l'intérieur du champ. Enfin, et l'auteur le reconnaît au passage, il faudra s'employer à analyser le contenu des livres et son rôle dans le développement des mentalités et des savoirs, comme le fait par exemple l'historien Serge Gagnon. Cela dit, il faut être reconnaissant à Paul Aubin pour son précieux travail bibliographique.

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Heather Murray. *Come, Bright Improvement! The Literary Societies of Nineteenth-Century Ontario*. Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2002. xx, 336 pp; \$60.00 (hardcover). ISBN 0 820 036 333.

The Puslinch Lake Football Club and Literary Society and the Angelica Shakespeare Club of Owen Sound can seldom have featured in a scholarly study along with the likes of Wolfgang Iser and Stanley Fish. But they do in Heather Murray's *Come, Bright Improvement! The Literary Societies of Nineteenth-Century Ontario*. The book provides a panoramic view of the free-standing literary societies in Ontario between approximately 1820 and 1900, commenting on their distribution, demographics, constitutions, models in British and American associations, favoured activities, and, in many cases, mysterious demise. The aim is not simply to contribute to the social history of the province, but also to throw new light on the cultural context of Canadian literature, and to suggest alternative, perhaps more fruitful, ways of studying the history of the book and of readers. In this the study succeeds admirably, opening a number of questions and new lines of approach.

The book is handsomely produced (barring a few scattered typographical errors) and designed to last as the reference source it will surely be. The text is followed by three appendices – a typical pledge for a “literary and debating club for mutual improvement”; the readings and recitations of the Barrie Literary Society, 1881-93; and the programmes of study of the Browning Club of Toronto, 1897-1905 – and then an eighty-page list of the known literary societies, arranged both thematically and alphabetically by location. It ends with a most helpful index prepared by Mary Newberry.

The survey of societies reveals an unexpected, and certainly heartening, breadth of literary activity in the province. There are some three hundred societies whose date of foundation has been

ascertained, and many more known only by name or allusion. Murray mentions finding twenty-five different literary societies for St Mary's, Perth County, and its surrounding villages in the last two decades of the nineteenth century alone. (Only three of these appear in the listing by location, however, presumably because the others do not fit the selection criteria – first, to be unaffiliated to a church, school, or college, and second, not to be a dedicated debating society). The activities of the societies are detailed with full awareness of the linguistic context, particularly the changing connotations of words like “literary” and “culture,” and the social milieu. The latter encompasses all the major issues agitating the province: political reform, adult education, the emancipation of women, racial relations, labour history. Those not familiar with the progress of the black community in southwestern Ontario will be fascinated to read that black women took positions of leadership in the clubs and mutual-improvement societies long before this was the norm among non-black groups. The Quakers, another minority, were a later pioneer of women's rights in their “Olio” at Coldstream. Notable passages in the clubs' history include the manoeuvres of the Reverend John Strachan to counteract the rise of the potentially radical York Mechanics' Institute, and the murder of the sexton of Mary Ann Shadd's unnamed debating society by a disgruntled heckler. Some tempests in club teapots, such as the dispute over the choosing of a secretary for the Canadian Chautauqua circles, are perhaps given at too great length for the amount of insight yielded. But all such details build up a picture of a society eager for learning, self-culture, and improvement as well as for fun and relaxation, through literature.

Murray has used an impressive number of sources for these forgotten details. Besides mastering the printed material and calling on the knowledge of a host of scholars mentioned in the preface, she has visited many archives and repositories to unearth local newspapers, typed local histories and reports, unpublished theses, the Tweedsmuir histories compiled by Women's Institutes, letters, diaries, and most importantly, the minute books of the various societies. Reading the latter must have been a labour in itself: minute-takers generally adopt an institutional style which yields a minimum of specific information. Their dearth of individualising detail is mirrored by the anodyne style of newspaper reports of meetings, in which a good time was invariably had by all. Fortunately Murray summarises her findings in a readable style enlivened by metaphor, as in “The

scholar of early Canadian taste has to get off her literary high horse and even take a trot on Yankee Doodle's metrical pony." She does her best to give a human face to her sometimes anonymous actors by suggesting that members "must have thought" this or "may well have been influenced by" various motives, showing a sympathetic understanding of typical life situations.

I have two minor cavils in regard to style and presentation. The first concerns the frequent use of bracketed interjections. On pages 141-42, for instance, we are told that Furnivall's societies developed "a broader range of memberships (including women in significant positions)," that some of his societies "were concerned (following the model of the Roxburghe Club)" with locating MSS, and that the Browning Society had the honour of "appearing to be (although one Ruskin society slightly predated it)" the first to use literary-critical methods on a living author. In the Furnivall paragraph two separate sentences are also in parentheses. Combined with a liberal use of dashes, this stylistic technique makes for a somewhat breathless and fractured delivery.

