

# THE LONG-ENDURING SPRING

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C RITICS OF CANADIAN LITERATURE seldom produce epigrams or *obiter dicta* and this fact makes all the more memorable a phrase provided by Frank Scott. To the plea voiced in the *Forum* of 1928, "Wanted — Canadian Criticism", Scott replied, "As well hope to hasten the harvest by assembling the harvesters in May." From that time on, it must be admitted, our ears have accustomed themselves to the continuous whetting of scythes.

The most cautious and systematic effort at distinguishing the growing wheat from the tares has been made by the *University of Toronto Quarterly*. A quarter of a century has passed since the first of its annual reports came out and the long unbroken series now invites our grateful review.

A. S. P. Woodhouse's introduction to "Letters in Canada" of April 1936 plunges us immediately into the Canadian cultural problem. In spite of "excellent quarterly bibliographies of Canadian history, economics and government", and the annual lists of the Toronto Public Library, there has existed up to 1936 "no annual publication devoted to the cultural and literary life of the Dominion; no bibliography of books and articles on that subject, and no account of the work done in Canada in a given year, in the different departments of writing, creative and critical." The very existence of a Canadian literature as anything distinctive, or even distinct, appears in 1936 to be still in doubt. "It will not be denied that letters in Canada is a legitimate and important subject of inquiry, and one in which many Canadian readers, and some outside Canada, are interested. The survey approaches the subject in the spirit of exploration. It eschews every element of propaganda, and it deliberately avoids the premature question, 'Is there a

homogeneous and significant Canadian literature?" If there is, the year's contribution to it will be found noted (along with much else) in the pages that follow." Woodhouse concludes by promising "a conspectus, not merely of literature in the narrowest sense, but of that culture of which it forms a part and by which it is (or ought to be) nourished."

The survey of our 1935 crop of poetry is the work of the late E. K. Brown (of grateful memory to more than one generation of Canadian students). He begins with that muted note of hopeful disappointment which all consumers of Canadian criticism have learned to anticipate: "At the outset it should be admitted that 1935 has not been a decisive year for Canadian poetry. . . . A number of our best poets have published new works during 1935; in none of their volumes is there a marked lapse from their best previous achievements: but in none of them is there a marked success in striking out along new paths, or an evident power to do better what they have done well already." Brown's evasion of the dilemma of the surveyor with little to survey is both adroit and honest. He makes every effort to elicit the poet's intentions and to balance a spirit of generous encouragement, at the level of reviewing, with some just discriminations on the level of criticism. Characteristically, he regards *The Titanic* as no advance on Pratt's previous poetic performance but as showing skills in the use of rhythm, imagery and technical terminology not previously recognized. Then, from the modest plateau of his consideration of this poem and *The Green Cloister* of D. C. Scott (a delayed effort of the post-confederation world) he picks his way down the declivity on the other side: "Only a few of the books listed . . . have been mentioned. Of the remainder a shockingly large number are worthless or, at best, have so little worth that mercy bids one avert his eyes and pass by." In passing he throws a stone at *My Kitchen Window*. Edna Jacques' "verses are an expression of the ordinary self of the Canadian middle class, that is to say, of the immense majority of Canadians." He closes with the customary and ritual cadence of restrained optimism: "To scan the future with a hopeful eye is a national characteristic: it is pleasant to note the excellence of much of the verse which has appeared in undergraduate periodicals during the year."

Fiction is next and falls to E. K. Broadus, who finds Grey Owl's *Sajo and Her Beaver People* "the best work of the creative imagination in the field of fiction, produced in Canada in 1935". He harbours assorted doubts about Morley Callaghan's *They Shall Inherit the Earth*; Mr. Callaghan's style is uneven, his characters never become quite real, his meaning remains uncertain, his plot contains improbabilities. The note of doubt continues to sound. *Father Abraham* is

crudely vigorous, but if Mr. Hardy is encouraged by his success "his characteristic qualities may make him a bull in a china shop." Humphrey Cobb's *Paths of Glory* has the force of Greek tragedy but unhappily Mr. Cobb does not classify as a Canadian. *Young Renny* reveals that the Jalna vein is worked out and that Mazo de la Roche's characterization is not as good as Mr. Broadus used to think it was. Mrs. McClung, Mr. Niven, Mr. Sullivan have all written books about the West, none of them more than mediocre. "Of some remaining books — none very significant — brief notice will suffice." Mr. Broadus lays down his pen, looks out upon the stubborn snows of Edmonton and sees no sign of an approaching summer.

A section on Canadian drama follows, but none of the plays named with the exception of *Moon over Mulberry Street* is likely to be recalled now.

