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In the Eyes of Others:
The Rise of Canadian Fiction[1]

Abstract

As Canadian fiction was developing in the twentieth century, critical forces in England and America were finding fault with it, even extending their subtle influence into criticism written in Canada. There was often debunking of the creative product for the sake of British or American tastes. Canadian fiction and the critical studies of it are now throwing off such vestiges of colonialism.

Résumé

Au cours de l'évolution de la fiction canadienne au 20e siècle, les pouvoirs critiques anglais et américains lui ont trouvé maints défauts tout en influençant ainsi, d'une manière subtile, la critique canadienne. Les créations canadiennes ont été rejetées parce qu'elles ne convenaient pas au goût des Britanniques et des Américains. La fiction canadienne est en train de se débarasser des vestiges du colonialisme.

Papers on Canadian writers being published in Serbian, in Hungarian, in Slovenian and so much more! This trend is fascinating, intriguing and, to most Canadians, mystifying. Why? Because Canada has never had a tradition of acknowledging itself as a cultural entity; it has never had a tradition of acknowledging its own excellence.

In the winter of 1982, I was lecturing in Stockholm, Sweden on the subject of the growth of Canadian fiction. At dinner one evening, Per Gedin, the foremost publisher of English-language works in Swedish, told me that his agents used to fan out to know what was happening in New York and London every fall. Then he stopped doing that – he became increasingly interested in Australia, South Africa and Canada. He proceeded to point out that Australia had won the Nobel Prize with Patrick White, and so Australia and its literature were being discovered. South Africa had all the problems of apartheid, and that was directing attention to itself. Canada, on the other hand, had no defining interest to the outside world – it had no problems which would garner world attention. It was, in other words, a safe place for literature to grow and develop without the steady gaze of the outside world falling upon it.

1) This article was originally delivered as the keynote address at the "Canada in Eight Tongues" conference held in Budapest on 22-23 October 2011.

I have often thought of that conversation – Per Gedin's thoughts – and the steady and unregarded growth of Canadian fiction. It is true that Canada has been developing without the rest of the world – or any part of it – paying attention. And this has a curious effect: to make the country wholly unique and to make it wholly dependent upon others. I would like to reflect on Canadian literature, and reflect, too, on why the national fabric of Canada seems to contain notions of inferiority, why perceptions of inferiority are part of the Canadian mentality, and why these traditions of cultural inferiority are so difficult to leave aside.

Let us follow the course of Canadian fiction over the last one-hundred years, and there is no better place to begin than with Stephen Leacock's charming ***Sunshine Sketches of a Little Town***, this year marking the one-hundredth anniversary of its publication. The only one of his books set resolutely and explicitly in Canada, this major work, which came to influence, among others, Mordecai Richler, Alice Munro and Rohinton Mistry, set the tone for much of Canadian literature. Leacock's fictional townspeople are always conscious of the country to the south, specifically the metropolitan centre beyond their country's borders. The narrator of the book introduces almost apologetically his home town of Mariposa:

> Busy – well, I should think so! Ask any of its inhabitants if Mariposa isn't a busy, hustling, thriving town. Ask Mullins, the manager of the Exchange Bank, who comes hustling over to his office from the Mariposa House every day at 10.30 and has scarcely time all morning to go out and take a drink with the manager of the Commercial; or ask – well, for the matter of that, ask any of them if they ever knew a more rushing go- a-head town than Mariposa.
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> Of course if you come to the place fresh from New York, you are deceived. Your standard of vision is all astray. You do think the place is quiet. You do imagine that Mr. Smith is asleep merely because he closes his eyes as he stands. But live in Mariposa for six months or a year and then you will begin to understand it better; the buildings get higher and higher; the Mariposa House grows more and more luxurious; McCarthy's block towers to the sky; the 'buses roar and hum to the station; the trains shriek; the traffic multiplies; the people move faster and faster; a dense crowd swirls to and fro in the post-office and the five and ten cent store – and amusements! well, now! lacrosse, baseball, excursions, dances, the Fireman's Ball every winter and the Catholic picnic every summer; and music – the town band in the park every Wednesday evening, and the Oddfellows' brass band on the street every other Friday; the Mariposa Quartette, the Salvation Army – why, after a few months' residence you begin to realize that the place is a mere mad round of gaiety. (4-5)

