Western Canada Fiction; Past and Future

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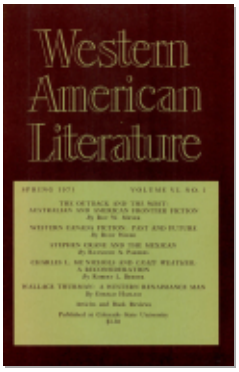

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In a paper published in *Western American Literature,* Winter, 1968, Dr. Donald Green of the University of Wisconsin candidly admits that his credentials for speaking about western Canadian literature could perhaps be based on only two facts: one, that he had 'always been an incurable addict of literature' and two, that he had 'spent the first 35 years or so of [his] life in western Canada.' He then comments at length.

The bent of his attitude is clear from his introduction where he raises the large (and for him not rhetorical) question: 'is there a Canadian literature worth consideration by a serious literary critic?' He continues:

> As I read Wilson's book [Edmund Wilson's *O Canada!*] I kept wondering when he was going to answer the despairing cry that young Ernest Hemingway, then a reporter on the Toronto *Star,* long ago uttered in a letter to Wilson, begging for some literary news—"You don't *know* anything in Canada!" But no answer was forthcoming.

An examination of all the evidence Greene quotes partially here shows that his attitude toward literature may indeed be addictive; he certainly does not follow the standard critical approach of disinterested rationality. In a year's correspondence between Hemingway and Wilson, beginning in November, 1923 and quoted at length in *The Shores of Light,* 1952, Hemingway in Toronto asks Wilson in New York whether or not his little book *Three Stories and Ten Poems* has been reviewed in the U.S.A., adding as explanation 'You don't know anything in Canada' (p. 116)—i.e. the facts of New York literary activities don't reach to Toronto. To make a despairing cry out of *that,* Greene, on his own initiative and without explanation, underlines 'know' and adds an exclamation mark; as a result, though in context Hemingway seems to imply no disparagement of Canadian knowledge, in Greene's context the sentence implies that Canadians *en masse* are too ignorant to have any literature whatever. What Hemingway himself thought

of New York and Boston literary activity becomes clear in subsequent letters to Wilson: one dated Oct. 18, 1924, says 'Do you remember my writing from Toronto wanting some reviews and publicity? [that substantiates my interpretation] and then got some and it turned me sick'. (p. 123) Earlier he had commented on what he saw as the demise of Sherwood Anderson: 'His work seems to have gone to hell, perhaps from people in New York telling him too much how good he was. Functions of criticism.' (p. 117).

So much for Hemingway's apparent support of the opinion that to know about literature worth serious consideration one must know what is going on in New York and Boston.

Further on in his paper Prof. Greene notes that the University of Saskatchewan should be grateful that its existence has been noticed by Mary McCarthy in her novel *The Group,* even though, as he admits, some facts she has about the university are wrong. Well, let's keep the record straight: we western Canadians have had our moments before Mary McCarthy. William Faulkner, with whom the author of *The Group* does not deserve to be mentioned in the same sentence, has a character in his novel *Pylon* come from the farthest and nethermost depths of the inhabitable world: Edmonton, Alberta. In literature too we have had our moments.

It seems to me Canada has given birth to an abnormally high number of expatriot professional debunkers. A vivid example appears in the *Atlantic Monthly* issue on Canada, November, 1964. In it a young man named Brian Stock, whoever he is, after recounting his pilgrimage from Canada via Harvard to the ultimate shrine, Trinity College, Cambridge, concludes,

> I feel that had I remained in Canada, something frightening would have taken place, Canada would have destroyed me. I felt that I could not have carried on the battle for culture and art in Canada, because the country does not have the spiritual resources to support them; and so, like the rest of "cultured" Canada, I should have become artificial and affected in my approach to the arts in general. No Canadian is honest about the arts in a Canadian way, therefore the fate of living in Canada is frightening for someone who wants to be honest with himself. (p. 114)

'Honest with himself', 'artificial', 'affected'! Well. All I say is, who needs such spindly cultural souls

It seems to me that I hear echoes of Brian-Stockism in Professor Greene, to whom I will refer only once more. He searches

his memory and can discover only three western Canadian writers worth recommending to, as he has it, 'the serious student of literature'; he names one short story by Wallace Stegner (who lived in Canada for several years as a boy), one novel by Frederick Philip Grove, and one collection of poems by Eli Mandel. The three-point, three-genre system here has obvious rhetorical advantages, but to pretend to cover the field of western Canadian writing in 1966 with such a list is, in critical terms, silly.

