

Colloquium on Canadian Literature

Canadian Literature in Canadian Schools: From the Old to the New Internationalism

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This paper considers the rise and fall of interest in Canadian literature in Canadian schools within the framework of the conflicting influences of nationalism and internationalism on Canadian society. Following World War II, Canadians were content to exist in a state of complacent internationalism born of a combined belief in the validity of British cultural institutions and American economic and military security. However, during the 1960s and 1970s, Canada entered a period of new nationalism, accompanied by rapid growth in Canadian literature and its teaching in schools. Despite this growth over the past five years, Canada has entered a period of renewed internationalism in which the status of Canadian literature in Canadian schools is seriously threatened.

Cet article porte sur les fluctuations de la cote de faveur de la littérature canadienne dans les maisons d'enseignement canadiennes à la lumière des influences contradictoires des courants nationalistes et internationalistes sur la société canadienne. Après la Deuxième Guerre mondiale, les Canadiens se contentaient d'un internationalisme suffisant, convaincus à la fois de la valeur des institutions culturelles britanniques et de la sécurité économique et militaire offerte par la société américaine. Au cours des années 1960 et 1970, toutefois, le Canada a connu une période de nationalisme renouvelé, période marquée par le développement rapide de la littérature canadienne et la prolifération des cours de littérature canadienne dans les maisons d'enseignement. Depuis les cinq dernières années, cependant, le Canada traverse de nouveau une période d'internationalisme et le statut de la littérature canadienne dans les maisons d'enseignement canadiennes s'en trouve très sérieusement menacé.

In 1968, on the basis of his survey of elementary and secondary education in Canada, Hodgetts concluded that "Canadian studies in our elementary and secondary schools have stagnated" (p. 7). Ten years later, in his preface to *The Country of the Young*, Gutteridge was able to proclaim that "the place of Canadian Literature in the nation's high schools now seems secure" (1978, p. 7). Similarly, in his introduction to *After Survival: A Teachers' Guide to Canadian Resources*, Robinson wrote that "one hundred years after Confederation Canada's literary heritage has arrived. 'CanLit' is of topical, best-selling interest" (1977, p. 1). However, in her study of

English teaching in Canadian secondary schools, Galloway observed that "many teachers are still prejudiced against the home-grown product" (1980, p. 6). And most recently, in his review of Canadian curriculum, Lorimer has concluded that the study of Canadian literature has been relegated to "a distant second place" (1984, p. 22).

The trajectory of opinion represented here reveals a tragic shortcoming in Canadian education. It would seem that Canadian educators have failed to sustain and build upon the interest in Canadian literature which developed during the 1970s, and there has been a return to the indifference characteristic of the period before this interest emerged. In order to understand the current status of Canadian literature and its teaching in Canadian schools, it is necessary to place this teaching within a broader framework – that of Canada as a political, cultural, and economic entity. This paper will therefore consider the rise and fall of interest in teaching Canadian literature within the context of changes in Canadian society in general. More specifically, it will be argued that, from the end of the Second World War to the present time, Canadian society can be described in terms of the conflicting influences of nationalism and internationalism and that the teaching of Canadian literature can be interpreted within the context of this conflict.

FROM OLD INTERNATIONALISM TO NEW NATIONALISM

Following the end of the Second World War and into the early 1960s, Canadians enjoyed what most believed to be the best of many worlds. Foremost was the heritage of a long cultural and political association with Britain, reinforced by the recent Canadian war effort and sustained by Canada's membership and post-war prominence in the Commonwealth. Together with the sense of comfort provided by these traditional associations was the economic and military security afforded by Canada's geographical proximity to the United States. While Canada remained politically and economically the smaller of the North American "twins" – as Harold Innis (cited in Clarkson, 1975, p. 20) put it, "a very small twin and a very large one, to be exact" – there was a decided sense of well-being in this arrangement, especially when Canadians looked over the pole to their most powerful and nearest neighbour in that direction.

