canada is not, and is not in the foreseeable future likely to be, high on their list of priorities.

To put my conclusion on this point briefly, I believe that the growth of outside interest in Canadian literature over the next generation will be measurable but not large. This means that we Canadians must scrutinize our own literature, and learn to set and apply our own standards of judgment. We have been too prone in the past to await the verdict of London or New York; our verdicts for the foreseeable future will have to be largely our own.

This brings us to Brown's next point, which is that "even within the national borders the impact of Canadian books and of Canadian literature has been relatively superficial." Here I believe there has been a demonstrable improvement in the space of a generation. For a long time Canadian writers had to find their publishers and their public outside Canada; now a Canadian book can command a large enough audience at home to make its domestic publication economically viable, even on occasion profitable. Irving Layton is a good example of a Cana-

dian writer who survives almost exclusively by virtue of his reputation within Canada, and the bulk of the sales of such accomplished writers as Ethel Wilson, Robertson Davies, Hugh MacLennan and Earle Birney are transacted in Canadian bookstores. There is a tremendous voluntary enthusiasm for Canadian books among Canadian students, and among a growing number of Canadian adults. I have some evidence that this conclusion is not merely the result of my own prejudices: Norman Levine, who is serving this year as writer in residence at the University of New Brunswick after sixteen years of voluntary exile in the United Kingdom, tells me that he finds an almost miraculous change for the better in the Canadian interest in books and writers.

Brown's third major obstacle to the development of a Canadian literature is what he calls "the colonial spirit." "A colony," he says, "lacks the spiritual energy to rise above routine" and "it lacks this energy because it does not adequately believe in itself." He goes on:

It applies to what it has standards which are imported, and therefore artificial and distorting. It sets the great good place not in its present, nor in its past nor in its future, but somewhere outside its own borders, somewhere beyond its own possibilities. . . . It is clear that those who are content with this attitude will seek the best in jam and toffee, from beyond the ocean. That anything Canadian could be supremely good would never enter their heads. . . . Canada has no distinct flag, and no single distinct anthem although Mr. Mackenzie King paused on the very brink of asserting the latter; the relations between the Canadian Provinces and the federal government are subject to review in London; and the Judicial Committee of the Privy Council, also in London, is our highest court. But Canada has her own ministers in foreign countries, makes treaties without reference to Britain, and declares, or refuses to declare, war by the instrument of her own Parliament. Is it any wonder that Canadian thinking about Canada is confused . . . ? The average English Canadian would still like to have it both ways and is irritated, or nonplussed, by the demand that he make a resolute choice; at heart he does not know whether Canada or the Empire is his supreme political value.

Our first reaction, on re-reading those words a scant generation after they were written, is to be heartened by the progress that we have made. We do have a flag, we shall soon have an anthem, and for better or for worse we have cut almost all the imperial ties. On second thought, however, we may wonder whether we have merely replaced one dependence with another: are we not now in danger of becoming a mere appendage of the United States? Temperamentally an optimist, I do not think so. Although we have yet far to go in fully defining and valuing our Canadian identity, I believe that we are on that road, and that as

we clarify our national goals our literature will at once reflect and guide us towards those objectives. We are far more ready today than we were a generation ago to judge what we have by our own standards, to put, for example, our own *imprimatur* upon our writers rather than to await the judgment of critics beyond our borders. As *The Times Literary Supplement* noted of Canadian criticism in its recent Commonwealth issue, we are no longer on the defensive: we see our own strength and weakness and neither boast of the one nor grovel over the other. We are at least approaching that state of cultural maturity in which we are ready to see ourselves steadily and see ourselves whole.

The next obstacle to the development of good Canadian literature cited by Brown is the spirit of the frontier, or its afterglow. He explains this as follows:

Most Canadians live at some distance from anything that could even in the loosest terms be known as a material frontier; but the standards which the frontier-life applied are still current, if disguised. Books are a luxury on the frontier; and writers are an anomaly. On the frontier a man is mainly judged by what he can do to bring his immediate environment quickly and visibly under the control of society. No nation is more practical than ours. . . . The uneasiness in the presence of the contemplative or aesthetic is to be ascribed to the frontier feeling that these are luxuries which should not be sought at a time when there is a tacit contract that everyone should be doing his share in the common effort to build the material structure of a nation. That a poem or a statue or a metaphysic could contribute to the fabric of a nation is not believed.

This passage now has an even more old-fashioned ring than Brown's description of our political dependence upon Britain. Theatres, art galleries, and centres for the performing arts have sprung up all over the country; poets read their works to large and enthusiastic audiences in every major city from coast to coast; our writers and artists are generously provided with fellowships, medals and travel grants by the Canada Council; resident painters, sculptors, musicians and writers are becoming a commonplace feature of our universities. We have come to realize that the quality of our lives and the prestige of our nation depend just as much on our art and culture as upon our science and technology, and we manifest an almost frantic desire to make up for our long neglect of things of the mind and the spirit. The Canada of the post-Massey Report era is no longer content to be a frontier society.

We are not content to be — but there are certain senses in which we still are, for all our frantic efforts to progress. The interest in literature in particular and the arts in general is still confined to a relatively small group of our population.