In writing the concluding chapter of the *Literary History of Canada* (1965—the book has 945 pages!), Northrup Frye defines a healthier critical stance. It is a sign of maturity, he writes, to outgrow

> 'the view that evaluation is the end of criticism instead of its incidental by-product. . . . The evaluative view is based on the conception of criticism as concerned mainly to define and canonize the genuine classics of literature. And Canada has produced no author who is a classic in the sense of possessing a vision greater in kind than that of his best readers (Canadians themselves might argue about one or two, but in the perspective of the world at large the statement is true). (p. 821)

I wish to follow this lead; not list and summarize and say 'Good'. 'Terrible'. I want to give a brief outline map of where western Canadian fiction has not and where it has been, then look ahead (as a fiction writer myself the forward projection is always the most exciting) to see where it could continue to go. For I believe that fiction, not poetry or drama primarily, is the mode of the Canadian prairie, as it is the mode of the Russian steppes.

The Blackfoot Myth of Beginnings has Ná pi—Old Man—make people first on the Teton River (Montana), then he travels north and, at the junction of the Bow and Elbow Rivers (Calgary), he makes more. These new people Old Man teaches the same things as the first; yet somehow the people are different, and it seems to me that the whites who have joined them, in some strange way, are different too. Though the plains and hills and mountains of Canada and the United States are contiguous, the Medicine Line does divide them, as potent as it is unseen. All the *big* action seemingly took place south of it: the covered wagon treks to Oregon and Zion, the railroad cutting through buffalo herds, the fierce plains Indian attacks, the violent cow towns. North of the Line the N.W. Mounted Police came in among the fur traders, the

railroad arrived five years after the last great buffalo hunt, the settlers came with the railroad and so, in effect, the Canadian west jumped from fur to farming with only minor local spasms of either Indian war or ranching.

There are then certain standard American fiction possibilities which Canada never had. It had no cowboy 'western' except as it has to do with continuing ranching. Most early unfenced ranching was an extremely brief interval between fur and farming; the Queen's law that ruled the Canadian west before whites arrived made six-gun shoot-ups not only unnecessary but downright dangerous in a way rather different from the mythical American pattern. Western Canada had no Indian wars, partly because of the police, partly because the Great White Mother kept her treaties. The Riel Rebellion was a war of Metis vs. White; the Cree Indians knew it was hopeless after their first emotional attack and spent all their time debating when they should have been helping Riel, if they were going to; the Blackfoot Federation, the largest in the West, refused Riel altogether. Western Canada had no rancher-homesteader wars. The C.P.R. and the Hudson's Bay Company between them owned most of the arable land and settlers settled along the railroad, not ahead of it; besides, most winters are too long and hard for herds to fend for themselves as they can on the southern plains (Stegner's *Wolf Willow* gives a magnificent description of how abortive Cypress Hills ranching could be). Western Canada had no Indian captivity stories; the exception that proves the rule is the journal of Mrs. Gowanlock and Mrs. Delany, *Two Months in the Camp of Big Bear,* ladies held by the Cree in 1885. It is written in the best flowered style of enraged Victorian womanhood, complete to standard circumlocutions about the 'fate far worse than death' one man apparently had in mind for Mrs. G. To judge from her portrait, he must have been a hardy brave indeed. Mrs. Delany, whose husband like Mrs. Gowanlock's was killed before her eyes, is very clear about one fact:

> "the half-breeds or whites or others may have real or imaginary grievances that they desire to see redressed. . . . I have never had anything to do with them. . . . . But there is one thing I do know and most emphatically desire to express and have thoroughly understood, and that is the fact that *the Indians have no grievances and no complaints to make* . . . the government spares no pains to make them adopt the agricultural life, to teach them to rely upon their own strength, to become independent people and good citizens." (p. 99-100)

It is indeed unfortunate that our native people today, eighty-five years later, still seem unable to grasp such clarity of thought.