The final section, "Remaining Material", is by the editor, with assistance from Alexander Brady in biography, history and the social sciences. Essays, together with descriptive and narrative pieces, are soon disposed of and we move on toward properly academic criticism. There is a noticeable quickening of pace and change of tone, as though a pair of army officers sent out to investigate a programme of civilian public works had returned to the mess, to the proper conventions and the familiar faces. The reason is not far to seek; here precedent and the assurance of tradition may be found. In this world of serious scholarship, even a partial or flawed work contributes something to the grand and ever-growing design. Criticism shows what this useful and permanent contribution is. "Rien n'est perdu." Here is none of the uneasiness that the critic must experience in adjudicating upon a flawed poem or a partial realization of fictional character. Biographies of public figures are commented on with gratitude. Historical analyses of national or regional significance, economic studies of the Canadian background, useful bibliographical lists: all are welcomed. Then, in unhappy return to the main concern of the literary output, there is a glance at some unsatisfactory comments on our prose and verse, eliciting the cry, "When will an adequate historian of Canadian letters appear?" The final pages proceed to more stable contributions, the work of scholars in fields other than Canadian — Herbert Davis' edition of Swift's *Drapier's Letters*, E. K. Brown's book on Edith Wharton, and so on. Impossible to resist the conclusion that they order these matters better in France, in England, in America. But, as always, the final upturn of hope, a hook to engage the future. It may be that the *Quarterly* "will become more definitely a journal for the humanities in Canada." (Italics not mine.)

THE SECOND ANNUAL SURVEY was improved and expanded, to the extent that reviews of French-Canadian works had to appear as a separate section in the July issue. The editor's summary of policy once more makes clear that lists of publications are "the foundation of the scheme, a solid foundation of indisputable fact"; that the reviewers are offering a "guide among the materials there collected, and a tentative judgment of value"; that the whole survey is intended to place the creative effort "in its true setting" of the historical and cultural background and of "writings on education and religion and the fine arts, and of Canadian scholarship and criticism, both in the humanities proper and in the social sciences." This hesitation in conceding any sort of autonomy to literature or to criticism is natural and inevitable in the circumstances. There was in 1937 no corpus either of literature or of criticism out of which a new growth of forms or ideas could spring. Canadian writing, it seemed, had to emerge from the facts of Canadian existence or not at all. It was impossible to imagine a kingdom of the imagination or to expect minds like those of Blake or Poe or Mallarmé.

The poetry section is again the work of E. K. Brown and he is able to welcome the New Provinces group: Finch, Kennedy, Klein, Pratt, Scott and Smith. Even so, the soil is thin and the quotations in support of favourable judgments often fail to perform their expected function. A double standard is never lost sight of; "a poor thing but mine own". But Brown's care for Canadian taste is always apparent: of some feeble productions he remarks that "they will probably have a small circulation; but what effect they have upon Canadian taste will be a weakening effect."

In this second issue James MacGillivray begins his long run as a reviewer of fiction. Our first impression is of an unobtrusive academic person drafted into the reception line and bravely holding out his aching hand to the long file of unknown guests. But soon the polite, necessary remarks are interspersed with comment that stays in the memory, low-pitched, mordant, filled with common-sense. When L. M. Montgomery has her Anne writing a letter — "And it will be moonlight in Lover's Lane and on the Lake of Shining Waters and the old Haunted Wood and Violet Vale. There should be fairy dances on the hills tonight" — MacGillivray opines that "with such an imagination Anne should be a great Canadian poetess." After much effort to do justice to the fiction of the year, he concludes, "The idea that the writing of fiction is an art involving the imposition of æsthetic form upon the raw material of life and the derivation of significance from the welter of events, has not seriously affected our sturdy belief

that a novel is a series of incidents which hold our attention by making us wonder what will happen next."

It has been worth while to look carefully at the first two issues of "Letters in Canada" because they so clearly present a pattern of all that has followed. The pattern is one of consistency rather than progression. Editorial support for this feature of the *Quarterly* has never wavered, even during the regime of Douglas Grant, from whom innovations were expected. Most of the reviewers of poetry and fiction have given continuous service for runs of between ten and fifteen years and the contributions of Alexander Brady and Watson Kirkconnell extend in unbroken order back to the beginnings of the enterprise.

The succession of works reviewed has also shown unexpected consistency. Brown's remark in 1943 that "our poetry has circulated within a national wall, and American as well as English readers have not cared to know what was going on inside" may be taken as broadly applicable to the whole period. MacGillivray's remark in the same issue that few of the creditable and interesting novels at hand "will be much read ten years from now, or even five" is of similar wide relevance. And the exceptions have done little more than prove the rule. *Barometer Rising*, *As for Me and My House*, *Brébeuf*, *The Loved and the Lost*, *Trial of a City*, *The Double Hook* (to name without invidiousness the first half-dozen that come to mind) are works of substantial and enduring merit which are not permitted by the nature of our national culture to point on to anything beyond themselves. It is extraordinary to see young Canadian poets looking to Black Mountain for their models, in general disregard of our native tradition. It is strange to detect a widespread intuition that our painfully and beautifully developed domestic expository novel (our equivalent of *The Mill on the Floss* and *Middlemarch*) has no future, no possibility of further fruitful extension.

