

## 1. *Its Modest Successes*

*Donald Stephens*

Our literature is not yet one of the world's great literatures, and may never be; but it is our own, and it has its modest successes as well as its dismal failures. Our literary history may not be glorious, but it is ours and we should be aware of it — even if only to learn from our own mistakes.

**S**O ENDS DESMOND PACEY'S *Creative Writing in Canada*, and so is stated the reason why he wrote it. Apparently, too, this is the reason for the *Literary History of Canada*, a massive work which will prove an indispensable reference book to students of Canadian literature in Canada, and around the world. This collection of essays on the whole growth of Canadian literature is of major importance. It answers countless questions, and will be extremely useful to authors, teachers, and general readers. Desmond Pacey did a great service to Canadian letters by compiling his book; Carl Klinck and his editors have extended the whole direction and brought forth a commendable work.

Up to now there has been little real criticism of Canadian literature available to the student in comprehensive form. There is a plethora of short essays, articles, and monographs on specific authors, numerous in number but restricted in subject matter. There is the rare book dealing with a specific author. But until the last ten years, books focusing on the history and criticism of Canadian literature have been uninspiring.

There were few studies done before the First World War, but major criticism came after it, thriving on the new nationalism that was a product of the war. Vigorous as the nationalism may have been, the identity of Canadian literature was left somewhat vague. Logan and French's *Highways of Canadian Literature*,

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## *Editorial Views*

published in 1924, seemed to apologize for its existence, for “however insignificant, from the point of view of world literature, Canadian literature may be, it is *important to Canadians themselves*.” The book was focused on new nationalism and was strongly didactic in style and tone. It was directed to people who were only semi-aware that a Canadian literature in itself did exist. The criteria for admitting the existence of Canadian literature was:

That verse and prose rise to the dignity of literature when they express and promote existence ideally — by delighting the æsthetic senses, by consoling the heart, by inspiring the moral imagination, by exalting or transporting the spirit.

With these aims and ideas, and a large dose of flagrant exaggeration, Logan and French were often capable of insipid moralizing and pompous grandiloquence. They considered Canadian literature to start with John Richardson; for them Frances Brooke was an incidental visitor. For them, the birthright was important in determining the Canadianness of the product they were selling. Kirby's *The Golden Dog* belonged to emigré literature; Sir Gilbert Parker is the best that Canada has produced because of his Canadian spirit.

The next historical study was Lorne Pierce's *Outline of Canadian Literature*, published in 1927, and here Kirby takes his place as part of the country, but

Frances Brooke is still an outsider. But Pierce is not sure of the quality of Canadian literature, and concludes that "by every token we surely have at hand the elements out of which *may* evolve a great people and a splendid literature". A biographical sketch of an author, a list of books, and short comments on the author's major works, make up in each case his history and criticism. And in 1927, Pierce, the friend of Carman, the man bred in the strictures of Victorianism, can say about Gilbert Parker that "there are many elevated moral passages in his book, as well as a fine use of the Scriptures. Parker is also free from morbidity, sombre psychology and sex; he is wholesome and yet virile". This is not good criticism, but Pierce is very certain of his authority and his opinions seem not to ask for either doubt or criticism.

Pierce set the method and plan that were to follow in much Canadian criticism after his time. V. B. Rhodenizer's *Handbook of Canadian Literature*, published in 1930, shows the Pierce influence of short biographical sketches, lists of books and short criticism, but with detailed studies of Kirby and Parker; Kirby's *The Golden Dog* he considered to be the best work produced in Canada, with Grove closely following. But Rhodenizer was moved by the spirit of his time and could question the "vicious prudery" of Grove's *Settlers of the Marsh*. His criticism seems more reasonable and contemporary in spirit, though he is not sure "whether there is a Canadian national sentiment of which Canadian men and women of letters are the voice". There followed for almost twenty years a repetition of Pierce's direction: the sketches of individual authors.