The historic absence in Canada of cowboy shoot-outs, massacres, etc. did not, of course, mean that there was no adventure, no danger in opening the West. There was plenty, and *The Literary History of Canada* records the long list of writers who tried to exploit that. The American pattern of more organized, man vs. man, violence was happly provided by the very short Rebellion of 1885. Edmund Collins, for example, without apparently leaving Toronto, wrote a bestseller, *The Story of Louis Riel* in 17 days while they were still fighting and followed it almost immediately by *Annette the Metis Spy,* which obviously has even more mass appeal.

The rebellious Metis have received some literary justice since, notably from the (western) French Canadian writers Georges Bugnet in *Nipsya* (1929) and Maurice Constantin-Weyer: *Vers l'ouest* (1921) and *La bourasque* (1927). Also the plays of John Coulter: *Riel* (1962) and *The Trial of Louis Riel* (1968) which, though they err in some details, do treat the subject seriously. The Canadian 'western' in the traditional sense is, however, largely non-existent; the Canadian land and personality drew out a different pattern. If it can be said that the archetypal American western is Wister's *The Virginian,* where, in Leslie Fiedler terms, extra-legal violence is the only bastion of justice; where authority is invariably corrupt; then surely the archetypal Canadian western is Ralph Conner's *The Sky Pilot* (1899). Not for Canadians were slick gunfighters galloping around like Robin Hoods in chaps; rather, handsome preachers ordained in the name of the Queen herself as well as the Trinity, standing rock-like for a muscular Christianity.

Connor in real life was the Rev. Charles W. Gordon, a Presbyterian minister who began writing in 1898 to raise money for a western mission project. He was extraordinarily successful partly because he knew the West and in his descriptive passages could evoke its beauty and wildness. Further, he was a man not primarily of literature but of message. His heroes, as a contemporary critic said, were 'Apollo, John Wesley and David Livingstone all in one', his heroines (modeled on his mother) as beautiful as Helen and as chaste, and cool, as falling snow. His great theme was: in a land of hard men and immense plains and mountains, under the watchful eye of a law-and-order police force that always gets

its man, destitute peoples can find work and freedom, can find goodness, can find a simple understandable God if they walk the narrow line carefully. His first three books, *BlackRock, The Sky Pilot,* and *The Man from Glengarry,* sold over five million copies within a few years. Hiram Cody, Nellie McClung, E. T. Seton and Frances Herring are only four of the scores of Canadians who, between 1900 and 1920 published novels about the Canadian West, mostly modeled on Connor: the western historical adventure romance with simple moral intentions.

The twenties, however, gave rise to quite a different kind of fiction which, in our context, deserves much longer treatment. The first realism in any Canadian fiction came from the West with the publication of Frederick Philip Grove's *Over Prairie Trails* (1922) and *Settlers of the Marsh* (1925), Martha Ostenso's *Wild Geese* (1925) and Robert Stead's *The Smoking Flax* (1924) and *Grain* (1926). These novels all deal with the same subject: the pioneering farmer confronted by an implacable natural world. Their approach to man is almost mythic, and I can do no better here than to point out the excellent paper Henry Kreisel has written on this realism: "The Prairie: A State of Mind" *(Transactions of the Royal Society of Canada,* June 1968, p. 171). Kreisel begins with his own short story "The Broken Globe", whose central figure is such a pioneer and whose life's affirmation comes as

> With a gesture of great dignity and power he lifted his arm and stood pointing into the distance, at the flat land and the low-hanging sky. "Look," he said, very slowly and very quietly, "she is flat and she stands still."

