LITERARY HISTORY OF CANADA: AN ESSAY IN CO-OPERATION

First of all, I should like to thank the Bibliographical Society most warmly for the honour they have done me in asking me to address their annual meeting. This becomes an especially happy occasion when I see in the audience so many friends from your membership and from that of the Canadian Library Association. The occasion is also gratifying because it reflects the welcome given to the Literary History of Canada since its publication in February of this year. The general editor of the volume, Dr. Carl F. Klinck, can best tell of the labour, scholarship, patience and enthusiasm which it called forth from the collaborators from 1957 until publication. It was, however, my privilege to work with the editors from the beginning of the project and to try to assist them in bringing together a volume on which 29 writers with differing assignments were engaged. I am pleased to be given such an opportunity of reviving my recollections of a pilgrimage which will likely remain unique in the history of Canadian literature: such a pilgrimage over such a territory and span of time will not be required again. Throughout the period of preparation the significance which this volume would have in itself and as a symbol for the study of Canadian life and letters remained a matter of conviction and inspiration, and about this aspect particularly I should like to speak this afternoon.

For the Literary History a positive need existed in the 1960s and to answer this need with any kind of satisfaction over 900 pages of print were required. The point here is, of course, that the Literary History is a sign of the present recognition generally in Canada, and to some extent abroad, that there is now available for study a significant body of published works, with an interesting and revealing range in subject-matter and level of achievement. which have been contributed by residents in or visitors to Canada over a long enough span of time, from the first explorers who peered through the fogs of Newfoundland to the most recent poets who return imaginatively to the ancient myths for their themes. Most important of all, it is now widely recognized that examination of this body of work need not be carried on only to satisfy an antiquarian interest or a chauvinistic desire for one's country to be noticed. It can be studied by the methods and the standards used in connection with literary traditions elsewhere, while at the same time it can be viewed without chagrin as a repository of many things we need to know about what this country is, and how its people and its writers have thought about it since it was discovered.

The Literary History makes a record and preliminary examination of this body of work, which has to include, to be meaningful for a study of cultural development, travel literature, folk tales, writings in history, religion, philosophy and the social sciences, as well as the conventional genres of poetry, the novel, the short story, the essay and autobiography. Such a task could not be sensibly attempted by one person. One might mention, for instance, that the group who surveyed the novels of the period 1880-1920 had somehow to cope with 1,400 volumes of fiction. Hence the
necessity of a co-operative endeavour, whatever the perils in
synthesis it might entail.

It must be stressed also that the examination undertaken
by the Literary History had to await not only the right moment in
time and the right climate of opinion but also the right stage of
documentation. Landmarks in documentation have appeared. We
think at once of Miss Tremaine's Bibliography of Canadian Imprints,
1751-1800, the two bibliographies of Canadia of the Toronto
Public Library and its Canadian Catalogue, the Check List of Miss
Tod and Miss Cordingly, the Macmillan Dictionary of Canadian
Biography and the Encyclopaedia Canadiana, the Peel bibliography
of the Prairies, the quarterly surveys in the Canadian Historical
Review. The list is not exhaustive. But there was, for the many
years before the National Library's Canadiana began its record,
hardly a guide book that took all Canadian literature as its territory.
R. E. Watters, at the instigation of the Humanities Research
Council, undertook a route march through this vast area, much of
it wilderness, by way of library catalogues with the aim simply of
going down on printed paper the names of works that had to be at
least considered in any examination of literature in English. The
very nature of this exploration meant that a light pack of biblio-
graphical apparatus was all that was feasible for Watters and his co-
voyageurs. They would also be the first to admit that items escaped
and errors reft in. But they did return from this inescapable trek
laden with an invaluable collection, and the Watters Check List was
indispensable for the compilers of the Literary History. The
Press was at the stage of page proof for the Check List when the
writing of the History was getting under way, and its editors had
access to this proof. The List guided their authors in their reading,
and it now serves as a documentary companion to the History. The
co-operation will continue. The authors of the History are making
available from their records notes of many corrections, additions
and omissions for the Check List and these will be incorporated
where possible in a further reprint of the first edition and sub-
sequently in a fully revised edition. Indeed such co-operation in
their own volume continues, for a reprint of the History is likely to
be needed soon, and they are active still in verifying dates and names
which there now seems some reason to query. It is the further hope
of all of us associated with the creation of these volumes that members
of this Society and this Association, and many others, will continue
the assistance so warmly given to both the Check List and the History
and will add to this recording of new information.