Pacey's *Creative Writing in Canada*, first published in 1952, revised in 1961, is unquestionably the best and most definitive work of criticism concerning the whole of Canadian writing until the *Literary History of Canada*. He still qualifies his statements when he feels that Callaghan, Moore, and Richler are the best writers that Canada has produced, yet they are "at the most charitable estimate, secondary figures on the world literary stage". But if Pacey's critical statements may be questioned, his pattern study of Canadian literature cannot. His book sets the patterns of Canadian prose: the historical romance and the regional idyll of the old past, the prairie realism of the near past, and the urban realism of the present. He explains the causes for these trends cogently and clearly in his conclusion. He argues that Canadian fiction has been held back by the slow and unspectacular growth of our society, by the complexity of that society which has forced authors back into the past or into romanticism and by "our distrust of abstract thought and our lingering puritanism". His thought and writing throughout the book are quick moving and perceptive. Admittedly he glosses over many

things, but his is a great, if not the greatest, contribution to Canadian criticism. He unlocked a door. The editors of the *Literary History of Canada* have opened it.

CANADIAN LITERATURE is definitely in a state of spirited movement, particularly in poetry. With this new literature will come a new criticism, for criticism needs a vital source if it is to be vibrant itself. It is surprising that the most vigorous decades of Canadian literature, the last thirty years, are the most poorly treated in this new volume. Before that, however, the writers in this volume have done an excellent job. Many gaps have been filled; there are the studies of the animal stories, the travel works, of minor novelists in the last part of the nineteenth century. When the writers feel that they should stress the work of a certain author they do so with little or no apology. There is a wonderful kind of astringency to most of the writing that invigorates, but does not overpraise the literature being discussed. The writing for the most part is extremely interesting and lively. No writer of any quality is ignored; Frances Brooke is included, as are Brian Moore and Malcolm Lowry, the famous visitors.

This book serves a great need of the student of Canadian letters; it is often well written, and shows some amazing perceptions. The conclusion is brilliant, as one could expect from Northrop Frye. The work of the editors, Alfred G. Bailey, Claude Bissell, Roy Daniells, Northrop Frye, Desmond Pacey, is extremely good. The index is precise and clear, yet the book is more than a mere catalogue of the historical growth of English literature in Canada. Carl Klinck has put together a series of essays which notably present an historical but also a critical examination of writing in Canada. The book is far too expensive for a general reader, however, and, because of its size and poor binding, easily falls apart — something one does not expect from a book priced at \$18. There are some interesting omissions; Evelyn Richardson and Lord Beaverbrook (his biography of R. B. Bennett, surely, should be included here) for instance, but these are bound to happen and the care with which others are included shows that the editors were not often forgetful.

Canadian literature has needed a book like this for over a hundred years. It is easy to disregard it because it is often necessarily superfluous, and some of the criticism makes one wonder if the specific works mentioned were read with any care. But these surely, are minor points. Most important, I think, the *Literary History of Canada* establishes once and for all that there is good writing in our

country, not writing that has to be praised because of nationalism, or writing that reveals the author as the last champion of the individual mind and sensibility against an intrusive society, but writing that is here, and has been here, and continues to be here. The book is long, but it is never completely dull, and often the perception revealed by established critics shows a refinement of taste and attitude, and supports Frye's vision that "the writers featured in this book have identified the habits and attitudes of the country, . . . they have also left an imaginative legacy of dignity and of high courage."

## 2. *The Long Day's Task*

George Woodcock

SIX YEARS AGO, when *Canadian Literature* came into being, work had already started on the *Literary History of Canada*. Now the long-expected work has at last appeared, a massive volume of 945 pages, written and edited by a team of thirty-three Canadian scholars. A vast common labour of so many hands cannot be considered lightly; the very activity which the preparation of the work had generated marks a stage in the development of Canadian studies, and the finished work will inevitably influence our views of Canadian literature and sub-literature for long in the future.

