

SURVEYORS AND NATURAL HISTORIANS

LITERATURE IN CANADA has become like a land rising out of the sea, over which the surveyors march with rod and chain, recording their observations almost before the soil has had time to dry out. Here I do not refer to such tasks as reviewing and criticism, which are normal processes of any literary society, but rather to the vast activity which takes the form of assembling and arranging information. This publishing season in particular there is a notable influx of the kind of books that cultural surveyors produce, books which no one is likely to read for entertainment, æsthetic pleasure or moral edification, but which, standing on the right shelves, become useful tools for critics and scholars.

Two such compilations, fresh from the press, are on my desk as I write, and more, according to the publishers' announcements, will shortly arrive. Neither of the volumes which I now mention will find much of a market outside the university libraries, and both have been subsidized by the Canada Council to make their publication possible. The first is entitled *The Humanities in Canada* (University of Toronto Press, \$6.00), and has been prepared by F. E. L. Priestley. It is, by confession, a restricted survey, made, as Dr. Priestley indicates, "without seeking out the humanities in the larger community." This limitation — while no doubt it may have some justification in difficulties of space — is a serious one, not only because exceptionally fine work is being done in the humanities by institutions and individuals outside the universities, but also because the kind of encystment of the universities and of university scholarship which such a division promotes is both artificial and unhealthy. It leads, *inter alia*, to the humourless over-valuation of academic trivia; for example, articles on "Place Names of Kentucky Waterways and Ponds, with a Note on Bottomless Pools" and on "An

Early Use of the Feminine Form of the Word *Heir*” are recorded in the Bibliography of Scholarly Publication which takes up two-thirds of the volume, while important books by non-university scholars — such as John Morgan Gray’s recent biography of Lord Selkirk — are not mentioned. Even the coverage of the universities is incomplete; on a first quick glance through the pages I noticed the absence of three abundantly published Canadian scholars in the field of English Studies alone.

Much more directly concerned with literature *per se* than Dr. Priestley’s volume is a new biographical dictionary, *Canadian Writers — Ecrivains Canadiens* (Ryerson Press, \$8.50), compiled by Guy Sylvestre, Brandon Conron and Carl F. Klinck. This bilingual volume presents the essential biographical and bibliographical facts concerning those 325 writers, in English and in French, whom the authors of the dictionary regard as the most significant in our double tradition. The selection of subjects is good; almost every one of them is justified by either literary quality or historical interest. However, it was hardly wise of the compilers to go beyond the presentation of factual material if all they can offer in addition is the kind of capsule criticism which is neither epigrammatically pointed nor gnomically profound. We are not much better informed when we read of Daryl Hine, for example: “An academic poet, versatile in prosody and fluent in the language of symbol and myth, Hine presents in his vivid and haunting lyrics disparate aspects of experience”, or, of Wilfred Watson, “Watson’s sensitive awareness of the tragedy of existence and his warm humanity are evident in all his work.”

Canadian Writers is the forerunner of that much more massive work, prepared also under Dr. Klinck’s direction, the *Literary History of Canada*, which may have appeared under the University of Toronto imprint by the time this editorial is actually in print. From what we have seen of the advance proofs of this work, written by a considerable team of scholars, its publication will undoubtedly be an event of major importance in the study of letters in Canada; in our next issue we shall devote a special feature to considering the extent of its achievement.

While these native surveyors have been at their useful work, the plump, urbane figure of a famous literary natural historian has appeared on the same terrain to observe its exotic fauna. The American critic Edmund Wilson, still expressing hurt dismay that not everybody in Canada agreed unquestioningly with his judgment that Morley Callaghan was in the same league as Turgenev, has recently published in the *New Yorker* a trio of long and discursive essays entitled collectively: “O Canada: An American’s Notes on Canadian Culture.”

Undoubtedly the striking aspect of Wilson's look at Canada is the fact that, to this American *littérateur* with strongly social inclinations, the most interesting part of our country was obviously Quebec, and the most interesting Canadian literature that written in French. The second of his three essays is devoted entirely to a study of French-Canadian fiction; the third to an enquiry into French-Canadian nationalism and separatism in their political rather than literary aspects. Even the first essay, which has something to say about English-Canadian writing, is heavily overshadowed by Wilson's great preoccupation. *Canadian Literature* and A. J. M. Smith's *Oxford Book of Canadian Verse* are brought in as bilingual publications, and the two novelists with whom Wilson deals lengthily — and well — in this essay are Hugh MacLennan, with particular reference to his concern with the national identity of Canada and the two solitudes it contains, and John Buell, Montreal author of *The Pyx* and *Four Days*, who thinks of his own work as French in spirit and whom Wilson describes as "a good bridge for a transition to French Canada". In considering Smith's anthology, Wilson deals equally with French and English writers, and spends as much time on Emile Nelligan as he does on E. J. Pratt.

In other words, Wilson devotes about five-sixths of his space and attention to French Canada and one-sixth to English Canada. Whether this is the most informative presentation for American readers I cannot say, but it is certainly salutary for English-speaking Canadians to see the whole Quebec question through the eyes of an intelligent outsider, and also to read a group of first-rate assessments of French-Canadian writers. So far I have come across no English-Canadian study of the fiction of Anne Hébert or Marie-Claire Blais as sensitive and penetrating as Wilson's.

At the same time the whole Wilson trio raises the curious question of the difference between the internal and the external views of a country's literature. In continental Europe, for instance, Wilde, Byron and Charles Morgan have been taken far more seriously than they ever were in England, Poe was for long the great American writer, and, if one can judge from the cheap popular editions, Mazo de la Roche is still the favourite Canadian author. In the same way, to Mr. Wilson, the strange morbidities of French-Canadian fiction are, for the present at least, more piquant than anything younger English-Canadian writers have to offer, and the terrorists of Quebec are more interesting, evidently, than the terrorists of British Columbia.

In part, of course, this may be due to the accidents of travel. Most of Mr. Wilson's journeys have led him to the East, where Montreal has understandably

been more congenial, more exotic and more interesting to him than Toronto. At the same time one can observe French Canada, with its inner ferment and its rebellion against the real or imagined tyranny of the majority, taking shape in his mind as a North American symbol of the need — which he so passionately feels — to rebel against the creeping uniformity that is afflicting the modern world. In fact, he sees both Canada in general, and French Canada in particular, as examples, at different levels, of the resistance to monolithic authority, and ends in a cry of rebellious brotherhood which we may welcome even if we do not feel it to be entirely deserved:

And all power in its recalcitrance to that still uncoördinated, unblended, and indigestible Canada that is obstructing assimilation not only abroad but within itself! The problem we all have to face is the defense of individual identity against the centralized official domination that can so easily become a faceless despotism.

Doubtless if Mr. Wilson were familiar with western Canada he would be showing the same interest in the Doukhobors as he now does in the French Canadians. What his views may teach us in social terms is to value, despite their manifest practical inconvenience, those elements within our society which prevent its congealing into a coldly efficient State; what they may teach us in literary terms is the amount of fascinating and original writing that, for most Canadians, lies concealed on the other side of the language barrier. Few English Canadians, even among academics and writers, have read all the books by Quebec writers which Wilson discusses so intelligently, and this is an excellent ground for grievance on the part of French Canadians. But how many French Canadians, faced with an equal list of books by English-Canadian writers, would make a better showing?