It is true, of course, that there had been many valuable
analyses of Canadian letters before. General accounts had been
given by such men as R. P. Baker, Watson and Pierce, Archibald
MacMechan, Logan and French, and Lionel Stevenson; critics such as
Cappon, E. K. Brown, W. E. Collin, and Desmond Pacey had analysed
particular kinds of literature; individual reviews and articles in little
magazines and periodicals over many years had contributed valuable
insights and assessments, but the very nature of these publications
meant that their effect would be scattered and in too many instances
ephemeral. Perhaps the nearest approach to the method and mood of
the Literary History has been the annual surveys of "Letters in Canada" in the University of Toronto Quarterly; but these surveys, which have been often acknowledged as invaluable, have, of course, taken up contributions annually and do not provide a survey across the years. All of these contributions have in their various ways, however, provided information and the best of them have encouraged a salutary critical mood. They were of immense use to the authors of the Literary History. Many will find their place in a check list of articles, books and theses on English-Canadian literature prepared by R. E. Watters and Inglis F. Bell which is in production at present. The Canadian Periodical Index is now the indispensable guide for those wishing to join in the further tasks of this co-operative exploration of our past and present, and Canadian Literature (founded when the Literary History was well under way) provides a forum for analysis, discussion, review and bibliography.

The efforts of literary history and criticism just referred to were, then, inevitably sporadic, limited in range, incomplete in coverage. A vast amount of basic data remained unexplored. An objective and balanced general survey of the national achievement and a reference work to act as a reliable guide to that achievement were needed so that the contemporary study of Canadian writing might have an adequate base.

The Literary History was first conceived in 1956 by Dr. Klinck, and by June 1957 he had been joined by the other editors -- Alfred G. Bailey, Claude Bissell, Roy Daniells, Northrop Frye, Desmond Pacey -- who were to guide the volume through to completion. It was originally hoped that Canadian literature in French might be treated properly side by side with literature in English, but it soon became obvious that size alone would make this impractical let alone problems of organization of material. This hope was not forgotten, however, and is after all to be realized. The editorial committee represented, as will readily be seen, the east, the west and the centre of Canada and further regional representation was to be secured by means of the writers chosen for chapters or sections.

The aim of the project (to study Canada historically and critically in terms of its literature) was clearly set out at the beginning, and never altered. The fulfillment of the aim in the co-operative work of creation was complicated and challenging. The many reports, directives and letters issued in the four years when the project was taking shape make a sizable collection even in my own files and I do not dare imagine the bulk of Dr. Klinck's archives. Archives indeed they are and I venture to suggest to collectors in this audience that from these memorabilia of the Literary History an item of Canadiana might be compiled. Authors of chapters and sections also exchanged letters and information as each sought to mark off the territory he or she was to cover and passed on information to those in neighbouring areas. The meetings of the learned societies from 1958 on -- Edmonton, Saskatchewan, Kingston, Montreal, Hamilton, Quebec -- provided annual opportunities for personal discussion and reporting for those attending. It was not
perhaps inappropriate that the final gathering before publication, with the last bit of manuscript completed on the incoming train, should have been at Charlottetown in its Confederation year.

