

# CLIMATE OF UNREST

## *Periodicals in the Twenties and Thirties*

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THE SPIRIT OF PATRIOTISM which arose in Canada during the “boom” era of the earlier 1900’s and culminated in the wartime jingoism of the 1914-18 struggle, still flourished in various forms during the 1920’s. The Canadian Authors’ Association, founded in 1921, drew together many who had contributed to the development of a national literature, and who were eager to equal in the cultural sphere what had been accomplished in terms of political and economic nationalism. But after 1920 patriotism was as often as not likely to be a more critical, and more demanding attitude. Not, “we must have a strong, prosperous, cultivated nation from sea to sea” but “what really are the conditions in this country, what are its shortcomings and its evils?”

Some writers for whom the less smiling aspects of Canadian nationhood were not essential but accidental, or whose sympathies were with the past rather than the future, found a spiritual home during the 1920’s in *Willison’s Monthly*. That magazine carried on many of the late Victorian Canadian attitudes as they had found form in *The Week* (in the 1880’s) and, more especially, in the *Canadian Magazine*, which had joined forces with the “new” to the extent of enthusiastically supporting the advance of free enterprise business and commerce in the early twentieth century. *Willison’s Monthly* was a patriotic journal (devoted, as one contributor put it, to “the upbuilding of Canada”), and it spoke on behalf of the main features of John A. Macdonald’s National Policy of 1879 as it was interpreted in the twentieth century: encouragement of immigration, tariff protection, provincial unity, Buy Canadian Goods, and lower taxes on capital. At

the same time the magazine displayed the well-developed Canadian Victorian capacity for conservative compromise by becoming in the realm of culture virtually the epitome of the "genteel" tradition. The most decorous and refined writers of the 1880's and 1890's would readily have appreciated the tone and atmosphere of *Willison's Monthly*: its nostalgic glances at the (supposed) calm and order of the Victorian Age, its aversion to the crass materialism of industrial civilization, its concern for "beautiful" art, its consistently elevated manner — the slightly formalized expression and the avoidance of petty details and slang vocabulary. In an article appearing in 1927, "Matter of Taste", C. F. Lloyd expressed with great eloquence the personal and social idealism of the *Willison's Monthly* milieu:

To be able to appreciate keenly and with a sureness of instinct, akin to the homing instinct of birds, all the finest and grandest production of human genius in every department or in one or two, and at the same time to be able on all occasions, the most trying as well as the commonest, to act and speak with the dignity and delicacy expected of a courtier in the presence of his sovereign is to tickle the palate with the finest flavor of life, to enjoy the fragrance and beauty of a rose that does not fade but rather grows sweeter with the wearing.

*Repose, conservatism, and stability* are what the world desires, wrote the editor in the first number of *Willison's Monthly* in 1925. But the pages of the journal bear witness to the presence of disruptive forces everywhere: democracy, Bolshevism ("Too much pressure cannot be exerted to stamp out Communist activities in the Dominion"), "Jazz Psychology" and the "pathological jottings" of modern literature, and most of the other features of twentieth-century industrial urban life. Truly, wrote a *Willison's Monthly* contributor, "the happiest time for a man to have lived" was in the days of "chop-whiskers and crinolines", between the years 1810 and 1880; and the solid virtues of that era were fast disappearing. The intellectual milieu of *Willison's Monthly* unquestionably looked backwards in time. The air of nostalgia, the valetudinarian tone, the shrinking from modern ugliness, the despairing defence of the Ancients in literature and in social customs, manners, and conditions against the barbarous encroachments of the Moderns — all this clearly marks off the "old" attitudes from the "new". Already, before the end of the war the "new" had begun to throw out its challenges. In 1917 the University of Toronto magazine, *The Rebel* — though the title itself is its strongest defiance — had dedicated itself to "an honest criticism of things as they are. . . ." The decade which followed brought an increasing pressure in this direction until the balance of mind of the intelligentsia of the 1920's seemed to swing towards a critical temper.

