The Canadian Readers Meet:
The Canadian Literature Club of Toronto, Donald G. French,
and the Middlebrow Modernist Reader

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OUR CREED

We believe that there is an already existing body of Canadian literature.

We believe that there are special messages for Canadian readers in the writings of Canadian poets, novelists, historians, biographers, essayists, journalists.

Therefore we desire to encourage Canadians to read more books written by Canadian authors.¹

The Canadian Literature Club of Toronto (1915-1973) was an active, advocating, convivial presence on Toronto's cultural scene for almost sixty years, and its influence extended further. The club had a clear sense of its purpose and practices, as initially envisaged by the founder and first president, the critic and editor Donald French, and it followed these with tenacity over decades – through an epidemic and a depression, two world wars, the aging and deaths of its core members – and through the challenges posed by success and by the expansion of its constituency. (Subscribing members at times numbered more than two hundred, with as many as eight hundred attendees at public events and productions.) While the Canadian Literature Club (CLC) arranged multiple series of authorial recitations

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1 Canadian Literature Club Program 1924-25, Canadian Literature Club of Toronto fonds, S83, Baldwin Room, Toronto Reference Library. Unless otherwise indicated, references to minutes, programs, correspondence, and other papers are to this fonds. I am particularly grateful to staff at the Baldwin Room for their knowledgeable assistance.

and critical lectures, staged plays, and hosted literary competitions, it was self-defined as a society of readers; over the years, it was sometimes necessary to remind the public (and even its members) of that identity and mandate. The CLC's aim, as formulated in December 1914 at a first organizational meeting, was directly stated: "The object of the club is to encourage the study of Canadian Literature and thereby foster original production in this field."² However, what was plain to its convening committee and first membership presents an interesting puzzle for the later literary critic or book historian. The essay which follows is an attempt to understand the crucial hinge word of the CLC constitution: "thereby."

Its activity and longevity, evidenced in orderly and fulsome archival records, makes the CLC suitable for study from variety of angles. The English-Canadian literary historian would encounter a sustained effort to boost Canadian writers and literature, one commencing before the founding of such organizations as the Canadian Authors Association (1921) and the Association of Canadian Bookmen (1935). A critic interested in the formation of a Canadian canon will find a running record of the evolution of literary tastes, and support for the critical contention that the current Canadian canon – whether scholarly or pedagogic – is far from reflective of what was read by authors' contemporaries.³ Theatre historians might wish to assess the role of the CLC in promoting Canadian drama through its stagings and dramatic readings of original material, and its connections to other Toronto theatrical bodies. A cultural analyst could turn to the CLC for an interesting window onto arts organization in the first half of the twentieth century, and for indications of the importance of local or civic groups in the development of a "national" culture. This essay will pursue a somewhat different line of inquiry primarily and will take the CLC at its word by viewing it as a society of readers. I will present the CLC as a case study of Canadian readers; will argue for the inclusion of readers, along with authors, publishers, and critics, as agents in the development of an English-Canadian literature; and will do so in large measure by letting the CLC speak for itself.

This essay's line of reasoning is grounded in an ongoing problematic in the field of book history studies. In his foundational essay "What

2 Constitution. Minutes, 18 December 1914.

3 See Carole Gerson, "Anthologies and the Canon of Early Canadian Women Writers," in Lorraine McMullen, ed., *Re(dis)covering Our Foremothers: Nineteenth-Century Canadian Women Writers* (Ottawa: University of Ottawa Press, 1990), 55-76.

is the History of Books?" (1982) Robert Darnton diagrams a print "communications circuit," which – despite the rival schematics since developed – is engraved on the heart of every book history scholar in North America and will doubtless be familiar to readers of this essay.⁴ It takes the form of a clock face in a slightly flattened oval, with the author and publisher at the noon position. Around the face are arrayed printers and suppliers, shippers, and booksellers, with readers occurring at nine o'clock. Famously, the segment of the circumference from reader back to author, from nine to twelve, is a broken rather than a solid line: writing some twenty-five years ago, Darnton was unable to draw upon sufficient scholarship to envisage more concretely how the reader fed back to authorial activity, and completed the communications circuit. More recent scholars have begun to fill in the connection.⁵ But this missing link is the postulate of the CLC constitution, the "thereby" clause: their reading, and study, would "foster original production." In the words of a later president of the club, the special role of the CLC was to be "a 'link' between the reader and the writer."⁶ Club members envisaged readers as literary generators as well as recipients; not only as consumers, but as agents (if not authors) in the production of a national literature. They thought they knew how to connect the dots.

The concluding section of this essay will make a further set of connections, by bringing the "problem" of readers and reading into alignment with an additional problematic signalled in this essay's title by the oxymoron of a "middlebrow modernism."⁷ The question of the reader and the question of the middlebrow are at base the same: each occurring at the interface of the economic and the aesthetic, of consumption and culture, they require a complementary analytical framework.

4 Robert Darnton, "What is the History of Books?" *Daedalus* 111, (summer 1982): 65–83.

5 Interestingly, in a recent appearance of the diagram, the arc is a solid line. Robert Darnton, "What Is the History of Books? Revisited." *Modern Intellectual History* 4 (November 2007): 495–508.

6 Reta Daniels to William Arthur Deacon, letter 12 February 1946, Box 14, folder CAA. William Arthur Deacon fonds, MS Coll.160, Thomas Fisher Rare Book Library, University of Toronto.

7 On the emergence of the "middlebrow" reading sector, and its relationship to new modes of book production and distribution, see Janice Radway, *A Feeling for Books: The Book-of-the-Month Club, Literary Taste, and Middle-Class Desire* (Chapel Hill and London: University of North Carolina Press, 1997).

The Canadian Literature Club, while in many respects a unique organization, profitably may be placed in the long lineage of literary societies – that is, reader societies – extending from the early nineteenth century to our own day. The later decades of the nineteenth century witnessed a literary society explosion throughout the population, as well as the rise of specialized literary discussion groups, originating with dedicated Shakespeare and Browning societies, in addition to the “eclectic” societies characteristic of an earlier time.⁸ By the beginnings of the twentieth century, and especially in the urban centres, a new model appeared, of cultural organizations with a more open membership, ambitious projects, and a greater civic cultural presence, which might include operation of independent premises or clubrooms.⁹ Toronto, for example, saw the foundation of its branches of the Lyceum Women’s Art Association (in 1886), the Women’s Musical Club (1899), and the University Women’s Club (1903), as well as the newly-formed and free-standing Arts and Letters Club and the Heliconian Club (both 1908), for men and women respectively. The stronger infrastructure of such societies allowed them to survive the social dislocations of the First World War; indeed, all of the organizations just listed are extant today, albeit with differing degrees of current activity. The war brought one further development, as Maria Tippetts has noted: many women artists refused to be segregated into separate art associations or schools, and other cultural organizations soon followed this trend.¹⁰

Disbanding just before achieving its sixtieth anniversary, the CLC provides an interesting continuum from turn-of-the-century cultural practices to the nationalist literary orientation of the 1970s, while showing as well some distinctive stages of development. The Club history may be reasonably bisected at 1945, a watershed year marking the end of the Second World War and the death of the club’s founder. To the later historian’s eye, further subdivisions seem possible, based on the club’s orientations, although these periods may

8 Heather Murray, *Come bright Improvement! The Literary Societies of Nineteenth-Century Ontario* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2002), 127-69.

9 See Heather Murray, “Literary Societies,” in Yvan Lamonde, Patricia L. Fleming, and Fiona A. Black, eds., *History of the Book in Canada: Volume Two 1840-1918* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2005), 473-78; and Maria Tippetts, *Making Culture: English-Canadian Institutions and the Arts Before the Massey Commission* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1990).

10 Maria Tippetts, *By a Lady: Celebrating Three Centuries of Art by Canadian Women* (Toronto: Viking, 1992), 67-68.

not have seemed entirely distinct to the members. An initial focus on criticism of Canadian literature in the 1920s was followed by the promotion of writers in the 1930s and 1940s, while a steadily-growing emphasis on drama arced across those decades. The post-1945 years commenced with a more specialized "literary" study (involving the development of reading sub-groups), moving to a final stage which could be envisaged variously as a decline, or as the subsumption of the society into the cultural crush of the post-Massey Commission era. The focus of this essay will be on the first half of the CLC history, its more active era of critical, creative, and advocacy work.