Some of the first and most dogged questions raised by the contributors related to terms, those of the title being especially pertinent. What was the significance of "literary", of "history", of "Canada"? I quote from a round robin of 1958: "The title was chosen carefully to describe, not a chronological survey of literary works which happen to be Canadian, but a comprehensive view of Canada and Canadians as their literary works have expressed them over the years." "Canada" and "Canadian" are not, as any one of us here knows by harsh practical experience, terms that ever stay pegged down, and they kept escaping into fresh questions many times. During one discussion, at an evening meeting in Montreal in 1961, Northrop Frye cut through the ambiguity by remarking that Canada should be considered "as an environment", "the place where something happened". Quickly I jotted this down, and sent it later by letter to Dr. Klinck. The phrase has survived in the introduction.

Other questions came up to the surface. Do we intend to read everything and mention everything? The answer: we attempt the first but may abandon the second in favour of discussion of what is significant. How much factual detail should be given? The answer to this evolved as birth and death dates for authors, publication dates for works, a brief bibliographical essay among the appendices if warranted, but in the main reliance on the Watters' Check List for publishing information and on the Wallace Dictionary now and eventually on the Dictionary of Canadian Biography for biography. A persistent question was "How can LHC be given structural unity? How can it achieve 'character'?" Here the Literary History of the United States of Spiller et al. provided much guidance, as did to a lesser extent the Cambridge History of English Literature and Baugh's Literary History of England, but none of these was or could be a pattern. The editors were reluctant to set a formula and anxious that each contributor should be able to give his best effort in the manner dictated to him by his materials. They refrained from setting up anything as uniform as a sample article. Thus contributors were encouraged to make their presentation in their own individual style of writing and it was thought undesirable to try in the final editing to smooth out the presentation into one anonymous style; individuality of response was to express itself in individuality of treatment and of word. There was an evident risk here of which the editors were conscious. Would the result be wildly uneven?

Dr. Klinck tells in his introduction how the first and overall plan of the contents of the book was allowed to develop slowly and as it would, and how gradually a shape emerged in four main parts. The first of these parts records the discovery in early travel and in report of travel, of the environment of Canada east, west and north; the succeeding three parts describe how literary and cultural traditions were transplanted to this country, Low new
traditions were developed as a result, and how these have matured in the twentieth century. In the fourth period, as might be hoped and expected, a more substantial number of authors and works have appeared, and here the contributors were obliged to distinguish, to analyse at some length, and to give more extensive judgments on books and writers of merit. The introductory essays for parts two, three and four were actually to become the means of compensating for some of the risks of method and by 1960-1961 the directives begin to mention them as the way of providing background and an over-all view for the chapters they precede.

I quote here a typical concluding paragraph from a 1960 directive, one which reveals the great expectations of the project and the encouragement that continued to flow from the editors: "The ideal one may hope for is a group of articles which will be at the same time general and specific; broadly philosophical and learnedly exact; full of names, people, places and ideas but yet brief; scholarly yet warmly human; in some subtle way, Canadian in content and in style. And complete, if possible, in the autumn of 1960." The expectation of 1960 was not realized, for many and good reasons. And some of the chapters themselves did not in the event meet all these qualities, but seemed to lean rather too much upon a catalogue of titles. Nevertheless, in rereading for the purpose of this talk, after a lapse of time so that the book is now much more at a distance, my own conclusion remains, that in a great many of the essays the gamble of freedom was successful. The analysis has been presented with vigour and aptness, often with wit; these essays are general and specific, philosophical and exact, scholarly and human, "Canadian" in the best sense.

