

Anténe, Petr

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Chapters in Contemporary Canadian Literature

Jiří Flajšar / Pavlína Flajšarová / Vladimíra Fonfárová

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Petr Anténe

Palacký University, Olomouc, Czech Republic

Chapters in Contemporary Canadian Literature is a collective work by three Czech scholars of American, British and Canadian Studies. The volume sets out to provide a “brief yet informative survey of Canadian literature in English” (6). (As the authors explain, Francophone Canadian literature falls outside the scope and target readership of their volume.) Each of the authors has written several chapters on the chronological development of individual literary genres and other aspects of Canadian literature. While the title states that the publication focuses on contemporary Canadian literature, the period before 1945 is covered in the opening sections of the individual chapters, as well as in the introductory chapter, written by Jiří Flajšar, which succinctly sums up the development of Canadian literature from the colonial beginnings up to the end of World War II.

Likewise, in the next chapter, Pavlína Flajšarová surveys trends in Canadian literary criticism from the mid-nineteenth century to the present. Flajšarová particularly concentrates on critics’ shifting views of nationalism, on the rural versus the urban, on regionalism and on cosmopolitanism. Towards the end of the chapter, Flajšarová deals with Northrop Frye and his legacy, as well as the postmodern theorists and writers Robert Kroetsch and Linda Hutcheon. The up-to-date survey also mentions W. H. New’s *Borderlands* (1998), which shows the relationship between Canadian literature, history, and culture and which “interprets Canadian identity as being defined by borders and binary dichotomies (such as inclusion and exclusion, in and out)” – that is, it reflects the “growing influence of Canadian multicultural writers who came from neither the English- nor French-speaking traditional communities but rather from smaller ethnic groups” (22). On the whole, this chapter is particularly useful, as it enables the reader to follow analogies between the critical and theoretical concepts and the views reflected in literary works that are discussed later in the book.

In the third chapter, Jiří Flajšar analyses the primary currents of Anglophone Canadian poetry after World War II. To provide sufficient background, Flajšar begins



with a concise characterization of the earlier Confederation poets and their influence, as well as the appearance of the Modernist poets of the 1920s and 1930s and the persisting binary between the modern and the traditional in Canadian poetry. Flajšar then smoothly moves on to the 1950s, when Canadian poetry was “becoming more and more diverse and decentralized” (30), foreshadowing the further expansion of its subject matter in the two following decades. Flajšar characterizes the 1960s in poetry as emphasizing the confessional and the 1970s as the revival of regionalism. My only criticism here is that while Flajšar does mention that Canadian poetry of the 1980s and 1990s diversified to include numerous poets from various ethnic backgrounds, he only lists four names (Daniel David Moses, Dionne Brand, Erin Mouré and George Elliott Clarke) and closes his survey by mentioning the 2005 publication of *The New Canon: An Anthology of Canadian Poetry* (2005), a collection deliberately reflecting this increasing plurality. A brief characterization of (at least some of) the four listed poets’ work would be extremely useful in helping the reader understand how the ethnic writers react to previous traditions in Canadian poetry.

In the following two chapters, Vladimíra Fonfárová traces the development of the postwar Canadian novel and short story. Fonfárová begins the chapter on the novel with a brief discussion of several critics’ views of which (if any) period represents Canadian Modernist fiction, finally opting for Richard J. Lane’s view that the Canadian Modernist novel only appeared during and after World War II, in contrast to Robert Kroetsch’s claim that Canadian literature evolved directly from the Victorian into the Postmodern (36). Fonfárová resists any simplification, however. While praising Sheila Watson’s 1959 novel *The Double Hook* as a masterpiece of belated Modernism, she admits that Hugh MacLennan’s *The Watch That Ends the Night*, published that same year, relies on a Victorian treatment of narrative and structure (37). In the remainder of the chapter (the longest one in the book), Fonfárová surveys the Canadian novel from the 1960s to the present, pointing out the most significant phenomena in each decade. She thus characterizes the 1960s and 1970s as “the golden age” (39), with writers such as Margaret Laurence, Margaret Atwood and Michael Ondaatje, and the 1980s and 1990s as the “boom of historiographic fiction and ethnic writing” (45). Finally, Fonfárová observes new manifestations of Postmodernism at the beginning of the twenty-first century, focusing on Atwood’s dystopias and Yann Martel’s novels with unreliable narrators.

Fonfárová’s analysis of Canadian short fiction is framed with W. H. New’s theory of the short story as a subversive genre, as introduced in the Canadian critic’s landmark study *Dreams of Speech and Violence* (1987), a concept that works remarkably well with respect to Anglophone Canadian literature, which strived to define itself against the dominant literary tradition of the United States. Further on, Fonfárová identifies the short story cycle as a prominent genre in Canadian short fiction, but



does not fail to mention that the great majority of Canadian short story writers are also novelists.

Fonfárová's survey of Canadian drama is equally effective in that she recognizes indigenous theater, the one-act play, and the radio drama as the foundation stones of the genre in the first half of the twentieth century (77-8). Fonfárová then proceeds to the breakthrough of Canadian drama in the 1960s, with playwrights such as George Ryga, and the major authors of the following two decades, such as Sharon Pollock and Michael Cook. Fonfárová also briefly mentions several winners of the Governor General's Award for Drama (presented since 1937) in the 1990s and early twenty-first century.

In the following chapter, Pavlína Flajšarová analyzes the situation of Canadian literature and English-to-French and French-to-English literary translation. Flajšarová explains that because of the political and cultural differences between the two groups, there has been a long tradition of French-to-English literary translation but not the other way round, as translation into English has often symbolized colonization for French Canada. Flajšarová also emphasizes, however, the recent proliferation of multicultural Canadian literature which has meant that the traditional English-to-French and French-to-English dichotomy no longer covers the entire scale of Canadian literary translation.

The following chapter, written by Jiří Flajšar, outlines a history of book-length translations of Anglophone Canadian literature into Czech. Ernest Thompson Seton, his research has revealed, is the most widely translated Canadian writer of all time, while Margaret Atwood has been the most translated author in the post-communist period. However, Czech translations of Anglophone Canadian poetry and drama remain unrepresented.

In the final chapter, Flajšar surveys the major print and online resources available to Central European researchers in Canadian literature, including reference books, histories, scholarly journals, online Canadian literature library catalogues and online subscription literature as well as criticism databases and archives. The book also includes a bibliography, compiled by Flajšarová, which lists all the publications referred to in the previous chapters.

In conclusion, all of the chapters are well-written and do represent, as mentioned in the opening chapter, a useful introduction "for Central European students of Canadian literature and for researchers at the early stage of their research" (6). Importantly, the volume not only provides a chronological overview of Canadian literature, but also familiarizes the reader with relevant theoretical concepts. Finally, it includes suggestions for further research by means of the research guide chapter and the extensive bibliography.