For these reasons, Canadians remained largely unconscious of changes taking place within their own society. Believing that they enjoyed an enviable combination of transplanted British culture and American economic and military security, Canadians existed in what they generally thought to be a happy state, free from the worrying concerns of other nations. That their sense of nationhood and cultural identity were

subsumed beneath a blanket of imported internationalism was something of which most were blissfully unaware and essentially uncaring. They were content to follow what Northrop Frye (cited in Greenfield, 1976, p. 109) has characterized as "a feeling that the head office is somewhere else, in London, Paris, Rome, or Washington." "History and culture," as Margaret Atwood put it, "were things that took place elsewhere and if you saw them just outside the window you weren't supposed to look" (1972, p. 18).

But stirring within Canadian society were influences which were to change all this. Perhaps the most obvious was the so-called "quiet revolution" in Quebec during the 1960s. While manifestations of change within Quebec initially puzzled and even annoyed non-francophone Canadians, it gradually became apparent that what was emerging and being expressed was not small-scale radicalism but rather a vital nationalism. And this nationalism came to animate a similar spirit in anglophone Canada as well. While the linguistic and cultural isolation of Quebec had created within that province a healthy realization of its peoples' identity, such a realization had not occurred yet in the rest of Canada. But, once noticed, the Quebec quiet revolution served as a catalyst for a deepening sense among other Canadians of Canadian nationhood and Canadian culture as a whole. The result was a growing sense of independence from both British and American influences in all aspects of national life.

What was happening in Quebec was only an extreme case of regional movements in other parts of Canada, movements which on the surface were incompatible with nationalism but which inadvertently provided needed paradigms for extensions to a national awareness. Historically, regionalism has always played a significant part in Canadian life, manifesting itself in such ways as Nova Scotia's reluctance to enter Confederation in 1867 and more recent movements in favor of western separatism. This should not be unexpected in a country whose population is thinly distributed, east to west, across a large continent. Moreover, when concentrations of population do appear, they are located most often in geographically separated and culturally diverse regions. It is not surprising, therefore, that the various centers of Canadian population tend to take their initial identity from their immediate region rather than a larger Canadian context. The hierarchy of identity which this produces has been articulated by Margaret Laurence who describes herself in this way: "I am prairie. I am by ancestry Scots-Irish, I am Canadian" (cited in Carley, 1978, p. 33). And yet it can be argued that a larger sense of national identity was encouraged through a process of regional identification. It is almost as though, given the regional disparity and

geographical space of Canada, its people had to pass through a period of intensified regionalism as a first step toward a sense of nationalism. In literature, the influence of regional environment on Canadian creative activity has long been recognized by Northrop Frye (1971) who has more recently contended that "all existing literatures are regional developments" (1980, p. 7). In a similar manner Denham and Edwards, in their review of Canadian literature during the 1970s, have argued that "a [Canadian] writer cannot be a good ... nationalist without being a good regionalist" (1980, p. xvii).

At the same time, events in both Britain and the United States caused Canadians to re-examine their willingness to accept uncritically British and American social and cultural models. Post-war Britain was seen as beleaguered by endless economic, social, and political problems. Rather than retaining its place as a focal point of vibrant culture to be emulated in the Canadian consciousness, Britain became viewed almost as a cultural artifact, a gigantic museum where the historical origins of many of Canada's institutions could be recognized but where the emerging sense of the new Canadian reality could not be found. Similarly, the lustre was tarnishing on the American dream. The racial turmoil of Watts county, the political assassinations, the Chicago Democratic Convention, the Vietnam war, and Watergate all combined to create doubt among Canadians as to the wisdom of patterning Canadian society upon that of the southern neighbours. In their imagination and consciousness, Canadians began to spend more time at home with the result that they began to discover a country of their own. Typical of this discovery was Steuwe's declaration that "for the first time in our history ... there is a sense that the action is *here*, that our traditional American and European models are no longer adequate for a society that has finally decided to accept responsibility for its own development" (1976, p. 3).

But "here" was found to be different from where it used to be. In 1970, the federal Royal Commission on Bilingualism and Biculturalism warned that "Canada, without being conscious of the fact, is passing through the greatest crisis in its history" (p. 13). This crisis, rather than failing to recognize Canada's "French fact," was a failure to recognize her multicultural fact. In October 1971, the prime minister announced a federal government policy of "multiculturalism within a bilingual framework" (Canada, 1971, pp. 8580-8581). However, this announcement, rather than initiating a new direction for Canadian society, only served to give formal recognition to what existed. While immigration had always been a fact of Canadian life, statistics provided by the Canadian Department of Manpower and Immigration (cited in Ashworth, 1975, p. 1) revealed that, between 1945 and 1974, over 4 million immigrants entered Canada.