As the written chapters began to assemble, we at the centre began to realize, with some excitement, that there was also actually a theme to inform the shape and the style, a theme which could be seen working itself out through the great variety of publications under examination, which did not lose its strength in those books over the centuries of writing, and with which almost all the contributors found themselves dealing implicitly or explicitly. That theme was Canada itself: this strange, huge northern land of forest, river and lake, rock and snow, of distance which divides and unites. It has never ceased to awe and puzzle. It can never be ignored. How does one live with such immensity and power? The explorers first expressed this wondering mixture of fear and admiration, the early settlers had to adapt their European literary imaginations to it, it is still central in one of our most recent novels, Hugh McLennan's The Watch that Ends the Night. Northrop Frye in his Conclusion to LHC quotes the final cadences of that novel as evidence: "In the early October of that year, in the cathedral hush of a Quebec Indian summer with the lake drawing into its mirror the fire of the maples, it came to me that to be able to love the mystery surrounding us is the final and only sanction of human existence." And I quote from Frye himself on the same theme in modern Canadian poetry: "From the deer and fish in Isabella Crawford's 'The Canoe' to the frogs and toads in Layton, from the white narcissus of Knister to the night-blooming cereus of Reaney, everything that is central in Canadian writing seems to be marked by the imminence of the
natural world. The sense of this mincemeat organizes the mythology of Jay Macpherson; it is the sign in which Canadian soldiers conquer Italy in Douglas LePain's The Net and the Sword; it may be in the foreground, as in Alden Nowlan, or in the background, as in Birney; but it is always there. One is tempted to read many more passages from Frye himself in his Conclusion, written when all the chapters were received and forming the final synthesis of the work. It has been highly commended by the reviewers and all of you, I know, have read, or will read, it with an enormous sense of enlightenment in just under 30 pages it provides an exhilarating guide to what present and future writers and readers in Canada can claim as their literary inheritance.

In his introduction Dr. Klinck describes the Literary History as "a positive attempt to give a history of Canada in terms of writings which deserve more or less attention because of significant thought, form, and use of language." All those who made this particular attempt were conscious that it was an attempt, and that from it as a base a lengthy line of investigation of subject-matters, of genres, of individual writers must stretch out. No one, fortunately, will have to repeat the look at 1,400 novels of the turn of the century, but that look had to be taken in order to make future concentration on some of them safe. And in other essays as well, questions have been asked, areas of ignorance have been designated, an interest in knowing more has been encouraged.

A publisher's office is a good vantage point from which to view current movements of thought and imagination, and the editorial department of a university press has a special connection with those who observe and analyse such trends present and past. From this vantage point it is obvious that careful, serious research in the Canadian literary past and responsible, objective reporting of that research is increasingly being felt as a pressing need. Moreover, the interest of a general public in our own intellectual and social history has also spread in recent years, and this interest should provide the readers without whom any research becomes a preoccupation of a select academic few. Some of the research anticipated here will no doubt remain academic and be enshrined as more MA and PhD theses, to appear publicly only in footnotes, in bibliographies and on library shelves. This is not necessarily a sign of ineffectuality, the result of the desperate kind of endeavour of a Solly Bridgetower at which we laugh in Robertson Davies' Leaven of Malice. A thesis may appropriately remain a thesis and still incorporate information of value if limited in range. But we all can hope -- and publishers for one are ever hopeful, of necessity -- that we shall see more and more research embodied in book-length works appropriate for publication, research faithfully done and reported with enthusiasm, to which readers can confidently turn for greater knowledge of our literary inheritance. The opportunities are large on every hand. To quote Dr. Klinck once more: "If we do not launch out from a studied knowledge of ourselves and of our own ways, no one else will." Among others, the chapters of the Literary History by Kilbourn, Mayo and MacLure provide a provocative indication of what needs to be done in their respective
fields and the problems in doing it. I might add that at the meeting in Vancouver in June 1965 of the Canadian Historical Association, Alan Wilson held his audience for nearly an hour while he described topic after topic and area after area that need attention.

To take the fullest advantage of the opportunities will require a co-operative effort in which all who are concerned with the written word must share. Those who are to examine and comment on the older and more recent past can only do so properly on the basis of full and accurate information. They need the expanded services of those who are now adding greatly to the collections in libraries of printed books, manuscripts and microfilm which will adequately document the development of periods and writers. One thinks in passing here of the increasing interest of libraries in the original manuscripts of Canadian writers, and of the much needed bibliographies of individual writers such as that of Mazo de la Roche on which your president has been engaged.

