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A Bulgarian's Glimpse of Canada: Overview of Translated Literary Works

Abstract

The article presents an overview of Canadian fiction and non-fiction translated into the Bulgarian language in the course of the twentieth century. It attempts a historical review of Bulgaria's publishing policy as to choice of authors, genres and language. While the works of some authors are well represented and popular with the Bulgarian public, there are great gaps in certain types of writing or regions, most notably Canadian poetry and both traditional and contemporary French Canadian literary works.

Résumé

L'article présente une revue de littérature canadienne de fiction et générale (biographies, mémoires, scientifique, etc.), traduite en Bulgarie au XXe siècle. C'est un aperçu historique de la politique des maisons d'édition bulgares concernant les auteurs, les genres et les langues (français ou anglais). Il s'avère que l'oeuvre de certains auteurs est très bien présentée au public bulgare, tandis qu'il existe des lacunes énormes dans certains genres tels la poésie canadienne, les oeuvres traditionnelles ou contemporaines de la littérature franco-canadienne.

Introduction

The idea of writing the present paper materialized when a translation of Margaret Atwood's novel *Alias Grace* was published in Bulgaria in December 2001. I decided to attempt an overview of Canadian authors translated in Bulgarian in the course of the twentieth century. With the kind cooperation of the Reference Department at the Sofia National Library I obtained a list of all translated books for the period 1878-2001. There are 78 titles altogether for the whole period under study.

Historical overview

Four broad periods could be delineated in Bulgaria's publishing policy with regard to the publication of Canadian authors.

1878-World War II

The first period begins when Bulgaria won its independence from Turkey in 1878 after five centuries of Turkish domination. For Bulgaria, the beginning of the twentieth century was a time marked by economic and cultural upsurge: Sofia University was founded, the general educational level of Bulgarians was rising, the circle of intellectuals expanding. It was then that the first recorded translation of a Canadian author came out: *The Biography of a Grizzly* (1906) by Ernest Thompson Seton.

Twenty-nine books were published during this period, most of them Seton's nature stories and novels for adolescents (e.g. *Two Little Savages* in 1921) and some were second editions. The most fruitful were the 1920s. Some of the books were translated from the Russian language, perhaps as a result of the close connections between the Bulgarian and Russian intelligentsia at the time, the relatedness of the two Slavonic languages (which was thought to facilitate translation) or simply lack of access to the original works.

End of World War II-1960s

Understandably the period after the Second World War was not conducive to cultural exchange. Apart from the ravages of the war, the virtual and literal Iron Curtain effectively divided and isolated the two world political systems both politically and culturally. This explains why only four Canadian books came out in this period, again mostly of Seton's books, in second editions (cf. Kürtösi, 26 for similar data in Hungary).

1970s-1980s

The turning point during this period was the 1975 Helsinki Accord, which confirmed the territorial status quo in Europe and contained commitments to respect human rights. The period of détente initiated by the Helsinki process was reflected in all spheres of contact between East and West. Fifteen books by Canadian authors came out in the course of these two decades, the most notable of which were 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), Farley Mowat's *The Great Betrayal* (1980), *The Boat Who Wouldn't Float* (1980) and *Never Cry Wolf* (1981) and Stephen Leacock's *Perfect Lover's Guide and Other Stories* (1986).

This period was characterized by a turning to some of the masterpieces of Canadian literature, to authors of international renown. Perhaps this was also a result of developments in Canada, whereby in the post-1960 era Canadian cultural achievements became internationally recognized (Riendeau, 288). The choices made by the translators and publishing houses deserve praise. Farley Mowat is one of the most widely read Canadian authors and his work has been translated into more than fifty languages. His writes what has been referred to as "subjective non-fiction"; he is considered to be anti-authoritarian, intensely nationalistic, environmentally aware and passionately romantic. Leacock's humorous sketches, based on an incongruity between outward appearance and inner truth in human conduct, are well-known in many countries. Callaghan's *The Loved and the Lost* is considered by many to be his masterpiece, a work that is partly indebted to his friend Ernest Hemingway, whose influence can be detected in Callaghan's spare literary style. *The Curve of Time*, published in Scotland in 1961, the year of Blanchet's death, is still on the list of the ten best-selling non-fiction books in British Columbia. Sheila Burnford's *The Incredible Journey* – a tale of friendship, perseverance and will power told through three personified pets – was made into a Disney film in 1993.

