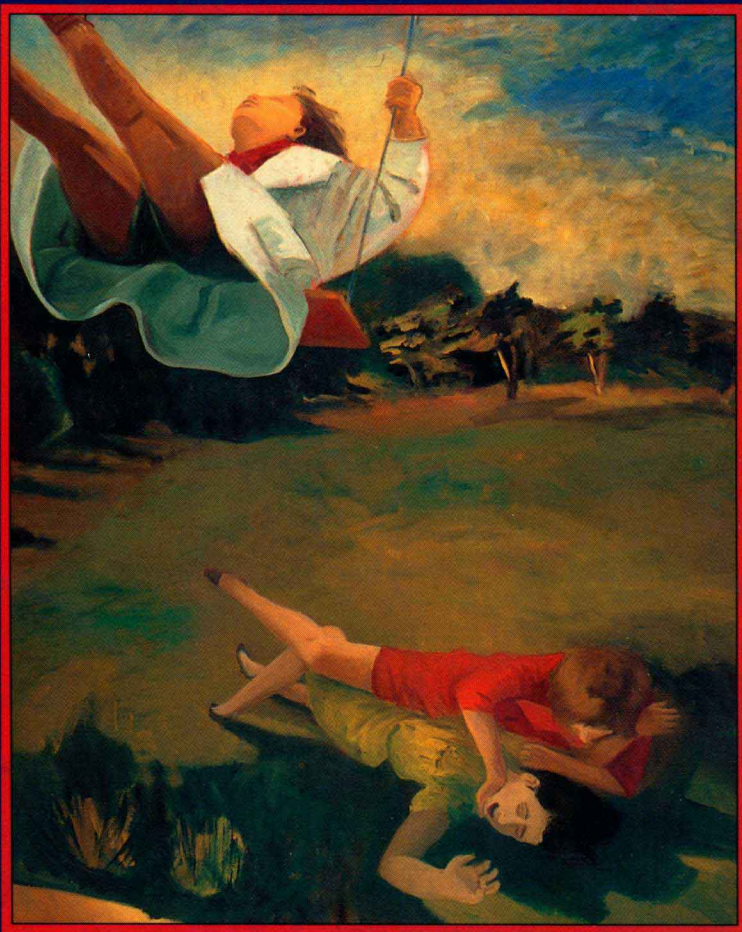
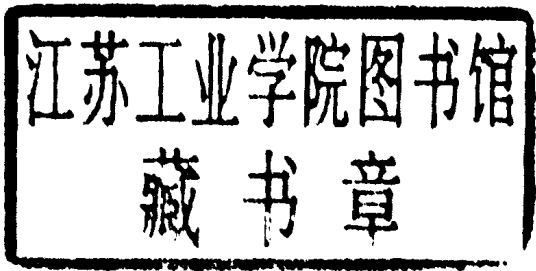


# Essays on Canadian Writing



20TH ANNIVERSARY ISSUE

Essays on Canadian Writing



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*Essays on Canadian Writing* was established in 1974 as a scholarly journal of criticism and review devoted to the study of Canadian literature. We are receptive to all critical approaches and to all theoretical modes of inquiry. Submissions are welcome in English and French.

The ideal *ECW* essay focuses on a problem or an issue of interest to people involved in the reading of Canadian writing, and does so in a style that is engaging and direct. Our aim is to publish original, challenging, and factually accurate research on all periods and genres of Canadian writing. *ECW* encourages the publication of detailed review essays of new books by and about Canadian writers or about theoretical issues connected with the study and appreciation of Canadian literature. The journal also supports the publication of interviews and bibliographies devoted to Canadian literary topics. *ECW* undertakes to verify the accuracy of all information that appears in each issue. Essays of any length will be considered.

In all submissions, the author should be identified only on a cover sheet that includes his or her name, address, telephone number, and fax number (if applicable). A decision regarding any submission can be expected within two months. All submissions must be accompanied by a self-addressed, stamped return envelope, and must conform to the format established in the *MLA Style Manual*.

