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[Ravvin, Norman. Hidden Canada: an intimate travelogue]

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Reviews

Critiques

The focus of courses given in Canadian literature is usually fiction, poetry or drama. Unfortunately this omits many of the most interesting texts being published in Canada today, namely those in the area of what is commonly termed "creative non-fiction". An excellent example of the latter and a text that can be enjoyed individually or as part of any course in Canadian Studies, since it qualifies in many categories - especially those of history and culture - is *Hidden Canada: An Intimate Travelogue* by Norman Ravvin.

Ravvin, a native of Calgary, has travelled widely in Canada and lived in many different parts of the country. He is now based in Montreal where he is Chair of the Institute for Canadian Jewish Studies at Concordia University. He is the author of a novel, a collection of short stories and a highly acclaimed study entitled *A House of Words: Jewish Writing, Identity and Memory*. In his background there is, as well, a Central European connection in that his grandfather immigrated to Canada from a small town outside Warsaw, Poland, in the 1930s. Norman Ravvin visited Poland in the 1990s to do research for a novel dealing with the Polish past of immigrants.

However, Canada is the focus of Ravvin's text here and his approach in a series of essays is an intriguing one. He states in the Introduction that he shares the feeling for the "momentary flashes of beauty in everyday life" that can be found in Norman Levine's earlier series of essays on the country *Canada Made Me*, but adds that they are "underwritten by the melancholy sense of loss and wonder that comes with an awareness of change sweeping away communities and ways of life before it". It is these layers of the past that Ravvin is seeking to recover, a past that, as he states, is often "made to go away quietly without a struggle". Interestingly, especially to readers in this part of the world, he cites as a fine example of the preservation of a historic past the rebuilding of Warsaw's Old Town after the Second World War. This is contrasted with the Canadian (North American) obsession with change, especially in architecture.

The essays in the book are varied. They begin with one dedicated to Kateri Tekakwitha, famous as a Mohawk currently moving towards sainthood and one of the characters in Leonard Cohen's *Beautiful Losers*. Ravvin investigates the background of the saint-to-be, the mission and the way history here has been "retouched". To read this in connection with *Beautiful Losers* is an interesting exercise and the essay adds to knowledge of the present-day situation of Native peoples in the country as well. The next essay deals with Malcolm Lowry's Vancouver and is entitled "Landscape's Narrative", as the author tries to recover Lowry's past in the area where he once lived. Another essay examines what used to be the Bohemian section of Vancouver. Often Ravvin intermingles compelling description with conversations and personal recollections. He is a very fine stylist and some of his images and thoughts remain with the reader long after the book has been read.

Of special interest is the section that describes and discusses Jewish settlement in Canada, not in the big cities but the Jewish settlement in the farming country of Saskatchewan where Ravvin's grandfather first came as spiritual leader and ritual slaughterer. Hirsch, once a thriving town, is now virtually abandoned but he finds a

few people who recall the past and adds their recollections to his own research. The text is accompanied by several photographs, and the one of the old, still-preserved, wooden synagogue is especially evocative. This chapter provides a fascinating image of Canadian life that is quite different from the one we usually form of the Canadian West. Still another essay follows the African Canadian Heritage Trail in Ontario, providing a glimpse into the history of Black Canadians from the time when fugitive slaves travelled across Lake Ontario to freedom. The final chapter takes us to a small town in Newfoundland to encounter a man who devotes his life to the study of communication between whales.

Perhaps the most compelling essay in the book, however, is the one entitled "Mapping the Boom and Bust – A Guide to Perfect Calgary Time". In this section Ravvin writes of his native city. It is a very personal essay, describing the Calgary he knew when growing up there, the city his father knew and the changes that took place over the years – years of *boom and bust*. "And the longer you stay away, the more you feel, upon returning, that the city you knew is gone," he writes. Any North American can relate very well to that statement. "Parking lots and a pool hall are all that's left of my father's life and business in the downtown core," he tells us. It is this sense of the melancholy passage of time and of the desire in North American to constantly tear down and build something new that gives this section a universal elegiac note.

Ravvin is an extremely poetic writer, one who is able to capture nuances of everyday life. These essays, describing sections of Canada and of Canadian life in particular, are among the finest I have seen in depicting aspects of the country that are often overlooked in the prose we read today. The narration is, by any standard, superb. The fact that the book is subtitled "a travelogue" is probably misleading, unless one pays careful attention to the adjective "intimate" that accompanies it. This is a text that conjures up a sense of place, of time, as well as of the times and the peoples who made the country what it is. Here is a book that, as we are told, looks "for vanished ways of life". It is the work of a journalist, a scholar and a storyteller in the best sense of that word. For an understanding of the many varieties of Canada, this is a very appropriate addition to any library and one that should not be overlooked