The theatres and art galleries have been built, but by the great mass of the population they are regarded as exotic growths. In many cities the theatres have trouble maintaining themselves, and the art galleries either fail to draw many visitors or draw them for the wrong reasons — for such reasons as social prestige and the desire to display one's new dress or hat. Of more direct relevance to the welfare of Canadian literature is the generally low cultural and intellectual level of our newspapers, magazines, radio and television programmes. In a country like England, a serious writer can augment his income by writing occasional reviews or essays for such newspapers as *The Observer*, *The Sunday Times*, or *The Guardian*, or for such magazines as *The New Statesman and Nation*, *The Spectator*, or *The Listener*. We have no such newspapers or magazines in this country. The book pages of even our best newspapers are naive and clumsy in comparison, and the fees they pay for reviewing are ridiculously low. Although *Saturday Night* is making a real effort to play a role in Canada similar to that of *The New Statesman* and *The Spectator*, its circulation is still so relatively small that it cannot exercise the kind of influence or command the prestige which would encourage our best writers to contribute frequently to it. And of course when we look at radio and television we realize only too keenly that we have not fully outgrown the frontier mentality. Despite all the heroic efforts of the C.B.C., the intellectual level of ninety-five percent of our television and radio programmes is moronic.

We have not yet, then, really outgrown the malign influence of the frontier spirit, although we have made some demonstrable progress. A more thoroughgoing transformation has occurred in the space of a single generation to the puritanism which Brown lists next among the obstacles to our literary development. Canadian Puritanism, says Brown, "allows to the artist no function except watering down moral ideas of an orthodox kind into a solution attractive to minds not keen enough to study the ideas in more abstract presentations." No one can deny that puritanism is still a force amongst us, but it has lost its power to control the media of communication. Books which were in trouble with the censors thirty or so years ago, such as Frederick Philip Grove's *Settlers of the Marsh* or Morley Callaghan's *Such is my Beloved*, now seem innocuous, almost naive, beside some of the poems of Irving Layton and Leonard Cohen or such recent Canadian novels as Hugh Hood's *White Figure*, *White Ground* and Stephen Vizinczey's *In Praise of Older Women*. There is virtually no subject that a Canadian writer cannot discuss frankly today.

The final obstacle which Brown mentions, regionalism, I have never been able

to see as an obstacle. He admits that regionalist art may have its virtues, particularly that of accuracy, but he asserts:

In the end, however, regionalist art will fail because it stresses the superficial and the peculiar at the expense, at least, if not to the exclusion, of the fundamental and universal. The advent of regionalism may be welcomed with reservations as a stage through which it may be well for us to pass, as a discipline and a purgation. But if we are to pass through it, the coming of great books will be delayed beyond the lifetime of anyone now living.

What worries me about the logic of Brown's argument is his assumption that regional accuracy and universal validity are incompatible. Are they incompatible in the Irish poetry of Yeats, or the Wessex novels of Thomas Hardy, or the Russian plays of Chekhov? Rather than seeing the strong regional particularities of this country as an obstacle to great art, I see them as an advantage — an advantage which we only began to exploit in the poetry of Carman, Lampman, Roberts and Scott and the novels of Grove and MacLennan. A regional novel or poem may be merely a pretty idyll; and too many of ours have been only that. But it may also be a work which reveals the basic stuff of human nature by a penetrating study of the here and now, and that is what I hope much of our literature may become.

Brown summarized his account of the difficulties confronting Canadian literature in 1943 with this sad sentence: "What I have been attempting to suggest with as little heat or bitterness as possible is that in this country the plight of literature is a painful one." I do not think that any honest writer could subscribe to this verdict today. The life of the artist is always a painful one, but the pain today in this country is the inner torment caused by the effort at creation, and the anxiety generated by the apparent drift of the world towards nuclear war. The specifically Canadian environment is *not* hostile to the writer, although it may in some areas still be indifferent to him. Gradually, all our traditional excuses for inaction and lethargy are being removed.

WE HAVE TODAY a literature which is still not great by world standards, but which is lively and interesting. Poets such as Layton, Reaney, Mandel, Birney, Jones, Souster and Nowlan are as productive and as skilful as any comparable group writing in the English-speaking world, and prose writers such as MacLennan, Frye, McLuhan, Richler, Moore, Davies, Wilson, Kreisel

and Levine are for the first time in our history as plentiful and as dextrous as our poets. Every year sees the emergence of new talents, so that today, again for the first time in our history, we have productive writers in every age group. Only in drama is there still a dearth of activity. Our great distances and our scattered population have so far been almost insuperable barriers to the growth of an indigenous theatre and theatre literature, but the theatres which have been recently built in almost all our major cities are bound — since art like nature abhors a vacuum — to stimulate playwriting in the not too distant future. Already the inimitable James Reaney has made a promising start.

To return to my original metaphor, my diagnosis and prognosis must be that the patient is healthy and is likely so to continue for the foreseeable future. Canadian writers have a growingly eager audience, and the old obstacles to our literary development have virtually disappeared. Whether or not my optimism is justified will depend upon factors beyond our national control: upon the diligence and talent of writers who are born amongst us, and upon the survival of human civilization in this anxious atomic age.