*Essays on Canadian Writing* is indexed in the *American Humanities Index*, the *Annual Bibliography of English Language and Literature*, the *Arts & Humanities Citation Index*, the *Book Review Index*, the *Canadian Index*, the *Canadian Literature Index*, the *Canadian Periodical Index*, the *Children's Book Review Index*, the *Humanities Index*, and the *MLA Bibliography*, and is included in *Abstracts of English Studies*, *The Year's Work in English Studies*, and *Ulrich's International Periodical Directory*.

*ECW* is available in micrographic and electronic reproduction in *Current Contents* (Philadelphia), from EBSCO Publishing (Peabody, MA), and from Micromedia (Toronto).

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IN CANADIAN LITERATURE

TO ENCOURAGE THE STUDY of Canadian literature, *Essays on Canadian Writing* established the George Wicken Prize for criticism in 1985. It is awarded annually to the student — either graduate or undergraduate — who submits the best critical essay on any aspect of Canadian literature. The award consists of \$200, publication of the essay, and a year's subscription to *ECW*.

The prize is named in honour of George Wicken (1952–84), who devoted himself to the study of Canadian literature and to the education of his students. He was widely respected for his research on nineteenth-century Canadian poetry and greatly admired for his innovative teaching methods at Centennial College. By awarding this prize, *ECW* seeks to further the dual commitment to scholarship and to students so characteristic of George Wicken.

Annual submissions for the prize must be of fewer than 9,000 words and must not have been previously published, accepted elsewhere for publication, or submitted elsewhere for publication. Proof of student standing must accompany the essay; a photocopy of a current ID card is sufficient.

The deadline for entry is 30 June of each year; announcement of the award will be made in the fall. Essays will be returned only if accompanied by a self-addressed, stamped envelope. Please send submissions to:

The George Wicken Prize in Canadian Literature  
*Essays on Canadian Writing*  
1980 Queen Street East  
Toronto, Ontario M4L 1J2

Some recent prize winners include:

1993: to Cynthia Sugars for “On the Rungs of the Double Helix: Theorizing the Canadian Literatures,” published in *Essays on Canadian Writing* 50.

1992: to Kenneth Wilson for “The Nutty Professor: Or, James De Mille in the Fun House,” published in *Essays on Canadian Writing* 48.

# Essays on Canadian Writing

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# Twenty Years of *ECW*: An Interview with Jack David and Robert Lecker

MICHAEL DARLING

MD: Let's begin with you, Jack. You were a graduate student at York when you started *Essays on Canadian Writing*, is that right?

JD: It was 1973. I was in Frank Davey's Canadian Poetry class and Bernice Lever . . .

MD: Later editor of *Waves*?

JD: Then editor of *Waves*, I think. Bernice said that there was money in the English Graduate Students' Association fund and the previous year they'd had four hundred dollars or something and they'd used it to have a big beer party. And from out of nowhere, I said "Let's start a magazine."

MD: About what? Anything?

JD: I don't think at that point the specific nature of the magazine was set. I sent out a flyer to the graduate students, and I said anybody interested in starting a magazine with the English Graduate Students' Association money should meet on the seventh floor of the Ross Building about 4:30 in the afternoon, and at that meeting were Ken McLean and Don MacLulich and Shyamal Bagchee, who would join anything . . .

MD: The editor of *The T.S. Eliot Review*.

JD: That's right. And maybe a couple of other people were there. And the discussion was over whether the magazine should be a general-interest magazine like a university quarterly, a creative magazine like *Fiddlehead* or *Descant*, or a critical magazine like *Canadian Literature*. And I wasn't too interested in A or B. I was much more interested in a critical magazine. I don't know why.

MD: Specifically on Canadian literature, though?

JD: I didn't care about anything else. Anyway, when I suggested the focus, MacLulich and McLean were the only two who expressed serious interest, so we got together and tried to figure out what to do and the issues, I guess, were: get some money, get some articles, put the package together. That must have been how it worked.

MD: And the first issue came out in the winter of '74?

JD: I think early in '75. Through '74 we were trying to get articles,



and if you take a look at that first issue it was virtually only people from around York. But we had sent out a flyer soliciting subscribers and contributions and that went out to all the English departments. MD: And you managed to get bpNichol to contribute his “Autotopography,” or whatever it was he called it.

