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Canadian Literature in English (review)

Cynthia Sugars



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She never considers the practical steps involved in adaptation, so her claims about creative process lack the empiricism that characterizes a useful theory. Describing the structure of each chapter, she writes, 'I first muse, meditate carefully upon the literary text, and then upon the film, sometimes interweaving, interstitching the two – a bit here and there.' This description of her style is precise in its omission of sustained analysis, and in its segmentation of literary and cinematic texts, a treatment that is surprising and inept in a book concerned with the relationship between the two.

Indeed, all too frequently *Dark Creative Passage* leaves its logic unhinged and its assumptions unquestioned. For example, a long section on the 'blindness' of space in Sei Shonagon's *The Pillow Book* relies on the prevalence of fans, blinds, and translucent walls in ancient Japan, a history that goes undocumented: 'We know enough about the construction of the Japanese temple or court buildings,' Imboden writes, 'to know that a certain kind of fragile translucency is there.' Here, as when she replaces analysis of texts and films with narrations of reading and viewing them, Imboden uses the first person plural as though writing in a voice that presumes agreement between author and reader could dispel the need to provoke, argue, and persuade.

Though Imboden focuses on the creative fecundity of dark space throughout, only at the end of the work does she refer to the darkened theatre of cinema, the communicative space through which audiences 'pass' to access films. In her description of the 'sacred darkness of this modern place of worship, the cinema theater,' she belatedly and incompletely accounts for the Christian mysticism that permeates the book. Religious thought also underpins Imboden's two earlier works, *The Church a Demon Lover* (1995), and *From the Cross to the Kingdom* (1987), but in *Dark Creative Passage* it goes undeclared as a primary critical framework.

Rather than casting light on the interpretive practices of filmic adaptors through systematic inquiry, Imboden's *Dark Creative Passage* reads as a highly personal meditation on creative process, and keeps the 'space' between texts and film in shadow. (JESSICA DUFFIN WOLFE)

W.J. Keith. *Canadian Literature in English*. Revised edition. 2 volumes. Porcupine's Quill. 220, 200. $24.95 each

This two-volume revised edition of W.J. Keith's literary history, *Canadian Literature in English*, is an expanded version of his 1985 book by the same title, which provides a valuable historical survey and analysis of Canadian writing from the eighteenth century to the present, with chapters organized by period and genre. Its focus is the formation of

a Canadian literary tradition, so the emphasis throughout is on linking authors within this trajectory. The major differences between the two editions are to be found in the organization of the chapters, an updating of the contemporary period to include works published in the intervening twenty years since the first edition, an updated list of suggested further readings, and the inclusion of a lengthy 'Polemical Conclusion' at the end of volume 2, which assesses the state of the humanities in the contemporary Canadian academy and the impending dearth of an educated reading public sufficiently qualified to appreciate serious literature.

Keith is well known among Canadian literary scholars as an incisive critic, unafraid to apply exacting evaluative criteria to Canadian writing. However, his opinions have also carried an edge of intolerance, which has lost him many supporters in the Canadian literary establishment. Many readers of this book will undoubtedly take issue with Keith's obdurate and sometimes defensive pronouncements about 'postmodernism' (which he always places in quotation marks). Unfortunately, this residue of the notorious 1980s culture wars pervades the book and ultimately dates it. A rift opened up within the field of literary studies in the early 1980s, a divide that has been formulated in different and often contradictory ways: between thematic critics and formalists, nationalists and cosmopolitans, cultural studies and literature, the ideologues (the 'politically correct' practitioners variously labelled 'postmodern,' 'postcolonial,' or 'feminist') and those committed to purely aesthetic criteria. These leftovers are a shame, because Keith's literary analyses merit attention from all camps. His discussion of the Canadian modernist movement is astute and wide-ranging, and his readings of Stephen Leacock, Frederick Philip Grove, Hugh MacLennan, and Irving Layton are second to none. He has much to add to discussions of Canadian literary history but unfortunately alienates potential supporters by not giving contemporary literary theorists and writers the same consideration that he grants to earlier writers and periods.

The contents of volume 1 remain essentially unchanged from the original edition. Keith's project is to trace a continuous Canadian tradition, or, as he puts it, to find signs of literary influence and 'cultural continuity.' This is unquestionably the greatest strength of the book. The clear plotting of a tradition is a welcome and satisfying way of ordering the mélange that has come down to us as the body of Canadian literature, and it is instructive to read a synthesis of literary influence within a local national context. The seriousness with which Keith approaches his task is admirable as he takes the time to make links across periods, enhancing the reputation of individual authors in the process. Comparisons between Malcolm Lowry and Frederick Philip Grove or between Thomas Raddall and William Kirby are

instructive. He is also to be congratulated for reaffirming many literary texts that have been neglected over the years, particularly the writings of Frederick Niven of the 1930s and 1940s.

