
The preface of this new and very welcome survey of the scene in Canadian Literature defines itself not as an attempt to "encircle all knowledge" on its topic but as a resource book, providing rather "a course of general education." This seems to me a regrettably prosy and deferential statement with which to open such a bulky and comprehensive tome, and I refuse to accept it. If there is anything this book’s pages suggest, it is that the acquired authority of Canadian literature to define and assert its own terms and its own intellectual space has been more than proven over the past forty years, and it is time to set aside such submissive posturings. This is indeed an encyclopedia according to the wider-ranging Enlightenment definition of that term. It has its problems, some of which need pointing out, but the possession of range, authority, and, in particular, intellectual stance are not among them.

Let’s dispose of one of those problems immediately: one Toronto newspaper reviewer has complained that the *Encyclopedia* has a west-coast orientation, that it has too many British Columbia contributors and pays too much attention to recent and perhaps little-known west coast authors. As for the BC contributors, anyone who has ever edited a large reference book knows that the grunt work is invariably done by those helpers within close range that the editor can draw on, and William H. New is of course a distinguished member of the faculty at the University of British Columbia. The real issue is not where they come from, it’s the quality of their work, of which more later. As for the recent and perhaps little-known west coast authors, the truth is that this volume contains a range of contemporary writers from all across the country that is stupefying to someone like myself who taught CanLit during the cross-fire of the canon wars. If it announces anything, it is that those wars, in Canada at least, are in the past. The entry that most reflects this is G.N. Forst’s solidly
informed and thoughtful account of the writings and career of Northrop Frye, which deals directly and effectively with the complaint that Frye's massive theory had somehow assigned Canadian literature to a lesser status. Forst provides a lucid account of Frye's historical position, his social concerns, and his aesthetic framework, and without particularly foregrounding this silly debate, clarifies why it took place by attending seriously to conflicting interpretations of the great critic's position.

It is the sheer range of this new volume which sustains that kind of judicious historicizing. To take a single example: there is no entry for "Aboriginal Literature," only the subheading "Aboriginal Writers; see First Nations, Inuit, Native, and names of Individual Language Groups." This reflects the current respectful practice of refusing to group Native peoples together in a single category, and of naming their nations correctly wherever possible. As this would suggest, at every point the borderlines between categories and genres originating in nineteenth-century criticism and educational practice, and represented for example by the Literary History of Canada edited by Carl Klinck in 1967, are not merely overturned but eradicated.

Blending English and French topics without excuse (and rightly so) are entries on Awards and Literary Prizes (thirty pages, that one), Cookbooks, Editors and Editing, and Intellectual History, separate entries on such specific cultural groups as Ukrainians and Mennonites, along with six thoughtful pages on "Multicultural Voices." Music and Literature (Libretti, Settings) is given nine pages and Mystery and Romance, Popular Culture, and Visual Arts and Writing demonstrate the generic range of Canadian writing. Inevitably these entries are of varying quality; Archives, Manuscripts, and Special Collections is little more than a list, and takes no account of the collections of public libraries, and the entry on Mennonite Writing in Canada tells us much about the Mennonites but little about the aesthetics and problems of their lively and very contemporary body of writing. In fact a major topic missing from this "course in general education" is that of the aesthetics of Canadian writing – one which would have given a reflective critic the opportunity to rise to the challenge of a classic topic in an age of criticism hostile to the kinds of questions the topic raises.

That hostility is evident in poet and critic Frank Davey's long entry on Anglophone Canadian Writing. Davey has a comprehensive mastery of Canadian writing in English, and he writes from a strongly stated critical position: "the motifs of a national literature are produced
by various segments of a society in the course of rivalries and contestations among them," he begins. Ranging like a virtuoso across several centuries of Canadian writing, Davey pursues his analysis with real intellectual rigour, and turns what might have been a rant into a genuine vision of the continuous historicization of interwoven motifs, class positions, nature/culture oppositions, and gender issues. The only problem is that he doesn't make the effort to historicize his own views (for that we probably have to turn to the entry on “Davey, Frank”). As a result, the Foucauldian principle of power conflicts determines the argument, when there may be good reason to think that the most interesting thing about these battles for power may be the creative stuff that goes on around their periphery. Davey and the Tish group, emerging near the end of the great contestation between modernist and Victorian aesthetics, may themselves afford an example.