The CLC held its first meeting in January of 1915, and the year helps to explain how a variety of models bore on its formation. Envisaged as an open-membership cultural organization with a broad mandate and goals, it also provided a forum for the reading and reviewing of literature, while seasoning its programs with recitations, musical interludes, and other aids to sociability, in a time-honoured fashion. It was not unusual in layering the practices of the public, specialized, and eclectic cultural associations in this way. What made the CLC different, however, was the degree to which the club was shaped, and continued to be guided, by the vision of a single individual: the *littérateur* and editor Donald G. French, the founder and first president, who would be referred to as the (capitalized) Founder in future years. In the early 1960s an annual commemorative evening became institutionalized as "Founder's Night," and in the same decade the printed programs featured this "Appreciation": "Donald G. French was dedicated to Canadian Literature. Since this Club was founded in 1915 how many hundreds have shared his vision! The young writers he encouraged by example, interest and counsel have matured with finely-crafted prose or poetry. Some achieved fame. When more Canadian readers know more Canadian writers we can be sure that literature is made in Canada."¹¹ It is as a "maker" of Canadian literature that Donald Graham French will achieve at least passing recognition from scholars today: the literary editor of McClelland and Stewart (a post he assumed in 1920), he also co-authored *Highways of Canadian Literature* (1924) with J.D. Logan.¹² (His name is rarely encountered in the critical or

¹¹ Program 1963-64.

¹² J.D. Logan and Donald G. French, *Highways of Canadian Literature: A Synoptic Introduction to the Literary History of Canada (English) from 1760 to 1924* (Toronto: McClelland and Stewart, 1924).

historical literature, however: this article's secondary purpose is to catalogue his work and to assess his contributions.) For more than twenty years with McClelland and Stewart (M&S), French enticed prominent Canadian authors to the publishing house and nurtured the unknown and the novitiate. He was a critic both philosophically and, quite literally, practically, developing anthologies, commissioning critical works, and writing a variety of authorial vade mecums. He also helped to construct the infrastructure of the Canadian book trade, by penning articles and columns, editing several trade journals, and helping to launch the Association of Canadian Bookmen. His was a vision vigorously promulgated both within, and without, the Canadian Literature Club.

In the winter of 1914-15, however, Donald French had yet to secure his point of purchase as the literary editor of M&S, and most of his publications lay ahead. Originally from Beaverton, Ontario and a one-time teacher who had trained at Normal School, he was the author of a slim monograph titled *Points about Poetry*, consisting of reprinted essays which had originally appeared in *The Editor (A Journal of Information for Literary Workers)*, a magazine published in New Jersey.¹³ (A guide for teachers, students and for "verse-makers" themselves, this was the first of three books French would author on poetic technique.) In the preface to *Points about Poetry* he alludes to his several years of reading, studying, and teaching literature – "the latter both orally and by correspondence" – and the title page identifies him as the principal of the Canadian Correspondence College, Toronto.¹⁴ While little can be learned of this group other than through the Toronto directories, it seems to have been linked with the Home Correspondence School of Canada, and it is probable French remained affiliated even after obtaining other employment. At some point in his past, French had also worked as a newspaperman, initially in Sault Ste. Marie, and by 1909 he was the literary editor of the *Toronto World*, responsible for editing (and in large part writing) that section of the Sunday edition of the paper.¹⁵ While it is difficult

13 Donald French, *Points About Poetry* (Ridgewood, N.J.: Editor Co., 1910).

14 French, *Points about Poetry*, 3.

15 While the *Toronto World* has been microfilmed, its Sunday edition (later called the *Sunday World*) is omitted, presumably because libraries subscribed only to the weekday paper. Some issues of the Sunday edition are in Archival Newspaper Collection, Baldwin Room, Toronto Reference Library: but only the issues of 24 October 1909, 9 April 1911, and 22 March 1914 are available for French's tenure with the paper. There are also a few undated clippings, appearing to be

to assess all of French's contributions in this capacity since very few issues of the Sunday edition are extant, an issue from 1909 shows that he wrote "Critical Notes" featuring gossip about Canadian and international authors and notices of new publications; and encouraged readers to submit reviews of their favourite books, with the winning entries published and awarded small prizes. Slightly later, French introduced poetry competitions, candidly assessing the contributions of these provincial Zenobias and Slaves of the Muse in a series of columns first titled "Amateur Poetry Competition" and then "Talks With the Amateur Poets." He also penned detailed portraits of Canadian authors and their works, in columns headed "Canadian Writers" and "Short Studies in Canadian Literature."¹⁶ It is evident that he had already developed the principles that would animate his later organizational work: to showcase the literature of Canadian authors, to encourage emergent authors, and to bring readers into an active relationship with the literature that animated their leisure hours. Donald French was 41 years old when he developed his plan for a Canadian Literature Club.

At first glance, the winter of 1914-15 might seem an unpropitious time to launch a cultural organization with an ambitious mandate: to this point, only one large-scale dedicated Canadian literature reading society had yet been attempted, the Society of Canadian Literature, founded in Montreal in 1889 by W.D. Lighthall.¹⁷ But the time was right: the admixture of "patriotism and propaganda" of the war

from 1912 and 1913, in French's papers. Donald French fonds, S170, Baldwin Room, Toronto Reference Library.

- ¹⁶ It is difficult to attribute, and to locate, much of French's writing, since he continued to write some materials anonymously or pseudonymously throughout his career. The papers include poetry under the initials DGF; a series of published vignettes titled "Streetcar Philosophies" under the pseudonym "Don G."; and drafts of freelance articles on diverse topics. He penned articles, on Canadian authors and how-to-write, for educational magazines such as *Canadian Teacher* and *The School*, and United Church of Canada publications *Pathfinder* and *Onward*. (He also attempted to develop and market a self-help program to "Improve Your Mind and Memory.") The papers are scanty; and it is difficult to ascertain whether clippings represent French's own anonymous work, or research on possible topics. The full sum of his writing remains to be measured. Another early book, co-authored by French, may have represented his bucolic leanings; or he may simply have participated as an amanuensis: Thomas E. Hill and Donald G. French, *Making Money from the Soil: The Open Door to Independence....* (Toronto: McCleod and Allen, 1915).
- ¹⁷ Micheline Cambron and Carole Gerson, "Literary Authorship," in Lamonde et al, eds., *History of the Book in Canada: Volume Two*, 119-34; 129.

years had produced an "insatiable demand" for books with Canadian content.¹⁸ A reaction to the flood of "American" cultural and popular cultural products now flowing across the border – and the growing hostility to United States boosterism as the war developed – further propelled this nascent cultural nationalism.¹⁹ More prosaically, Canadian publishing was thriving with the economic boost of wartime and the impediments to importation.²⁰ Donald French laid the ground work carefully, presenting a series of public lectures in November and December of 1914, focusing on the poetry which was his critical specialty: *The Poet's Message*, *Some of Our Leading Poets*, *Canadian Fiction*, *The Would-Be Poets* (referring to minor or untrained poets), *Canadian History in Fiction*, and *Present Day Poets*, were the titles of the six lectures, whose admission proceeds went to the Red Cross.²¹ A first executive committee meeting in mid-December 1914, at the Euclid Avenue home of Dr. A.D. Watson, developed an initial constitution whose double-jointed object – to study Canadian literature, and to "thereby" foster its production – has been quoted above. It also laid down a series of Methods by which this Object could be achieved:

- (a) By the formation of Canadian Literature Clubs in as many communities as possible
- (b) By lecture, discussion, and publication of matters relating to Canadian Literature
- (c) By affording as many as possible the opportunity of hearing recitals and lectures by Canadian authors and specialists
- (d) By the establishment of libraries of Canadian Books.²²

This document is quite characteristic in its scope. Canadian literary societies of the nineteenth and early twentieth century typically saw themselves as "projecting societies" (to use a term current at the birth of the literary society movement): that is, as associations whose effects

18 Carl Spadoni and Judy Donnelly, *A Bibliography of McClelland and Stewart Imprints, 1909-1985: A Publisher's Legacy* (Toronto: ECW Press, 1991), 25.

19 See Paul Litt, "The War, Mass Culture, and Cultural Nationalism," in *Canada and the First World War: Essays in Honour of Robert Craig Brown*, ed. David Mackenzie (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2005), 323-49.

20 See George Parker "Distributors, Agents and Publishers: Part II. The Toronto Publishing Scene During World War I," *Papers of the Bibliographical Society of Canada/Cahiers de la Société bibliographique du Canada* 44 (Spring/Printemps 2006): 7-68.

21 Program in Minutes, December 1914 to May 1921.

22 Constitution. Minutes, 18 December 1914.

would have a wider public impact, or which aimed to be emulated by others. Over time, the mandate would inevitably simplify.