The quality of the patriotic spirit underwent a change in such public manifestations of it as we see in the *Canadian Forum*. In the first issue of that periodical in October, 1920, the editors announced: " 'The Canadian Forum' had its origin in a desire to secure a freer and more informed discussion of public questions and, behind the strife of parties, to trace and value those developments of art and letters which are distinctly Canadian." But this assertion, not so very different from what Goldwin Smith, for example, might have made a generation earlier, is accompanied by sharp critical hits at traditional nationalism: "Real independence is not the product of tariffs and treaties. It is a spiritual thing. No country has reached its full stature, which makes its goods at home, but not its faith and its philosophy." By the mid-1920's the *Canadian Forum* had clearly taken on the temper of criticism. It was hopeful rather than cynical or negative, however, and could scarcely be confused with the wave of cynicism and pessimism which swept over other countries following the war. The key term is "progressive", a word which the editorial board of the 1920's applied to itself not in any specialized political sense, but as a way of suggesting the spirit of evolutionary optimism. "The majority of us," said one editorial in 1924, "hold in common a belief in the mutability of human nature, which is the fundamental characteristic that distinguishes the progressive from the conservative." The vagueness of the *Canadian Forum's* self-attribution "progressive" arose from the fact that in 1924 the editorial committee experienced the embarrassment of being unable to agree upon a "Platform" which would express their political and social philosophy. In the end the eighteen members of the committee were obliged to make a virtue of necessity, to fall back on the concept of "Forum". In the public statement "Forum *Versus* Platform" their confession was made, and the periodical was committed to the principle displayed in its name — in effect, to the critical temper, rather than to any specific ideology.

The *Canadian Forum* in the 1920's reflected a critical "revolt" which was to begin with moral and æsthetic in motivation, and which found political associations only later. The sense of the repressive bonds and inhibitions of the existing social order and the desire to shake them off found expression in many forms. Margaret Fairley put the attitude at its most general in her *Canadian Forum* article "Creative Evolution", written in 1921: "If man is to rise above himself, the cramping influences of wealth as well as poverty, of arbitrary custom, and of the audacious tyranny of each generation upon the next must be removed" — lest, she went on to say, "Originality and virtue are destroyed by the fear of being a freak or prig, and everywhere initiative is repressed by the too rigid bonds of

social life." In a lighter vein, Douglas Bush was attacking some of the same enemies when in the *Canadian Forum* in April, 1922, he entered his "Plea for Original Sin", and argued that Canadian literature was "anæmic" because "Canada is too moral." Some of the most vigorous creative writing of the 1920's shows a similar critical spirit at work. It would be well, perhaps, to see the early poetry of E. J. Pratt in this light, especially that whimsical and extravagant *Witches' Brew* (1925), which shatters with comic vitality the conventional pieties of a religion and morality too narrowly conceived. Pratt's *Newfoundland Verses* two years earlier had found favour in the eyes of the *Canadian Forum* as a happy departure from the Canadian tradition of romantic sensibility. Similarly Merrill Denison's witty and caustic portrayals of the Ontario north country in the 1920's were, in their own way, critical exposés of regional idyllic sentimentality.

The revolt became explicit and self-conscious in the vigorous challenge "Wanted — Canadian Criticism", flung down by that young champion of the "new" in Canadian culture, A. J. M. Smith, in the *Canadian Forum* in April, 1928. Smith's thesis was essentially that Canadian culture was lacking in the critical intelligence (and in particular Canadian culture as envisaged and perpetrated by the Canadian Author's Association, upon whom Smith heaped his scorn). "One looks in vain through Canadian books and journals for that critical enquiry into first principles which directs a new literature as tradition guides an old one." Part of the critical task as Smith envisaged it was to shatter the unholy bonds between commercialism and art ("Buy Canadian Goods" applied to literature) allegedly established by the C.A.A. The critic must help the Canadian writer in his fight against social pressures which make him use the methods of low-level Canadianism endorsed by the "Maple Leaf" school, and in his struggle for "freedom in the choice and treatment of his subject." The inhibitions in regard to realism, irony, cynicism and so on require overthrowing. Above all the need is for intelligence: "Modernity and tradition alike demand that the contemporary artist who survives adolescence shall be an intellectual. Sensibility is no longer enough, intelligence is also required. Even in Canada."