Writers in French, whether Acadian, Quebecois, or neither, are stunningly well-represented, frequently in vignettes by Margaret Cook, whose five books of poems in French unhappily do not entitle her to an entry of her own. Francophone literature, as a general topic, is less well-covered. We find “Francophone Writing in Quebec” followed by “See Quebec, Francophone Writing in,” but the actual entry is titled “Quebec, Writing in French, Motifs in.” (This kind of variation in secondary headings is defended, unpersuasively, in the preface to the volume.) Mary Lu McDonald’s essay begins by acknowledging the same diversity and complexity as did Davey, but backs away from the challenge: “with such diversity to draw from it is difficult to produce a comprehensive theory, applicable to all periods and genres.” It may well be that “there is no critical agreement about the thematic material in contemporary Quebec literatures and any attempt to achieve a consensus would merely dissolve into a long list of subjects.” Yet the task of the critic – and the encyclopedist – is surely to make that attempt. The result was clearly not helped by the volume’s editorial decision to isolate Acadian, Quebec, and other French writings in separate entries that make an over-arching view almost impossible to achieve.

The test of a good encyclopedia – like a good atlas – is how useful it becomes in practice. I explored this massive volume with that in mind. High points and low points: besides Frye (an entry I loved), and Davey (I disagreed with every second word, but what a read!), I was delighted to see an appreciative entry on Nick Bantock and his three-dimensional texts, but distressed that the entry on Robert
Brighhurst didn't say more about his importance to modern typography – and its effect on the printing of poetry he has worked on. The hateful word “parented” turns up in several entries (meaning not “acted as substitute parents for” but “actually gave birth to”). Juan Butler's entry ends abruptly “he died suddenly in the Clarke Institute,” which will be no help to someone from elsewhere who knows not that psychiatric hospital. The importance of religion in the writing of Morley Callaghan is sadly underplayed, but the poetry of Margaret Atwood receives its due – no surprise to Canadians, but mention of her poetry abroad usually brings a puzzled response. Of Hector Charlesworth it is mysteriously observed “rumoured to be related to royalty” but he could have been the brother of Queen Marie of Romania for all the inquiring reader is able to discern. Why, oh why is there no entry on the Winnipeg writer Miriam Toews or the poet and editor Bruce Whiteman? Why too is there a substantial entry on the American poet Elizabeth Bishop, whose poetry was, I admit, influenced by her sometime residence in Nova Scotia, and a very short one on the excellent western writer Sandra Birdsell, who deserves better? To move to areas where I may claim some expertise, the entry on James Reaney ignores the crucial influence upon his Sowesto regionalism of his years in Winnipeg, there are no entries on those interesting and significant early figures Pierre Boucher and David Willson, and the brief entry on Pierre-Esprit Radisson (one among the many which are not signed) is sixty years out of date.

The Encyclopedia of Literature in Canada adopts an expansive stance, and a primarily pedagogical one. Sometimes it tries too hard; brief entries on Buddhism, Bloomsbury, Parsi, Scandinavian Connections and – incredibly the direction “South” – insufficiently justify the connection with Canadian literature that provoked their inclusion, and the perfunctory entries on Anecdote, Elegy, and a few other literary or para-literary forms should have been left to the textbooks that do that kind of job better. Nevertheless, as an encyclopedia this volume makes a splendid beginning and will doubtless have a long history of its own, let us hope even to the “eleventh edition” of its famous exemplar.

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