The membership accepted the constitution and elected an initial slate of officers. Donald French, of course, assumed the presidency, while Dr. Watson, Gertrude Lawler (MA), W.J. Shaw (MA), and Dr. Augusta Stowe-Gullen, assumed the first through fourth vice-presidencies respectively. Miss L.K. Hoffman took on the role of secretary, J.M. Faircloth became the treasurer, and Miss E. Davis was appointed librarian. There were also four councillors, among whom were Miss F. May Simpson, Mrs. J.W. Garvin ["Katherine Hale"], and both Mr. and Mrs. Everton McNichol. Some of these names will be immediately familiar to a Canadian cultural critic, and some unknown. Augusta Stowe-Gullen was the first woman to be trained as a physician in Canada, and she had many decades of experience as a cultural and social reformer, and membership in a variety of other clubs including the Toronto Theosophical Society. Fellow physician Albert Durrant Watson was an accomplished amateur astronomer, as well as a prolific author and a poet, who turned his pen to a variety of social and spiritualist topics, and shared Stowe-Gullen's theosophical interests if not formal membership in the society. (That at least three of the founding members were theosophists is not coincidental – Hale would become involved with the theosophical Muskoka Assembly – for there was a deep connection between theosophical ideas and early twentieth-century English-Canadian nationalism, as Michèle Lacombe has detailed.)²³ Gertrude Lawler held a BA in modern languages and mathematics from Toronto, as well as an MA in mathematics, and was the head of English at Harbord Collegiate; a linguistic imperialist, she supported Canadian literature as an extension of the global spread of "English." Lawler would complete several Shakespeare school editions for Macmillan, and was granted an honorary doctorate by Toronto in 1927.²⁴ Among the councillors, Amelia Garvin was also known under her pen-name Katherine Hale. The literary editor of the *Globe* until her marriage two years before to

23 Michèle Lacombe, "Theosophy and the Canadian Idealist Tradition: A Preliminary Exploration," *Journal of Canadian Studies* 17 (summer 1982): 100–118.

24 Biographical information is from A73-0026/221(92), University of Toronto Archives and Record Management. No suitable W.D. Shaw appears in the street directories of this time, but alumni/ae records show an MA holder of that name who later practiced law in the western part of the province [A73-0026/410(37)]. L.K. Hoffman remains obscure.

the critic and anthologizer John Garvin, Hale was in the public eye after the recent success of her first volume of war-time poetry, *Grey Knitting* (1914). (She had authored an introduction to Watson's verse volume *Love and the Universe*, published in 1913. And to round out this tight cultural circle: surely John Garvin was the "J.G." who recently had profiled Gertrude Lawler as a "Representative Woman" for the *Globe*.)²⁵ F. May Simpson, according to club minutes, also had some claims as a writer and was the composer of *A Christmas Playlette*.²⁶ It should be noted that prominent figures were more common in the club's early years and among its officers. Presidential statements emphasized that the club was intended for the "ordinary" man or woman, and not for the dedicated *littérateur*: treasurer John Faircloth was the president of a painting and decorating firm, Everton Nichol ran a hardware store, W.J. Shaw was probably a fledgling lawyer, and E. Davis was apparently a library employee.²⁷ But the names of its more influential founders do speak to the intellectual-nationalist orientations of the club on its formation.

The initial program ran only from January to March 1915, but it laid out a format that endured for the club's first thirty years, with some alterations. While members of the club were reminded to read the relevant books for the evening's session, and to prepare in other ways – later newsletters to members commonly featured such exhortations – detailed book discussion was not a feature of the programs. In contrast to the familiar book club model of our own day (where members read and discuss a common text, sometimes assisted by a convener or by study questions), the activities of the CLC seemed better designed to develop an understanding of "Canadian Literature" in the aggregate. However, like book clubs members today, they were alert to the emotive dimensions of texts, valued literary sincerity, and presumed – a point made clear in their Creed – that Canadian writers had special "messages" for them. Discussion by members was structured through a set of activities: Additions to Canadian Literature (that is, notices of recent publications), Notes and Comments, and The Question Box. The latter allowed for requests for information or for discussions of a more general nature – need a Canadian writer

25 J.G. [John Garvin?], "Representative Woman," *Globe* 19 Apr. 1913.

26 Minutes, 30 October 1916.

27 Somewhat later, in the 1920s, Thomas Marquis, John Garvin, suffragist Alice Chown, and nature fiction writer Archibald McKishnie, were among the members; McKishnie at one point shared an honorary vice-presidency with Margaret Marshall Saunders, who held that position for a number of years.

be Canadian born? – and at times may have involved an actual box from which slips of paper would be drawn. Each meeting also had a “special feature” that was the evening’s main attraction, such as a lecture, an authorial reading, an elocutionary recitation, or the staging or reading of a one-act play. While visitors were occasionally invited to address the club, the society was structured primarily along mutual-instruction lines in its first ten years, and the members themselves assumed most of the responsibility for the CLC’s monthly programs. But the expertise – or the acquired expertise – of the members was considerable and varied. “Special features” of the first five years included presentations on Canadian journalism, the short story, historical fiction, war poetry, children’s literature, French-Canadian writing, pioneer life in Canadian literature, and songs and songwriters, as well as evenings devoted to Isabella Valancy Crawford and to L.M. Montgomery. The club convened the first Monday of each month from October through May, in the kindergarten room of Lansdowne school (where it remained until forced to move by the coal shortages of 1918, a year which also saw the suspension of the club during the influenza epidemic).²⁸ A library of Canadian works, assembled initially from donations of books by members, was established, and maintained in a member’s home.²⁹ The CLC maintained connections with other societies, meeting occasionally conjointly with the Dickens Fellowship (political cartoonist J.W. Bengough was a member of each), and institutionalizing a shared social evening with another literary society, the Century Club.

An extensive and eclectic list of authors came under discussion in their meetings. In their first five years, for example, CLC members discussed a total of 89 authors (as detailed in appendix A); this is exclusive of authors and books that received brief mention under notices of new publications, or of CLC member-authors who read from their own writings or whose work was otherwise discussed.

28 The CLC remained peripatetic. It met in venues as various as the chapel of Victoria College, the Art Gallery of Toronto, the central library, Harbord Collegiate, the Sherbourne House Club, and the hall at McMaster University (before its relocation to Hamilton); after the Second World War, it was sometimes at the Heliconian Club and then, more consistently, at the headquarters of the I.O.D.E. and finally at Cody Hall, on Bloor Street.

29 The library was sold for \$123 to Canadiana House in 1975. The library at time of sale was missing many books mentioned in earlier records (in book lists of the 1930s, for example). In common with the earlier “social libraries,” the CLC probably sold off older holdings to pay for new acquisitions.

Many names will be expected, many will be lesser-known or forgotten; fully 25% are women.³⁰ While the members were au courant with contemporary Canadian writing, some of the programs had a strong historical orientation, dealing either with "pioneer" authors, or with historical fiction. Writers such as Wilfred Campbell, Gilbert Parker, and Charles G.D. Roberts appear frequently and expectedly in the minute books, while Crawford, Alan Sullivan, Norman Duncan, and Robert Norwood were especial favourites. But in the CLC "canon" there are some surprises. In the fall of 1917 a member of the club had been asked in conversation by a sceptical Montreal businessman, whether any Canadian writer had ever produced a classic. When the question was put to the membership, they produced the following list: "When Valmond Came to Pontiac" 'The Law Bringers' 'Tecumseth' 'The Witch of Endor' and 'Carmichael.'³¹ Scholars today should recognize the historical sagas of Gilbert Parker and Charles Mair, and even Robert Norwood's closet drama: few would know *The Lawbringers*, by club member Lillian Leveridge, or *Carmichael*, by a staffer for the *Farmer's Advocate*, May Wilson, under the pen-name "Anison North." (The latter book had already been praised in CLC discussions, and French was an admirer. A charming child's-eye view of rural folkways and an inter-family conflict, initially published by a London, Ontario press in 1907, *Carmichael* would be reissued by McClelland and Stewart in 1919.)³² There was both a living body of literature, and one with a strong heritage. A congratulatory letter received from Emily Murphy ("Janey Canuck") must have resonated with their own beliefs, by envisaging the literature of Canada as both

30 The names of some authors and critics (such as the music critic and Arts and Letters Club stalwart Augustus Bridle) are easily-recognizable today. Of the more obscure figures, a number are minor poets (Alfred Gordon and Llewellyn Morrison), although sometimes well-known in their time (Robert Kirkland Kernighan – "The Khan" – was a popular versifier, while Cy Warren, recognized today as a pioneering "railroad writer," wrote the lyrics for the song "Sweet Marie" after which the chocolate bar is named). Some are local colour writers (James Edward Rossignol); or historians (Charles William Colby, and "Suzanne Marny"); or travel writers (Frank Carrel). Others are not "authors" strictly speaking, such as the musician and composer Gena Branscombe. Some remain unidentified; illegibility and mistranscription pose further problems. Could the "Miss Lawsey" who apparently wrote "Sons of Euchrania" be the Florence Randal Livesay whose *Songs of Ukrana* appeared in 1916? I am grateful to Dean Irvine, and to one of the helpful PBSC assessors, for some of these identifications.

