

Canadian Literature in English

W. J. Keith



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Canadian Literature in English

General Editors: David Caron and Michael Worton
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Longman Literature in English Series

General Editors: David Carroll and Michael Wheeler
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Editors' Preface

The multi-volume Longman Literature in English Series provides students of literature with a critical introduction to the major genres in their historical and cultural context. Each volume gives a coherent account of a clearly defined area, and the series, when complete, will offer a practical and comprehensive guide to literature written in English from Anglo-Saxon times to the present. The aim of the series as a whole is to show that the most valuable and stimulating approach to literature is that based upon an awareness of the relations between literary forms and their historical context. Thus the areas covered by most of the separate volumes are defined by period and genre. Each volume offers new and informed ways of reading literary works, and provides guidance to further reading in an extensive reference section.

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David Carroll
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Longman Literature in English Series

General Editors: David Carroll and Michael Wheeler
University of Lancaster

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 * Canadian Literature in English *W. J. Keith*

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Author's Preface

This book contains one man's reading of Canadian literature in English from its earliest beginnings. It lays its emphasis firmly on cultural tradition, the way in which literature written in Canada began as a continuation of what was being produced in Great Britain, had to define itself against the American tradition as it developed in the United States, and eventually evolved as a distinctive literature related to but independent of both parent and neighbour. Canada's geography and her historical development were obviously immensely influential factors, and these will be discussed briefly in the introductory chapter. But the concept of a 'Canadian tradition' is not easily established. In literary terms it is, I believe, neither an abstraction like a sense of identity nor a theme like survival. It evolves gradually from the achieved literary works that have been written by its people. I have tried to approach my task without narrowing preconceptions, describing what I found by focusing on works that attain a high degree of literary quality. While attempting to survey all writing of continuing interest, this book concentrates on the main stream; it emphasizes authors who may be considered 'major' because they have dominated the country's literary language, shaped its consciousness, and so fostered the native tradition. Ultimately, I am convinced, it is the tradition established by the best that sets the standard.

Inevitably I have had to be selective. There are far more writers of merit than could be included unless parts of the book were to degenerate into little more than a list of names. This is particularly true of the contemporary period, although non-Canadian readers may still be surprised by the amount of attention paid to literature produced since about 1950. But the pattern of Canadian literary development consists of a long slow growth followed by a sudden creative burgeoning. Indeed, it seems reasonable to suppose that the majority of Canadian writers up to the present whose work will prove of continuing interest in the future are alive now. Many of these, naturally, are at an early stage in their careers, and because of my special concern with cultural continuity I have concentrated on the present-day writers whose debt to the past is most obvious. Some notable experimentalists have doubtless been scanted in the process, but the concept of tradition is constantly revisionist, and, if they prove to be of lasting importance and succeed in altering or refining the tradition, they will eventually come into

their own. I shall be satisfied if I have distinguished, albeit superficially, some of the main lines in an intricate literary development.

One practical problem always confronts the writer on early Canada: what does 'Canada' mean at any given point in time? The country's present boundaries were not established until after the Second World War. At various times new administrative units were created; names (Upper Canada, Canada West, Ontario for example) can change with changing circumstances or the whims of politicians. While I have sometimes reminded the reader of these anomalies in phrases like 'what is now Saskatchewan', I have thought it best to refer for convenience to Canada as we know it today. E. J. Pratt was surely Canadian despite the fact that Newfoundland was a separate colony when he was born there. The risk of occasionally blurring through imprecision is, in my view, outweighed by the general advantage of simplicity and straightforwardness. So long as the reader is alerted to the difficulty at the outset, few problems should result.

Very occasionally, when referring to authors and books that I have previously discussed in print, I found that I could not improve upon certain phrases and sentences that I have already published in articles and reviews. With these small exceptions, all the material in this book appears for the first time.

An unavoidable difficulty in describing and assessing a literature most impressive in its contemporary achievements is that works are continually being published that deserve attention and alter the general picture. I have tried to keep as up to date as possible, but the reader should know that the body of the text was written between June 1982 and June 1983. Some very recent publications have doubtless not received the attention that is properly their due.

As usual, there are debts that I am happy to acknowledge. First and foremost, I am grateful to the Connaught Committee of the University of Toronto for the award of a Connaught Senior Fellowship that gave me a year's release from teaching duties, during which period I wrote the bulk of the book. The General Editors have been most helpful and patient in offering advice, while colleagues too numerous to mention individually have been prodigal with interest and encouragement. And, as always, I am thankful to my wife Hiroko, since for many years we have explored Canadian literature together.

W. J. Keith,
University College,
University of Toronto.

Canada is a very peculiar and different country.

James Reaney

TRUEMAN: A weight of tradition may be as great a handicap as none at all.

LOVEWIT: But a genuine, living tradition is constantly renewing itself.

