

PROBLEMS OF EQUILIBRIUM

FOR THE THIRD YEAR, *Canadian Literature* announces the award of the University of British Columbia's Medal for Popular Biography. Fewer good biographies were published in 1963 than in 1962, but there were still several very competent books in the field; after lengthy consideration the panel of judges, consisting of S. E. Read, Donald Stephens and George Woodcock, decided to award the Medal to *Lord Selkirk of Red River* by John Morgan Gray. A review of this book by one of the judges appears in this issue of *Canadian Literature*; here it is enough to say that, besides being based on copious research, *Lord Selkirk of Red River* is a finely written book which presents vividly the complex historical background to Selkirk's life without diminishing our interest in the personality of its hero. In doing this Mr. Gray has solved the vital problem of equilibrium between man and environment which faces every historical biographer and defeats so many.

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IN SPITE OF THE VIKINGS and Cartier, the discovery of Canada by American magazine editors is an almost annually recurrent event. Trapped in their myths of the Last Frontier, these hearty pioneers usually regard the country to their north as a kind of misty hinterland to their own shining world, where the ghost of Manifest Destiny can walk again in the shape of the American investor or the American big-game hunter. A recent special issue of *Holiday* has somewhat changed the customary perspective; instead of Americans talking about Canada, the task of presenting the country has been

given to a visiting English writer, V. S. Pritchett, and a team of eight Canadians, including a quartet of novelists — Hugh MacLennan, Robertson Davies, Mordecai Richler and Jack Ludwig.

The result is not the glowing symposium one might have expected from such a group of writers. But what one does read in this issue of *Holiday* at least emphasizes some interesting facts about the relationship which exists in Canada between journalism and the art of writing. For it is V. S. Pritchett's leading article, *Across the Vast Land*, that dominates the magazine in quality as well as in length. It is urbane and perceptive, full of those quick and penetrating insights by which a practiced traveller can often reveal the truths about us which are too near for our own ready perception. It presents sensibly and accurately the characteristics that make Canada a country different from others and Canadians a people elusively distinct. It is, above all, admirably written, as clear and controlled as its author's short stories or his excellent critical explorations in the *New Statesman*. Here is a writer who maintains at its best the tradition and the pride of the European man of letters, to write at the height of his powers no matter what the occasion.

In comparison, the Canadian contributors either plod with elephantine slowness or strike feebly provocative attitudes; the one thing they have in common is that none of them is doing his best. And here, I suggest, they are victims of a pernicious attitude bred of the snobberies of North American *littérateurs* and encouraged by the deliberate Philistinism of Canadian magazine editors. The notion that there is a hierarchy of writing, with poetry, drama and fiction — united in current cant under "creative writing" — floating somewhere in the empyrean, and other genres wallowing in the depths below, is neither old nor universal. But it is persistent and powerful in Canada today, and it causes writers who practice in both fields — as necessity often forces them to do — to make a half-conscious distinction between the poems or novels which must be as good as they can make them, and the magazine articles which need merely be good enough to pass. Without exception, the editors of popular magazines in Canada — begin the roll with *Weekend* and end it with *Maclean's* — encourage this attitude by demanding articles that are cocky, superficial and shoddily written, and by deliberately discouraging anything that in terms of style or thought might demand a mental effort on the part of their readers.

These two influences have helped to create a double standard in Canadian writing. Not only is it demanded by editors — and presumably by well-conditioned readers — that articles published in large-circulation periodicals should be more

shallow and vulgar than anything one would expect to find between the hard covers of a "serious" book; writers themselves, led away by the notion that some genres are lower than others, produce two different levels of writing and seem unaware of what men like Gide knew all their writing lives — that a good article needs as careful shaping as a good story or a good play. And so, among the eight contributions by Canadian writers to the special issue of *Holiday*, we find nothing that is first-rate, even as journalism, and some remarkably bad writing. Robertson Davies, discussing *The Northern Muse*, at least produces a workmanlike and sometimes sparkling note on the main trends and names in Canadian writing, and Hugh MacLennan records some pleasant, ambling reminiscences of Cape Breton. These are the high points. Jack Ludwig leads what begins as a promising descriptive piece on Winnipeg into the bathos of column chatter: "There, in an office featuring autographed pictures of Elizabeth II and her Prince, I found Stephen Juba, the Mayor"; "I spent time with Manitoba's Premier Duff Roblin, an intense man in his forties, and with Dick Bonnycastle, the chairman of Metro." And Mordecai Richler writes a piece on Canadiana, in which he builds up some grotesque Aunt Sallies out of accumulated mis-statements and proceeds to knock them down with great gusto and self-satisfaction. He accuses *Canadian Literature*, for instance, of publishing "straight-faced critical reports of thrillers and cookbooks"; instead, we have published, in his better moments, Mr. Richler. Nevertheless, Richler's attack on excessive preoccupation with the Canadian identity might have been salutary if he had not dissipated his energies in a back-slapping interlude on Toronto literary personalities and ended with an antique plea for annexation. "All we have to do is to acknowledge what's obvious to any foreigner. We're Americans."

To one foreigner at least, and a well-travelled one, our Americanness is not obvious. Noting what distinguishes Canadians' attitudes towards themselves and the world, V. S. Pritchett has no doubt that they give Canadian life a special flavour; he does not see us as American except in the wider, geographical sense.

The professional Canadian, let us agree, is absurd; so is the professional non-Canadian. History and politics, the English presence and the existence of Quebec, our sense of the great empty North and our paradoxical consciousness of being — in all but acres — a small nation on which the shadows of the Powers bear down, all help to mould our lives and hence our writings into something different from the lives and writings of people elsewhere. The fact is there; Mr. Richler's vehemence is one of its manifestations.