31 Minutes, 9 October 1917.

32 Anison North [May Wilson], *Carmichael* (London, ON: William Weld, 1907); rpt. (Toronto: McClelland and Stewart, 1919).

vital and venerable. Then-president of the Canadian Women's Press Club, Murphy was delighted to find that she was among the authors slated for discussion: "Do not accuse me of irreverence if I express the opinion that every nation should kiss its own *Biblia* or book, in its courts, rather than that of a nation which died thousands of years ago. Here in Canada, we have the story of our Genesis; of our Exodus to the unknown lands of the North and West; our Leviticus (a long, long chapter this); our own Ecclesiastes [*sic*], Cantiles, Lamentations, many-noted Psalms, Acts of the Apostles, and even our Revelations. Surely the literature of our own country [should] be sacred to us above all others."³³ Such enthusiasm was shared, if not so fervently expressed. Members of the CLC, individually and collectively, were soon involved in a miscellany of efforts to promote the reading and writing of Canadian literature, in addition to their public lecture series, and the establishment of the specialized library available to its members. The schools and universities were an especial target: soon after its founding, the CLC was encouraging school boards to offer works by Canadian writers as the prizes for school exhibitions and commencements. It also voted to send representatives to Ontario universities to press them to offer Canadian Literature as an option; when Donald French spoke at Ontario Agricultural College, Guelph, later that year, the minutes noted pointedly that this was the only place where Canadian Literature was "embodied in the curriculum."³⁴ And when Acadia established a chair in the subject, they wrote to the President in appreciation.³⁵ In turn, the CLC became quickly known for its expertise: professors Douglas Durkin and A.W. Crawford of the English department at the University of Manitoba joined as distance members, and sought suggestions for their courses.³⁶ There were other interventions and ventures. The club wrote in support of proposed changes in copyright legislation which they believed to the benefit of homegrown authors; and on one occasion their patronage was more direct, when they sent \$25 to the ill and impecunious Bliss Carman.³⁷ The CLC also attempted a journal, *Canadian Literature*, of which only the first issue is extant (it is not known if there were

³³ Emily Murphy to Donald French, 5 November 1916.

³⁴ Minutes, 13 December 1915; 10 January 1916; 11 December 1916.

³⁵ Minutes, 17 November 1919.

³⁶ George Parker, "A History of a Canadian Publishing House: A Study of the Relation Between Publishing and the Profession of Writing 1890-1914" (PhD Diss., University of Toronto, 1969), 143.

³⁷ Minutes, 17 February 1919; 19 January 1920.

others). *Canadian Literature* contained club news (including a history of the initial years), reviews and suggestions for reading, and was sponsored by a full back-page advertisement from McClelland, Goodchild, and Stewart.

Simultaneous to this flurry of CLC activity, Donald French was engaged in projects of his own. In addition to his work for the *Toronto World*, in 1918 he compiled and edited *The Standard Canadian Reciter*, the aim of which was to "displace similar books of American origin which are being used in our schools, colleges, clubs, etc. to furnish selections for public platform reading."³⁸ Such enterprise bore fruit when he was chosen to be the first literary editor at McClelland and Stewart – as the firm had now become – when that position was created in 1920. His work for M&S and his role in the CLC remained symbiotic: his position as CLC president (and, later, as honorary president) was listed on the title page of his own publications, while he used the opportunity of correspondence undertaken as editor to publicize the club and make a pitch for members.³⁹ Throughout the 1920s, French himself edited and authored a number of books, designed to set Canadian literature before the public eye. *Famous Canadian Stories* by Leslie Horner (1923) and *More Canadian Stories* (1926) were popular and enduring collections aimed at a juvenile audience, and went through a number of new editions and repackagings throughout the decades (one edition, re-edited by G.E. Tait, was still being printed in the 1950s).⁴⁰ His own slim volume, *The Appeal of Poetry* (c 1923), copiously illustrated with examples drawn for the most part from Canadian poets, appears to have been designed for the self-study or study group market.⁴¹ Perhaps his most noteworthy publication of the

³⁸ Donald French to E.W. Thomson, 4 March 1918, cited in George Parker, "History," 143. The full publication information is Donald G. French, comp. and ed., *Standard Canadian Reciter: A Book of the Best Readings and Recitations from Canadian Literature...with which is included Hints on the Oral Interpretation of Literature* by Frank Home Kirkpatrick ([Toronto]: McClelland, Goodchild and Stewart, 1918).

³⁹ Parker, "History," 143.

⁴⁰ Donald French, ed., *Leslie Horner's Famous Canadian Stories Re-Told for Children* (Toronto: McClelland and Stewart, 1923); *More Famous Stories Retold for Boys and Girls* (Toronto: McClelland and Stewart, 1926); *Famous Canadian Stories: The Romance of Discovery Exploration and Development* [variant title *Famous Canadian Stories Retold for Boys and Girls*] (Toronto: McClelland and Stewart, 1931).

⁴¹ Donald French, *The Appeal of Poetry* ([Toronto]: McClelland and Stewart, [1923]).

decade was the "synoptic history," *Highways of Canadian Literature*, which he co-authored with J.D. Logan, contributing the chapters on "Novelists," "Short Story Writers" of the post-Confederation period, and writers of the "Second Renaissance" which for French began in 1908 with the publication of *Anne of Green Gables*, *Sowing Seeds in Danny*, Marian Keith's *Duncan Polite*, and Pickthall's first published short story. (French does not comment on the specific gender dimensions of his choices which are interesting, as well, as an index of his taste at the time.) More than a contributor, French also edited *Highways* in the course of his duties for M&S, and functioned as a general counsel according to Logan's introduction, which praised French for his deep knowledge and the "wise passiveness" Logan considered the essential characteristic of the just critic.⁴² Theirs was a mutual appreciation of long-standing: French had recommended Logan's essays on verse writing, appended to Logan's *Preludes*, to the readers of *Points about Poetry* some fourteen years before.

While the connection between the CLC and M&S was evidently close, it was not the only avenue for such collaboration. The Ryerson Press published two collections of Dr. A.D. Watson's poetry in the twenties, and he was commissioned by Lorne Pierce to edit the poems of Robert Norwood.⁴³ The result was the first volume in Ryerson's influential *Makers of Canadian Literature* Series. Pierce and Watson together had also predated the Logan and French volume with their own critical survey, *Our Canadian Literature*, in 1922. Katherine Hale also published in the "Makers" series with her volume on Isabella Valancy Crawford, which appeared in the same year as the Norwood edition.⁴⁴

The mid-1920s marks the zenith of critical activity for the CLC and its members, which was motivated by the clear set of principles that appear to have been easily shared by the members. The annual printed programs from the 1924-25 season onwards feature the club "Creed," cited as an epigraph to this article, which was maintained (with only one attempted revision) until after the Second World War.⁴⁵ The same year shows a crest – by designer unknown – that

42 J.D. Logan, "Introduction," *Highways of Canadian Literature*, 7.

43 (Dr.) A.D. Watson, *Robert Norwood* (Toronto: The Ryerson Press, 1923).

44 Katherine Hale, *Isabella Valancy Crawford* (Toronto: The Ryerson Press, 1923).

45 In 1929 the Creed was reformulated, at least according to an account of the season in *Canadian Bookman*, to read as follows:

We believe there is an already existing body of Canadian literature.

would in future adorn their programs, letterhead, and other CLC communications. An open book rests on a maple leaf, underneath which is a rising or a setting sun, and the whole is framed on either side by two quill pens. At the base of a crest is a banner or a scroll bearing the words "The Canadian Literature Club of Toronto," and an item that appears to be an acorn, added for graphic balance. Superimposed on the book is a drawing of a figure seated on a shore, gazing at a ship in full sail. The seated figure is ambiguous, for all extant reproductions of the crest are small (a woman with long hair? a figure in "Indian" head-dress? a habitant in a toque?), but one needn't be a Panofsky to decipher the rest of the iconography. While the ideological inclinations of the club remained, at least on the face of things, more or less constant, the second half of the 1920s witnessed alterations to the club's genre emphases, programming, and membership – changes that all appear to be inter-related.

We believe the best Canadian writings should be read and studied by our citizens for their instruction and inspiration.

We believe that no nation can be ranked as truly great which has not originated and developed a significant literature, and hence that both the writing and reading of Canadian literature should be given every encouragement. (*Canadian Bookman*, November 1929, 240).

The revised wording is a more overtly cultural-nationalist statement. After French's death there were some further oscillations, as to how to best represent the state of the national literature. In 1947 they believed the literature was "growing" rather than "existing"; in 1948 they could affirm it was "distinctive."

