

Canucks between the Covers

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WHEN CANADIANS SLIDE between the covers of a good book or magazine, it is usually to connect with a foreigner – most reading material purchased in the country comes from elsewhere. Canadian writers, publishers and bookstores have always sold mainly to a small and widely dispersed regional or national market. Canadian literary celebrities are inevitably those who are known beyond the borders, which explains the snide force of calling someone “world famous all over Canada.” Yet requests for government subsidies to improve competitiveness have always smacked of mediocrity and colonial special pleading. Those who remember *Maclean’s* when it was intellectually engaged and politically advanced, or who mourn *Saturday Night*, understand what the need to please a small and increasingly beleaguered print market entails. (Another story defending Conrad Black or Brian Mulroney, more silly gossip from Parliament Hill on fashions in ties or cleavage). The bankruptcies of Canadian publishers, the poverty of Canadian writers and the disappearance of Canadian independent bookstores are all explained by this economic bind. (The problem is smaller in French Quebec, where recent governments have rarely wavered from the belief that political survival requires cultural subsidy.) In response, both provincial and federal government programs have been developed to assist Canadian book and magazine publishers, although often they are one or more jumps behind the latest market catastrophe.

Nick Mount writes with considerable wit as he tells of such a moment: the Canadian literary “brain drain” to the United States between 1880 and 1900, when over a million Canadians left for the south. Despite the widespread belief that a nation required a national literature, Canadian writers had to leave an economically depressed Canada to find work. The result was not only a Canadian literary mafia that shared apartments in New York and other eastern US cities, passing along hot tips and recommendations to editors, but also a group that collectively was often at the forefront of new literary and journalistic trends. They made their living, not so much by writing literature, but by meeting the deadlines of the big popular magazines with genre fiction, romance and “virile” writing about big city crime or wild animals. It is, for the most part, a history of unknowns – a history of anti-modernist writers even Mount cannot admire. He notes that “In the 1920s, writers went to Paris to escape

the market; in the 1890s, they went to New York to find it.” Apart from Charles G.D. Roberts, Ernest Thompson Seton and Bliss Carman, few of the names he mentions resonate, which means that the book at times is reminiscent of those forgettable conversations between your mother and your aunt about a distant cousin in the States you’ve never met.

Just as London after WWII formed a literary crucible for writers from Africa and the Caribbean who never would have met in their own regions, so the magazine markets of New York and other eastern US cities, Mount argues, collected writers from widely separated communities across central and eastern Canada and landed them where they could practice their craft. By the turn of the century, expatriate Canadians (along with Ralph Connor and L.M. Montgomery, who both stayed home) were finding a place on the best-seller lists in the United States and on the bookshelves of Canadians. This, Mount argues, made possible the “flowering” of Canadian literature documented by an array of nationalist literary historians. Paradoxically, the rise of Canadian nationalism after WWI meant that these successful and prolific expatriates were written out of the new literary histories: “Whatever it was that kept [L.M.] Montgomery in the canon and shut [Palmer] Cox out, it wasn’t literary greatness.” Cox, the author of a wildly successful children’s series about little people called Brownies (yes, they named the camera for them) wrote about urban America, and that disqualified him and others like him from true Canadianness. Only those, like Roberts and Carman, who came back when they could, mourning the necessity of leaving “home,” were redeemable. Mount sardonically notes that “Canadians wouldn’t have wanted Carman’s body back if its owner hadn’t left in the first place.”

Nationalist criticism has meant, for many years, that literary-critical curiosity stopped at the border, or that only the obviously “Canadian” works were mentioned in

Nick Mount, *When Canadian Literature Moved to New York*. Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2005, 638pp

Carole Gerson and Jacques Michon, eds., *History of the Book in Canada*, vol. 3 1918-1980. Gen. eds. Patricia Lockhart Fleming and Yvan Lamonde. Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2007, 210pp

Lorraine York, *Literary Celebrity in Canada*. Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2007, 200pp

accounts of expatriates' output. Nor was it possible to take comparative courses on North American literature in Canada (and it still isn't). Oddly, Mount falls into this nationalist category trap himself in the last sentence of the book, where he states that "in order for Canadian literature to reach its adulthood, it had to rewrite its adolescence." He's convinced us that this rewriting took place, but he does so by repeating a metaphor that places national literatures into neat categories, all proceeding (according to the myth of progress) towards their separate maturity. (This attitude is labeled "evolutionary progressivism" in *History of the Book*). At some level he does not get outside his own nationalism, proudly noting that Canadian writers have been "practicing transnationalism since before there was a Canadian literature" and arguing that the writers he deals with were cosmopolitan without explaining what he means by these highly theoretical concepts. (In an uncharacteristic tongue-twisting moment, York calls this "shift[ing] between a reformulated nationalism and a celebration of proto-postnationalism").

Nonetheless, in documenting a neglected era of Canadian literary history and explaining what caused the neglect, he has done a huge service — and it is greater than just ensuring we don't have to read all the books and articles these writers churned out. If I were Don LePan, I would get Mount to edit a new edition of Arthur Stringer's *The Wire Tappers*, which he calls "a pre-digital *Neuromancer*." And perhaps it's time for the Brownies to be appropriated to this side of the border?