Mariposans realize that the centre is south of the border; they love their world, but realize it is on the periphery. They present themselves and their town with a disarming, apologetic smile; Mariposa is an outpost, a suburb, a province, a colony. If you do not alter your standard of vision, the narrator warns, you will think Canada different, and difference seems to contain the connotation of inferiority.

At the end of the 1920s, Leacock would write: "It seems to me, in short, that the attempt to mark off Canada as a little area all its own, listening to no one but itself, is as silly as it is ineffective" ("National Literature Problem", 9). And in the 1930s he would again state that "there is no such thing as Canadian literature today, meaning books written by Canadians

in a Canadian way" (*Greatest Pages*, 23). It took a long time for this idea to shake itself off, if indeed it has!

In his early years, Morley Callaghan was writing for a distinctly North American audience; all his stories and novels were first published in Paris or New York. In 1938, he wrote to the younger writers of Canada "who were desperately trying to get started, and who, being Canadians, seemed to think they ought to get published in their own country. I was simply trying to tell them that if they were very good and had a distinctive talent and wrote honestly the chances were that they would not get published at all in this country unless they were first of all published some place else" (152). Canada was still a country without a solid publication base, and so writers had to sell their fiction abroad before they could obtain a distributor within the country.

At the same time, E.K. Brown, the first Canadian-born critic of his own country's literature, noted that Canada's writing suffered because it was written in English or French – and people could buy their literary readings from England, the United States or France. There was no reason necessarily to read the literature of your own country. Norway was an example Brown cited – Norwegians can read only their own literature. Canadians, on the other hand, could read from elsewhere. And this situation further exacerbated the belief that Canada was not a home for a writing culture.

In 194l, two novels were published which ushered in a new experience, two novels with a fixed time scheme, and only a few characters: Hugh MacLennan's *Barometer Rising* and Sinclair Ross's *As for Me and My House*. And both these novels were published in the United States with only a few copies imported into Canada – and both novels sold very poorly.

In the winter of 194l-1942, MacLennan travelled to New York, having received word in Montreal

that two major Hollywood studios were interested in *Barometer Rising*, his account of the 1917 shipping disaster, the worst man-made disaster prior to Hiroshima. He went to meet the representative of the studio, Richard Mealand, story editor of Paramount Pictures, one of the studios interested in his book. "I saw dollar signs all over the Windsor Station the night I boarded my train for New York," MacLennan recounts in his essay "A Boy Meets a Girl in Winnipeg and Who Cares?" (1959).

> Mr. Mealand was exceedingly affable, though somewhat boiled-looking about the eyelids, and before ordering a thirty-dollar lunch he gave me two cocktails. He also told me the deal was off.
> "It's like this," the man explained. "This book of yours, it's about this town Halifax and who's ever heard of Halifax down here except as a word nicely brought-up kids say when what they really mean is hell? 'Go to Halifax,' is what nicely brought-up kids down here say. Well, of course, this wouldn't make any difference if this was an ordinary book. We could work a switcheroo. But the trouble is in this book of yours Halifax gets itself blown up in the climax of the story. We fooled around with a switcheroo even on that. We thought of the Johnstown Flood, but that happened so long ago that who cares, so we canned the whole idea." He looked at me in sincere friendship and said: "It's tough, but that's how it is. All you've got to do next time is set the scene in the United States and then we'll be really interested."
> Being naïve in those days, I asked what difference the locale of a story makes so long as the story is good.