And, as consciousness of multiculturalism developed, immigrant non-English and non-French ethnic groups demanded recognition of their educational, language, and cultural rights (see, for example, Heyman, 1979). Moreover, these groups tended to concentrate in large urban centers where employment was more readily available and support during their transition to Canadian life was more easily obtained. The result was that, in Toronto, where the Research Service of the Toronto Board of Education (Ramsay & Wright, 1970) in 1970 reported that 39% of Grade 5, 7, and 9 pupils learned English as a second or additional language, one politician declared that "Ontario has more Canadians of German origin than Bonn, more of Italian origin than Florence, and Toronto has more Canadians of Greek origin than Sparta" (cited in Porter, 1965, p. 286). It was for these reasons that the Canadian Minister of State for Multiculturalism (Cafik, 1978) could state in 1978, in an address to the Western Regional Conference of the Canadian Association for Curriculum Studies, that multiculturalism should be recognized as a fact of life in Canadian society. The effect of this fact of life was to bring to Canadians an awareness that theirs was no longer simply a society made up of an English-speaking majority and a French-speaking minority but instead a unique blend of peoples from many origins. The result was further evidence that Canada, almost in spite of itself, was gaining a special identity of its own, an identity worthy of exploration. As Frye put it in *The Bush Garden*, the question for Canadians became less one of "Who are we?" than one of "Where is here?" (1971, p. 220).

In response to questions such as this, Canadians began to discover their literature. What they found was a point of reference for their newly developing sense of national selfhood. Here was an existing expression of an identity which many Canadians had only recently come to recognize, an expression which, while relatively small when compared to the body of British and American literature, was alone in articulating their growing sense of their country as a separate cultural and social entity worth discovery and respect. Through the works of such established fiction writers as Robertson Davies, Ethel Wilson, Hugh MacLennan, Malcolm Lowry, Sinclair Ross, and W. O. Mitchell and such poets as Earle Birney, Dorothy Livesay, Al Purdy, and Irving Layton, Canadian readers found themselves becoming closer to themselves and to the country to which they belonged. Mathews has described this process in this way:

The thoughtful people in the country understand the terms of its intellectual history, the tensions and conflicts of the country's historical dynamic, because they live the intellectual history, microcosmically, in their own lives from day to day. As time passes, the people of the country begin to recognize the most significant aspects of the dialectic [of their country] and they recognize, too, the artists in

the community who present the terms of the dialectic most vividly, most truly. Out of an inundation of works, thoughtful people begin to pick certain works and authors as particularly relevant to their identity. Artists, then, more consciously employ the dialectic – as it becomes more visible and historical – to make what critics like to call ‘universal statements.’ (1978, p. 6)

It is not surprising, therefore, that during the 1960s what Souster (1966) characterized as “the new explosion in Canadian poetry” took place. Not only were existing writers discovered as never before, but out of this period a new generation of writers began to assert itself as well. Included among these were poets such as Susan Musgrave, Tom Wayman, and Beverley Simons and fiction writers such as Alice Munro, Margaret Atwood, and Rudy Wiebe. As a result, in 1970 Woodcock could proclaim that Canadian writing had “come of age” (p. 143). Canadians were provided with what Atwood described as “a map of the territory” (1972, p. 18) without which national survival was impossible. It was a time when Canadian literature was read increasingly, as Ramsay Cook put it, “to reveal something of the problems of man, in time, in Canada” (1971, p. 26). And it was through this reading that, as Jones contended, Canadian literature provided a basis for “recognizing and articulating a view of life within which they [Canadians] can live with assurance or at least some conviction” (1970, p. 5).