The History of the Book in Canada/ Histoire du livre et de l'imprime au Canada (Volume 1, beginnings to 1840, published in 2004; Volume 2, 1840-1918, published in 2005; Volume 3, 1918-1980, published in 2007, each translated into French) was produced with a \$2.3 million award from the Social Sciences and Humanities Research Council. One of the main points this book conveys is the need for such economic support of publication projects unlikely to sell outside Canada. Like Mount, these volumes move away from looking at literary production solely through the lens of literary quality, instead contextualizing it through the array of institutions that produce and support it. Both books are a result of the move from viewing literary culture as evidence of a healthy nation to, in the 1970s, seeing publication as a cultural industry. Much as we might believe that some writers are geniuses and just appear out of nowhere, the whole apparatus of literary projects, agents, editors, prizes, university courses, publishers' series, libraries, reading clubs, government subsidies, printing trades etc. belies this. Social, political, intellectual and commercial forces produced a book industry in Canada only after World War I, the period covered by volume 3. A history covering this range of issues and this number of decades is hard to manage, and the book's arrangement into overviews interspersed with case studies relieves the strain of reading only at the level of statistics and breathless, fact-packed summary. Much of the research is new, conducted in archives or by interviewing

still-living participants. Those with memories of the thrill of going to Britnell's bookstore, or of happy hours spent in one of the many Carnegie libraries in Canada, or of trying to make sense of Beth Appeldoorn's accent while rifling through the Canadian-only wares in her Toronto bookshop will find their memories — perhaps disconcertingly — turned into history. For example, CanLit, a research collective that I worked for, appears fleetingly.

Fascinating snippets of information fill the book. In 1921 there were only 344 graduate students in Canada. School attendance did not become mandatory in Quebec until 1943. In the 1940s, Gabrielle Roy made over \$100,000 on the international and film rights to *The Tin Flute*, which sold 750 000 copies in the US and won the Prix Femina. (Earle Birney, on the other hand, earned \$560 from royalties in 1957 — lucky he had that UBC salary). In 1944 in the printing trades men earned an average of \$36.00 a week, while women earned \$15.23. In 1951 Vancouver had more bookstores per capita than Toronto or Montreal. Government translation jobs were sometimes passed down in families. *Les insolences du Frère Untel* (1960) a critique of education and of the sorry state of the French language in Quebec sold 100 000 copies in four months. A Finnish-language newspaper survived in Nanaimo until the 1970s. Farley Mowat's non-fiction works had sold over 4 million copies in 22 languages by the early 1980s. One secret to publishing success is to publish a good cookbook — another is to publish a good children's book (or, as did Anansi Press, a timely handbook for draft dodgers). Little magazines and small presses in Canada have an average lifespan of around two years. In 1975 Canadian periodicals represented only 3% of newsstand sales. By 2000, German-owned Random House controlled more than 25% of the English Canadian trade market. In the same year, 87% of Canadian titles were produced by Canadian publishing houses. British-owned Pearson Education Canada claimed in 2005 to be Canada's largest publishing house.

Usually the book left me wanting more in the positive sense: in writing a reference text, authors have to pare down and reduce. And the editors did leave in a few good anecdotes. Only once did I find the pace of the book too fast: Lionel Groulx was certainly a major figure in Quebec intellectual and publishing history, but the nature of his thinking is understated here — he admired European dictators, and promoted racial purity and anti-semitism. The book will serve students in a wide array of disciplines well, and its references provide a useful starting point for more focused studies, histories, and biographies. And if you just love reading, well, this is a book to love.

In *Literary Celebrity in Canada*, Lorraine York examines the tensions between the idea that literary quality (highbrow) is not compatible with literary celebrity (lowbrow). Like Mount, she shows how Canadian nationalism produces ambivalent responses to writers who become famous outside Canadian borders, leaving home figuratively, if not in fact. The authors she chooses add gender

and ethnicity to the mix of tensions that play out around nationalism: Pauline Johnson, L.M. Montgomery, Stephen Leacock, Mazo de la Roche, Margaret Atwood, Carol Shields and Michael Ondaatje. Interestingly, the men have managed to defend their private lives more successfully than the women — perhaps because men are seen as independent of their domestic situation, while women who become famous are often seen as neglecting the duties of wife and mother (and the public feels free to pry into whether that women’s work is getting done). Johnson’s celebrity may have interfered with her chances of marriage, not only because of the lingering connota-

tions of “the stage” but also because once you’ve come out as an Indian Princess it’s hard to be accepted back into the closet of married white respectability.

York’s analysis of Ondaatje’s celebrity notes that he is sometimes questioned about how Canadian he actually is and that he has also been accused of self-exoticizing (a classic bind, where for some critics he is neither Canadian enough nor Sri Lankan enough to be authentic). She notes that his insistence on privacy does not necessarily mean he resists celebrity (one is reminded of Diana, Princess of Wales, marching resolutely up to a video camera to put her hand over the lens).

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