Drama had been conspicuously missing from Donald French's initiating series of lectures in 1914, but there was a lecture on Canadian dramatic literature within the first year of the club's activity and the prevalence of the topic had been increasing ever since, and with various inflections of the term "drama." As part of its club entertainments, the CLC presented "dramatic" readings by visiting elocutionists, and this element of club activity became regularized with an annual evening of "dramatic recitals" or "interpretive readings" presented by club-member F.W. Hayden, a well-known local elocutionist. These extended from 1917 to 1937, even after Hayden retired and moved away from Toronto, and were an enduring fundraiser for the CLC. (Hayden's dramatic reading of L.M. Montgomery's "A Tangled Web," attended by Montgomery herself, drew an audience of more than eight hundred in 1931.)⁴⁶ In an activity that was part intellectual and part social, the CLC members also presented dramatizations of "scenes" from famous Canadian works – from Louis Hémon's *Maria Chapdelaine* for example – although it is difficult to construe from this distance of time whether these were original short plays or "playettes," or monologues, or something more akin to tableaux. Lecturers, both club members and visitors, focussed on the Canadian drama, both contemporaneously and historically; and in the early years there were evenings devoted to Charles Mair, Norwood, and Norah Holland as well. Most notable, however, is the role the CLC began to take in the latter half of the 1920s in the promotion of Canadian drama and dramatists, through its readings, productions, and commissioning of original material, as the initially modest "dramatic nights" – which involved read-throughs of plays, perhaps even staging "without accessories" – evolved into full-fledged multi-night theatrical productions. Their first successful attempt, using the stage of the Central Library on College Street, emboldened them to book the Hart House Theatre at the University of Toronto for two nights in the 1928-29 season, presenting a triple bill of Merrill Denison's "Brothers-in-Arms" with two shorter selections, J.E. (Jessie) Middleton's "Loot" and Fred Jacob's "The Basket." (Denison's backwoods satire had been staged previously and indeed published in the first volume of *Plays from Hart House Theatre*; similarly for Jacob's drama of immigrant life, published in his own *One Third of a Bill*. But it was a first production of Middleton's historic drama about the influx of non-Loyalist Americans to the Lake Erie settlement of Port

⁴⁶ Minutes, 18 November 1931.

Dover in 1805.) The evening must have functioned, too, as a tribute to club member Jacobs who had died two years before. Anticipating both a financial and an artistic success, the CLC proposed to use the proceeds to offer "substantial prizes next season in a Dominion-wide contest for Canadian full-length plays, and one-act plays, and presenting at least two bills, selected from the prize-winning plays"; the economic crash of that fall may have meant the death of this (apparently) never-realized plan.⁴⁷ But the Hart House evenings continued the next year with a three-night run for Middleton's "Royal Doulton," a three-act comedy of manners about modern-day United Empire Loyalists; in 1932, the choice was "Chore Time" by that year's CLC president Colin Henderson.⁴⁸ The addition of Marguerite Bibby to the CLC infused their dramatic activities with new vigour. An English woman who had trained in elocution in London, and who married the scientist and playwright Harold Bibby, she founded the Children's Theatre Guild of Toronto in 1932, and was involved in other little theatre groups including the Tecumseh Drama Club.⁴⁹ The CLC continued to perform one-act plays throughout the 1930s, often by Denison, Harold Bibby, or Raymond Card, and theatrical personages such as Herman Voaden and Dora Mavor Moore made appearances as guest directors. That this created some dissension within the club, is apparent from an entry in the minutes stating that "Mr. French discouraged programmes which featured too much drama. Mr. French also believed that plays of some standing should be chosen."⁵⁰ The remark may have been a pointed reference to the mysteries or farces occasionally among their offerings; but he may have felt, as well, that dramatic interludes presented little opportunity for the detailed textual appreciation which was the hallmark of their honorary president. The need for more focused discussion may have been sensed by other members for another reason: club membership topped 225 in that year, so opportunities for interchange would have been curtailed.⁵¹ The result was the formation, in the late 1930s, of

47. Notice to Members, 23 February 1929.

48. *The Curtain Call* 1 (11 January 1930):4; *The Curtain Call* 2 (7 January 1931): 6.

49. H.M.R. [Hilda Ridley], "The Toronto Director of the Tecumseh Drama Club," *The Crucible* 5 (Christmas 1938): 1.

50. Minutes, 15 December 1932.

51. The membership information comes from *The Curtain Call* (Summer 1932):

five reading groups, each with its own convenor.⁵² The format for these sessions was the presentation of polished reviews by members: prizes for book reviewing and for short autobiographical studies of authors and their works, were added in the early '40s to the fiction and poetry prizes.

For Donald French, it may be inferred, the study of literature involved the discernment of the author's sentiments, ideation, and technique, which should be (in order) sincere, idealist, and refined. But while he evidently felt that poetry was the form that most repaid such study, he was prepared to acknowledge the merits of a wide range of prose genres, as were the other club members. While the CLC would also begin to narrow its sense of the "literary" in the years following the Second World War, in its first stage it kept the broad definition of "literary" activity characteristic of the nineteenth-century and turn-of-the-century literary societies, giving the oratorical arts a place, and holding to a more elastic definition of "literature" itself, with a wider generic range, and with the terms "literary" and "cultural" on occasion used interchangeably. Thus, for all its attention to the publications of the current day, the CLC adhered to literary paradigms that were becoming dated. Lectures and discussions of Canadian journalism (and of war journalism, and of women journalists), music (both secular and liturgical), folk songs, folklore, and radio drama, were some of the ways the CLC strayed from the path of the "literary," strictly speaking; and in other activities, such as Margaret Marshall Saunders' discussion of the similarities between humans and animals, or a display of ornamental driftwood and a lecture on the inherent "poetry" of its forms. Further indication of the CLC's eclecticism of taste is shown by a pair of "favourite author" elections held by the CLC in the autumn of 1935 and the following winter. The editor of the *Club News* asked the members "Who Is Your Favourite Canadian Poet?" and offered a list of "most of our outstanding poets" to which CLC members were free to add (see appendix B). While the eventual results are predictable – Bliss Carman received the laurel, with Marjorie Pickthall in second place, and Roberts and Lampman tied for third – the juxtapositions of the list are (to a twenty-first century eye) more unusual, as emblemized by the metonymic relationship of two poets each of whom had recently been the subject of a CLC evening programme: Annie Charlotte Dalton, the west coast "mystical" poet, and E.J. Pratt, the historical

⁵² Notice, 28 February 1939.

epicist from Newfoundland. (Pratt, now appointed at nearby Victoria College, would read to the group on numerous occasions.) The list is noteworthy, too, in nearing gender-parity, with women composing 11 of the 25 names on this list.

Results could not be so easily achieved for the prose competition, and not only because there were more potential contenders as well as some delicacies to observe. (There were prose writers among their own members, and Margaret Marshall Saunders had been the association's honorary vice-president since 1923). Again the editor offered a list of names (see appendix C) – there were fifteen women, and twenty-five men – but in this case, the original slate was overturned by later nominations from the members. Names like Thomas Chandler Haliburton, William Kirby, even the dean of Canadian letters Charles G.D. Roberts, were replaced by the following finalists: William Lacey Amy ("Luke Allan"), Leslie G. Barnard, "E. Barrington" (Lily Adams Beck), Harold Bindloss, Morley Callaghan, Ralph Connor, James Oliver Curwood, Coningsby Dawson, Mazo de la Roche, Lloyd Douglas, Louis Hémon, Fred Jacob, Raymond Knister, Stephen Leacock, John Mitchell ("Patrick Slater"), Robert Norwood, Martha Ostenso, Laura Goodman Salverson, Arthur Stringer, and Alan Sullivan. The list is an interesting alphabetic merger of well-known popular authors (Connor, de la Roche, Leacock), with emergent modernists and prairie realists (Callaghan and Knister, Ostenso and Salverson), and with authors known in their day but currently lost to view. (Who today could discuss the prose of Amy, Bindloss, and Dawson, or even name their most important works?) While the results of this particular competition are not known, the list illustrates the dominating tastes of the CLC members, and further evidences its increasing emphasis on the works of women.

The club's own constituency is reflective of this change, for by the early 1930s – the first years for which detailed membership lists are available – women dominated the membership. Of 186 members on the roll for the 1932-33 season, 158 were women, and the club elected its first female president, Mrs. W. Nelson Campbell, for that year.⁵³ It is difficult to interpret these figures with precision – were women more likely to pay their dues in a timely fashion?⁵⁴ had the Arts and

53 A Mrs. Miller – otherwise unidentified – had stepped in the year before when the elected (male) president was unable to serve.

54 The membership lists can be used in only a guarded fashion. In the early '60s the club was still remarking on the disjunction between paid memberships and attendees (R.L. Mudge to Executive Committee, 1 September 1961).

Letters Club, to which many cultural figures belonged, attracted the male members? – but the programs indicate that men remained active as participants and visitors even if relatively absent from the roll. Of the 26 presidents who served one or more terms after Donald French assumed that title honorifically in 1927, 14 were men and 12 women, and from the '40s onwards the club maintained what appears a conscientious male-female alternation. From a later feminist perspective, the gender redistribution of the club was accompanied by a gender stratification: while members continued to present reviews and reports to one another, there was an increased reliance upon experts and external lecturers, as male poets, editors, and professors addressed the female-dominant audience of the CLC. (The division into reading groups noted just above, would have given these female members a greater chance to speak.) This gender distribution would continue for the remainder of the club's existence: ten years later, there were 130 women to 37 men; by 1959 there were 78 to 14; and toward the end, in 1970, 64 women to 18 men. Many of the male members, it appears, were stalwarts from the early days or attending conjointly with their spouses (or both).