> "Well, take Paris," he said, "that's okay for one kind of story. Take London – that's okay for another kind. But take Canada – that's not okay because what do Americans think when they hear that word 'Canada' except cold weather and Mounties or maybe when they hear it they don't know what to think. Now this is not the way it ought to be and it's tough, but look at it like this. A boy meets a girl in Paris, one thing leads to another and they – well, it's interesting. But a boy meets a girl in Winnipeg and they swing into the same routine and who cares? I'm not saying it's not just as good in Winnipeg as it is in Paris. Maybe it's even better because in Winnipeg what else is there to do? But for the American public you've got to see it's a fact that Winnipeg kind of kills interest in the whole thing."
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> I protested (I was very naïve in those days) that my books tended to be serious, what you might call social novels.
>
> "That's exactly what I've been trying to say," he explained. "The way you write, if you want a big market down here, you just haven't got much of a choice. The way you write you've got to make it American." (116-117)

In the fifties, Sinclair Ross was experiencing great difficulty with his second novel, ***The Well***. W.K. Wing, a major New York agent, disliked the novel intensely. He sent it back to Ross, noting that Ross could submit it again to John Gray, the president of Macmillan Canada, but there was no chance of it being published in the United States. "Canada may handle tripe," he said, "but down here we're more particular" (Stouck 2005, 168).

Meanwhile, England was reacting to Canadian literature in a way which mirrored the American disinterest. When Ethel Wilson's first novel, ***Hetty Dorval*** (1947), was being published by Macmillan of Canada, John Gray, Wilson's editor, wrote to the parent company in London to publish an English imprint of the novel. On February 14, 1947, Daniel Macmillan wrote him of his idea: "We have examined the proofs of Miss Ethel Wilson's novel ***Hetty Dorval***. I am afraid that this is not a book which we could import – in fact it is not the sort of book which in our opinion should be published at all. However, of course, you will have to publish it as you are already committed to it. It is quite harmless, but it seems to have very little merit" (Stouck 2003, 128).

In the fifties and sixties, Canadian literature came into its own, occupying a major place, but in whose eyes? As editor of ***The Canadian Imagination: Dimensions of a Literary Culture*** (1977), I had the enviable task of preparing the book for the publisher in the summer of 1976. One of my cousins, a first-rate scientist with a PhD, told me – as I worked away on my book – that he never reads Canadian literature – he said that when he went into a library and found a red maple leaf on the exterior of a book, he automatically passed it by because it meant that the book was Canadian and, therefore, second-rate.

And even afterwards, reviewers still would seek the approbation of our literature in foreign climes. Canada's literary stature continues to be seriously undercut by colonial concern about foreign reactions to our literature. Perhaps some reviewers are still looking over their shoulders, seeking external approval for their literature and even, alas, for some validation of their role as reviewers.

Looking back on the year's work in literature for 1985, William French, the literary reviewer of the Toronto ***Globe and Mail***, our major daily, concluded that, among the year's fiction writers,

> the big winner … was Robertson Davies, whose time had clearly come. His new novel, ***What's Bred In The Bone***, received major reviews in ***Time***, ***Newsweek*** and ***The New York Times***, and showed up on the ***Times***' bestseller list. It seemed obvious, in fact, that Canadian writers were at long last making a breakthrough into the awareness of Americans … It will be interesting to note the reception accorded Atwood's provocative cautionary novel, ***The Handmaid's Tale***, when it is published in the United States in February. (December 28, 1985, D21)

Here was 1985 in Canadian fiction! Did Davies's novel capture no critical attention in Canada? Had Atwood's novel not already appeared in Canada? The same over-the-shoulder glance occurs in French's review a year later of Alice Munro's collection ***The Progress of Love***:

> In recent years Munro has become well known to U.S. readers – five of these stories, for example, first appeared in ***The New Yorker*** and four were published in other well-known U.S. magazines. Those readers must get the impression that Canada is a country of suffocating small towns and unsophisticated people who pray frequently and disapprove of drink, dancing and card-playing …
> Granted, rural Canada was like that once, and there may still be isolated pockets beyond the metropolis. And it's true that Munro is often writing about these communities as they were half a century ago. But it's too bad we don't have a writer as talented and in demand as she is to portray our contemporary urban society. It might help the tourist trade. (September 20, 1986, F19)

Still Canada as colony or, more accurately, Canada as theme-park for the tourist trade.

