

editorial

SHOOTS FROM AN OLD TREE

ONE OF THE MORE HAPPY consequences of traditional colonialism, in which it seems to differ profoundly from the atomic-economic imperialisms of our own day, has been its complex propagation of cultures—and particularly literary cultures. It is true that even today certain features of the North American way of living—usually the worst—and certain equivocal manifestations of Russian ideology, may find their way into the neutral regions of the earth. But the age is past when large numbers of colonists, of Britons and Spaniards, of French and Dutch and Portuguese, set out to make their homes in distant lands and carried with them their native literatures, rooted in the living soil of language. Little as one may wish to minimise in any way the destruction of indigenous cultures by the colonists, there is at least some consolation to be drawn from the fact that they did not create a cultural vacuum; Peru cannot give us back the world of the Incas, but it has given us the poetry of Cesar Vallejo; Mexico cannot give us back the world of the Maya, but it has given us the painting of Orozco.

The ties of language and literature in particular have proved more durable than those of politics. Two centuries after New France was forcibly detached from its parent country, almost as long after the United States detached itself from Britain, and nearly a century and a half after the American colonies of Spain became the republics of Latin America, the descendants of the colonists still speak French and English and Spanish with variations which, considering the time that has elapsed, are surprisingly slight. Printing has conserved languages in a way that was impossible during the centuries after the breakup of the Roman Empire. Nor has the literary heritage been lost; Racine and Shakespeare and Cervantes are as deeply read and understood in Montreal and San Francisco and Mexico City as they are in Paris and Oxford and Madrid.

Yet we have already recognised an American literature that—while sharing the same roots—is distinct from English literature, a Mexican literature that is distinct from Spanish literature, a way of writing in Quebec that is different from the way of writing in Paris. And we are becoming more and more aware that something very similar happens when Canadians and Australians use the English language to represent their own distinct and individual ways of life.

In fact, it is when “empires gleam / Like wrecks in a dissolving dream” that the cultures which grow in their shadows are liberated to take on new and various forms in the lands of colonisation. Rome has left its indelible mark on every European literature west of the Rhine, but this does not mean that French and Italian, Spanish and English literatures are merely offshoots of the Latin. Each has been moulded by the history and the physical environment in which it has developed. Yet the heritage of Rome—and the heritage of Greece before it—remain, diffused and immensely enriched by history’s long process of selective breeding.

The same is happening to the literature of Britain. The colonial empire merges and melts into the loose organisation of the Commonwealth, and while this is happening, the fragments of the culture which the colonists took with them begin to take on new life and new forms over all those regions where British men and women settled and where British administrators introduced their own conceptions of education.

In a recent issue of *Canadian Literature*, Dr. R. E. Watters showed how differently Australian and Canadian writers are solving their peculiar literary problems. The Penguin and Oxford anthologies devoted to poetry in Canada, Australia and New Zealand have further emphasised the differences between what is being written in the outlying lands of the Commonwealth and what is being written by poets in contemporary England. Now the subject has predictably aroused the interest of American scholars, and pioneer courses in Commonwealth literature are already being taught in some universities south of the border, while Cornell University Press has recently published an illuminating collection of essays, edited by Professor A. L. McLeod, under the title of *The Commonwealth Pen* (Thomas Allen, Toronto, \$3.75.)

The contributors Professor McLeod has gathered are mostly from the countries whose literature they discuss; Canada, for instance, is represented by our own frequent contributor, F. W. Watt. The panorama they present is one of contrast and variety. It is true, as one might expect, that the countries where a large proportion of the population speaks English as a first language are producing the

most copious literatures in that language. Poets like Roy Campbell and William Plomer and Charles Madge have long made us aware of the claims of South Africa, and in recent years the West Indians have been creating a vigorous and unique literature in English. At the same time, English has a special appeal in countries where many dialects and languages are spoken; writers in India and West Africa can actually command larger audiences in their own countries if they write in English than if they wrote in their own tongues, and so in both these regions one finds considerable and very original literatures in English which respond to regional conditions and are as far as Australian or Canadian literatures from being pale imitations of London models.

Much can be gained, and nothing lost, from closer links of understanding among these various awakening currents of literature in the English language, and one hopes that volumes like *The Commonwealth Pen* will be the beginnings of nearer contacts, both personally and through receptive reading, between writers in the great family of literatures which includes, besides all those described in Professor McLeod's symposium, the literatures of America and of Britain itself.

WITH GREAT REGRET we learnt of the recent death of Anne Wilkinson. Anne Wilkinson was one of the most sensitive and urbane poets of the generation that made the Forties in Canada so stimulating in its new literary departures. From the end of the War onwards her work appeared in the better literary magazines, and her first volume, *Counterpoint to Sleep*, was published by John Sutherland's pioneering First Statement Press in 1951. She was one of the founders of *Tamarack Review*, and remained closely associated with it until her death. She also wrote, in *Lions in the Way*, a highly personal history of the Oslers, from whom she was descended. Her death has silenced a clear poetic voice we had hoped to hear often again.