JD: He helped a bit, but it was mostly me. It came about as a result of Frank’s class. I was really interested in bp, and I decided I had to get the background information, so that’s where that came from. Then there was my essay on bp and Margery Fee’s interview with Eli and Don’s review article on *Survival*. Ken wrote some little review I guess. And you were in there.

MD: Two reviews.

JD: Who else?

MD: Klaus Stich, Leon Slonim, Lazar Sarna.

JD: Now Leon Slonim was a grad student at U of T, and he must have seen the bulletin posted in the English department there. That was our first external submission.

MD: Why didn’t you have an editorial board? Did you ever think about that?

JD: Absolutely. And we thought about it for years until recently, and the reason was I never had any faith in external people. I was a do-it-yourself guy. I didn’t believe that people could offer me useful advice on editorial matters. I knew what was good and I didn’t need anybody else to tell me. At the time the first issue came out, Clara Thomas had her annual party for her fiction class at the . . . what was that place called, the old village beside York?

MD: Black Creek Pioneer Village.

JD: Yeah. She used to hold a luncheon there for her students and she asked me if I was going to get an editorial board or what, and I said no, I wasn’t interested. She also asked if I was going to send my bp Nichol essay off to *Canadian Literature* so that it would really be published, and I said no, I thought it really *was* published even if we didn’t have the circulation of *Canadian Literature*. So at that point she obviously thought that it was a student magazine, it would travel no further and end with one issue, because most student magazines do.

MD: What about Frank Davey? Did you ever ask him for advice?

JD: No. I didn’t take any advice from anybody.

MD: Where did you get the title?

JD: The title was trouble. The subtitle was *Essays on Canadian Writing*. That part was OK, and the “Writing” for me, specifically,

was because I didn't want to limit it to "Literature," to that concept that Ray Smith was talking about last night, that snobbish Jane Austen kind of literature. I was always interested in the full range of writing, and when MacLulich did that piece on Farley Mowat I thought that was more the kind of stuff that we ought to be doing, to venture into other aspects of writing. And "Writing" in the subtitle designated that, whereas "Literature" didn't. "Essays" was clear, but the "on" was a problem because everybody thought it was "in" . . .

MD: And still do.

JD: And still do. But I always thought the "on" was better because it was the equivalent of "about," and "in" could have meant creative work, even, or creative essays. It didn't make as much sense to me. But the title was what we worked on, and the best title we came up with was "Routes/Roots." We thought that "Routes" would show the various roads that could be taken and "Roots" would take us back to the beginnings of Canadian literature, and that was nice. But ultimately nobody liked going "Routes/Roots" all the time. So then we were going to just call it "Roots," but we didn't know which spelling to choose, and ultimately I decided that the clearest way was to say in the title what the magazine was about.

MD: After the magazine got started, did you ever think of changing the title?

JD: No. It always seemed to work.

MD: Robert, you appeared in issue number 2. Did you meet Jack at York?

RL: I came to York in '72 and finished my BA there, but Jack and I didn't know each other then.

MD: When did you meet Jack?

RL: Well, it would have been in '74. I had this Newlove bibliography that I had done for Eli Mandel's class because Eli was encouraging students to do bibliographies for his course. So I had this bibliography that I had to schlep around and I didn't know what to do with it and here was this open door. And it came out in the second issue — spring '75.

MD: So how did you become an editor?

RL: Well, that's kind of a joke. Jack gave me this blue pen and said, "These are galley proofs of your Newlove bibliography. Correct them." So I just drew pictures all over them and they were corrected and off they went to the printer. It was easy.

MD: In the fall 1975 issue, number 3, you were listed as associate

editor along with MacLulich and McLean while Jack was the nominal editor. But who was responsible for what?

JD: I was the money guy. I was the manager guy and the production guy so I arranged with the typesetter, I arranged with the printer, I did all that kind of stuff. Everybody handled subscriptions. We had a little box with filing cards.

RL: We were the lackeys.

JD: And the best thing we always thought was the editorial debates. What should go in, what shouldn't go in.

MD: How much didn't go in? What sort of volume of submissions did you actually get? You must have put in pretty close to everything you got.

