

Andreev, Andrei; Yankova, Diana

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In: *Canada in eight tongues : translating Canada in Central Europe*. Kürtösi, Katalin (editor). 1st edition Brno: Masaryk University, 2012, pp. 23-29

ISBN 978-80-210-5954-2

Stable URL (handle): <https://hdl.handle.net/11222.digilib/digilib.81908>

Access Date: 29. 04. 2025

Version: 20250404

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Andrei Andreev and **Diana Yankova**

New Bulgarian University, Sofia, Bulgaria

Translation of Canadian Literature in Bulgaria: Changes in Editors' Choices

Abstract

The article presents an overview of Canadian fiction and non-fiction translated into the Bulgarian language since the political changes in Eastern Europe of 1989. The aim is to investigate what changes have taken place in Bulgarian publishers' policies regarding Canadian literature in terms of the overall number of titles as well as choice of genres and authors. The research concludes that in the past two decades there has been a real boom in translation of Canadian writers, but while the works of some authors are now well represented and popular with Bulgarian readers, there are still significant gaps in the representation of certain types of writing or regions, most notably Canadian poetry as well as both traditional and contemporary French Canadian literary works.

Résumé

L'objectif de cet article est de présenter un aperçu de la littérature canadienne, traduite en bulgare depuis les changements politiques en Europe de l'est de 1989. Il s'agit d'étudier l'évolution de la politique des éditeurs bulgares concernant la littérature canadienne, en termes de nombre total de titres ainsi que du choix des genres et des auteurs. La recherche conclut qu'au cours des deux dernières décennies il y a eu un véritable boom dans la traduction d'auteurs canadiens, mais, si les ouvrages de certains auteurs sont maintenant bien représentés et qu'ils sont devenus familiers aux lecteurs bulgares, il reste néanmoins des lacunes dans la représentation de certains types d'écriture ou des régions, et notamment dans le domaine de la poésie canadienne et des œuvres littéraires d'expression française, tant bien traditionnelles que contemporaines.

The fall of the Berlin Wall in 1989 and the dramatic political, economic, social and cultural changes which followed in Eastern Europe had a serious impact on the publishing industries in the countries of the region, including Bulgaria. As old restrictions were abolished, new freedoms granted, and private businesses mushroomed, a marked change was discerned in the quantity and quality of publishers' output and in editorial policies.

The aim of this paper is to trace the changes in the choices of Bulgarian publishers regarding Canadian literature especially over the past twenty years. The main bulk of the data used in this study originated from several sources: it was collected by Madeleine Danova and Galina Avramova (St Kliment Ohridski University) as well as by the authors themselves with the kind assistance of the Reference Department at the National Library in Sofia. Additional



information was also collected from publishers' websites and online bookstores and in personal interviews with Bulgarian publishers.

Canadian literature in Bulgaria before 1990

Broadly speaking, three main periods can be outlined in publishing policies in Bulgaria with regard to Canadian authors prior to 1990: from the beginning of the 20th century to the end of the Second World War; the 1950s and 1960s; and the 1970s and 1980s (for more details cf. Yankova 2002, Yankova & Andreev 2010).

The translation of major titles from world literature into Bulgarian began in the years of the National Revival and truly flourished after the country's liberation from five centuries of Ottoman rule in 1878. Due to various historical and cultural factors, translators – most of whom were also leading Bulgarian writers of the time – concentrated predominantly on Russian, French and German authors. The selection of works from other literary traditions, including British and North American, was also governed primarily by their reception in Russia, France and Germany, cultures that defined tastes in Europe and countries the Bulgarian political and artistic elite was closest to. It is hardly surprising, then, that for the first half of the twentieth century there are no more than about 50 entries in the National Bulgarian Library records of translations of Canadian literature, some being second, third and even fourth editions.

The first recorded translation of a Canadian literary work is that of Ernest Thompson Seton's *The Biography of a Grizzly* in 1906 (reprinted in 1920, 1927 and 1937). Seton's adventure tales for adolescents such as *The Biography of a Silver Fox* (1919) and *Johnny Bear* (1921) must have proved popular among the young reading public in Bulgaria for, of the 50 or so Canadian books translated and published before 1945, 38 were penned by him. Second in popularity, with 11 titles, was Sir Charles G.D. Roberts, one of the fathers of Canadian poetry, although introduced in Bulgaria through his travel writings and shorter fiction, for instance *Children of the Wild* (1928). Like most literary translations on the Bulgarian market at the time, many of these books were translated from the Russian language – perhaps because of the tradition of choosing authors already acknowledged in Russia, perhaps as a result of the relatedness of the two Slavic languages, which was considered to facilitate translation, or simply due to lack of access to works in their original language and the scarcity of translators from French and English.