If the curriculum of our schools can be said to represent “a mirror of our society ... [reflecting] back an image of ourselves and what we hope to become” (Harker, 1980, p. 1), then the growing importance given to Canadian literature during the 1970s demonstrated an aroused sense of nationalism and a recognition of the place of Canadian literature in expressing this nationalism. Typical of the spirit of the decade was Mathews’ admonition in his address to the 1976 conference of the Canadian Council of Teachers of English:

The population in which the Canadian student is struggling to become most whole and most responsible is the population of Canada. For that reason, without neglect of other cultures and literatures, the literary expression, the language and the social order of his or her own culture must be the most important in the student’s education. (1977–78, p. 3)

Equally typical was the outrage expressed by the director of the Children’s Book Centre in Toronto at the limited availability of Canadian children’s books in schools and bookstores:

Why should a child in Saskatchewan find a story in her reader about our national holiday on July 4th? Why should Lexington, Kentucky be a familiar-sounding place to children in Ontario when Moose Jaw is not? Why should *Anne of Green*

Gables and *Alligator Pie* be the only Canadian children's books you find in your local bookstore? (Yaffe, 1978, p. 41)

Similarly, if less stridently, the Curriculum Committee of the Canadian Council of Ministers of Education (Massey, 1971) strongly advocated more Canadian content in the school curriculum, while the Symons Commission investigating the state of university curricula concluded:

The most valid and compelling argument for Canadian studies is the importance of self-knowledge, the need to know and to understand ourselves: who we are; where we are in time and space; where we have been; where we are going; what we possess; what our responsibilities are to ourselves and to others. (Symons, 1975, p. 12)

In response to this emphasis, the decade of the 1970s witnessed the growth and development of instructional methods and materials for teaching Canadian literature. In 1973, an organization calling itself CANLIT was founded to aid teachers in developing instructional materials incorporating Canadian literature. Their publications included *CANLIT Crash Course* (Birdsall, Broten, David, Donald, & Plant, 1973), *Mix N' Match 1: Ideas for Canadian (Literary) Studies* (Donald, Broten, & Birdsall, 1977), and *Antitoenailimagery: Research Projects in Canadian Literature* (Birdsall, Broten, & Donald, 1978). Also published at this time were Underhill's *Starting the Ark in the Dark* (1977) (its title providing a grim commentary on Canadian teachers' preparedness to teach Canadian literature), Gutteridge's *The Country of the Young* (1978), and Hale's *An Introduction To Teaching Canadian Literature* (1975). Instructional materials making their appearance included such new series as *Casebooks in Canadian Literature* (1979), *Themes in Canadian Literature* (1975), and *Crossroads* (1979).

FROM NEW NATIONALISM TO RENEWED INTERNATIONALISM

Given the vitality of Canadian literature during the 1960s and 1970s and the wide recognition of its legitimate and necessary place in the school curriculum, the question has to be asked, "What went wrong?" Why is it that in 1981 the report on the status of English education in Canada of the Curriculum Committee of the Council of Ministers of Education revealed that some provinces still did not place Canadian literature within the core curriculum but left it as an option? Why is it that Margaret Atwood (1985), commenting on the current state of Canadian literature and its teaching, characterized it as, at very best, "more survival?"

In order to understand the failure of Canadian literature to establish

itself in the curricula of Canadian schools, it is necessary to look at fundamental changes taking place within Canadian society. It would seem that, during the last five years, nationalism has diminished in the Canadian consciousness. It is almost as if the nationalism of the 1960s and 1970s had become associated with Trudeau Liberalism – with bilingualism and biculturalism, the National Energy Policy, the Foreign Investment Review Board, and the other trappings of the Trudeau era. However, with growing disaffection with this Liberalism as evidenced by the Conservative victory of 1984, there has been a reduced emphasis in the public mind on nationalism. Canada, as the present prime minister never seems tired of repeating, is “open for business.” Funding for such “nationalistic” cultural institutions as the Canadian Broadcasting Corporation, the Social Sciences and Humanities Research Council, the Canada Council, and the National Film Board has been cut. And, as the maple leaf becomes subsumed beneath the shamrock leaf, the doors of free trade between Canada and the United States are being eased open, and everything, including Canada’s cultural institutions, is “on the table” (Harris, 1986). It seems that Canadians and their institutions must now compete in the international arena; if they cannot, they deserve to fail.

