

Northrop Frye

The
Modern
Century



The Modern Century

The Whidden Lectures

- 1 1956
C. W. DE KIEWIET
The Anatomy of South African Misery (1956)
- 2 1957
VIJAYA LAKSHMI PANDIT
The Evolution of India (1958)
- 3 1958
RONALD SYME
*Colonial Élites:
Rome, Spain and the Americas* (1958)
- 4 1959
CHARLES DE KONINCK
The Hollow Universe (1960)
- 5 1960
SIR GEORGE CLARK
Three Aspects of Stuart England (1960)
- 6 1961
W. F. ALBRIGHT
New Horizons in Biblical Research (1966)
- 7 1962
J. ROBERT OPPENHEIMER
*The Flying Trapeze:
Three Crises for Physicists* (1964)
- 8 1963
IAN T. RAMSEY
Models and Mystery (1964)
- 9 1964
DAVID DAICHES
*The Paradox of Scottish Culture:
The Eighteenth Century* (1964)
- 10 1965
W. ARTHUR LEWIS
Politics in West Africa
(London, Allen & Unwin; Toronto
and New York, Oxford University Press, 1965)
- 11 1966
SIR ANTHONY BLUNT
Picasso's Guernica (forthcoming)

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The Whidden Lectures 1967

Northrop Frye

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Foreword

THE WHIDDEN LECTURES were established in 1954 by E. C. Fox, B.A., LL.D., of Toronto, the senior member of the Board of Governors, to honour the memory of a former Chancellor of McMaster University.

The Reverend Dr Howard P. Whidden, D.D., LL.D., D.C.L., F.R.S.C., was a man of striking appearance, unusual dignity, deep Christian conviction, and ready tolerance. Born in 1871 in Antigonish, Nova Scotia, where his family had settled in 1761 after three-quarters of a century's residence in New England, he attended

FOREWORD

universities in both Canada (Acadia and McMaster) and the United States (Chicago), and also served as a minister of Baptist churches in both countries (in Ontario, Manitoba, and Ohio). From 1913 to 1923 he was President of Brandon College, Manitoba, then an affiliate of McMaster University, and for part of that period (1917-21) he represented Brandon as a member of Parliament in the Canadian House of Commons at Ottawa. He was appointed administrative head (Chancellor) of McMaster University in 1923 and in 1930 became, in a manner of speaking, its second founder when he directed its transfer from Toronto, where it had been established since 1887, to Hamilton. His broad educational outlook and effective leadership resulted in the University's burgeoning greatly in its new location, and Dr Whidden was able to retire in 1941 with the comforting conviction that he had built both wisely and well. He died in Toronto in 1952.

The selection of a Canadian scholar to be the Whidden Lecturer in 1967, the year of Canada's centennial, was inevitable. And that the choice should fall on H. Northrop Frye, the first person ever to be named by the University of Toronto as its University Professor, was almost equally inevitable. His reputation as one of the most significant of contemporary literary critics is world-wide and securely established. It is a cause for pride to academic circles in his native country that he should be the subject of a special volume, issued by the Columbia University Press just over a year ago. A graduate of Toronto and Merton College, Oxford, he made

his mark some twenty years ago with a penetrating study of William Blake, *Fearful Symmetry*; and since that time a steady stream of books and articles from his pen has made his name one of the most familiar and most respected wherever the study of English letters is seriously pursued. He has lectured in scores of universities throughout the English-speaking world and has received honorary doctorates from many of them.

For the 1967 Whidden Lectures he chose as his theme *The Modern Century*, the century in which, as the saying goes, Canada came of age. He did not restrict his vision, however, to the literary and creative activities that have occurred in this country over the past one hundred years. Rather, he attempted to relate Canadian developments to those of the world as a whole; and it was a stimulating and exciting exercise to accompany him as his purview ranged over other countries, other continents, and other cultures. That the perspective of the many hundreds who had the privilege of hearing him was deepened and broadened, there is not the slightest doubt.

McMaster University is now very pleased to publish the lectures in book form so that an even wider audience may share in the rewarding experience of learning the views of a distinguished Canadian on man's spiritual and intellectual adventures since 1867.

February 1967

E. T. SALMON
Principal of University College
McMaster University

Author's Note

THE OPERATION of giving the Whidden Lectures for 1967 was made pleasant and memorable by the hospitality of McMaster University and my many friends there. To them, as well as to the extraordinarily attentive and responsive audience, I feel deeply grateful.

I am indebted to the Canada Council for a grant which enabled me to work on this and other projects, and to Mrs Jessie Jackson for her preparation of the manuscript.