Just as one may speculate on the degree to which the Arts and Letters Club – or other groups, such as the Century Club or the Dickens Fellowship – were competing organizations to the CLC, one may also wonder what needs could be met by the CLC that were not addressed by other organizations. Beginning in the late 1920s, the CLC had begun to encourage the production of original Canadian writing. While the plan for a nation-wide dramatic competition was never realized, it began to offer prizes for poetry and for short stories – and later, as mentioned above, for critical review essays as well – although entry to the competitions was initially restricted to their own members. Blind submissions were judged by the club's "editor," sometimes assisted by local literary personages such as Marshall Saunders or E.J. Pratt.⁵⁵ There were small cash prizes but also the opportunity to showcase a winning entry at the annual "Contest Night" which became a feature of the CLC calendar beginning in the season of 1925-26, and which superseded the more open "Contributors Night," which had been inaugurated somewhat before.⁵⁶ (That Laura Ridley and Hilda Ridley were members of the CLC is perhaps not incidental to this new emphasis: they were the convenors of the

⁵⁵ Contest announcements, 1928-1965.

⁵⁶ The absence of programs or minutes from 1921-24 precludes precise dating.

Writers' Craft Club and now the editors of *The Crucible: A Quarterly Publication Dedicated to Canadian Literature in the Making*, a journal designed to provide information and support for fledgling authors. They had looked to the CLC for both subscriptions, and members for the editorial board.) This new direction may also be referred to the gender distribution of the membership of the 1930s, for it is plausible that women saw the organization in which they felt most comfortable as a forum for their own amateur and, they may have hoped, one-day professional, efforts.⁵⁷ This burgeoning activity appears to have altered public perception of the CLC as well, and by 1934 the executive issued a corrective: "May we emphasize here the fact that this is a club for the study of literature, not, as some persons wrongly infer, a club of writers. On its membership roll will be found the names of business men and women, persons of various occupations and ages, as well as a few authors, professional and amateur."⁵⁸ However, the CLC's current connections with the Canadian Authors Association (CAA) would have done little to overturn the assumption. Nathaniel Benson (an advertising executive who was also a poet, an anthologizer, and the director of the Electra Theatre Players) was on the national executive of the CAA simultaneous to his CLC presidency from 1938-40: during his tenure, literary club members were welcomed to the authors' association events, and the CLC and its library were housed in the Writers' Club at the corner of Yonge and Adelaide, headquarters of the Canadian Authors Association and several other literary organizations.⁵⁹ Further, Donald French had been a charter member of the Canadian Authors Association – his name appears on the earliest membership lists – and had served two years as president of the Toronto branch of the CAA in 1931 and 1932.⁶⁰ Since then

57 In the 1934-35 season, 8 of the 9 literary prize winners were women, according to an unidentified newspaper clipping headed "Literary Ladies."

58 Newsletter announcing 1934-35 season. Underscores in the original.

59 There were other less formal overlaps as well. Club minutes mention the Elson Club – a writers' group convened by journalist and critic John M. Elson under the auspices of the University of Toronto, presumably its extension department – and French reminded members of the "Writers' League" luncheons at the Willow Inn. (The group is not identified: French may well have been referring to the Toronto Writers' Club, also known as the Writers' Club of Toronto.)

60 CAA membership lists in Canadian Authors Association Toronto Branch fonds, "Correspondence 1921-1922," MS Coll. 101, Fisher Library. The minutes for the years of French's presidency are not extant. He may also have been the editor for a time of the CAA's *Bulletin* (later *Authors' Bulletin*). See also Canadian Authors Association records in the William Arthur Deacon fonds.

he was continuing to provide an infrastructure for authors based in Toronto and indeed more broadly: operating writing workshops, editing a long-running journal, publishing numerous writing guides and authors' handbooks, and offering criticism to aspiring authors both in person and through correspondence. His career provides a glimpse of the piecework undertaken by hard-pressed literary labourers in the dirty thirties.

The loss of the early records of McClelland and Stewart makes it difficult to estimate French's role in the firm during the 1930s. While some accounts list him as editor-in-chief, George Parker (who was able to consult the original records prior to their destruction) has noted that French's influence waned after the 1920s, and that while he continued to be employed by the firm as a reader into the 1940s, many of his projects were turned down during the Depression.⁶¹ Whether from interest or from economic necessity, French maintained multiple other forms of employment in the 1920s and 1930s, continuing as a freelance writer and taking on freelance editorial work. In the mid-1920s, and again from 1929 to 1931, French had contributed a column titled "Writer's Corner" to *The Canadian Bookman* (along with a baker's dozen of other articles on literary topics): the 31 columns provide detailed technical advice to writers of short stories and poetry, as well as more general guidance on copyright and publishing.⁶² Drawing on the reputation he had gained through these columns – and continuing a strand of work extending back to the correspondence school of the 1910s and his "amateur poets" competitions for the *Sunday World* – French set up in business as "The Writers' Studio," which functioned as an editorial bureau (although not as a literary agency) and as a publishing house. He provided epistolary criticism for rates ranging from a dollar per poem to five dollars for a novel: judging from a few samples in his scanty personal papers, authors would have been well-served by his frank and detailed assessments of the quality both of thought, and of technique. Such advice was made more generally available through a series of gestetnered publications, again distributed by The Writers' Studio: published essays advised writers, variously, on verse, short story, and article writing (*Lessons in Verse Writing*, *Story Writing Course*, and *Why Not Write Articles?*).⁶³

61 Parker, "History," 229.

62 These are listed in Grace Heggie and Anne McGaughey, *Index to Canadian Bookman* (Toronto: McLaren Editions, 1993), 58–59.

63 Donald G. French, *Lessons in Verse Writing* (Toronto: [The Writers' Studio], 193-); *Story Writing Course* (Toronto: [The Writers' Studio], 193-); *Why Not Write*

A more compendious guide, *The Canadian Writers' Notebook*, went through several printings and at least two editions (in 1932 and 1934).⁶⁴ French also edited, published, and largely authored, a long-running journal titled *The Writers' Studio: A Monthly Aid for All Who Write – Amateurs, Professionals, or Beginners*, which was in existence from 1933 until at least 1942, and which (according to an early editorial) grew out of the *Canadian Writers' Notebook*.⁶⁵ *The Writer's Studio* represents an attempt by French to commercialize on activities he was already performing for free, as he wrote to William Arthur Deacon when promoting his new enterprise: "The little magazine is a sort of evolution arising out of the constant inquiry for information about the 'game.'"⁶⁶ The magazine offered French's characteristically finetuned (or finicky, depending on one's point of view) observations on technique, notices of markets and literary competitions, reviews of books of interest to authors, and some publication of original works. From the literary historians' perspective, it is of particular interest for its columns of correspondence, as depression-era writers, often in remote rural communities or settlements, used *The Writers' Studio* as a way to maintain cultural and intellectual connections and keep up their creative spirits. The magazine also ran annual poetry and short-story writing competitions, with judging by the editor and cash prizes to be awarded, for which competitors were charged an entrance fee. This was a money-maker for Donald French, and also one which generated suspicion, as evidenced by a Better Business Bureau letter investigating whether the promised prizes had, in fact, ever been awarded.⁶⁷ (There is no reason to suspect French of dishonesty in this scheme however. There may have been a complaint by a disgruntled sonneteer, and some unanswered correspondence in his files suggests that French became more disorganized, not only with age, but after the tragic accidental death of his wife in 1938.) That there was money to be made, however precariously, in the long-distance critiquing of poetry and prose for novice writers anxious to supplement their own

Articles? (Toronto: The Writers' Studio, n.d.). Copies of these three publications are in the Toronto Reference Library. Other publications, such as *Five Hundred Places to Sell* and *The Studio Poets' Notebook*, have not been located.