RL: We weren't getting that many submissions in the beginning but we did reject stuff, and the discussions we had about the material were definitely focusing our sense of where the discipline was going, where the field was going. We didn't have a great sense of the field, I didn't anyhow, but all of a sudden those kinds of questions started coming up: What's good? What's not good? How do you decide what to publish? What do we stand for?

MD: And did you have any sort of idea what you stood for?

JD: I think the magazine was established in the first issue: interest in contemporary writing, interest in poetry, interest in establishing the database of Canadian literature, and interest in taking on current issues, argumentatively, in the way that MacLulich took on *Survival*, and I think that has been continued all the way through.

RL: Maybe I shouldn't be changing the topic here but the situation was that we were sitting in this cramped little office in the Ross Building on the seventh floor and we had three desks, a little red subscription book, a cash box, and a bank account downstairs, and we were still very much students. I mean, it was a small-time thing. We were having fun debating this stuff. And there was a sense that if we made it to the next issue that was good. Whereas now we think three years down the line, is our SSHRC funding going to be renewed? Since we didn't have that kind of funding back then, the big question was, would the Graduate Students' Association give us another forty-two dollars? We had to be sure to show up at those meetings so that we could lobby for that.

MD: It may have been small to start with, but the magazine grew at an astounding rate compared to most little magazines or most academic magazines, which tend to stay the same size. ECW went from 64 pages to 80 in number 3, 96 in number 4, 112 in number 5,

160 in number 6, 224 in the double issue numbers 7-8, and then 328 in number 9.

RL: That's the point at which we began to lose money in a serious way and we've never recovered.

MD: There weren't any comparable magazines in Canada even remotely that size. Why was that?

RL: Because we had all kinds of material and we were interested in what we were doing and I just don't think we were thinking about the consequences. But I remember very well unloading that big issue with the books on the front cover. Was that number 9? The thick thick one.

MD: That was 9.

RL: I remember unloading that from Jack's yellow Ford.

JD: Red.

RL: Red. And he had brought it over in the trunk of his car, I guess, from Porcupine's Quill.

JD: It would have been.

RL: And the car was hardly raised off the ground. The car was dragging on the ground with this issue. That was the end of that car for Jack.

MD: External funding must have made a big difference. When did that start?

JD: I think it was with number 5. It was Don MacLulich who suggested that we apply to the Canada Council, and I said there's no way they're going to give us money. They're going to see us as a grad-student magazine and that's going to be that. And he convinced me to apply. I think it was probably the first official grant that I'd ever applied for. And I was astonished when we got it.

MD: Do you remember how much you got?

JD: Yeah, the problem was when I took a look at the list of what all the other journals got, I found that we were the lowest funded because that's what we'd asked for. We asked for some modest amount like \$2,700.

MD: It didn't matter that *ECW* was not a refereed journal?

RL: It wasn't that much of an issue back then.

MD: So it wasn't for many years afterwards that it became an issue?

JD: The journal was externally assessed. We used to get two or three reader's reports from the Canada Council on the quality of the magazine and they said things like "This is very good stuff. This is very interesting, it's energetic, it's useful, it's different from what other people are doing."

MD: As an example of being different, there's Robert's review of Martin Vaughn-James in number 4, which was a dialogue of sorts, with his responses to your ideas printed right in the review, and his striking illustration which you used for the cover — without his permission, I gather.

RL: We did get permission for it. But we forgot to credit him and he went crazy.

JD: We do that all the time. We still make mistakes like that.

RL: On books, yes, but I can't remember the last time we forgot to credit somebody for the cover of the magazine.

MD: And then in the next issue you had a cover by Bill Bissett and an essay by D.M.R. Bentley on Lampman which is a strange mixture of the unconventional and the traditional. And in number 6, you had a pair of reviews with Jack's titled "Everything You Always Wanted to Know" followed by Robert's "But Were Afraid to Ask."

RL: But this is the first time you've revealed our identities.

MD: No, no. They're right there.

RL: I thought we used pseudonyms.

MD: No, that was later.