Those who are to do the inquiring will, it goes without saying, need the continuing tangible encouragement of the grants-in-aid of the Canada Council through the two research councils and other similar assistance given by governmental bodies and universities. Without the provisions for the Literary History made by the Humanities Research Council the book would not have been possible.

If there is to be effective communication, there must also be publication, and an examination of lists of recent years will show how Canadian publishers have responded to the growth of this interest in literary and intellectual history. They have tried to make available original texts in individual titles or in such paperback series as the "New Canadian Library" or the "Carleton Library", the Macmillan "Pioneer Books" or the Clarke Irwin Paperbacks or the University of Toronto Press's Paperbacks -- to mention only some. The history of Canada, as such, has already developed a steady stream of publication -- it was inevitable that this should be so for no one could deny that we have had a long succession of political and economic events in this country, though there might be scepticism about the existence of a literature -- and so we have seen, to speak only of more recent years, an important group of one-volume histories which provided a general account, and now a number of series which will in individual volumes examine particular periods in greater depth; and there has been a growing body of biography which provides insight into the role of individuals. It is to be expected that a similar development will take place for other types of literature: from other general volumes and series ("Our Living Tradition" being an example) on through books concerned with specific subjects or writers (a start at this will be the Twayne series on Canadian authors). Perhaps one of the most obvious signs of the times is the immense effort in biography in the Dictionary of Canadian Biography, whose first volume will appear this autumn. It would not have been possible until the present expansion of attention to Canada's past and with it the appearance of the necessary number of able scholars.
Tout ce que j'ai dit est en fait de la littérature anglaise. Toutefois, plusieurs de ces commentaires pourraient être faits également de la littérature française. En plus, en ce qui concerne celle-ci, il y a un intérêt croissant à représenter et à évaluer, et en préparation dans le moment, est une Histoire de la littérature canadienne-française, sous la direction d'un comité formé de membres de l'Université Laval, de l'Université de Montréal et de l'Université d'Ottawa. Il va sans dire qu'il ne peut être dit que l'on connaisse la littérature du Canada à moins que l'on soit conscient de ce qui a été écrit dans les deux langues, et il est à espérer que le projet d'éditer Literary History en français et l'Histoire en anglais prêtera une aide efficace dans ce domaine.

No finally useful purpose will be served by all this activity unless it is carried on under the guidance of a proper critical temper and attitude. More writing which issues from such an approach has been, and still is, badly needed in the periodical press for the description and assessment of the works of contemporaries. To describe it I use the words of George Woodcock, quoted in the Literary History: "criticism which, in the full sense, seeks to evaluate Canadian writing in a creative manner and to relate it, not only to creative experience, but also to a universal criterion." The History, and its antecedents, have tried to proceed on this premise. Undoubtedly the much wider admission of Canadian literature into the pattern of university research will be of assistance in the future. Of recent years Canadian scholars are discussing more and more in articles or books the literatures of other countries and their work is going abroad for examination in the international world of scholarship. The future scholars of our own literary history will be sharing this non-parochial atmosphere and should be able to turn a steady yet sympathetic eye upon what literature in Canada has really attempted and accomplished and what it has not attempted or accomplished. This enterprise will be healthy. It need not be discouraging. All of us who must have a share in the co-operative efforts of the future may address ourselves in our various ways to assisting the work of cultura; identification, heartened by Principal Frye's concluding words in the Literary History: "For present and future writers in Canada and their readers, what is important in Canadian literature, beyond the merits of the individual works in it, is the inheritance of the entire enterprise. The writers featured in this book have identified the habits and attitudes of the country, as Fraser and Mackenzie have identified its rivers. They have also left an imaginative legacy of dignity and of high courage."

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