Before considering how far the *Literary History of Canada* has succeeded, one must consider the objective which the editors set themselves. Wisely, and apparently deliberately, the title of *A History of Canadian Literature* was not chosen. The word *literature* carries a qualitative connotation, and if we take this seriously, the proportion of books published in Canada or by Canadians which it might cover is slight indeed. To give only one example, the first 188 pages of the *Literary History* deal with the period up to 1880, and mention several hundred titles; it is doubtful whether — apart from the narrations of explorers and travellers which Dr. Victor Hopwood describes so ably — there are more than a score of books from this period which would pass muster either as notable examples of good writing or even as acceptable entertainment for the common reader.

The editors of the *Literary History* have in some degree anticipated this objection in the introduction which Professor Carl Klinck has written on their behalf; this tells us that they have chosen the title of *A Literary History of Canada*, rather than calling their volume "a history of literature" because:

... the latter carries too limited a suggestion of a review of books. Each term indicates that temporal sequence is not to be neglected; but the latter would not have conveyed fully the purpose of noting whatever germinates, grows, continues, recurs, or becomes distinctive, perhaps unique. This volume represents a positive attempt to give a history of Canada in terms of writings which deserve more or less attention because of significant thought, form and use of language. It also aims to contribute to criticism by offering reasons for singling out those works regarded as best.

This statement justifies one aspect of the *Literary History* — the comprehensiveness that brings in not only the works of poetry, fiction, criticism, drama, etc., which one would normally expect in a history of literature, but also philosophic, scientific, religious and theological writings with neither literary intent nor literary merit.

At the same time, the editors, according to Professor Klinck's introduction, at least began with the intention of seeking out whatever deserved "more or less attention because of significant thought, form and use of language" and of making some selective and critical judgments on the works which were mentioned in the *Literary History*. Presumably this intention was transmitted to the contributors, and their work can therefore be judged fairly on this basis.

It is difficult, in fact, to make a comprehensive judgment of the *Literary History* since there is much variety of approach, and an equal variety of quality, between the various chapters. Critics of the project as it was originally presented pointed out the dangers of committing a work of this nature to so many different hands — some of them untried — and in the event these doubts have been largely justified. One of the principal faults of the *Literary History* is the evident division among its authors between those who consider that they are writing sections of a mere reference book, and who painstakingly list every publication within their period, and those who consider that their function is a more selective and critical one — to show the spirit of a period as revealed in its best or most typical books.

Since the output of Canadian writers has inevitably grown more prolific from decade to decade over the past two centuries, there is a tendency for this division of approach to be complicated by the actual period with which a contributor is dealing. Fred Cogswell and Carl Klinck, discussing the eighteenth and early

nineteenth centuries, have little difficulty in naming almost all the works with literary pretensions that appeared during their period; they even comment on many of them individually. By the end of the nineteenth century the flood of publications had become too great for this kind of treatment to be feasible. Gordon Roper, for example, found that Canadian writers between 1880 and 1920 published 1,400 volumes of fiction, and in his chapter, "New Forces: New Fiction" he claims the unenviable achievement of having read "only about two-thirds of the volumes published in those years, all that is at the moment available in Canadian and American libraries." Though Professor Roper's discussion of the novelists of this period assumes at times the aspect of a catalogue, with names of books flowing out in virtually meaningless sequence, he still does not succeed in mentioning, let alone commenting on, all the 900 or so novels which he actually read.

All this, of course, does not mean that reference books, catalogues and bibliographies are not necessary tools of literary scholarship. But we have to be extremely careful how far the scholarly mechanic is allowed to usurp the functions of the perceptive critic; there is no doubt that the proportion of uncritical listing of titles in *A Literary History of Canada* detracts from its value as a work based on writings distinguished by "significant thought, form and use of language". Obviously only a small proportion of the works whose names are mentioned and then passed by in various chapters of the *Literary History* have the smallest pretensions to lasting significance.

Some contributors, it is true, have not only written good literary history, drawing out the meaningful trends of the times they discuss, but have also criticized and evaluated judiciously. I have already remarked on the excellence of the two early chapters by Victor G. Hopwood on "Explorers by Land (to 1860)" and "Explorers by Sea: The West Coast". Not only does Dr. Hopwood admirably re-create the spirit of the narratives he discusses; he also makes good critical appraisals, and his defence of his admiration for David Thompson is in itself admirable.