TOWARD THE END of the twenties a new periodical appeared in which contributors and editors declared themselves even more emphatically for emancipation and the free critical spirit. The first number of *The Canadian*

*Mercury* (December, 1928) dedicated itself to "the emancipation of Canadian literature from the state of amiable mediocrity and insipidity in which it now languishes," and asserted its independence: "We have no affiliation whatsoever: we owe no allegiance to the Canadian Author's Association, the Canadian Manufacturers Association, the Young Communist League of Canada, the I.O.D.E., the Y.M.C.A., the U.F. of A. or the C.P.R." The editors were youthful but unashamed of the fact: "the editors are all well under thirty and intend to remain so. We seek to ally ourselves with all those whose literary schooling has survived the Confederation, and whose thought and verse is not afraid of being called free." One of the *Canadian Mercury's* first tasks was to attempt to destroy that quintessence of the old tradition, "respectability", and on the front cover the opening challenge was hurled by the nearly naked, corpulent Mercury in the magazine's colophon, thumbing his nose defiantly at all those to his right. At one point in its short existence, the *Canadian Mercury* entrusted to Marcus Adeney the task of an outright and explicit confronting of "respectability". In "The Respectability Myth", published in 1929, Adeney began with a cursory generalization about the Victorian Age in Canada: "there was no real social criticism and no real quest of human values." The effort to carve out a way of life in a new country made this unlikely, and Canadians tended merely to "transplant" Victorian England as best they could. "Unreflective men and women fitted easily into the carried-over institutions of more civilized lands and no truly radical changes occurred until a twentieth-century industrial orgy threatened to absorb not only our natural resources, our institutions, but our homes and our lives as well." The effect was not very salutary, however, "for the respectability of good-natured ignorance was giving way only to the respectability of money power." Here, then, is the object of Adeney's attack, as he himself sums it up:

These two forms of respectability we have with us to-day; . . . they govern our thoughts, our feelings, our manners and customs, our newspapers and our 'literature', with a rod of iron. The newer form gradually supplants the old. . . . The effect remains the same: obstruction, hypocrisy, self-deception, ignorance, cant, the organized suppression of all effectual criticism and its counterpart, vital creative work.

The tenor of *Canadian Mercury* contributions and editorials accorded with Adeney's eloquent diatribe, and the magazine was therefore assured of its place in the critical revolt of the 1920's.

But the *Canadian Mercury* was committed no more than the *Canadian Forum* to any political or social ideology. The real nature of this detachment is perhaps

best expressed by Howe Martyn in "Wanted — a Gospel", an article in the *Canadian Mercury* in 1928 which points directly to the change in political climate the thirties were to bring with them. In the most general terms Martyn complained that "We in Canada are not a nation, because we are incoherent." What was lacking was a unity of vision, for everywhere Canadians "are searching and wavering, losing one ideal after another, waiting vainly for the stimulus which would be provided by initiation into some combination of writers, poets, and all people with the vision of a socially progressive Canada." Their desire and need is still vague and scarcely understood, according to Martyn. "We have groups of very progressive people in Vancouver, and again in Montreal, and there are isolated individuals scattered all over the country. But that contact by which one mind, like steel on flint, strikes the spark of new thought from another mind, is for the most part impossible." Everywhere, Martyn claimed, writing in this year of 1929, people are listening "for a new gospel, a gospel which will send old men out seeking young converts, which will link them all by the completeness and beauty of its vision of the future of Canada in a passionate and consuming love for her." A gospel was soon found — in the radicalism of the 1930's — and we will turn in a moment to see how it was received. The æsthetic and moral revolt of certain intellectuals in the 1920's became, with the depression of the 1930's, political. The critical tools of Marxism were seized upon as answering a great need. The calamity of the Great Depression made palatable, even desirable, social and economic theories which were once only of interest to a small minority at the lower levels of society. In the 1930's that minority swelled in numbers and in power and it became, for the first time, of major literary and cultural significance in Canada.

The emergence of political radicalism in the 1930's in the wake of the Great Depression was not so sudden as it is sometimes thought. It had familiar precedents in the disturbances and dislocations of the post-war decade which will now be reviewed briefly, but its roots also go back into the first years of the century and earlier. The continuity is readily seen in the far West, where political radicalism had early successes and where some of its individual champions remained in the public eye during the greater advances of the thirties. But elsewhere, too, it may be inferred, modern and extreme radicals alike in more recent years have sown and reaped the better for the reason that the soil was assiduously cultivated in advance by the almost forgotten left wing active in the earlier days of nation building and national expansion. At any rate, whatever its origins and causes, the leftward movement of Canadian intellectuals and the dialectic it en-

tailed make a striking contrast to the conciliatory, conservative inclination of the cultivated milieu of late Victorian Canada. Conciliation had given way to angry debate, patriotic aspirations to the cry for social justice, defence of moral, social and spiritual absolutes to radical probings especially of the existing social order and its justification. If this was what it meant to have achieved nationhood, the Victorian founding fathers might well have felt themselves fortunate not to have seen the working out of this phase in their great project.