A fundamental question which arises from this shift in national perspective is whether there is something in the Canadian character which accounts for the movement from post-war internationalism to nationalism to the new internationalism. An answer is suggested in an observation made about Canada by Malcolm Ross (1954) over thirty years ago:

Ours is not, can never be, the ‘one hundred per cent’ kind of nationalism. We have always had to think in terms of 50–50. No ‘melting pot.’ Rather, the open irony of the multi-dimensional structure, an openness to ‘the larger mosaic’ (p. xi)

It is this openness, this capacity, as Robertson Davies (1980) put it, to travel “very light” (p. 14), that characterizes the Canadian consciousness. Canadians do not seem capable of remaining sustained in a condition of national self-celebration; rather, they seem compelled to move on to new things which are always beyond themselves even if this brings with it the threat of a cultural takeover. It is this impulse which explains the spirit of Frye’s (1980) smug statement that “Canada seems to have gone from a pre-national into a post-national phase without ever having been a nation” (p. 6). It would seem that nationalism embarrasses us, that we somehow cannot accept it, and that in order to get over our embarrassment we must hide ourselves in a larger context.

Even advocates of Canadian literature have recently felt compelled to qualify their nationalism with gestures in the direction of inter-

nationalism. For example, Margaret Laurence (1983) now argues that "nationalism and internationalism are not mutually exclusive" (p. 206), and Margaret Atwood (1985) contends that "being culturally sovereign doesn't mean strident nationalism" (p. x). While these statements may be interpreted as defenses against the charge of bellicose nationalism, they suggest an uncertain future for Canadian literature and its place in Canadian schools. Our cultural identity is by no means well secured, and an awareness of Canada in the minds of students is by no means well established. While it is not a part of the Canadian personality to engage in nationalistic histrionics – and this is a commendable aspect of our liberal traditions – it should be part of the Canadian personality to maintain a sense of national self-respect and to introduce and nurture this self-respect in the minds of young Canadians in schools. That we seem bound to failure in this regard gives little comfort as one considers the future of Canada during a time when its national institutions and national character are being eroded by a kind of continentalism and internationalism more based on political and economic expediency than any sense of the long-term good of this country. For Canadians in general, and Canadian educators in particular, to quote in translation from the French Canadian poet Saint-Denys-Garneau, "... it is unthinkable to sit/ quietly accepting/ the body of this death" (Glassco, 1970, p. 115).

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Diese Arbeit untersucht den Anstieg und das Abklingen des Interesses an kanadischer Literatur in kanadischen Schulen vor dem Hintergrund gegensätzlicher Einflüsse von Nationalismus und Internationalismus auf die kanadische Gesellschaft. Im Anschluß an den Zweiten Weltkrieg waren Kanadier mit ihrer Existenz in einem Zustand selbstgefälligen Internationalismus, der dem zweifachen Glauben an den Wert britischer kultureller Institutionen und amerikanischer wirtschaftlicher und militärischer Sicherheit entwuchs, zufrieden. In den 60er und 70er Jahren trat Kanada jedoch in die Phase eines neuen Nationalismus ein, der von einer rapiden Zunahme an kanadischer Literatur und dem Unterricht dieser Literatur in den Schulen begleitet wurde. Trotz dieses Wachstums ist Kanada in den letzten fünf Jahren wieder in eine Periode des wiederbelebten Internationalismus eingetreten, durch den der Status der kanadischen Literatur in den Schulen ernsthaft bedroht ist.

Este artículo estudiará el crecimiento y la mengua del interés por la literatura nacional en las escuelas canadienses, dentro del cuadro de las influencias opuestas del nacionalismo e internacionalismo en la sociedad canadiense. Luego de la Segunda Guerra Mundial, los canadienses estaban satisfechos de vivir en un estado de internacionalismo complaciente, nacido de la creencia de que las instituciones culturales británicas eran válidas y de la seguridad económica y militar ofrecida por los americanos. Sin embargo, durante las décadas de los sesenta y los setenta, Canadá entró en un período de renovado nacionalismo acompañado del rápido crecimiento de la literatura canadiense y de su enseñanza en las escuelas. No obstante, a pesar de este crecimiento, durante los últimos cinco años Canadá ha entrado en un período de renovado internacionalismo en el cual la situación de la literatura canadiense en las escuelas canadienses se ve seriamente amenazada.

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