One last personal anecdote to support all this. At this time in the eighties, I was editing my high-school text, ***Illuminations***, a series of heavily annotated Canadian short stories. The editor was a woman I admired, who happened to be the daughter of Maynard Mack, a critic I very much admired. We were speaking on the phone one day, and she happened to say that Alice Munro's ***Progress of Love*** had been chosen as one of the ten best books of the year by ***The New York Times***; she was ecstatic for Munro. Puzzled, I told her that I thought Munro would be satisfied if her book was well received – which it was – in Canada, and not by some foreign world.

Foreign approbation is unnecessary to a post-colonial society; indeed, the need for it is an affront to that society and the final vestige of a colonial mentality. Foreign reviews should not longer validate Canadian literature; they only complement, not confirm, our appreciation and understanding of ourselves. These dying traces of critical colonialism impede the awareness and acceptance of the distinctive voice of Canadian criticism and inhibit its stable maturity.

This conference is absolutely enthralling because the papers are complementing our appreciation and understanding of ourselves, and as you explore our literary stature, perhaps some Canadian readers, like my erstwhile scientist-cousin, will understand what we already are.

And so I come now to why I am writing the first history of Canadian fiction, why I am being so bold and daring as to believe, first, that it should be done and, second, that I can possibly do it. One has never been written before – perhaps for these reasons I have outlined – perhaps because many at home do not believe still in their own literature. And why am I trying to write it? Well, it goes back to my graduate days at Harvard. When I was there, there was one senior professor, long retired, whom I admired immensely – Douglas Bush – whom I came to know

through a small organization known as the Harvard Victorians. He and I were both members. And as I came to know him, I realized that he was the kind of major scholar I wanted to be.

One day I saw him in early 1976 in Widener Library, carrying a huge load of books to the checkout. I went over to him and asked what he was reading. "All the writings of Margaret Atwood," he replied, "because Jerry Buckley invited us to dinner with her when she comes to your class next month." He had all her volumes of poetry, her novels, and her book of literary criticism. I was impressed because Douglas Bush was the kind of scholar who had to read everything before he would offer his opinion about someone – he had to read all of her writings before he could have dinner with her.

When I was putting together ***The Canadian Imagination***, I thought of asking Douglas Bush to contribute a chapter on Stephen Leacock to the completed book. Again, he went through all of Leacock's countless volumes before sitting down to write what is the best essay on Leacock. With him in mind, I am now setting out to write a history of Canadian fiction – and each section is being written after I have gone through all the writings of these people. I have read all of Lucy Maud Montgomery – and twice – before I set down to write about her. And in the same small chapter are her two contemporaries, Nellie McClung and Mazo de la Roche. I defy anyone to say that what I am doing – slowly indeed! – is not somehow worthwhile.

To close, I would like to offer a brief excerpt from what I have been writing, the opening of the chapter called "Embracing Realism".

> In 1928 Raymond Knister, a fine poet and short story writer from southwestern Ontario, published his edition of Canadian Short Stories, a collection of seventeen short stories by such distinguished authors as Morley Callaghan, Norman Duncan, Stephen Leacock, and Charles G.D. Roberts as well as his friends Mazo de la Roche and Duncan Campbell Scott. The appendix also lists other such writers as Sara Jeannette Duncan, Nellie McClung, L.M. Montgomery, Martha Ostenso, Laura Goodman Salverson and Arthur Stringer. Knister had read almost everything written in the short story genre to prepare this encyclopaedic introduction to the form.
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> To his edition Knister adds an Introduction which is the first public statement about the need for realism in Canadian fiction: "What is known as realism is only a means to an end, the end being a personal projection of the world. In passing beyond realism, even while they employ it, the significant writers of our time are achieving a portion of evolution. But most tale-spinners did not even achieve realism" (xiii-xiv).
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> Knister well understands the difficulties that had been confronting the Canadian writer: "Conventions have held sway with the compulsion of a tradition of romantic externals ... much of our writing has seemed mechanical, and the literary flowering whereby it may be seen that the roots of a nation's life are sound has often had the aroma of wax and paper" (xii).
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> Although Canadian magazines encourage "in the main, third-rate imitators of third-rate foreign models" (xviii), a new movement is asserting itself: "Many thousands of Canadians are learning to see their own daily life, and to demand its presentment with a degree of realism" (xviii). Into this new literary flowering, Knister contends, the short story is a major artistic form, and writers must follow the finest models, taking whatever they can from a broad selecton of sources while remaining aware that the natural outlets for their work are across the border and across the ocean.