The end of World War Two and the ensuing division of the world into two opposing political blocs naturally did not stimulate much cultural exchange between Eastern Europe and the Western world, especially in the first post-war years (cf. Kürtösi 2001: 26 for similar data in Hungary). In fact, the renewal of cultural contacts with the West began – hesitantly, and under the strict control and censorship of the ideological apparatus – as late as in the late 1950s, after the process of de-Stalinization had started. In their selection of titles from beyond the Iron Curtain, Bulgarian publishers opted either for innocuous classics or for works judged to carry progressive ideas. Thus, from 1945 until the end of the 1960s, only five books by Canadian authors were published in Bulgaria: four Ernest Thompson Seton reprints and *Fatherless Sons* (1963) by Herbert Dyson Carter, an ardent Sovietophile and advocate of communism.



The Helsinki Final Act of 1975 and the process of détente which it initiated proved to be a turning point in all areas of East-West relations, including cultural exchange. Additionally, the 1970s and 1980s witnessed the growing appreciation worldwide of Canadian cultural achievements, and an increase in the number of translations of Canadian literary works into various languages. It also came as a result of developments in Canada, whereby in the post-1960 era Canadian cultural achievements became internationally recognized (Riendeau 2000:288). In Bulgaria, a total of 20 titles by Canadian authors are on record as having been published during these two decades. Among them are Morley Callaghan's *The Loved and the Lost* (1977), Muriel Wylie Blanchet's *The Curve of Time* (1980), Sheila Burnford's *The Incredible Journey* (1981), Margaret Atwood's *Lady Oracle* (1982), Stephen Leacock's *Perfect Lover's Guide and Other Stories* (1986) and four works by Farley Mowat: *The Great Betrayal* (1980), *The Boat Who Wouldn't Float* (1980), *Never Cry Wolf* (1981) and *And No Birds Sang* (1986).

Obviously, shortly prior to 1990 Bulgarian publishers were already focusing on Canadian authors of international renown. Margaret Atwood – poet, novelist, literary critic, essayist and environmental activist – has won multiple awards and holds numerous honorary degrees and is perhaps the best-known Canadian writer worldwide. Farley Mowat is also one of Canada's most extensively read authors, whose works of subjective non-fiction have been translated into 52 languages. Stephen Leacock was probably the most popular humorist in the English-speaking world in the first decades of the twentieth century. Since its publication in 1961, M. Wylie Blanchet's *The Curve of Time* has been on almost all top ten selling book lists in British Columbia, while *The Loved and the Lost* is acknowledged to be one of Morley Callaghan's finest works. *The Incredible Journey* is the book Sheila Burnford is best remembered for today and has served as the basis for two Disney films, made in 1963 and 1993 respectively.

Antonine Maillet's *Pélagie-la-Charrette*, which brought its author the Prix Goncourt in 1979, was the first title of French Canadian fiction to be published in Bulgaria. Its Bulgarian translation came out in 1983, only a year after it was translated into English. The first collection of Canadian poetry was Hedi Bouraoui's *Earth Rainbow* (1987).

Canadian literature in Bulgaria after 1990

After the end of the Cold War, contacts between the countries of the former Soviet Bloc in Central and Eastern Europe on the one hand, and the Western world on the other, grew rapidly closer. At the same time, the process of globalization intensified communication and exchange between different countries and cultures, further facilitated by the access to all kinds of information through satellite television and the internet.

In the early 1990s, for many Bulgarians the newly acquired sense of freedom resulted in a hunger for everything Western in all areas of life, especially if it had been previously banned or censored. In just a few years, countless new publishing houses sprang up, flooding the market with translations of predominantly English-language literature, mainly of the light reading kind: thrillers, espionage novels, romances, erotica, etc. The Bulgarian reader was inundated with books of questionable artistic merit, dubious quality of translation, and sometimes even uncertain authorship.



This somewhat giddy trend in Bulgarian publishing naturally could not last long and by the mid-2000s the business had become both more diverse and more balanced. Along with commercially successful blockbusters, publishers started offering the public not only critically acclaimed titles, but literary works from cultures previously little known. It would not be an exaggeration to say that the decades after 1990 have marked a boom in translations of Canadian authors in Bulgaria, especially in the past ten years. Thus, if in the first nine decades of the last century only 86 Canadian entries were made available in Bulgarian according to official records, at present their number exceeds 300. And while before 1990 there were only three authors represented by more than one title – Ernest Thompson Seton, Charles G.D. Roberts and Farley Mowat – today there are ten times as many, some of them (for instance, Arthur Hailey) with their complete body of work translated.