64 Donald G. French, *The Canadian Writers' Notebook* (Toronto: [The Writers' Studio], 1932); 2nd ed. 1934.

65 Editorial, *The Writers' Studio* (15 March 1934), n.p.

66 French to William Arthur Deacon, postcard, 26 November 1933, Deacon fonds, box 9.

67 Letter in Donald French fonds.

incomes through sales or literary prizes, is indicated by the fact that several other Toronto-area editors were in competition. Hilda Ridley taught courses and provided editorial services through her "Crucible Service," while author Alan Creighton promised to show authors how to "Modernize Your Poetry Technique" at 3 cents a line.⁶⁸ It may be noted, parenthetically, that "editors" as a group have yet to receive their fair share of analytical attention. While we have studies of important figures such as Lorne Pierce and William Arthur Deacon, poetry correspondence schools and criticism-by-the-inch have usually remained beneath the radar of book history and literary scholars.⁶⁹

In addition to his paid services, French continued in literary efforts of a voluntary nature. The poetry group of the Toronto CAA was inaugurated when he served as president of the Toronto branch, and he was indirectly responsible for others: the Calgary CAA branch started their sub-group after studying his columns of poetic advice in the *Bookman*.⁷⁰ In 1940 French also began to convene a small writers' workshop, The Poetry Group; he maintained the group right through his final illness and it was, according to William Arthur Deacon, the last of the projects he let go.⁷¹ (The group itself survived him, into the 1950s.) Meeting at the Castlefield Avenue home that he shared with his second wife, the artist, novelist, and broadcaster Maida Parlow French, this tight group of seven participants (including Parlow French) engaged in general discussion of poetic topics and self-criticism of their own writings, distributed in advance of the meetings. French, as always, took the guiding role: there is a sheaf of poetry carefully annotated in his miniscule hand, and he seems to have been the final judge of whether a poem needed further work or could be "passed without revision." But French's concern, noted the members, was less with the niceties of expression, than with the underlying poetic conception: it was, as one of them called it, a poetic "carpenter's shop." (Members William Whitney, Dallas Banister, and

68 Advertisement in *The Crucible* (summer 1938).

69 Sandra Campbell, "Nationalism, Morality, and Gender: Lorne Pierce and the Canadian Literary Canon 1920-1960," *Papers of the Bibliographical Society of Canada/Cahiers de la Société bibliographique du Canada* 32, 2 (1994): 135-60; Clara Thomas and John Lennox, *William Arthur Deacon: A Canadian Literary Life* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1982.)

70 Lyn Harrington, *Syllables of Recorded Time: The Story of the Canadian Authors Association 1921-1981* (Toronto: Simon and Pierre, 1981), 246.

71 William Arthur Deacon, "Donald G. French: A Tribute," *The Canadian Author and Bookman* 21, 4 (December 1945): 22.

J. Patrick Byrne each contemplated "What the Poetry Group Means to Me" in a series of sketches published in *The Writers' Studio*.) Of the members, only one emerged to poetic prominence – Patrick Byrne, later Pádraig Ó Broin – who remained always grateful to French as his mentor. Ó Broin assisted French with the *The Writers' Studio* and published in its pages; and he was collaborating as well on French's book "Poetry in the Making: Lessons in Verse Writing," which was left in manuscript form at French's death in the spring of 1945.⁷²

In the early 1930s, French was sketched for the *Mail* in a verbal "Picturette," as the incoming president of the Toronto branch of the CAA. After characterizing him as the "strong, silent" type, the anonymous author turned to his place in the literary world. French could be considered the "kindest and most trouble-taking of men" for the pains he has taken not only with authors, but with readers:

he has tried, so far as it has been in his power, to satisfy the hunger for reading, and for fuller knowledge of writers that he knows exists among those who are far from good libraries, and away from the currents of literary thought. For years he has lectured on literary topics and writing folk, and the meat of his information has always been garnished with the whimsicality for which those who know him best have learned to look. One of the outstanding characteristics of this man is his conviction that Canada can provide ample material for all types of writers and all types of books, and if sometimes he may seem too lenient to Canadian authors and their errors, it is because he does not want to destroy anything that may contribute to the record – social, political, historical – of his native land.⁷³

Later, in William Arthur Deacon's obituary tribute in *The Globe and Mail*, which was republished in the *Bookman*, Deacon also reflected on French's reticence, and an "excessive reserve" which Deacon confessed himself unable to penetrate. He remarked on "the strange spectacle of a man with an instinctive feeling for words and by temperament inarticulate."⁷⁴ French's low profile even today can be attributed in part to his own self-presentation, his modesty and reserve, and to the placement of his literary talents, more and more, at the service of others.

72 Information from Pádraig Ó Broin fonds, MS 247, Fisher Library. See box 2, folder 9 re: Poetry Group, as well as the manuscript of "Poetry in the Making."

73 "A President Elect," *Mail*, 14 May 1931.

74 Deacon, "Donald G. French."

With some irony, the minutes for the CLC are missing for the year of French's death and several years to follow, but the reaction of the members must have been profound. Maida Parlow French assumed the honorary presidency after her husband's death, and the club instituted an annual "Founder's Night" in the 1961-62 season: part tribute, part reminiscence, part lesson for the newer or younger members in the heritage of the club. (Presidential correspondence from the closing years sometimes lamented how few of its current members had known the CLC's originator.) By the late 1940s the CLC had settled into a format which it would follow with fidelity until the end.⁷⁵ In addition to the Founder's Night – set for February, in proximity to French's birthday – members would present reviews of the year's "Fiction," "Poetry" and "Drama" on evenings specially devoted to those topics. The drama evening could include the reading of a play, but the full-fledged productions were a thing of the past. They continued the tradition of the "Contest Night" and usually had a Christmas entertainment as well as a social evening or at-home to round off the season. Writers, publishers, academics, and theatrical personages continued as visiting speakers or guests at meetings, but the recast program structure allowed a more direct involvement by this shrinking membership circle and stressed their social connections, which were for some of very long standing. (The widow of elocutionist F.W. Hayden remained a member until she died at 102.) It may be observed that the prevalence of the "review" format narrowed the generic range of the group somewhat, and threw the emphasis onto contemporary writing. While the club's activities were curtailed in its senior years – it was not, for example, among the more than 470 groups that made submissions to the Massey Commission – it remained active and connected albeit to a diminished degree.⁷⁶ E.J. Pratt and William Arthur Deacon each served long

75 In answer to a request by president Reta Daniels in 1946 that he publicize their club, William Arthur Deacon refused, with a lengthy and candid critique of the lack of focus caused by mixing writers and readers in the same association, and of the superficiality of their study. Further, the group could no longer support writers as it previously had. "Once your mere existence was an encouragement to Canadian authors. Today is not more required?" In a further letter, Deacon reminisced about the early days when the CLC "carried the banner." William Arthur Deacon to Reta Daniels, 12 February 1946; 25 February 1946, Deacon fonds, box 4.

76 A list of submissions to the Royal Commission is given in an appendix to Paul Litt, *The Muses, the Masses, and the Massey Commission* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1992).

terms as honorary vice-presidents; novelists Laura Salverson and Isabelle Hughes, biographer Elsie Pomeroy, playwright Raymond Card, and Colonel E.L. Thompson, of the Guild of All Arts, each served as president in the 1950s; other literary figures such as Dora Hood (whose Bookroom specialized in Canadiana), or the book collector W. Perkins Bull, were among the active members. Indeed the club continued to retain a public profile judging by the amateur authors who sent work for critique, and by an interesting letter from a Helsinki bookstore seeking information about the new academic journal *Canadian Literature*: they had been given the CLC's address by the Canadian legation.⁷⁷ The Club developed a new mandate, of "encouraging young Canadians to become more familiar with their cultural heritage," in the wording of the revised credo.⁷⁸ But they saw their work as remaining in the spirit of the Founder even as the literature expanded and diversified in the newly nationalist and "McLuhanesque" sixties. So wrote then-president R.G. Adams: "This Club continues to demonstrate the objectives of its founder-teacher, Donald. G. French – to foster an appreciation of good literature, whatever the media, and to conserve the best that is Canadian from whatever source."⁷⁹

The title of this essay contains, of course, a readily-recognizable allusion to F.R. Scott's satiric poem "The Canadian Authors Meet" where the tea-sipping, aging, and mostly-female members (represented by the "poetess" Miss Crotchett) are mocked for an anachronistic admiration of "Confederation" poetry, lack of first-hand emotional experience, and formal timidity as they continue to set the "self same welkin" ringing. All of the key words in Scott's poem are found in the records of the CLC: the tea and cakes, the "Canadian topics," the "earnest thought," the overt patriotism of a group that for decades began and closed their meetings by singing the national anthem and "The Maple Leaf Forever." Their idealist aspiration was upward and their patriotism unmediated; they loved nature poetry and quaffed the anti-urban antidote of the rural idyll; their taste for the experimental could not extend comfortably past *vers libre*. While they believed that they had access to the finest expressions of a national culture, one could characterize the CLC's taste as "middlebrow" without

77 Akateeminen Kirjakauppa to Norman E. Horn, 25 January 1961.

78 Program, 1963-64.

79 R.G. Adams to Alan C. Coman, 22 May 1968.

participating in Scott's condescension. (Indeed, I hope that the reasons for including groups such as the CLC in English-Canadian literary history, have emerged clearly enough in this essay.) Donald French shared those tastes, and – despite his seemingly elevated position as “literary” editor – lived in a world of contests and contracts, freelance editing jobs, anonymous piecework, and criticism-by-correspondence. The commercial nature of his activity is highlighted by the choices and compromises he, and other writers and editors, made of necessity during the Depression; but they display as well the changing conditions of literary labour in the transition period to mass literary production. The term, again, is “middlebrow,” used this time not only as an indicator of taste but as a locator in (what Pierre Bourdieu would call) the field of cultural production, in which the “high art” values of literary singularity come into a contradictory encounter with new and expanded systems of production and distribution: where, in other words, “modernism,” and modern commodification, meet.⁸⁰