Robertson Davies

Our writing cannot but be Canadian, don't let us ever worry about that. But it can be good or bad. That is what matters.

Ethel Wilson

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Introduction

Canada. A country stretching over 3,000 miles (some 5,500 kilometres) from east to west and sometimes extending almost 3,000 miles from south to north, though most of its northern lands are unsettled and uninhabitable. In area the second largest country in the world, with a population less than half that of the United Kingdom. A country with two official languages, English and French, and many unofficial. A country that shares its vast east-west boundary with an English-speaking, culturally aggressive nation-state boasting almost ten times its population. A country in which the native peoples (Indian and Inuit) now constitute less than 2 per cent of its total inhabitants. A country of close to 4 million square miles in which over three-quarters of the population live in towns and cities. A country which began to come together as a stable political unit in 1867 and whose present boundaries were established as recently as 1949. A country whose written history spans no more than 500 years (John Cabot entered the Gulf of St Lawrence in 1497), and whose English literary tradition can be traced back no further than the middle of the eighteenth century.

So extensive and rugged a country could be settled only gradually. At first, white communities consisted of isolated trading-posts and military garrisons, with scattered settlements (French and English) in the eastern parts of the land. In the seventeenth century, most of the activity was French, with the English-speaking colonies more prominent in the areas to the south. A little later, increasing imperial ambitions led to an inevitable clash between the two main powers interested in the control of North America. The defeat of the French by the English, ensured by Wolfe's victory over Montcalm on the Plains of Abraham in 1759, resulted in a brief period, effectively little more than a decade, when most of settled North America was British. However, the American Revolution soon followed, and it left Canada in a curiously anomalous position. At that time it consisted of a series of (more or less) loyal communities which preferred to align themselves with Britain than with the infant United States but which, from the beginning, sought to establish a viable society that modified British social and political customs without hurrying into the extreme experiment of immediate independence.

The establishment of the United States as a separate country led to a notable influx of 'Loyalists' into the Canadian maritime colonies, and it was this nucleus of immigrants and settlers, unwilling to sever connexions with

the mother-country, that laid the foundations – at once social, political, and psychological – for what eventually cohered as the Canadian nation. But the province of Quebec, where Loyalists had also settled, was at the same time in a state of crucial transition. As early as 1791 the Canada Act had divided the area into Upper and Lower Canada (the former primarily English-speaking), and the War of 1812, in which inhabitants of both Canadas successfully resisted expansionist tendencies from south of the border, did much to foster a sense of corporate distinctiveness. In particular, the uneasy period of forced readjustment in Europe after the close of the Napoleonic Wars saw increased British immigration to Canada on a massive scale. The society of Ontario (at first Upper Canada, then Canada West) began to take shape during this period. Further west, however, the land was still for the most part wild, only sporadically and sparsely settled, and to a considerable extent not even mapped, though the efforts of the Hudson's Bay and North West Companies had given the area considerable commercial importance.

But Canada was not and could not be a mere copy of Britain reproduced on the other side of the Atlantic. Changes of all kinds were inevitable. The unsuccessful but disturbing rebellions in Upper and Lower Canada in 1837 gave evidence of substantial political unrest, and resulted in Lord Durham's famous Report (1839), which eased the way towards responsible government. This and the increased awareness of the possibilities of western expansion clearly demonstrated the need for unification of British North America, and a series of conferences duly led in 1867 to 'Confederation', the creation of the Dominion of Canada originally made up of New Brunswick, Nova Scotia, Ontario, and Quebec. These provinces were soon joined in 1870 by Manitoba (created after the controversial handing over of power from the Hudson's Bay Company and the defeat of the first Riel rebellion), in 1871 by British Columbia (whose entry depended on the promised building of a transcontinental railway), and in 1873 by Prince Edward Island. The western prairies, previously administered as part of the Northwest Territories, were reorganized into the provinces of Alberta and Saskatchewan in 1905. Finally, as I have already noted, Newfoundland joined Confederation to complete the nation's current boundaries in 1949. With political responsibilities divided between the central federal government and the ten provincial governments, Canada remains to this day a curious amalgam in which a combination of flexibility and reluctant compromise has over the years proved to be a source of frustrating weakness but also of paradoxical and even endearing strength.

This ambiguous compromise is also conspicuous in the history of Canadian literature. Until comparatively recently, the vast majority of the population was either British or French in ethnic origin, though other peoples now constitute a quarter of the total. Naturally, this majority looked back to Britain and France for its intellectual and literary sustenance. And equally naturally, in the case of English-speaking Canada, the influence of the energetic and populous United States (in recent years most conspicuous through radio, film, and television, but from early times to the present no less significantly through newspapers and books) was considerable. The

Americans, of course, had a far greater stimulus to produce an alternative and distinctive literature in English. Since they had become an independent nation, it was a logical step to define the difference between Britain and the United States in literary as well as other terms. But because Canada had not severed political ties, there was less reason to break literary connexions; the incentive to produce an independent national literature that might stand as both a foundation and a symbol was thus comparatively weak. Besides, the majority of the early immigrants were practically minded settlers with little time or inclination for artistic or intellectual pursuits; the Moodies and the Traills were very much exceptions to the general rule. The conservative character of the Canadian experiment is also manifest here. Pioneering was considered praiseworthy in matters of everyday living, but not in the arts; it was in the virgin forests, not in literature, that trails were to be blazed.