The man is seen in giant terms, believing his own dogma against the beliefs of any other human, against the very science of his own son. In his paper Kreisel expands on this strange ambiguous image of man both as giant and dwarf found in all the best western realism, on the earth that is both a mistress who must be conquered violently by giants, and who nevertheless is never conquered; a fickle mistress who takes away as easily and completely as she gives. [Compare the reversed image: the rancher as giant = Jim Brewton in *The Sea of Grass,* where the farmers are vermin digging into the earth for shelter. This picture is not found in Canadian literature.]

Grove's five prairie novels (published between 1925 and 1932) stand as the major artistic achievement by one writer on the Cana-

dian West; his is the giant hard world of the pioneer farmer in *Settlers of the Marsh, A Search for America, Our Daily Bread, The Yoke of Life,* and *Fruits of the Earth.* The writers of western realism in the forties like Christine Van der Mark *(In Due Season),* more notably W. O. Mitchell *(Who Has Seen The Wind),* and most notable of all Sinclair Ross *(As For Me and My House)* have followed in this tradition: the human under the giant open sky, yet oddly hemmed in trying to find his soul, his self. However, the postwar writers, living in a world well beyond pioneer and depression, have found new strands that begin to show there may be fiction subjects in the West beyond turning the first sod, beyond the primary struggle for existence. These strands reach beyond the West in their implications, but can be seen with particular clarity in it, I believe. They can be stated most easily in terms of myth: the three Canadian myths of one nation, of nonracism, of the north.

If Marshall McLuhan's pronouncements about the 'global village' are more than midnight musings (and I think they are), the fact remains that modern communications media have at least made us as aware of our differences and our uniquenesses as they have of our common humanity. Each of us is not only of the great mass; we are also of the ethnic minority. If the Negro in the U.S. and the Canadien in Quebec can claim they too have a piece of the history action in their country, why can't the Ukranian in Alberta, the Icelander in Manitoba, the Mennonite in Saskatchewan claim as much? The Canadian West in more mixed racially than any other part of Canada; just because the Anglo-Saxons, via the Hudson's Bay Co. and the CPR, once owned all the land and have until now run most of the politics doesn't mean that we others did not exist. In any town or village on the prairies you are still as likely to hear a central European language as English. And if the Jews of New York and Montreal can shape great novels on the foundations of their ethnic and religious problems, well—? In the last two decades the finest western Canadian novels have been those that chose their matrix from small ethnic groups. These are not 'ethnic novels' in the usual (and condescending) sense; they do not treat their subjects in the idealized, perfected fashion of earlier ethnic novels (i.e. much of Laura Salverson or Martha Ostenso during the 20's and 30's) but with the hard, clear credibility of contemporary writing. There are the Jews in Adele Wiseman's *The Sacrifice* and Henry Kreisel's

The Betrayal, the Hungarians in John Marlyn's *Under the Aibs of Death,* the Canadiennes in Gabrielle Roy's *Where Nests the Waterhen* and *The Road Past Altamont,* the Ukranians in Vera Lysenko's *Yellow Boots* and in George Ryga's *Ballad of a Stone Picker,* the Mennonites in my own *Peace Shall Destroy Many.* Margaret Laurence's Manawaka trilogy, especially the first two, can be seen as superb examples of the ethnic novel I am talking about but they look at the world from the *other* side: the protagonist Curries and Camerons simply lord their Scotch superiority over the Ukrainians, Indians, and other assorted bohunks of the Manitoba West. And Denis Godfrey brings the concept full circle: his *No Englishman Need Apply* deals with the prejudice against English immigrants in a western university town.