Fred Cogswell on the early writers of the Maritimes shows a curiously divided attitude which sometimes has its rewards. He is constantly warning us not to make too much of the works he discusses. The writing of this time and place, he tells us, "is more significant when considered as history and sociology than it is when considered as literature." It adopts forms "already out of date in England"; it is "exclusively the province of the amateur"; it is "the vicarious fulfilment of frustrated hopes". Yet, having made these reservations, he can often

enter into the spirit of the times he discusses to such an extent that he praises for their charm such works as Cartwright's *Labrador*:

So cutting cold, so blust'ring Boreas blows,  
None can with naked Face, his blasts oppose.  
But well wrapp'd up, we travel out secure,  
And find Health's blessings, in an Air so pure.

Occasionally, as in his brief section on Henry Alline, he even transmits to us some of the sympathy which he himself has developed towards these deservedly half-forgotten authors. But Cogswell, unlike most of the contributors to the *Literary History*, is a practicing writer, a poet, and this has enabled him to reach a kind of understanding which accepts the author he discusses — no matter how inferior — as a human being reacting as best he can to his situation and perhaps showing some grain of originality or mental courage in doing so. This is one of the ways of dealing interestingly with work which one knows would crumble like a mummy before the first breath of a direct critical judgment.

Carl F. Klinck, who also, in discussing the earlier writers of the Canadas, has to deal with material equally vulnerable to criticism, contrives often to arouse interest in work whose merits hardly deserve it by his sheer enthusiasm for the peculiar, out-of-the-way or hidden fact. His style reflects his enthusiasm, and he delights in sentences crammed to bursting point with descriptive phrases.

... The term "Canadian" was equivalent to "*canadien*", that is North American French, and the image of Canada was made up of seigneurs, habitants, black-clothed clergy, advocates, *coureurs de bois*, *voyageurs*, French Hurons at Lorette, Gallic gaiety, rides in *caleches* or sleighs, folk singing, farm labour, lumbering, church-going, and villages scattered along the banks of the St. Lawrence. The English image, significant of power but also picturesque, included vice-regal display, military colour and bustle, polite sport, harbours full of transatlantic ships, vast stores for continental trade and development, political quarrelling, and high social life.

So it goes on, the portmanteau sentences exuberantly spilling their miscellaneous contents one beside the other. Dr. Klinck is nothing if not devoted to his subject, and at times — for example in his advocacy of the claims to "priority among the poets of the Canada" of the Montreal versifier Levi Adams — he takes one up in the quest rather as a detective story writer might do. We remain unconvinced of the literary worth of anything Levi Adams ever wrote, but for the time being his defender's zeal has made the question of Who First? seem worth following to a solution.



WHILE WRITERS LIKE Cogswell and Klinck can sometimes succeed — by their sympathetically understanding or scholarly enthusiastic approaches — in giving a certain bloom of interest to works which are intrinsically dull, concentrating on men and facts where the works themselves will not bear close examination, it is disappointing to find that the contributors to the *Literary History* who have at their command the much richer fields of Canadian writing in the present century are so often unable to win, let alone hold our attention.

This failure to produce a really adequate critical as well as informational survey of modern Canadian literature is emphasised by the presence of an excellent bridge between the proto-literature before 1880 and the literature after 1920 in the form of the three chapters by Roy Daniells on the so-called Confederation poets and their contemporaries. I do not think anyone has stated more clearly or with a closer, more searching insight than Dr. Daniells the limitations and the real achievements of Lampman, Carman, Roberts and Duncan Campbell Scott. He is at once critical and appreciative; he presents the most convincing case I have yet read for the serious consideration of these writers within the context of a developing Canadian literature. Here at least the avowed intent of the *Literary History* is admirably fulfilled, as it is in a number of the more peripheral essays, such as Jay Macpherson's short but sensitive chapter on Autobiography and F. W. Watt's fine survey of the Literature of Protest considered in the context of a rapidly changing Canadian society.