RL: I remember now. Do you know why we didn't use pseudonyms? You'll like this story. In those days we used to have to write away for review copies and we had noticed this huge thing called *Contemporary Literary Criticism* in about twenty or thirty volumes. So I wrote a letter to them saying that we would like to review this. And about two months later a shipping company came to the door of 5765 Ross with about ten huge boxes. They had sent the entire series to be reviewed. So Jack and I, thinking always in terms of the financial well-being of the company — the magazine at that time — decided that the best review that we could probably give this would be to offer it to the public in the form of sale to a used-book store. So we carted most of the stuff down to a used-book store in Toronto, and sold it for a good price, but of course we felt a moral obligation to review these books before they were sold. So that's the origin of that review and I think we made a handsome profit on it of about two hundred bucks.

MD: Wasn't there also a review of a fictitious book?

JD: There was an announcement in *Quill and Quire* of a forthcoming book by Metro Paserik — *Tish and Yankee Poetry* or something like that. I was pretty interested in *Tish* so I tried to track down the book. And I couldn't track it down and I figured it was probably a hoax. Maybe somebody told me that it was George Bowering who

put it in. I figured one good hoax deserved another, so I reviewed a book which didn't exist and used my mother's maiden name.

MD: What was that?

JD: Demels. Madge Demels. So my mother got into print for the first time. Then, about two years ago, Roy Miki called me up and said, do you know anything about this review of this book and I said, yes I do. He said, do you know who wrote it? I said I can't reveal who the author was. He said, I've been trying to track it down for the Bowering bibliography and I can't locate it. It's one of the few items I can't nail down. And I said, you're not going to either. Finally the book was published, so I can reveal it now.

MD: Is that the only fake review that ever went into *ECW*?

JD: I don't think I can reveal that. There were a few others.

MD: Coming back to the contrast between bissett and Bentley in the same issue, what does that say about editorial policy? That we'll take anything as long as there's a big name involved?

JD: No, I think what it says is we'll take anything as long as it's quality. Quality was defined by someone writing about something for the first time. Like Len Early writing about bissett, or me writing about Nichol, or Robert writing about Newlove. There just had not been any attention given to these people.

RL: I still think that Len Early's is the definitive essay on bissett.

MD: How did the Hugh Hood special issue come about? Was that the proceedings of a conference organized by Tim Struthers?

JD: No, that was our conference.

MD: But why Hugh Hood?

JD: David Latham did a review for us of one of Hood's books, and then Hugh wrote us a letter about the review. Do you remember that?

RL: That's right.

JD: And it was one of those raving Hugh letters.

RL: It was very long.

JD: Yeah, it went God, Jesus, Hugh. . . . I'm the greatest writer since Tolstoy or whoever. So we looked at this letter with astonishment. I mean this guy, we didn't know who he was. I had read *White Figure*, *White Ground* and *A Game of Touch*, but I didn't know there was this personality behind it. The guy sounded loony. So we checked out some of his work and we said, "Gee, no one's written very much about this guy. This would be an interesting thing to do." Then the conference came together, and when we were looking around for someone to edit the special issue, Struthers seemed like the logical one to do it.

MD: Wasn't that special issue reprinted as a book, with a different cover and a different title, so that you could sell both to unsuspecting libraries?

RL: That was the breakthrough concept.

JD: The reason was that the magazine was going to sit in the serial section and the book was going to sit in the ps8500s. I think we printed five hundred copies of the book and ultimately sold them all.

RL: Yeah, it did OK.

JD: And we actually did a reprint by taking off the covers of the magazine and putting the covers of the book on.

RL: And reprinting the table of contents.

MD: How much control did you give up to Struthers in terms of editing? He was the first guest editor, right?

RL: The mistake was that we gave him almost total control. It was a huge mistake.

MD: Why?

RL: Tim was very methodical and he was very concerned with getting everything just right, which was good, but what we weren't prepared for were the enormous delays. We were experiencing pressure to get that book out from Hugh, and we just couldn't seem to get the final manuscript out of Struthers, which became very frustrating.

JD: There was pressure probably in a number of ways: pressure to get an issue out, pressure from the granting bodies, pressure from this and pressure from that, and Struthers would take the article and he would rewrite it and it would come back in galleys and he would rewrite and redo the editing, and it would go back again.

RL: So it was becoming expensive too.

JD: Very expensive.

MD: And that meant that you would not be publishing the expected number of issues per calendar year?

JD: The correlation between the date on the issue and the actual date of publication was slim.