Robert Darnton's difficulty in connecting the “reader” to authorial production was caused, one could argue, by more than a lack of scholarly resources at the time of his writing, since a quarter-century later the uncertainty, more generally, persists. Or, rather, it has been solved in a particular way: by segueing readerly activity into the authorial “productive” realm. This occurs in both the fields of “theory” – reader-response work that stresses the reader as fully participant in the construction of textual meaning – and “research,” as with a current tendency in sociology of readership to focus on the ways in which readers in turn become literary producers (through fanfic involvement, for example). There is every reason to believe that the readers of the CLC engaged with their books actively and imaginatively, and incorporated what they read (the “special messages”) into their lives; and it is also evident that they took a strong hand in creating the conditions and circumstances for their own reading practice. They were far from passive. It is further the case, that the activities of CLC members collectively and individually spanned a variety of productive, distributive, and consumptive activities (to use the common triad of book history). They authored and published (minutes, newsletters, creative writing); publicized and circulated (through lectures and

80 Pierre Bourdieu, “The Field of Cultural Production,” in David Finkelstein and Alistair McCleery, eds., *The Book History Reader* (London and New York: Routledge, 2002), 77-90. On the interconnection of modernist aesthetics and modern modes of production see Radway, 127-53.

dramatic performances); and provided live and print audiences for their authors. But they were also readers *qua* readers and purchasers of books, an activity they saw as central to their support of Canadian letters: "Authors write books to be read. In many instances their writings are their bread and butter. Even though a small royalty may not be the chief source of their livelihood, nevertheless authors want you to read their works... It is the desire and purpose of the club to assist our authors to become better known and further to increase the sale of their past, present and future works."⁸¹ As cultural critic Susan Willis has perspicuously noted, it has been easier for cultural critics to focus on the sphere of cultural production, than to examine and theorize such manifestations of cultural consumption.⁸²

The question that remains, is what can the Canadian Literature Club, or other such associations, tell us about not only *Canadian* readers, but Canadian *readers*? Further exploration is needed of this interface of the consumptive and the productive (and the commodified and the aesthetic) if we are to better understand how the Canadian readers, and authors, meet.

81 Newsletter, 11 October 1952.

82 Willis gives two reasons for this phenomenon: a focus on production coming from Marxist forms of cultural analysis; and a tendency to overlook "consumption" as a female-gendered activity. See Susan Willis, *A Primer for Daily Life* (London and New York: Routledge, 1991).

APPENDIX A: AN OPENING CANON,
JANUARY 1915 - DECEMBER 1919

Authors discussed at CLC meetings, according to minutes and programs (not including authors who were then club members themselves, or authors mentioned in the brief notices of new books). An asterisk indicates specific listing on a published program.

William Banks	*Rev. R.E. Knowles
Harold Begbie	*Archibald Lampman
Jean Blewitt	Z.A. (Zebulon Aiton) Lash
Gena Branscombe	*Agnes Laut
Augustus Bridle	Miss Lawsey ?
*William Francis Butler	*Stephen Leacock
*William Wilfrid Campbell	*James Edward LeRossignol
*Bliss Carman	*William D. Lighthall
Frank Carrel	Harold G. Louvrey?
Charles Cassen	Peter McArthur
*Charles William Colby	*Nellie McClung
*Ralph Connor	H.B. McConnell
*Isabella Valancy Crawford	*William Wilbur McCuaig
*John Henry Crichton	Agnes Maule Machar
Sarah Anne Curzon	*Tom McInnes (also MacInnes)
James de Mille	*Isabel Ecclestone MacKay
Col. John Hunter Duvar	*Archibald McKishnie
*William Henry Drummond	*Alexander McLachlan
*Norman Duncan	*Charles Mair
*William Alexander Fraser	*"Suzanne Marny" (Mabel Johnston)
R.W. Geary	George Millner
Alfred Gordon	*Lucy Maude [sic] Montgomery
*Thomas Chandler Haliburton	*Susanna Moodie
M.O. Hammond	Llewellyn Morrison
Charles Heavysege	"Anison North" (May Wilson)
Norah Holland	*Robert Norwood
Dr. James L. Hughes	James Macdonald Oxley
*Pauline Johnson	*Frank L. Packard
*Marian Keith	*Valance Patriarche
"The Khan" (Robert Kirkland Kernighan)	*Gilbert Parker
Basil King	*Marjorie Pickthall
*William Kirby	*John Richardson

*Charles G.D. Roberts	*Alan Sullivan
*Theodore Goodridge Roberts	*Adeline Tesky
Margaret Marshall Saunders	*Edward William Thomson
*Duncan Campbell Scott	*Catharine Parr Traill
Rev. Frederick George Scott	Bernard Freeman Trotter
*Robert W. Service	*Cy Warman
*Ernest Thompson Seton (also
Seton Thompson)	*Robert Watson
Virna Sheard	Robert Watson (may be same
as above)
*Rev. William Wye Smith	Agnes Ethelwyn Wetherald
*Robert J.C. Stead	*George M. Wrong
Arthur Stringer	Rev. Egerton Ryerson Young

APPENDIX B: FAVOURITE CANADIAN POETS,
AUTUMN 1935

WHO IS YOUR FAVOURITE CANADIAN POET?

Let's vote.

Next meeting bring on paper the name of your favourite Canadian poet, together with the titles of the best loved selections from his work.

You will find below a list of names of most of our outstanding poets. Perhaps we have missed your favourite. If so, tell us.

Sir. Charles G.D. Roberts

Bliss Carman

Archibald Lampman

Duncan Campbell Scott

Wilfred Campbell

Francis Sherman

Isabella Valancy Crawford

Frederick Geo. Scott

Pauline Johnson

S. Frances Harrison

Ethelwyn Wetherald

Wm. Henry Drummond

Helena Coleman

Isabel Ecclestone Mackay

(Canadian Literature Club News

[Oct. 1935?])

Marjorie Pickthall

Robert Norwood

Arthur Stringer

Wilson MacDonald

Tom MacInnes

Theodore Goodridge Roberts

Annie Charlotte Dalton

E.J. Pratt

Katherine Hale

Audrey Alexander Brown

Jean Blewett

APPENDIX C: FAVOURITE PROSE WRITERS,
WINTER 1935-36

WHO IS YOUR FAVORITE [sic]?

Now that we have decided on our favorite poet, let us turn our thoughts to the prose writers of Canada. There are too many of importance to give a complete list, but here are some, and next month an attempt will be made to bring the list up to date.

Mrs. Susannah Moodie [sic]	Joseph Howe
Thomas C. Halliburton [sic]	John Richardson
Gilbert Parker	Roxanna [sic] Mullins
Sir Charles Roberts	[Leprohon]
Ernest Thompson Seton	Wm. D. Lighthall
Ralph Connor	Marshall Saunders
L.M. Montgomery	S. Frances Harrison
Marian Keith	Wm. MacLellan [sic]
Nellie McClung	[MacLennan]
Agnes C. Laut	Jean M. McIlwraith
W.A. Fraser	Norman Duncan
Frederick Wm. Wallace	Nina M. Jamieson
Robt. W. Service	Robert Stead
Robert Watson	John Murray Gibbon
Theodore G. Roberts	C.H.J. Snider
Archie McKishnie	E. Barrington
Marjorie Pickthall	Isabel E. Mackay
Arthur Stringer	Victor Lauriston
L. Adams Beck	Laura Salverson
Mazo de la Roche	Marjorie MacMurchy
William Kirby	(<i>Canadian Literature Club</i>
James de Mille	<i>News Nov. 1935)</i>

SOMMAIRE

Pendant de nombreuses décennies, le Canadian Literature Club of Toronto (1915-1973) s'assura une forte présence sur la scène culturelle torontoise. Il s'efforça d'encourager le développement de la littérature canadienne-anglaise en faisant la promotion de livres canadiens, de monter une dramaturgie originale et d'apporter un soutien aux auteurs. Le club fut fondé par l'éditeur et pigiste Donald French qui resta fidèle aux principes et aux méthodes qu'il avait proposés à l'origine. Cet article retrace l'historique du CLC en abordant les étapes de la carrière de Donald French et son rôle dans la création d'une infrastructure littéraire et éditoriale propre au Canada. Il examine également certains problèmes actuels auxquels font face le CLC et son fondateur dans le domaine de l'histoire du livre et l'histoire littéraire canadienne. Ainsi comment devons-nous envisager plus concrètement la relation entre les lecteurs et les écrivains? Est-il possible de conceptualiser le rôle du lecteur autrement que comme consommateur culturel? En quoi consiste le rôle de l'éditeur dans la production culturelle? Quel est le lien qui existe entre les organisations locales ou régionales et la culture dite nationale? ou encore entre une culture bourgeoise ou «sans grandes prétentions» et l'art noble ou sérieux? L'article fait valoir l'importance d'inclure les organisations populaires tel que le Canadian Literature Club dans l'historiographie littéraire.