These are not novels of pioneering realism; rather of small ethnic community settlements trying to relate old-country beliefs and traditions in a land and landscape sometimes hostile, sometimes benevolent but always (and this is usually the most invidious difficulty of all) always somehow free and completely morally demandless in a way which can be terrifying to those who have known the tight society of old country villages where the range of acceptable behavior was circumscribed and therefore secure. These novels are usually marked by the second generation battling towards a new consciousness that contains both old and new, but which is neither European nor Anglo-Saxon Canadian; it is the kind of 'canadianism' which may, after another two generations (may we live so long!) eventually produce the Canadian 'one-nation', but chances are it won't. And may we be forever spared the kind of pressurized Canadianism that came during the World Wars when people felt forced to deny their past, to hack away their identity with such stupid devices as changing their name to some common-denominator Smith. It is no accident that the first prime minister of Canada who was neither of British nor French origin was the Saskatchewan lawyer John Diefenbaker; he came to power in 1957.

My first statement, if correct, can be summed up: a) Canada has not yet lived itself into its myth of being one nation (if by nation we mean the majority of the people in it have a common history), and that therefore b) the uniquely Canadian novel, especially in the multi-racial West, will be one that recognizes, or better, uses the strengths that this diversity contains, the clash

not only of opinions and ideas, but also of social structures, religious belief and perhaps even blood that inevitably results from such diversity.

If, as I say, this first approach is correct, then second, the past twenty years have also destroyed the myth that Canada is a classless, non-racist society. The memories of Nick Kazlik while he is in Rachel Cameron's arms *(A Jest of God)* only underline what every Canadian born into a small ethnic group feels in his gut the first day he comes to school and has to start learning English: some Canadians are more classless than others. Further, we may not have 25 million Negroes, but we do have a quarter of a million Indians and for them Canada *is* racist. One of the main pillars supporting the claim of our cultural superiority to the U.S. has been that we never slaughtered the Indian. True, our law has kept us to the Indian treaties and before that law all are treated impartially, but, in the unchanging British conservative tradition we have also never changed that law, those treaties. In 1969 who else do we expect to live contentedly in an 1870 world? The fictional world in western Canada has still largely to come to grips with this racism; the Indian hardly appears in the pioneering realistic novels and even in some of the best recent ones he remains a fringe character, seen sympathetically perhaps but not vital to what happens in the novel world which is, essentially, white.

It seems to me Canadian western fiction is particularly suited to use these two unrealized myths: our classless non-ethnicity and our non-racism, to explore where we are going in a huge world squeezed strangely small by the media yet one in which the individual must, even more than before, find a small group where he belongs, where he has a history, a private entity. The Indian, for example (Winnipeg has 15,000 of them) must become our central, not our fringe figure, exotic, a bit mysterious perhaps, but mostly drunken and prostituted; he must become the center of serious fiction as other small groups have. It hasn't happened yet, but novels like *In Due Season* (1946) or *Peace Shall Destroy Many* (1962) or *First and Vital Candle* (1966) prove that it will. Mort Forer's *The Humback* (1970) may well be the breakthrough..

I have some theories about the fictional uses of western rural and town life, but enough has been said about them in other places. The huge western cities are like teenagers: they have as yet little character except growth and pushiness. Winnipeg

perhaps — but it too is changing so quickly and bragging about bigness ('playing with the bigness of their littleness') that a pure western city novel loses most Canadian identiy: it becomes more or less whatever has been done in growing cities anywhere else in the western world. The frontier of western Canadian writing is somewhere else.

It is in the north. Two-thirds of Canada remains empty: one of the last great empty spaces on earth. Oh, airplanes and helicopters and hovercraft and skidoos roar over it in all directions all the time, but in two million square miles you can still get away from diesel noise and fumes; you can still, if you walk in the wrong direction, have half the circumference of the moon to go before you'll likely meet another human. There you can be alone, not 'alone' as in the city. There you can still battle elements on a basic level, study your own thoughts undisturbed on the picture tube of your own mind, always a private and individual production unmuddled by deordorant reminders. In a natural world man has not looted or polluted, yet, you can still look about, see what has never been seen before and in the absolute silence of never-before-breathed air, hear your own heart beat. I know there's good fiction there!