The political shift to radicalism was only of major significance after the Depression, but in the 1920's there had been forecasts, hints and prophecies of what was to come. Labour and agrarian unrest had grown during the 1914-1918 period of international war when for many Canada was emerging for the first time in the eyes of the world as a fully-fledged adult nation. The price and market dislocations which the latter part of the war and its conclusion brought with it were the immediate blows felt by farmers and urban workers, and their response was a series of strikes and protest movements culminating in the Winnipeg disorders of 1919 and the emergence of the party of progressive farmers as a federal power in 1920.

For a time there was a considerable rise in political tension. "All eyes in Canada are turned to the new third party," the *Canadian Forum* announced in 1921, referring to T. A. Crerar's farmers' party. J. S. Woodsworth in the same year expressed his trust that the interest and activity were not only agrarian: "The old leadership rejected, the workers of the West are rapidly accepting the Socialist analysis of society. In the present distress, they believe they are experiencing the birth pangs of a new social order." The political potency of the farmers' party was quickly exhausted but the conjunction of agrarian and urban discontent was significant for two reasons. First, it was a sign that that traditional safety-valve for dissatisfaction, the Western frontier, by the twenties had virtually closed. "Go West, young man" was no longer a feasible answer to dissenters and malcontents. Second, the unrest of both Labour and Farmer was in the next decade to throw these habitual enemies into doubtful but efficacious league with one another in the Coöperative Commonwealth Federation Party, and to make the concept of the Third Force more meaningful than ever before in the political arena. The Winnipeg Strike of 1919, which for many (not without some justification) was associated with the recent Russian Revolution, was dealt with vigorously by civic and federal governments, so much so that a public reaction in the electoral campaigns in the years following carried left wing candidates to unexpected success. However, the most significant effect was perhaps that clear

differentiation that took place during the twenties between revolutionary and gradualist elements among the radicals. The stream of gradualism moved towards the moderate C.C.F. of the thirties with its close ties with the Fabians and the British Labour Party, while the stream of revolutionary fervour went on to the formation of the Communist Party, the dedication to forceful means of achieving its ends, the prolonged martyrdom of Tim Buck, and the closer alignment with Soviet philosophy and precedent.

**D**URING THE 1920's most of the intellectuals, while often ready and eager to be critical of the *status quo*, were not prepared to join forces with the advocates of a revolutionary social change. They remained apart from radical commitments until the cataclysm of the Depression brought home to members of every class of society a sense of deep-rooted shortcomings in the existing order, the necessity for action of some kind, and the potentialities of the socialist and communist economic arguments as expressed by the Fabian-like League for Social Reconstruction and the Coöperative Commonwealth Federation of 1933, or as pressed with greater ruthlessness by the Communist Party. The dimensions of the Depression are still memorable enough not to require re-viewing, but it is worthwhile to emphasize the extent to which the middle and upper strata of society were drawn toward the lower by its pressure. A writer in the *Canadian Forum* in 1932 commented upon the impact of the depression in these terms:

There is at least one feature of the present depression in Canada which sharply distinguishes it from all previous economic crises, and that is the manner in which the professional and intellectual classes are losing faith in the fundamental features of our existing social system, and are becoming more and more critical of our respectable and well-established institutions. This sudden swing towards radical ideas has so far found little organized expression, it is not clearly reflected in the daily press, but any clear-sighted observer will find evidence that it is surging and bubbling throughout the whole of middle-class society.

A sociological article by S. D. Clark in the *Canadian Forum* in 1933 — “The Proletarian Intelligentsia” — is significant independent evidence supporting this description. “The large number of university graduates in the ranks of the unemployed today is a phenomenon which has no parallel in any depression since



the beginning of modern capitalism." Clark goes on to discuss the potentialities of the leadership he feels his group will offer the proletariat.