It is, unfortunately, a downward slope to the six chapters which deal with the most fruitful period of Canadian writing — most fruitful in qualitative achievement as well as in the actual amount of literary production. Desmond Pacey describes fiction from 1920 to 1940 and Hugo McPherson from 1940 to 1960. In the four succeeding chapters Munro Beattie discusses Poetry from 1920 to 1935, E. J. Pratt, Poetry from 1935 to 1950, and Poetry from 1950 to 1960.

Dr. Pacey, who has always been a literary historian rather than a literary critic, tends, as ever, towards a much too level plane of appreciation, which makes him devote excessive attention to minor and justifiably dated figures. He gives, for example, twice as much space to the short stories of Jessie G. Sime as to those which Morley Callaghan wrote during his best period. It is true that Pacey devotes much more attention to Callaghan's novels, but here, though one must agree with his final judgment of this author — that "he most fully succeeded . . . in the three novels of the mid-thirties" — he does not penetrate very deeply into the complexities behind the apparent simplicity of Callaghan's fiction. Similarly,

while the section on Frederick Philip Grove is probably the best part of Pacey's chapter, it does much less than full justice to that impressive failure, *The Master of the Mill*, and so avoids the real problem of Grove — the problem of why a writer so large in texture, so gigantic in his fumbblings, never wrote a book that seemed completely to fulfil his possibilities. At times Pacey shows an astounding failure to grasp what is essential and what is completely inessential in the study of literature. For example, in discussing Mazo de la Roche, he breaks off all at once to remark that, "One of the most dramatic events in the literary history of Canada between the wars was the 1927 award of the *Atlantic Monthly's* \$10,000 prize to Miss de la Roche's *Jalna* as the best novel submitted for its contest." He then goes on to devote a whole page, out of the three and a half pages he spends on discussing this writer, to a description, culled from a periodical of the time, of the civic celebrations by which Toronto welcomed the award. Two sentences suffice to show the nature of this document of literary history.

In addition to the tea service from the City, Miss de la Roche received a beautiful basket of flowers from the Canadian Literature Club of Toronto.

During the evening music was provided by Cassar George Finn, pianist, and Mrs. Fenton Box, soloist, accompanied by Mr. D'Alton McLaughlin.

I would like to think Dr. Pacey included this item with tongue in cheek; I have, alas, no reason for so believing.

Hugo McPherson moves on a higher level of sensibility in his study of the fiction published between 1940 and 1960. He refuses resolutely to pay undue attention to what he calls "the verbose and deciduous many", and generally speaking his judgments are shrewd and good. Yet this chapter is not McPherson at his best. I have read much more capable individual studies by him of some of the writers he deals with here, such as Robertson Davies and Gabrielle Roy, and I feel that he excels in the discursive critical examination and does not take very well to the condensed form of the historical survey. He wisely stresses the importance of visiting and immigrant novelists in the recent broadening of the scope of Canadian fiction, but he feels constrained to allow only brief consideration to writers of such importance — for their influence as well as for their actual works — as Malcolm Lowry and Brian Moore, and thus he fails to convey the range and complexity of the achievement of these novelists who have produced some of the best and most sophisticated fiction written in Canada. Yet McPherson's chapter, for its general sense of what the critical historian should seek in literature and for its occasional penetrating and pleasingly expressed insights, is by far the best of the six chapters on the contemporary period.

One is at a loss to explain why, after deciding to produce a work by many hands, the editors of the *Literary History of Canada* should have taken the risk of allotting all the four chapters dealing with Canadian poetry since 1920 — the crucial chapters in the whole book — to a writer whose only previous publication in the field of Canadian literature was — if one can judge from the Notes on Contributors at the end of the volume — a single article on Lampman. This is a field in which there is no shortage of able young critics, many of them practicing poets, and one would have thought an excellent team of three or four writers could have been assembled who would have dealt brilliantly and sensitively with the various aspects and trends of contemporary Canadian poetry.

