
A more accurate subtitle for this work would have been *The Writing of Canadian Fiction in English during the Nineteenth Century*. The opening quotation by John Metcalf states in part that 'Literature is a relationship between writers and readers.' From this, it would be quite natural to assume that equal treatment has been assigned to both writers and readers; but this is not the case. The book is principally concerned with the writing of Canadian fiction, and only superficially with reading. When readership is acknowledged it is linked with Canadian fiction. Immediately excluded, therefore, is the large mass of non-Canadian reading matter more generally digested by Canadians throughout the nineteenth century. Bearing this in mind, a search for the typical reader of Canadian fiction was undertaken, but an individual who ought to have featured prominently in this account remained, in the end, elusive.

The real subject of this book is the 'cultural elite' dedicated to forming 'the writing and reading habits of their compatriots,' a phenomenon explored largely through a variety of literary publications of the period. The opinions and tastes of the constituent members naturally play a significant role in the discussion, but their views are not counterbalanced by those of the mass of Canadian readers, as they should have been. Professor Gerson believes that access to this information is difficult, for the views and predilections of average Canadians were largely unexpressed. Therefore, they 'must be inferred from their leaders' comments and frequent diatribes' aimed at the mass of sensational literature that emanated from the United States. First, this seems to suggest that only sensational matter was read by the majority; secondly, it implies that we can only guess at the reading tastes of the mass of people. Neither assumption is true.

Noting that by the end of the century most adult Canadians could read and had access to book collections, Professor Gerson is curious about the degree of Canadian content, and wonders if there is a possible correlation between Canadian books reviewed and their subsequent readership. The author does recognize the basic flaw in the methodology – the reviews were selective and not, therefore, fully representative of actual output – but concludes that 'the products of Canadian writers and publishers did not, as a group, have a major impact upon Canadian readers.' This conclusion is correct, of course, and not at all surprising, but it is possible to support it in a more substantive fashion.

Questions of readership may be answered with much more confidence by resort-
ing to sources which, in fact, receive only brief notice in the introductory chapter. First, the book and periodical collections of mechanics institutes, library associations, circulating libraries, and public libraries make it possible to establish Canadian content, and may be used as indicators of reading tastes. Ontario is an especially rich resource in this regard through the catalogues and lists that are extant. In fact, for the period, Ontario and Canada may be considered synonymous terms, as far as library development is concerned. Secondly, graded school readers offer another source for determining the formation of nascent reading tastes in children. Thirdly, the book trade is an important resource. Numerous publishers’ and wholesalers’ catalogues exist that inform us further on prevailing literary tastes. The offerings of local booksellers are particularly important to our understanding of community reading habits. In fact, Levin Schücking (The Sociology of Literary Taste, p. 101) remarks that ‘It would be like playing Hamlet without the Prince of Denmark if in a discussion on the formation of taste we were to omit the retailer.’ Much can be learned about readers and writers from a perusal of booksellers’ lists which were frequently advertised in newspapers and magazines. Schücking makes a similar point about the value of libraries [p. 97].

Per Gedin (Literature in the Marketplace, p. 9) points out that ‘books have become part of an organized economic market where writers, publishers, printers, booksellers and the reading public are part of the system.’ This fundamental thesis is almost recognized in Professor Gerson’s statement that ‘The fictional writings of this colony acquire new importance when viewed as documents in literary and cultural history, for which an understanding of their intended audience is crucial.’ A community of interest similar to that described by Gedin existed in nineteenth-century Canada; set in that context, this study would have been much more enlightening.

Professor Gerson is clearly more comfortable dealing with the world of the author and the critic, and it is here that the strength of the book lies. Some basic concerns are discussed, such as the acceptability of writing and reading fiction, and whether Canada was a suitable setting for fiction plots. In asking if writers and readers could agree upon definitions of romance and realism, together with the appropriate balance, it seems unlikely that dialogue of that sort would have engaged the interest of the average reader. The difficulties encountered in attempting to write serious fiction in nineteenth-century Canada, and to foster a national literature appropriate to a new country, are described and brought clearly into focus. It is overstating the case, however, to suggest that each English-speaking community ‘grappled’ with the huge quantities of reading matter that emanated from the United States. By and large, many people read and enjoyed it.

Factors that militated against the growth of indigenous publishing and authorship are also noted – in particular, the restrictive copyright laws, and the overpowering presence of the American Republic whose book trade tenaciously exploited the Canadian market. But it does seem a little harsh to suggest that in ‘choosing romance as their fictional mode, most nineteenth-century Canadian novelists deliberately removed themselves from the frontiers of serious literary advancement and placed themselves directly within the mainstream of popular literature: the obvious route to local fame, possible fortune, and international recognition.’ While this may
be true, no evidence is offered to show that such a decision was taken \textit{deliberately} by these writers, nor is it suggested that simply a lack of talent may have been a significant factor in their inability to achieve international recognition. This, at least, does not strike at their integrity.

The chapters that explore the reception of the fiction genre by the cultural elite, the question of subjects and their settings, the influence of Sir Walter Scott, and the tensions between romance and realism, represent valuable contributions to our understanding of literary endeavour in nineteenth-century Canada. These topics are, furthermore, fleshed out with succinct portraits of the major participants.

James Smith Allen (\textit{Popular French Romanticism: Authors, Readers, and Books in the 19th Century}, p. 230) refers to Robert Escarpit's 'central insight into the dual nature of literature, as both expression and artifact.' In Professor Gerson's work we have a clear picture of the expression but not of the artifact. If a model is needed, then the work cited above is recommended. Allen explores popular French romanticism in the context of such pertinent topics as popular literature, authorship, publishing, production methods, distribution, and readership. Canadian fiction in nineteenth-century Canada could have been treated in a similar manner. It is natural for scholars professing English literature to have a central concern with authorship, but in any discussion of literary taste, the methodologies of the sociologist, the cultural historian, and the historical bibliographer must be brought into play to explore every facet of creative writing. Otherwise, a serious imbalance will occur.

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