There were other even more practical barriers. Not only was a leisured class barely existent, but the scattered communities spread across immense distances dissipated whatever impetus to literary and cultural pursuits might have developed. The economics of printing and distributing local books in such a situation were virtually prohibitive; books were only needed in small numbers, cartage rates were high, even bookshops were few and far between. British and American publishers, on the other hand, were able to produce their own popular items in such quantities that the price could be kept low, and whatever Canadian market existed could be adequately served. Copyright arrangements (or the lack of them) also worked against the interests of potential Canadian writers. These were daunting obstacles, and some of them still operate. Only those Canadians who reach the international best-seller lists can be distributed in Canada on equal financial terms with successful foreign authors. This is a plight shared by many countries with small populations, but it is exacerbated in Canada's case by the fact that her rivals within the same language have produced some of the finest literature in the modern world.

In such circumstances, it may seem almost quixotic to speak of a Canadian literary tradition; indeed, a number of critics and commentators have offered cogent reasons – some mutually contradictory – why the concept is untenable. The psychological effects of a colonial past, a narrow and emotionally crippling puritanism, excessive openness to foreign influences (or, sometimes, an obstinate and parochial rejection of them), the general dullness of Canada and the Canadian people, a 'lack of ghosts' (Earle Birney's phrase in 'Can. Lit.'), the lack of an authentic history: all these have been isolated, dissected, brooded upon. And ironically a tradition of criticism assuming (sometimes with regret, sometimes almost with satisfaction) the absence of tradition has grown up and established itself. This critical assumption is, I am convinced, a myth – and an explanation becomes evident in any firm scrutiny of the last item on my list, the supposed lack of an authentic history. In strictly historical terms, this has always been suspect: it referred, in fact, to the recent appearance of the white man upon the Canadian scene and his reliance on *written* history. In literary terms, it is a view that could be argued cogently (though not, in the last analysis,

convincingly) up to half a century ago but has long since become outdated.

The remarkable literary activity in Canada since the Second World War has, of course, been recognized and celebrated by literary criticism (which has itself multiplied in conspicuous, even alarming fashion), but the critical presuppositions derived from an earlier period have remained curiously entrenched. Partly as a cause, partly as an effect of this situation, the critical emphasis in recent decades has been upon thematic studies stressing the artistic treatment of what are considered notably Canadian preoccupations, or on detailed discussion of individual writers. With the only partial exception of the *Literary History of Canada* (1965, enlarged 1976), which is better described as a classification and intellectual census and which has, one suspects, been more often consulted as a reference book than read through as a history, Canadian literature has seldom been considered in terms of any consistent historical continuity. Nor are there many generic studies to demonstrate the debt, in poetry or fiction or whatever, of one literary generation to another. The existence of a Canadian tradition has sometimes been asserted, sometimes questioned, but rarely traced with any care.

This critical hiatus has occurred, I believe, because individual investigators have experienced a clash of loyalties and priorities. Alongside the natural desire to foster and encourage a growing literature went a corresponding fear that this new creative burgeoning might be stifled by the burden of a traditional past, especially if the traditions in question came from outside the country. Aware of, and embarrassed by, the general conservatism of nineteenth-century Canadian literature, its technical and formal timidity, its derivativeness from primarily British models (though not, as we shall see, without gradually evolving independent features), they found the whole concept of tradition questionable. Besides, the nation was struggling to assert its own independent identity – the word is a Canadian favourite – at a time when increasing political independence from Britain was offset by increasing economic dependence on the United States. In such circumstances, it was thought proper to stress the originality of Canada's literary productions. Emphasis fell on the contemporary achievement; its ancestry, its lines of development, its relations to the larger context of literature in English, went for the most part unexamined.

I would argue, however, that the Canadian literary tradition is now sufficiently established that it can be discussed in relation to the literatures of Britain and the United States without embarrassment and without any nagging sense of cultural inferiority. Thus the British tradition can now be recognized not as an imperialistic burden to be discarded but as an example – not one to be meekly imitated, of course, but to be cherished and emulated. However independent Canada may now have become, the British connexion remains an essential element in our past with palpable effects upon our present. Similarly, while there are currently reasons to view it with some defensive unease, the American literary achievement is better seen not negatively as a threatening force but as a parallel yet different and stimulating offshoot. Indeed, this metaphor of branches growing out from an original tree (or of children gradually becoming independent of a parent)