The translation of Antonine Maillet's *Pélagie-la-Charrette* (1983) was the first of a total of three titles of French Canadian fiction translated in the whole period under study. Maillet received the prestigious Prix Goncourt for *Pélagie* in 1979 and it was translated into many languages (in 1982 into English). The only collection of poetry in

Bulgarian translation came out in 1987 and brought together verse by the Tunisian-born Hedi Bouraoui.

1990s-the present

The non-violent 1989 revolutions in Central and Eastern Europe and the end of the Cold War, the collapse of the political blocs and the fading distinction between internal and external, brought about closer contacts, cooperation and exchange between former “enemies” and led to the erosion of frontiers. Globalization became a fact, and albeit a controversial concept, has facilitated transnational and intercultural communication.

For Bulgaria this meant the opening up of markets, the free movement of people and access to all kinds of information via the Internet and satellite TV. This period marked a boom in translations of Canadian authors. With 36 titles (17 fiction and 19 literary non-fiction, that is autobiographies, memoirs and other types of creative non-fiction), the Bulgarian public was presented with some great pieces of Canadian writing: Margaret Atwood's *Surfacing* (1991), Charlotte Vale Allen's *Painted Lives* (1996) and *Time/Steps* (1997), Lucy Maud Montgomery's *Anne of Green Gables* (1993) and *Anne of Avonlea* (1998), Carol Shields's *The Box Garden* (1999), the “dean” of Canadian science fiction Robert Sawyer's *The Terminal Experiment* (1998), Victor Ostrovsky's *Lion of Judah* (1993). This period also witnessed the translation of books by several writers from British Columbia, among them Laurence Gough's thriller *Sandstorm* (1992), William Deverell's *Kill All the Lawyers* (1994), Evelyn Lau's *Runaway, Diary of a Street Kid* (1999) and one of the few titles by an author writing in French, Jean-Pierre Davidts' *Le Petit Prince Retrouvé* (1998).

Evident in this period is an attempt to introduce many different authors and various literary genres to the Bulgarian public. The choices of the publishing houses were definitely guided by the esthetic value of the literary works, most of them international best-sellers. At last Bulgarian readers were able to meet *Anne of Green Gables* (translated long before in other countries, e.g. 1909 in Sweden, 1952 in Japan). A second novel by Margaret Atwood offered the Bulgarian readership another contact with her fine writing. Carol Shields's place in Canadian literature is firmly established by the several novels and short stories she has published. Her books have won a number of awards, among them the Canadian's Author's Award, two National Magazine Awards and the Governor General's Award. After *The Box Garden*, publishers might consider translating some of her other great works such as *The Orange Fish*, *Happenstance* or *The Stone Diaries*. In the field of science fiction, Robert Sawyer's *Terminal Experiment* seems a good choice – a novel that has won the Nebula Award, dubbed the Academy Award of science fiction, for best novel. He has also won le Grand Prix de l'Imaginaire – a top science-fiction award in France. Laurence Gough is also a well-established writer of crime fiction, winning many literary awards for his novels *The Goldfish Bowl*, *Hot Shots* and *Sandstorm*. Evelyn Lau's *Runaway* came out when this Chinese Canadian was only 18 and became an immediate bestseller. The Belgian born Davidts' book is inspired by Saint-Exupery's classic, *The Little Prince*. Dealing mostly with the capacity of women to survive and overcome hardship, Charlotte Vale Allen's books present a lighter genre – something she herself refers to as “commercial fiction”. She is Canada's most financially successful female writer and her novels have been translated into more than twenty languages. Strangely enough, Michael Ondaatje's *The English Patient* has not been translated into Bulgarian, even though publishers are now quick to respond to market demand, which clearly exists thanks to the success of the film.