The lectures were delivered in the centenary year of

AUTHOR'S NOTE

Canada's Confederation, and were originally intended to be Canadian in subject-matter. I felt, however, that I had really said all I had to say about Canadian culture for some time, with the help of about forty colleagues, in the 'Conclusion' to the recently published *Literary History of Canada: Canadian Literature in English* (1965). Hence the shift of theme to a wider context. I have tried to make my Canadian references as explicit as possible, for the benefit of non-Canadian readers, but have not invariably succeeded. For example, the titles of the three lectures are titles of poems by well-known Canadian poets: respectively, Archibald Lampman, Irving Layton, and Émile Nelligan.

N. F.

*Victoria College in the
University of Toronto
January 1967*

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City of the end of things

THE WHIDDEN LECTURES

have been a distinguished series, and anyone attempting to continue them must feel a sense of responsibility. For me, the responsibility is specific: I have been asked to keep in mind the fact that I shall be speaking to a Canadian audience in the Centennial year of Confederation. I have kept it in mind, and the first thing that it produced there was what I hope is a sense of proportion. The centenary of Confederation is a private celebration, a family party, in what is still a relatively small country in a very big world. One most reassuring quality in

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Canadians, and the one which, I find, chiefly makes them liked and respected abroad, when they are, is a certain unpretentiousness, a cheerful willingness to concede the immense importance of the non-Canadian part of the human race. It is appropriate to a Canadian audience, then, to put our centenary into some kind of perspective. For the majority of people in North America, the most important thing that happened in 1867 was the purchase of Alaska from Russia by the United States. For the majority of people in the orbit of British traditions, the most important thing that happened in 1867 was the passing of the Second Reform Bill, the measure that Disraeli called 'a leap in the dark', but which was really the first major effort to make the Mother of Parliaments represent the people instead of an oligarchy. For a great number, very probably the majority, of people in the world today, the most important thing that happened in 1867, anywhere, was the publication of the first volume of *Das Kapital* by Karl Marx, the only part of the book actually published by Marx himself. It was this event, of course, that helped among other things to make the purchase of Alaska so significant: another example of the principle that life imitates literature, in the broad sense, and not the other way round. There is a still bigger majority to be considered, the majority of the dead. In the year 1867 Thomas Hardy wrote a poem called '1967', in which he remarks that the best thing he can say about that year is the fact that he is not going to live to see it.

My own primary interests are in literary and educa-

tional culture. What I should like to discuss with you here is not Canadian culture in itself, but the context of that culture in the world of the last century. One reason for my wanting to talk about the world that Canada is in rather than about Canada is that I should like to bypass some common assumptions about Canadian culture which we are bound to hear repeated a good deal in the course of this year. There is, for instance, the assumption that Canada has, in its progress from colony to nation, grown and matured like an individual: that to be colonial means to be immature, and to be national means to be grown up. A colony or a province, we are told, produced a naïve, imitative, and prudish culture; now we have become a nation, we should start producing sophisticated, original, and spontaneous culture. (I dislike using 'sophisticated' in an approving sense, but it does seem to be an accepted term for a kind of knowledgeability that responds to culture with the minimum of anxieties.) If we fail to produce a fully mature culture, the argument usually runs, it must be because we are still colonial or provincial in our attitude, and the best thing our critics and creators can do is to keep reminding us of this. If a Canadian painter or poet gets some recognition, he is soon giving interviews asserting that Canadian society is hypocritical, culturally constipated, and sexually inhibited. This might be thought a mere cliché, indicating that originality is a highly specialized gift, but it seems to have advanced in Canada to the place of an obligatory ritual. Some time ago, when a Canadian play opened in Paris,

a reviewer, himself a Canadian, remarked sardonically: 'Comme c'est canadien! Comme c'est pur!' I should add that this comment was incorporated by the Canadian publisher as a part of his blurb.

Analogies between the actual growth of an individual and the supposed growth of a society may be illuminating, but they must always be, like all analogies, open to fresh examination. The analogy is a particularly tricky form of rhetoric when it becomes the basis of an argument rather than merely a figure of speech. Certainly every society produces a type of culture which is roughly characteristic of itself. A provincial society has a provincial culture; a metropolitan society has a metropolitan culture. A provincial society will produce a phenomenon like the tea party described in F. R. Scott's well-known satire, 'The Canadian Authors Meet'. A metropolitan society would turn the tea party into a cocktail party, and the conversation would be louder, faster, more knowing, and cleverer at rationalizing its pretentiousness and egotism. But its poets would not necessarily be of any more lasting value than Mr Scott's Miss Crotchet, though they might be less naïve. It is true that relatively few if any of the world's greatest geniuses have been born in Canada, although a remarkable British painter and writer, Wyndham Lewis, went so far as to get himself born on a ship off Canadian shores, and developed an appropriately sea-sick view of Canada in later life. But we do not know enough about what social conditions produce great or even good