RL: Because at that time we were into the funding cycle so we had to prove that we had published a certain number of issues every year, so even if an issue had come out six months after it was supposed to, we would backdate it.

JD: Otherwise we would lose our grant.

MD: In my copy of number 20, winter 1980-81, I've pencilled in "published May 1981."

RL: Well that depended on whether you consider winter early or late.

JD: We've had great debates about winter. What winter really meant. And in Canada winter kind of meant the entire year.

RL: Once we thought of calling all issues "winter."

MD: When did you decide to go with three issues a year?

JD: We announced it as quarterly at one point and the reason for that was so we could take advantage of the postal rates which gave advantages to quarterly magazines but not to anything less frequent than quarterly. But we never managed a quarterly cycle. We didn't have the facilities to do it, we didn't have the people, we didn't have the production experience, we simply couldn't do that. But we could get three out even though they were published occasionally. So that seemed to be the more natural cycle.

RL: And that's the cycle that's come in.

MD: As far as the business aspect of it goes, I have this very vivid memory of going into the office in the Ross Building when David Latham was associate editor, and David was saying "Look what just came in." He pointed to something in the in tray and it was a credit card for a gasoline company in the name of *Essays on Canadian Writing*. And that's when it hit me that it really wasn't a magazine anymore, it was a business.

JD: The financial aspect of running the magazine quickly became a major concern because for the first three or four issues it was possible to pay off the issue after it was done and before the next one began. But then it began to overlap and we didn't quite pay off the one before the next one began, and as the issues grew larger and continued to be printed at the Porcupine's Quill, our costs were getting higher and higher and we didn't have the subscriber base or the grant base to support that kind of thing.

MD: How many subscribers did you have, do you recall, in the late seventies?

JD: Well, I can tell you what our print run was when we did the Layton issue.

MD: That would have been number 10, spring '78.

JD: We printed about eighteen hundred copies of that issue, figuring that we would have about twelve hundred or fifteen hundred subscribers eventually and three hundred for back issues. And that was the largest run that we ever did. And boxes of those now fill the Pickering landfill site.

RL: There is another reason to account for the increase in costs, and that was that we were becoming increasingly conscious of quality. We wanted to create the journal as an artefact, as a beautiful thing,



and that's where Tim Inkster and The Porcupine's Quill came in. The whole thrust during that period was to try to make the thing look better and better. At one point we sat down and redesigned the journal: we changed the logo with number 6, we tried to get better covers, we used that high-quality zephyr antique laid paper. That kind of stuff cost.

MD: So where did the money come from? From you?

RL: Not me personally.

MD: But you put money in, did you not?

RL: I didn't put any money in. I think Jack took out a loan.

JD: I was putting in my money and I began to borrow money. I think the first money we borrowed was about '78, '79.

MD: Did you ever get it back?

JD: No. Not that money. We've gotten back other money. We had a SSHRCC grant at that time and the SSHRCC grant would be paid out in February, say, and it might have been September when I went to the bank and said, can you lend me the money until we get the SSHRCC grant? And that was the treadmill we got on to.

MD: It seems to me that *ECW*, at least in its first ten years, was not like any other academic magazine in Canada, or any other that I've ever seen. It had things like a fiction quiz and a poetry quiz, and bill bissett reviewing the *Four Horsemen* l.p. in his inimitable style, and that kind of thing is totally different from what you would have seen in *Studies in Canadian Literature*, for instance.

RL: That's because *SCL* was run by people who were already academics. I mean they were academics in the sense that they had teaching positions, they were profs. My recollection is that we wanted to get some kind of excitement going, we wanted people to write in, there was a sense back there that studying CanLit could be a participatory kind of thing. Maybe we misjudged the audience, but when we talked about these quizzes we had this idea of there being people out there who would actually be interested in responding to such a quiz. But of course you, Michael, were the only one who ever did. I guess that was our first real awakening to the nature of the audience for the study of Canadian literature.

JD: I see it in a different way. It was just playful and you could do that in whatever medium you were using. And that sense of play often didn't show up otherwise, but it showed up in the covers for example. They were playful.

MD: When did you feel that the magazine was taken seriously in the academic community? Would it have been when you started getting