In keeping with world-wide tendencies in the field of non-fiction, the Bulgarian book market has been inundated with self-help books and this has led to the publication of Canadian authors: the Jungian psychoanalyst Guy Corneau's *Lessons in Love* (1999), the pioneer in the field of family therapy Virginia Satir's *Pour Retrouver l'Harmonie Familiale* (1996), Albert Swann's *Dictionnaire de l'Amour at des Rêves* (1994), Mark Fisher's *The Instant Millionaire* (1997), Donald Tyson's *The New Magus* (1996) and Victor Ostrovsky's *The Other Side of Deception* (1998) and *By Way of Deception* (1999).

Translated Canadian titles in figures

All the 78 Canadian titles make up a total of 87 books (due to second editions), 8 of them translated from French, 5 from Russian and 65 from English. The genres of the books are as follows: biographies, memoirs – 5; self-help books – 16; novels – 24; children stories – 5; novels for adolescents – 24; crime novels – 2; stories – 1; poetry – 1.

There are six authors that are represented on the Bulgarian literary scene by more than one title: Ernest Thompson Seton, Lucy Maud Montgomery, Farley Mowat, Margaret Atwood, Victor Ostrovsky and Charlotte Vale Allen, of which two, Lucy Maud Montgomery and Ernest Thompson Seton, have enjoyed second editions of their books.

The number of copies of each publication depends largely on the publishing policy of the period. In the 1960s, 1970s and 1980s, most books were printed in runs of 30,000 – 40,000 copies: each school, library and some ministries were obliged to add the new titles to their collections. With the advent of a market economy, the circulation of publications dropped dramatically and is now in the range of 3,000 – 5,000 copies, which reflects the actual demand.

Some of the books took a long time from their date of publication in Canada to their appearance in Bulgaria: 85 years for Montgomery's *Anne of Green Gables* (1908 in Canada, 1993 in Bulgaria), 89 for *Anne Of Avonlea* (1909, 1998), 19 years for Blanchet's *The Curve of Time* (1961, 1980), 21 for Burnford's *The Incredible Journey* (1960, 1981), 26 for Callaghan's *The Loved and the Lost* (1951, 1977), 18 years for Mowat's *Never Cry Wolf* (1963, 1981), 22 for Carol Shields's *The Box Garden* (1977, 1999). Others enjoyed a swift reaction from publishers and translators: Deverell's *Kill All the Lawyers* (1993, 1994), Gough's *Sandstorm* (1990, 1992), Mowat's *Canada North Now: The Great Betrayal* (1976, 1980), Sawyer's *The Terminal Experiment* (1995, 1998). One of the main reasons for this is that the late 1970s marked the beginning of a great influx of translated foreign language books. Publishers felt they had to make up for books not translated in the 1950s and 1960s. The period of the 1990s was characterized by closer cultural ties between nations, hence the larger number of titles that appeared.

By way of conclusion

Bulgarian readers still have a long way to go in getting to know Canada through its fiction and exploring the changing dimensions of dominant beliefs and cultural thought patterns of the Canadian mosaic. There is a strongly marked absence of poetry, plays, anthologies, "ethnic" writers, regional fiction and, in particular, Canadian authors writing in French. Let us hope that in the near future we will have access to at least

some of the following authors and books that have not so far merited the attention of Bulgarian publishers: Gabrielle Roy's *Bonheur d'Occasion*, *Rue Deschambault* and *Ces Enfants de Ma Vie*, works by the novelists Hubert Aquin, Jacques Godbout, Anne Hébert, Roch Carrier, Jacques Poulin and Lise Tremblay, the playwrights Yves Theriault and Michel Tremblay, the poet and novelist Yolande Villemaire, or the Haitian-born Dany LaFerrière and Gerard Etienne, the Trinidadan-born Dionne Brand, the Tobago-born Marlene Nourbese Philip and many others others.

It remains to be seen whether the absence of certain Canadian authors is due to the oversight of Bulgarian publishers or a lack of promotion on the part of Canadian governmental and professional bodies, or a combination of both. Certainly the kind of support offered by the Canada Council for the Arts and the Canadian Department of Foreign Affairs and International Trade for the publication in Bulgaria of Margaret Atwood's *Alias Grace* was instrumental in enabling the translation to appear, and would be more than welcome in the case of other books by Canada's leading writers.

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