The same change could, of course, be interpreted in a number of ways, and it is useful to compare the translation into Marxist terminology by the B.C. *Clarion*, the voice of the Socialist Party of Canada:

With the proletariat, even as Marx predicted, are aligned the masses of the shop-keeping, professional classes, the ranks of the lower middle class thrown into the fight against Capitalism by economic distress. These 'white-collar' additions to our ranks are welcome allies. We need them and we can show them the way to complete emancipation and freedom from oppression.

The Socialist Party of Canada in British Columbia looked upon itself as the cornerstone of the C.C.F. with which it joined in 1933, a truly socialist cornerstone which would keep the party loyal to socialist ideals. The S.P. of C. had its roots in the left wing movement at the turn of the century, and hence could claim that it carried over into the thirties the traditions of an earlier radicalism. The claim is of course far too extreme, but it does help to place the "discovery" of Marx, socialism and communism by Canadian intellectuals in the thirties in a truer light — that is, as in part the emergence of an old, minor and previously ignored tradition of radicalism in Canada. While English and American literary and political movements served as a model and stimulus, the presence of certain necessary factors in Canada made the literary and political turn to the left here possible: an organized trade union movement as a source of power; a degree of class consciousness and radicalism among the lower orders; highly active though small socialist groups well versed in radical doctrines. The radical culture of the thirties, if the term may be used, is consciously or otherwise plainly indebted to these three conditions.

The *Canadian Forum* in the 1930's became a ready vehicle for articles upon and news about the Third Force. During 1930 and 1931 the activities of the League for Social Reconstruction, the first significant organization of Canadian radical intellectuals, were reported fully. The movement was charted which culminated in the formal debut of the political party best embodying that force: J. S. Woodsworth's introduction in the House of Commons in 1933 of a resolution that "the Government should immediately take measures looking to the setting up of a coöperative commonwealth in which all natural resources and the socially necessary machinery of production will be used in the interests of the people and not for the benefit of the few." The parliamentary début of the

C.C.F. was important not only because that party threatened, by its endeavour to unite Farmer and Labour interests, to become a major political power, but also because it gave form and expression to the spirit of moderate radicalism and assured it of a lawful political existence. While it tried to live up to its name, the *Canadian Forum* tended to be a critical but sympathetic supporter of a position not often far from that of the C.C.F. The relationship became closest for a short period during the early thirties when members of the League for Social Reconstruction assumed financial control temporarily. But even at this stage, the *Canadian Forum* succeeded in keeping its pages open to a range of opinion and points of view which generously reflects the ideological and intellectual dialectic of the time. It may still have been true in 1931, as T. W. L. MacDermot complained, that "the freedom to venture new theories, to re-question old ones, is suspect if it is exercised in any but the most intensely respectable form." But it was becoming much less so than before, and many were ready to agree with MacDermot on the need for "Radical Thinking in Canada":

Everything is changing at an enormous pace. The body of working prejudices and assumptions upon which the 19th century proceeded with relative equanimity has been assiduously undermined by the events of the last quarter of a century. Queen Victoria is at last dead. We are now compelled to work up new prejudices and assumptions, and in this work the practical man will have to play a new listening role. Whether he likes it or not radical things are happening and will go on happening.

So, for example, in the *Canadian Forum* in 1932 Howe Martyn, little pleased with the new gospel of radicalism being propagated, ventured a general exposition and critique of "Marxism" in terms which — though simple enough to show his relative innocence in regard to the history of left wing controversy — suggested that the theory was one of general pressing concern. Martyn's attack on Marxist theory was met early in the following year by Leo Warshaw in "Marxism — a Reply", and so the debate continued. Though the internecine quarrels of the extreme left did not warrant extensive space, the *Canadian Forum* was generous in airing a wide variety of opinion throughout the mid-thirties, and social, political and æsthetic battles were fought with unprecedented vigour.