In choice of titles and subject matter, an attempt is evident on the part of publishers to diversify and introduce a variety of authors and genres, acquainting readers with both previously untranslated classics and critically acclaimed contemporary works. At last, there are Bulgarian editions of Lucy Maud Montgomery's immensely popular *Anne of Green Gables* and its sequels *Anne of the Island*, *Anne of Windy Poplars*, *Anne's House of Dreams*, *Anne of Avonlea* and *Anne of Ingleside*. Three titles by Pulitzer Prize-winning author Carol Shields can now be read in Bulgarian: *The Stone Diaries*, *The Box Diaries* and *The Republic of Love*. Also available are works by two other renowned late-20th century writers – Timothy Findley (*Pilgrim*, *The Piano Man's Daughter*) and Robertson Davies (*Fifth Business*). Multiple-award winner Jane Urquhart has had three of her novels translated: *Away*, *The Stone Carvers* and *The Underpainter*. Gail Anderson-Dargatz, one of the most popular Canadian writers of recent years, has to date written four novels, three of which have been published in Bulgarian: *A Recipe for Bees*, *A Rhinestone Button* and *The Cure for Death by Lightning*. Four out of applauded writer Nino Ricci's five novels have also come out in the past few years: *Lives of the Saints*, *Testament*, *In a Glass House* and *Where She Has Gone*. All three Canadian Booker Prize winners – Michael Ondaatje's *The English Patient*, Margaret Atwood's *The Blind Assassin*, and Yann Martel's *The Life of Pi* – are on the market, and they are not the only novels by these three authors which can now be read in Bulgarian: there are also Atwood's *Alias Grace* and *The Penelopiad*, Ondaatje's *Divisadero* and Martel's *The Facts behind the Helsinki Roccamatios*.

It becomes obvious that lately Bulgarian publishers have been choosing titles of high literary merit and international recognition. It appears that in the selection of lighter reading matter, publishers also opt for authors with a solid reputation in their particular genre of writing. Charlotte Vale Allen's commercial fiction, which deals with the hardships facing young women in the modern world, has been translated into over twenty languages, making her one of Canada's most financially successful writers. Bulgarian readers can now enjoy five of her novels: *Night Magic*, *Painted Lives*, *Parting Gifts*, *Mood Indigo* and *Time/Steps*. For science fiction fans, there are four titles by Robert Sawyer (who has won over forty awards for genre fiction, including the Nebula): *Starplex*, *Flashforward*, *The Terminal Experiment* and *Factoring Humanity*. Lovers of fantasy can choose from the works of Guy Gavriel Kay (*Ysabel*, *The Fionavar Tapestry* trilogy and *The Sarantine Mosaic* duology) and Steven Erikson (the ten-volume series *Malazan Book of the Fallen*). The cyberpunk subgenre is well represented by six of William Gibson's novels, including the famous *Neuromancer*, which popularized the term *cyberspace*.



and was the first book ever to win the three most prestigious science fiction awards – the Nebula, the Hugo and the Philip K. Dick Award. As for crime novels or thrillers, there are now over ten titles (each) by the internationally bestselling David Morrell and Joy Fielding.

At present, most major Bulgarian publishing houses have at least several Canadian titles on their list. Zhar Publishers, which popularized Jane Urquhart and Gail Anderson-Dargatz among local readers, have started a Contemporary Canadian Writers series. Zhar also made possible the first visit to Bulgaria by a Canadian writer to promote her work: in 2004 they invited Jane Urquhart for the launch of *The Stone Carvers*. This event seems to have established a tradition: in 2005 Prozoretz Publishing House had Yann Martel for the release of *The Life of Pi*, and in 2006 Arka Publishing House organized a visit by Jean Little for *Orphan at My Door*.

The proliferation of Canadian titles on the Bulgarian market in the last twenty years is indeed an achievement considering the country's dwindling population due to low birth rate and rising emigration (down to under 7,500,000 according to the 2011 census), its decreasing purchasing power coupled with the high price of books, and the relatively conservative tastes of the local reading public. Book-publishing is a risky business in Bulgaria and, as one of the founders of Obsidian Publishers put it, "If you don't have a sure winner like John Grisham or Paulo Coelho on your list, you don't want to experiment." At present, a print run of 1,000-1,500 copies for a book by a previously untranslated author – unless he or she has become a worldwide sensation – is considered a good figure (compared to print runs in the tens of thousands prior to 1990, when schools, libraries and community centres were obliged to purchase all new titles). In the thriller genre, in particular, says a representative of Bard – one of the most prolific publishing houses, averaging two new titles a month – "If the author is not male and American, the book will usually not sell." Nevertheless, it was Bard which launched both David Morrell and Joy Fielding on the market and, judging by the number of titles by these authors it has published, the risk was worth taking.