My second cavil concerns the method of documentation. The actual text occupies just less than half of the volume – 166 pages out of 335 – and many notes swell the apparatus. Using both endnote references and a list of works cited, the book combines aspects of both methods of citation outlined in the *Chicago Manual* and reaps the advantages of neither. The very purpose of a "works cited" list with bibliographical information is to allow the author to give a page number in brackets after the quotation in the text. Murray passes up numerous opportunities to do so. In addition, there are a number of totally superfluous notes, of which note 18 on page 135 may serve as an example. The text says that in publications such as "Books and Reading" Clark exhorted his readers to develop their own tastes; the note says "Clark, 'Books and Reading'." An editor could easily have whittled down these twenty-eight pages of endnotes to save much vexatious and unrewarding turning of pages.

The thoroughness of the search for details, even if over documented, is nevertheless key for a study such as this. The fact that certain kinds of information are not forthcoming in spite of all efforts, in fact, makes for somewhat of a conceptual leap between the first six chapters, which chronicle the various clubs, and the seventh, which outlines the ways in which such knowledge might enrich theory. The path from social to intellectual history is not a straightforward one; the available information supports conclusions

more readily in some areas than in others. In one field, that of English pedagogy, Murray is able to point out a number of ways in which the clubs supplemented the methods of instruction in schools and universities. The Toronto Women's Literary Club provides an example of both conservatism and innovation: it kept alive an older tradition of oral skills and recitation that had disappeared from formal education and at the same time, in anticipation of later developments, studied journalistic accounts and contemporary authors as well as the classic authors favoured by the university curriculum. It was the hunch that "English as a discipline may be seen to have developed, not within the academy, but rather, on the complex intersection of the academy with the public sphere" that first led the author to look at this material after her study of English as a discipline in *Working in English* (1996). In the absence of specific information about discussions – the topic often being recorded in the minutes, but not the arguments or conclusions – she is able to infer the general method of approach used by the different clubs from her knowledge of that of the critics and authorities favoured, such as Furnivall, Dowden, and Toronto professors W.J. Alexander and William Clark.

The relevance of literary societies to a study of the development of Canadian literature is also well brought out. Murray concludes that Canadian authors could find far more of a literary community than had previously been supposed in the small towns and villages of Ontario. She suggests too that the conception of "Canadian literature" might profitably be enlarged to encompass vernacular and amateur writing, theatrical performances, recitations, and other entertainments. In that the latter suggestion involves popular culture, it awakens the *bête noire* of Canadian studies, the question of colonialism and the relation of Canadian to the dominant English literature. It is notable that these clubs are instruments of "high culture," overwhelmingly devoted to the study of the English tradition, their readings and recitations favouring Shakespeare, Tennyson, Browning, Burns, Scott, George Eliot, Wordsworth, and the rest of the pantheon, although classic American writers such as Twain and Longfellow were also popular. Glancing at this question in passing, Murray suggests that the club members who read these texts may have been "working against the larger grain, advocating independent thought, public speech, and cultural democratization" rather than assimilating cravenly to the dominant culture. Or were they perhaps giving substance to Frye's contention that the dominant

tradition was itself centrally literary and empowering, thus nurturing the emergent Canadian literature?

How, in fact, *did* these clubs read and assimilate their texts? Here the dearth of some kinds of information becomes most telling. The lack of first-hand accounts of the process and effects of reading has been bewailed before; as with the missing link in evolution, there is a gap at the crucial node. Murray suggests that reader-response theory, and the history of reading in general, could be reinvigorated if, instead of concentrating on the experience of the solitary reader, we enlarged our conception of reading to include the public discussion and use of literature. This is what she has done in her own study of "groups of readers who in turn were studying texts." Thus she neatly side-steps the very real, if problematical, question of how an individual reader decodes a text. But in the public realm a similar black hole looms, in that the group encounter in its immediacy is as undocumented as is that of the individual. As we have seen, the student of literary societies must piece an account together by reading between the lines of official reports and minutes; she must guess the content of debates from authorities used, and infer positions taken from books purchased. So far, diaries and letters have yielded few firsthand accounts of club meetings and their effects. But perhaps the projected databases of reading experiences associated with history-of-the-book projects will eventually include group discussions as well, to the immense benefit of historians of reading.

Meanwhile there remains much information to be gathered on the acquisition of books, the contents of club and individual libraries, curricula and reading programs, choice of passages for recitation, and all the many bookish activities studied in this volume – a study not unlike that of earlier cultural historians, though enriched immeasurably by recent theoretical developments. It is encouraging to see the work of our cultural forbears validated and their efforts to improve themselves incorporated into recorded cultural history. They were after all the nucleus of many a public library and long-standing society. The renewed popularity of book clubs today makes it conceivable that we are returning to the once scorned idealistic belief of these societies, that reading books will do you good. In any event, reading this book is sure to do so.

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