FOR SOME, HOWEVER, the *Canadian Forum* was too moderate and disinterested in its attitude towards the contemporary scene, endeavouring as it did to maintain its character as a "forum" for all views and opinions. New periodicals emerged in the thirties which took an angrier and more aggressive view of the times. "The new day when the workers of Canada will pass from defence to counter-attack is slowly approaching", the Marxist monthly *Masses* proclaimed in 1932. "In this, and not in the reformist belly-crawling tactics, lies the salvation of the Canadian working class." *Masses*, organ of the Progressive Arts Club, looked upon itself as spokesman and leader of the revolutionary proletariat, and it continued for the two years of its existence to carry on this belligerent role with all the vitality it could muster. Its Marxist successor, *New Frontier* (begun in 1936), was somewhat milder and more cultivated in its manners, but it was equally distinguishable in its views from the moderate *Canadian Forum*. *Masses* had made it a duty to abuse the *Canadian Forum* continually and to correct in robust proletarian language its bourgeois socialist heresies whenever space and time permitted, and *New Frontier* took on the burden. "Characteristically enough," wrote a contributor in the first number of *New Frontier* in 1936, "the depression-born Canadian social-democratic party with its professional brain-trusters is a rather genteel sprig clipped from the suburban hedge of British Fabianism."

*New Frontier*, while less inclined to a narrow dogmatism than *Masses*, was from the outset completely engaged: "*New Frontier* is founded on the conviction that the Canadian middle class is awakening to certain unbearable features of our present social system — and willing to provide an audience for those writers, artists and intellectuals who have something relevant to say about the troubled times we live in." It was therefore typical of the magazine's policy that it should, in December, 1936, have published its *Special Issue on Spain* which included the replies of a number of well-known Canadians to the problem, "Where I stand on Spain". The answers, which ranged from W. A. Deacon's "we should cut clear of the Empire and the whole continent of Europe" to E. J. Pratt's "My sympathies in the Spanish situation are wholly with the Popular Front", give a lively indication of the extent to which Canadian society was divided by the international debate between left and right wing ideas and attitudes, the more so because the Spanish Civil War may be used as a kind of convenient touchstone to show up political ideologies, degrees of social commitment, and concern for international situations, events and ideas.

Disappointment and disillusion following the collapse of the Spanish Loyalists was felt by liberal Canadians as by liberals elsewhere. The great moment of world social revolution desired by some and feared by many had not come, and hopes of any dramatic advance faded as the decade drew to a troubled close. With the signing of the Non-Aggression Pact between Soviet Russia and Germany in 1939, communism suffered its most serious reaction. "Dialectical Contortionism" was too much, as one "Ex Fellow-Traveller" announced in the *Canadian Forum*: "Our fellow-traveller had come to the parting of the ways. No longer could he make excuses for Soviet Russia. The hurt was too deep. . . . He was now free, he was no longer a fellow-traveller." In due course the Second World War arrived to unravel in its own effective way the tangled social problems of the country which the dialectic of ideas had left unsolved.

A remarkable change had taken place in the temper of Canadian thought from the years following Confederation to the years of the great Depression. In those earlier days any serious social concerns of the intellectual were likely to be associated with nationalism in one of its possible forms. Differences in social ideals were relatively slight, or if they were not, the pressures were all towards decorously making them appear so. The conservative tradition had its work of nation building to do, and it would not encourage, scarcely even tolerate, radical questioning except of the most modest kind. Conciliation and compromise were the key notes of public discussion and basic principles were assumed rather than considered. But in the 1920's and 1930's, however troubled by economic disasters or critical deprecations, the nation existed securely as a social, political and economic entity. Within that entity and partly perhaps as a consequence, a range and a violence of opinion seemed possible to a degree not imagined before. Conflicting positions, points of view, philosophies of art and of life were thrust forward and argued with urgency and vehemence. It can scarcely be said that the intellectual tempests of the thirties produced any great social theorists or thinkers in Canada, or for that matter that the issues of the day were aired and clarified with impressive success. A critic was even able to assert with respect to the most "principled" and political party in the mid-thirties: "This is the basic weakness of the C.C.F. — inaction due to the fact that it has no theories to nourish it. No vital discussions are carried on in the party."

Much of the ideological debate of the thirties echoed the language and ideas of other countries. Nevertheless, the immediate significance and the urgency of many far-reaching issues was seen and felt by Canadians in ways quite different from the responses of late Victorian Canadians. Foreign ideologies and debates on

general principles were not referred to in a detached way as the noise of battles far off or long ago, but were seized upon for their relevance to the immediate situation. The effect on Canadian literature was, naturally enough, very marked, though today a generation later it has still to be fully measured.