Various factors account for the recent translation and publication of so many Canadian authors. After the Bulgarian book market was literally saturated with predominantly American bestsellers in the early 1990s, there now seems to be at least some interest in other, less well-known cultures. The international recognition Canadian literature has gained in the past few decades has inevitably also affected Bulgarian publishers' policies. Last but not least, Canada's state policy for promoting its culture abroad has greatly facilitated the popularization of the country's literature.

According to Zhanet Arguirova of Zhar Publishers, the Canadian literary tradition is "very good, as it is neither too elitist nor too low-brow", but that unfortunately does not attract the attention of the Bulgarian media, who prefer to focus on more sensational reading matter. Sanya Tabakova of Lege Artis Publishing – which introduced Bulgarian readers to Timothy Findley, Robertson Davies and Anne Michaels (*Fugitive Pieces*, 2001) – lists three reasons for opting for Canadian literature: it is one of the few literatures offering novels which are both of high quality and entertaining; its promotion is a suitable alternative to all this Americanization; and it can secure the publisher at least partial sponsorship.

In 1981, the Canada Council for the Arts and what was then the Department of External Affairs (currently Department of Foreign Affairs and International Trade) established the



International Translation Grants Program, which encourages translation of Canadian literary works and their publication abroad by covering a certain amount of the translation costs (at present up to \$20,000 per title). With the assistance of this programme, Canadian literature has been translated into all major European languages, as well as into Arabic and Farsi. According to the official records of the Canada Council for Arts, 41 grants were allocated to 16 Bulgarian publishing houses within the period 1991-2009.

The International Translation Grants Program gives priority to the publication of works which have been awarded or have been nominated for Canadian or international literary prizes in the categories of poetry, fiction, drama, children's literature and literary non-fiction targeted to the general public. This, along with contemporary reading trends worldwide, probably accounts for the following statistical data regarding the presence of Canadian literature on the Bulgarian book market: the greatest share is that of award-winning works of fiction and commercially successful titles from the popular genres (thrillers, romance, science fiction), followed by children's literature and non-fiction. Young readers can now choose from Paulette Bourgeois's and Sharon Jennings's series about Franklin the turtle (over 30 titles), Bryan Perro's *Amos Darragon* fantasy series (5 titles) and Richard Petit's stories for adolescents (4 titles). In line with global fashion, non-fiction is represented mostly by the so-called self-help books – such as Guy Corneau's *Lessons in Love* (1999), Virginia Satir's *Pour Retrouver L'Harmonie Familiale* (1996), Albert Swann's *Dictionnaire de L'Amour et des Rêves* (1994), Mark Fisher's *The Instant Millionaire* (1997), Victor Ostrovsky's *The Other Side of Deception* (1998) and *By Way of Deception* (1999), and the international phenomenon John Kehoe's *Mind Power into the 21st Century* (2010) – with studies in sociology, political sciences and esoterica coming next in popularity.

Concluding remarks

Bulgarian publishers' policies towards Canadian literature have changed dramatically in the years since 1990 in regard to both volume and scope. Today, Bulgarian readers can acquaint themselves with renowned Canadian authors in a variety of literary genres, and can enjoy both acknowledged classics which for a long time had remained unpublished and current works which have received worldwide recognition. Despite the impressive number of titles on the market, however, the publishers' selections remain to a certain extent one-sided: while fiction and popular non-fiction are well represented, poetry and drama are conspicuously absent. Novels seem to be the order of the day, while short story collections are practically non-existent. No works of ethnic or regional Canadian literature have been published, and English-speaking authors by far outnumber French-speaking ones: in fact, the official records of the Bulgarian National Library list a total of 15 entries by five writers translated from French (Antoine Maillet, Bryan Perro, Michel Tremblay, Nancy Huston and Richard Petit), compared to about 300 by Anglo-Canadian authors.

Undoubtedly, in this selective approach Bulgarian publishers are following to some degree global trends, but in this way they can hardly succeed in painting a true picture of the rich diversity of Canadian culture. One can only hope that at some point in the future Bulgarian



readers will have a better opportunity to get a feeling of the Canadian mosaic through the work of writers who so far seem to have eluded the attention of Bulgarian publishers: Gabrielle Roy, Hubert Aquin, Jacques Godbout, Anne Hébert, Roch Carrier, Jacques Poulin, Lise Tremblay, Yves Thériault, Michel Tremblay, Yolande Villemaire and Dany LaFerrière, to name but a few.

Yet, in spite of this imbalance, it is inarguable that Canadian literature has firmly found its place on the Bulgarian market and will in all likelihood extend its position there in the future.

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