Among the elements of consistency several are salient. The Jewish contribution to Canadian literature continues to be out of all proportion to the size of the Jewish element in our population. Klein, Kreisel, Richler, Wiseman, Mandel, Layton, Cohen are among the first names to come to mind. More mysterious and perhaps more significant is the number of works at a high level of significance of which both the material content and the informing sensibility are derived from extra-Canadian sources. During the past year, we have been presented with two books of poems by Robert Finch, each having as its starting point an English scene or event and each exhibiting the refinement of artifice which their author owes to his immersion in the culture of France. At the same time, Malcolm Lowry's *Hear Us O' Lord* has been posthumously published, to remind us that his

origins and sensibility were, in respect to the Canadian tradition, quite atypical. A final consistency, and an unhappy one, is the continuing inability of good writers to produce more than one memorable book. *As for Me and My House* and *The Mountain and the Valley* should not stand alone as they do.

It is true that the volume of reputable writing in Canada has increased, but that is only to be expected, along with increased population, increased educational opportunities, and increased public interest. Every year we have a shelf full of books of interest and value. Each year there is likely to be one book with some new promise. But the breakthrough never occurs, or if it has occurred has remained disguised. We have come through the Red Sea but we have not yet passed through Jordan. The true crisis of the Canadian psyche, with its incalculable promise for our creative life, is yet to appear.

In any assessment of twenty-five issues of "Letters in Canada" we are bound to be unfair to certain of the reviewers, especially to those who with real devotion committed themselves to objectives which the war and other national circumstances rendered impossible of attainment. W. S. Milne and V. Tovell were faced not only with the perennial lack of stage facilities and audiences in most parts of Canada but also with the deprivations of the years from 1939 to 1945. Reviews of French-Canadian letters in an English-language journal suffer from the bald fact that few of those who read them have any effective command of the French language. Not all the long devotion of W. E. Collin could make the review of *poésie canadienne* seem other than from the outside looking in. No reviewer could have induced a resonance between his materials for review and his readers, because there has not been during the past twenty-five years any wholeness of sensibility in the Canadian public to which he could address himself. The intellectual membrane between the two languages has permitted only a kind of slow osmosis. It remains to be seen, now that this section of "Letters in Canada" has been taken over by a team of French reviewers, whether they can deploy their manifest skills to develop across a period of years something other than voices from the inside speaking out. All who care for our Canadian unity-in-duality must wish them well. The section which began in 1939 as "New-Canadian Letters", now significantly changed to "Publications in Other Languages" has been throughout the work of Watson Kirkconnell. It is impossible to guess what will be the ultimate effect upon the Canadian tradition of the writings, mainly in northern and eastern European languages, produced by immigrant groups with strong cultural roots of their own. In the meantime we may note with gratitude that everything one man could do to achieve liaison and understanding of the

problem has been done. The bibliographical section, once the announced base of the whole enterprise, has now had its main function taken over by organized services connected with the national library system. It continues, however, to perform such useful functions as supplying the substratum of special features; for example the very acute critiques on education written by Robin Harris. It is important to the success of this kind of effort that Canada is still small enough for a bird's eye view of a year's work in a single field to be within the field of vision of the unspecialized reader.

There remains the curious problem (which perhaps baffles nobody but the present writer) of the "Remaining Material", much of which was reclassified after 1947 as "Social Sciences". Here we owe a great debt to the tactics of Alexander Brady, who operated as a reviewer on the borderland between creative and critical writing. From one point of view this operation may be regarded as a valiant attempt to carry out on a smaller scale the functions of other journals such as the *Canadian Historical Review*. From another point of view Brady had the ungrateful task of conducting across the back of the stage a choral procession composed of characters from another play. At all events, Woodhouse's apparently reasonable expectation, that reviews of social studies would reveal the matrix from which the poetry and creative fiction came, was not destined to be fulfilled, or perhaps to be fulfilled only in some cumulative sense. It is now perhaps possible, reading over the whole twenty-five issues of "Letters in Canada", to see that all the writings of Earle Birney relate to the social and political history of this country, possible to guess that Pratt's preoccupation with the gigantic corresponds to the montrousness of the Canadian terrain, possible to believe that Callaghan and MacLennan are searching for the same Canadian sense of identity as has hitherto eluded the historians and sociologists.