Professor Beattie's remarks on modern Canadian poets are rarely brilliant and not often sensitive. His dark horse, no Pegasus, is at best a plodding and serviceable ambler. It is not that Professor Beattie is lacking in knowledge, at least of the scholastic kind. He has obviously read the poets he discusses; he is familiar with their biographies and with the background out of which they emerge and in which they work. He talks with professorial gusto about movements and trends. Yet his approach lacks imagination as his writing lacks the proper clarity of a critic dealing with poetry — the clarity of the lens that looks into a poem and reveals its layers of inner meaning.

There are in fact no revelations and no surprises in what Professor Beattie has to tell us about Canadian poets; we know everything already. He recites facts, often with little sense of their relevance, and he presents documents; three pages at one point are devoted to a paraphrase of a forgotten series of articles in the *Canadian Forum* to make a point that needed a mere paragraph of direct statement. But, above all, Professor Beattie *describes*, and the character of his description can be seen from this typical paragraph taken from his discussion of the poetry of Earle Birney.

“Trial of a City” (originally a radio drama entitled “The Damnation of Vancouver”) is a fantasy-drama in mingled verse and prose of both present and future idiom. The situation is a hearing to determine whether Vancouver should be annihilated. Witnesses are materialized from among the dead: Captain George Vancouver, the headman of the Indian nation that formerly occupied the site, Gassy Jack Deighton, and the author of *Piers Plowman*. Living witnesses are a professor of geology and a Vancouver housewife. There is much excellent fooling, a great deal of good sense, and a thorough treatment of two of Birney's principal themes: the squalor of contemporary urban life and the need for hopeful decisiveness about the next stage of human history. His versatility as a prosodist is strikingly demonstrated. The professor couches his geological erudition in a bleak

four-stress rhythm with deep caesuras and emphatic alliteration; the housewife speaks in lyric stanzas; and Langland utters his condemnation in a version of a fourteenth-century alliterative poetry. The superb achievement of "Trial of a City" is the sequence of passages spoken by the Salish chief summoned to describe for the officials "a way of life that died for yours to live". These sturdy and shapely lines, abounding in vividly realized details, are as splendid as any of Birney's.

We are told the subject of Birney's poem, the characters are named, and something is said of the mechanics of the verse. But at no point are we given an inkling of the special nature of "Trial of a City", of what makes it a unique and personal work, of its poetic essence, nor is there any suggestive insight expressed that is likely to send us to the bookshelf for another reading. For the reader who does not know Birney's work, Professor Beattie might be describing a closet drama of some modern Heavysege, and Birney is far from that.

*The Literary History* is saved from an ending of grand bathos by the efforts of Northrop Frye, whose Conclusion magnificently lifts the tone as it draws in all the trends that have emerged in the preceding chapters and establishes in the reader's mind a synthesis of the Canadian literary arts, united by a series of striking generalizations on Canadian myths and heroes, on the Canadian intellectual's attitude towards nature, and on the foreshortening of Canadian history, with its possible effects on Canadian culture — "its fixation with its own past, its penchant for old-fashioned literary techniques, its preoccupation with the theme of strangled articulateness". But perhaps the most important point that Frye makes, almost in passing, is an admission of the need for something more than the present *Literary History* — for "another book: *A Literary Criticism of Canada*, let us say."

ONE OF THE VIRTUES of the *Literary History* is that it has cleared the air for a real work of literary criticism blended with literary history. At least the present work has done all the listing, all the cataloguing and most of the general charting of the terrain that are likely to be needed for a long time ahead. Students will use the *Literary History* as a reference book, and if all they are seeking is information on a primary level, they will find their needs well met. Some few chapters, and a handful of assessments of individual writers will take their due place in our critical literature, but on the whole it cannot be said that the *Literary History* advances notably this particular field of Canadian writing.

On the other hand, by getting out of the way so many of the basic tasks, and by showing the fields still to be explored, its appearance may well have a fecundating effect on Canadian literary studies in general. One can see it as the starting point for many a notable monograph. Few such massive efforts in fact pass without leaving their permanent effect on the world of letters and scholarship, and few of them are faultless. We complain of their imperfections but we accept them, much as Johnson's contemporaries accepted his Dictionary, because, as yet, there is nothing else of their kind.

