

CANADIAN BIOGRAPHY

WE ARE PLEASED TO ANNOUNCE that the British Columbia Medal for Popular Biography, which is administered by *Canadian Literature*, has been awarded to Phyllis Grosskurth for her *John Addington Symonds: A Biography*, which the judges unanimously regarded as by far the best biography published in 1964 by a Canadian writer. Mrs. Grosskurth's book is a lucid and penetrating study of her subject. She considers carefully and delicately the tensions that afflicted Symonds as an upper-middle-class Victorian who spent half his life resisting and the other half guiltily accepting his homosexual inclinations; she suggests with appropriate obliqueness the reasons for the great gap between Symonds' evident promise as a writer and his actual literary achievement; above all, the architecture of her book is beautifully balanced, and the writing admirably sensitive and clear. *John Addington Symonds*, published in Canada by Longmans, stands so far above any other biographical work published by a Canadian during 1964 that there was no moment of doubt that it deserved the award.

This is the first time in many years that the U.B.C. Medal for Popular Biography has been awarded for a work on a non-Canadian subject. This does not mean that the judges in the past were unduly chauvinistic. During the years following the end of the last war there was a great burst of biographical activity directed at Canadian figures of historical importance, for the simple reason that few good Lives of the fathers of Canada actually existed. Now that the major part of this task is done, it is perhaps a sign of cultural maturity that Canadian scholars are showing an increasing tendency to look for subjects beyond our boundaries and in this way to re-assert continuity with the common Anglo-Saxon tradition.

“I FEEL, LIKE MOST OTHER VERSE WRITERS of my generation, that I do not know how much of my mind he invented, let alone how much of it is a reaction against him or indeed a consequence of misreading him. He had a very penetrating influence, perhaps not unlike an east wind.”

So, seventeen years ago, William Empson wrote of T. S. Eliot. In this year of Eliot's death the same might be said, and not only by verse writers, wherever English is used as a literary language. Even the youngest generation of writers belongs, by inheritance or derivation, to the revolution in creative and critical attitudes which Eliot and Pound, Joyce and Wyndham Lewis, Hulme and Ford, set going in the years between 1914 and 1922.

Revolutions usually develop in ways which surprise their originators, and there are many younger writers, in reaction against all preceding generations, who would deny Eliot's poetics as fervently as most modern writers deny those manifestations of religious and political conservatism which — in Eliot's case — illustrate how carefully we must avoid being influenced by a writer's opinions when we set out to judge him as a literary artist. But the fact remains that poetry and criticism in English, and to a less extent even drama, are different from what they might have been — in Canada and India as much as in Britain and the United States — because of that extraordinarily penetrative influence which Eliot began to wield in the crucial year of 1917, when he published both *Prufrock* and his first critical writings on Pound, and which persists even after his death.

Within the wider tradition of writing in English, the common elements are more important than those that mark the individuality of national or regional strains. Eliot, like James, stands as a symbol of the fact that, no matter how far writing in North America may become differentiated from that in Britain, impassable gulfs are never created, and influences that are vital still flow from land to land on the sea of a common language. What unites is as precious as what sets apart, and so we join in the tribute to T. S. Eliot, whose ultimate influence is perhaps incalculable, but without whom few of us — in Canada as well as elsewhere — would have written quite as we have done. Leaving to posterity the judgment of comparative greatness, it can still be said that Eliot, like Shakespeare and Wordsworth, like Dante and Gogol, was one of those artists who erect weirs across the stream of literature, making of what goes before them a past to which we cannot return, and forcing writers who follow them to choose the forms of expression that are proper to their times and places as well as to their own natures.

CONTINUING THE COMMON STRAIN, we may welcome, as an event of interest to anyone concerned with the circumstances under which writers work, the appearance of a fascinating study, *The Profession of Letters* (Toronto, \$5.75), by J. W. Saunders of the University of Leeds. Mr. Saunders is concerned with the development of a profession of writing in Britain from the time of Chaucer up to the present day. In the strict sense, professional writing for publication is no older even in England than the earlier part of the eighteenth century, and it appeared in Canada little more than a century afterwards. However, Canadian professional writers have relied very largely on publication in Britain and the United States, and it is only in comparatively recent years that the kind of responsible publishing which might be the foundation for a real local profession of letters has begun to appear in Canada. In the sense that every Canadian writer still hopes for London publication, both to make his royalties worthwhile and also to gain something more than a local accolade, what Mr. Saunders has to say is very much our business. Moreover, as Canadian publishing and a Canadian profession of letters develop and interact, there will undoubtedly be a great deal to learn from the experience of Britain, where the back lane to Parnassus is called Grub Street.