ONLY THE SECTIONS dealing with poetry and fiction seem to have developed as entities. They were at the outset intended as the principal foci. They have offered an increasingly clear conspectus, which is not to say that their methods have altered in any fundamental way or that the materials at their disposal have become different in kind.

What is this complex of sensibility developed by the poetry and fiction sections of "Letters in Canada"? First, the sense of writing for a real public, chiefly be-

cause here (and particularly in the poetry reviews) the writer, the reviewer-critic and the reader come close to being the same person. A high proportion of the best-known Canadian poets (Pratt, Watson, Birney, Finch, Reaney, Mandel and Macpherson come to one's mind) have not merely academic associations but also make their living in universities. Even Layton's contempt for professors has not prevented him from belonging to their ranks. Among writers of fiction, MacLennan, Hardy, Kreisel, Birney, Sheila Watson, McCourt, Pacey and others have an academic background. A large number of reviewers and critics are in the same position. In a country as newly developed as Canada, it could hardly be otherwise. And in spite of (let us face it) the highly factitious elements of the situation, some consistency does accrue. An ideal, homogeneous and reliable audience is dramatized, corresponding fairly closely in character, though one hopes not in extent, to the real audience the poet, in particular, is likely to achieve.

As an indication, and a valuable one, as to how reviewers have seen their own task we have Frye's farewell summation as he closed a decade of poetry reviews. After recalling with gratitude work by a range of poets from Pratt to Margaret Avison, he returns to the old problem of responsibility to his readers: "I have spent a great deal of my space in trying to explain as clearly as I can what the poet is saying, and what is characteristic about the handwriting, so to speak, in imagery and rhythm. I have felt that it is well worth insulting the intelligence of some readers if one can do anything to breach the barriers of panic and prejudice in others. . . . I have for the most part discussed Canadian poets as though no other contemporary poetry were available for Canadian readers. . . . And every genuine poet is entitled to be read with the maximum sympathy and concentration." Frye's final phrases are predictable, teleological, inevitable: "The critic to whom falls the enviable task of studying Canadian poetry in the sixties will, I trust, be dealing with a fully matured culture, no longer preoccupied with the empty unpoetics of Canadianism, but with the genuine tasks of creative power."

The fiction review, now in the capable hands of Frank Watt, after classic runs of more than a decade each by MacGillivray and Bissell, shows a slightly less clear image than the review of poetry but only because fiction as a genre is more diffuse. Bissell, near the end of his term as a reviewer, struck the note of disillusioned cheerful expectation with exactness: "Despite the solid achievement of writers like Ethel Wilson and Morley Callaghan, and others, too, one feels at times that the novelist has not yet learned to be completely at home in Canada, and that he has difficulty in seeing this country as a human society. That is the reason why so much of our fiction splinters into dramatized sociology, or earnest parable, or



private narrative. But that is the reason, too, why the writing of fiction in this country should be a quest and may ultimately be a discovery.”

So Canadian literature, as Pelham Edgar always maintained, is just coming. No critic can think or believe otherwise, even if on some evenings he awakes like Lamb to hear the receding voices of dream children. The bridges built by the critics of “Letters in Canada” have seemed to be from writer to reader, from culture to culture, from criticism to creation, but all this is child’s play to the real fabrication, that of a bridge into the future. They have maintained a constant alert for developing trends, for hopeful prognostics, for unifying themes. They have been eager to mediate and explain, loath to judge or condemn. They have felt with Arnold “it is by communicating fresh knowledge, and letting his own judgment pass along with it” that the critic serves his readers. The reviewers have performed many incidental and ancillary services, works of supererogation from which we benefit. They have saved us from heresies that haunt the temple of the arts, from the notion that good writing is no more than the correct application of techniques, from the opposite error that good poetry is no more than free self-expression. They have been patient, unfailingly competent, frequently brilliant in their bursts of penetration and in their inducement of synthesis. They have turned their dreariest assignments into labours of love. In fact, the retrospective reader of “Letters in Canada” is likely to feel a stronger bond of sympathy with the reviewers than with the writers themselves. By dramatizing an ideal public, they have gone a long way toward creating a real one.

Their most serious lapse has been the failure to project an image, like Whitman’s American Poet, of the ideal Canadian creative writer, in not evoking his recognizable likeness from the mists of our cultural drift, in not insisting upon the autonomy of the imagination and the primacy of the world which, being not seen, is eternal. And yet — how much has been done of a cumulative kind. Impossible for the present writer to end on any but a hopeful note or to refrain from joining the ritual dance of the harvesters in Maytime. After such sacrifices, such processions and long marching about the fields, such symbolic inseminations of the furrows, such regard for all the rites of fertility, the gods must act, the Muse descend and Urania show her divine shape. The powers themselves, seeming indifferent through our long-enduring spring, can they now withhold their gifts, the cornucopia of a full and abundant harvest long delayed?