In his own readings, the young Knister, who attended the University of Toronto for only a few months because of pleurisy and pneumonia, was international: he read British fiction of the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries as well as Balzac, de Maupassant, Flaubert, and Hugo in the original French and, in translation, the Russians, Gogol, Tolstoy, Turgenev and especially Chekhov. The moderns also fascinated him: John Galsworhty and D.H. Lawrence in England, James Joyce and John Millington Synge in Ireland, and Sherwood Anderson and Willa Cather in the United States. He brought a cosmopolitan vision to the Canadian scene. Knister's first story, "The One Thing", published in the American magazine ***The Midland*** (January 1922), which H.L. Mencken called "the most important magazine America had produced"[2], explores the increasingly isolated world of Billy Dulckington, who operates an unproductive farm in Knister's own area of southwestern Ontario. Instead of farming for the marketplace, Billy provides pasture and upkeep for prize horses, estranging himself from his relatives and neighbours. A stupid misunderstanding with his own brother leads only to their enmity. In this and subsequent stories, Knister depicts realistically the farm world of his childhood and its inhabitants. Indeed, so entrenched were his stories in his Ontario world that no Canadian editors would publish them, and so ***The Midland*** and other magazines including ***This Quarter*** (Paris) became home for his stories.

In January 1929 Jonathan Cape of London printed Knister's first novel, ***White Narcissus***, another account of the failure in communication between human beings; Macmillan published the book in Canada in May, Harcourt and Brace in the United States in August. Richard Milne, now a successful novelist and the book's hero, returns to his small Ontario farm community to persuade his childhood sweetheart, Ada Lethen, to marry him: "Their awakening to each other ... seemed without beginning" (47). She, however, is still trapped into being a mediator between her parents, who have not spoken to each other for many years. Richard has a mission: to free Ada from the bondage of responsibility, but all seems to no avail. Her father's rage leads him to destroy his wife's treasured white narcissi, and the spell between them suddenly snaps. As the Lethens speak, Ada is set free, and she and Richard can now leave, "Her generous eyes were the stars of that night" (254). Like Frederick Philip Grove's Settlers of the Marsh (1925), ***White Narcissus*** suffers from a perfect romance ending, which undercuts the inherent power of the story itself.

Although character portrayal in ***White Narci***ssus is at times wooden, Knister succeeds in his major aim: to make the landscape authentic to his readers. The moods of nature, the charms of the countryside, the workaday world of farm life, all these he captures in realistic detail, and he achieves the recognition of reality, the recognition of the Canadian reality of the ordinary and the extraordinary world it embraces.

When Knister accidentally drowned on August 30, 1932, he left behind a mass of finished and unfinished novels, poems, and short stories. His novel about Keats's final years, ***My Star Predominant***, was published in 1934, lending further details about the wide range of his readings. And many other of his writings have been printed since the time of his death.

To the budding literary scene in Canada, Knister gave realism, which paints clearly the Ontario landscape. He placed before his readers the experiences and the objects as directly and as fully as possible. Realism paints directly, offering finally "a personal projection of the world". And Knister stayed in Canada, attempting to bring about a new direction in its literature, moving the literary world out of the vestiges of Victorian romanticism into the rigours of modernism.

2) Raymond Knister, "This Land is Full of Voices", ***Saturday Night: Christmas Literary Supplement*** (December 1, 1928): 6.

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