

Canadian Literature in Canadian Schools: A Response to Harker

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I know what Harker is getting at – the times are a-changing, again. I recently attended a meeting to consider possible revisions in the English Language Arts curriculum for Saskatchewan. One consultant reported that administrators in her region were concerned about the proposed changes, not with the question of the amount of Canadian content, but the place of the classics in the program. For one who lived through the CANLIT crisis of the 1970s, such a concern seems a trifle odd. Harker argues that schools are losing their interest in Canadian literature, opting instead for an international perspective. He gently chastizes Canadian educators for not sustaining the focus on Canadian literature that developed in the 1970s. In short, Canadian literature has failed to establish itself in the curriculum of Canadian schools.

Let me, first of all, emphasize the value of this concern. Certainly many English educators in Canada share his commitment to Canadian literature and vigilantly guard against its demise in the curriculum. Canadian literature is there for a reason: it's Canadian. It helps us think and be Canadian. Those of us who experienced the literature curriculum of the 1950s and 1960s, dominated by the British tradition, can genuinely understand the importance of our national literature and of keeping it in a place of prominence. I can still remember my first encounter with the prairie in W. O. Mitchell's *Who Has Seen The Wind* and how emotional this experience was for me after many years of studying British skylarks and daffodils.

I am not certain that the situation is as bleak as the scene that Harker describes. He appeals to the research of Galloway (1980) and Lorimer (1984). But, Galloway, for example, based her conclusions on six schools in Ontario, hardly a representative sampling. Besides, she was more interested in the feminist issue, noting forcefully the fact that schools failed to use women writers. Harker argues, too, that the report of the Curriculum Committee of the Council of Ministers (1981) mentions a concern about the place of Canadian literature. Yet in a summary

statement, this same report mentions the achievements of Canadian literature in the curriculum: "Canadian nationalism is reflected in a preference for Canadian materials. Provincial literature is also favoured. There has been a definite improvement in quality and quantity of Canadian adolescent material" (p. 7).

Where Harker sees interest in Canadian literature turning to internationalism, I see our interest turning in the other direction, to an intensified regionalism. But I need, first, to put this statement into context. Teachers in the 1960s and 1970s struggled to include Canadian literature in the English curriculum. What appeared in classrooms was a genuine Canadian literature program, one of which we were proud. This curriculum included literature of a national scope: If it was good and we liked it, we included it, without worrying about who wrote it or when or where it was written. In the 1980s, teachers have changed the view of the Canadian literature program. Encouraged by provincial writers' guilds, teachers often select literature because of who wrote it. And so we have the pressure to have a course, for example, in Newfoundland literature or Saskatchewan literature. Most certainly, as Harker points out, good Canadian writers are regional writers first, then good national writers. My concern is not with the writers but with those people who select the literature for school programs. My fear is that this concern for regional literature grows out of a sense of myopic pride or perhaps even the economic incentive to spend the school dollar locally. There is little of merit in such an argument, other than of parochial mental inbreeding. Where Harker is afraid of the new spirit of internationalism, I fear the growing demand for regionalism.

Finally, I add my own concern about teaching Canadian literature in secondary schools. When Canadian literature was first introduced in a major way into the curriculum, it entered with a spirit of freedom – no Coles' Notes. As a result, teachers handled it for what it was: an expression of Canadian people, concerned with Canadian issues, and presented through Canadian images and symbols. Students responded to this new sense of freedom, this breaking away from the academic, rational approach of the traditional curriculum. They experienced what we now call a response approach to literature. I see a tendency to intellectualize Canadian literature in the curriculum. It has become a canon of literature, to be studied and analyzed, just as students of the 1950s studied and analyzed British literature of the Victorian and Romantic periods. Indeed, it is this institutionalizing of Canadian literature that I fear most for the Canadian curriculum, and not a movement toward a new internationalism that fails to value national literature.

Harker's paper indicates the need for continued caution. The place of Canadian literature in the curriculum is not secure. For this reminder, we owe Harker a vote of thanks.

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