The valuable contributions of Keith's original 1985 study make the limitations of the revised edition all the more disappointing. I would have welcomed Keith's considered commentaries on many contemporary Canadian writers, and even more, would have enjoyed an account of the ways the tradition has been quite powerfully continued and reformulated into the late twentieth and early twenty-first centuries, particularly given the revival of the historical novel and documentary poem in Canada. Postmodernism, after all, does not necessarily signify a break with tradition, but an incorporation of it. The opportunity to publish an expanded edition of his work, especially given the additional space provided by the two-volume format, would have afforded Keith the opportunity to build on the strengths of the first edition by enabling him to offer a significant extension of his discussion of post-1980 Canadian writing (including an expansion of the chapter on drama, which admittedly is weak in both editions). Instead, Keith allowed himself to be sidetracked by his bugbear, what he refers to as 'the new buzz-word: "Postmodernism"' (a term that was not all that 'new' in 2006, when the revised edition was published, and has since undergone rigorous assessment and criticism). This obsession reaches its epitome in the final 'chapter' of volume 2 entitled 'A Note on "Postmodernism," Jargon, Etc.,' in which we are privy to a stream of focused disdain for theoretical literary terminology. Then the introductory note to the bibliography of 'Further Reading' on Canadian literature states that it omits 'highly theoretical discussions, most thematic and conspicuously ideological studies, as well as writings that employ complicated and obscure jargon.' That leaves out the bulk of post-1980 literary analysis in Canada, thereby misrepresenting the literary historical field that this book aims to survey, not to mention depriving uninitiated readers of an accurate sense of the field of Canadian literary studies today. Postmodern and post-colonial writings may not be to the author's taste, but they are part of the literary critical field that forms his subject, all the more so because both approaches engage with 'tradition,' even if that engagement sometimes takes the form of critique.

Regrettably, Keith's resistance to contemporary theoretical movements, and the writers who have been championed by these critical movements, leaves a huge gap in this 'updated' study. Indeed, the additions to the literary history are not incorporated into the chapters from the 1985 text but are contained within a single chapter towards the end of volume 2 entitled 'Twenty Years After,' which means that the lines of influence and continuity that Keith sets up within particular

genres get muddled; this 'add-on' is at once too brief and inadequately integrated with the earlier discussions. As he notes in his preface to the revised edition, '[T]his book is a report on what has pleased me,' which means that many important and increasingly canonical authors have been left out. Keith states that he is uninterested in the 'avant-garde,' and so there is no consideration of such writers as bpNichol, Christian Bök, Jan Zwicky, Don McKay, Lorna Crozier, or Anne Carson. Likewise, there is a noticeable absence of many contemporary ethnic and regional writers – such important authors as George Elliott Clarke, Dionne Brand, Fred Wah, Wayson Choy, SKY Lee, Anne Michaels, Wayne Johnston, and Eden Robinson. While the critic is free to like or not like any of these writers (and Keith is not reluctant to include Canadian literary texts that are not to his taste in earlier sections of the book), a literary history is pressed to discuss them at the risk of misrepresenting the field, and indeed the 'tradition,' of contemporary Canadian writing. Aside from a brief discussion of Rohinton Mistry, M.G. Vassanji, and Neil Bissoondath, and a reluctant nod to Michael Ondaatje whose fiction, Keith feels, may not 'possess lasting interest,' the book considers very few writers outside of the Euro-Canadian mainstream. As Keith puts it in his preface to the 1985 edition, '[T]his book concentrates unabashedly on the mainstream.' And yet, it also concentrates on the forging of a tradition, and it may be that in the present day the tradition is being tweaked and appropriated and reformulated by many non-mainstream writers.

The omission of so many contemporary works seems ill considered, given Keith's stated focus on 'items from the Canadian past forming themselves into a coherent tradition,' notably in the works of John Newlove. At the very least, many of the recent practitioners of historical fiction might fit this pattern nicely, works such as John Steffler's *The Afterlife of George Cartwright*, Wayne Johnston's *The Colony of Unrequited Dreams*, Jane Urquhart's *The Whirlpool*, or Susan Swan's *The Biggest Modern Woman of the World*. Moreover, his repeated praise for John Metcalf's Porcupine's Quill literary critical publications appears more than a little nepotistic, given that Keith's book appears under the same imprint; volume 1 even bears an epigraph from Metcalf. In fact, the frequent citations of Metcalf's criticism, and the laudatory nods to *Kicking against the Pricks*, is puzzling, given Keith's stated commitment to establishing a Canadian literary tradition (not to mention the central place he gives to Duncan Campbell Scott), the very thing that Metcalf worked so hard to disprove in his infamous *What Is a Canadian Literature?*

Keith's defensiveness about the destructive impact of post-modernism, as he construes it in his additions in volume 2, detracts from what might otherwise have been an impressive and sensitive appraisal of Canadian literary history. He is at his best when offering

considered analyses of individual works and his prose is accessible and compelling. It is certainly a valuable enterprise to provide an updated edition of *Canadian Literature in English*, and the lavish Porcupine's Quill editions are always a pleasure to read. However, the knee-jerk diatribes against 'the trendy ''postmodernist'' present' are unnecessary and ultimately do the book and its readers a disservice. (CYNTHIA SUGARS)

Noah Richler. *This Is My Country, What's Yours? A Literary Atlas of Canada*
McClelland and Stewart. xiv, 476. $37.99

According to this literary 'psycho-geography' of Canada, Noah Richler's Canada is a country of dwindling communities, faltering company towns, and thin topsoil; a land ruled by patrician monopolies and indifferent authorities, which instil a 'sense of collective injury' fed by 'low-grade resentment'; a country that 'is constantly conspiring to wipe you out without trace' as if it were a 'testing country such as Job's tormentors might have conspired to set him in.' Canada is a nation founded on 'myths of disappointment': 'Stories that can be considered Canadian creation myths express a distrust of whatever is the prevailing power at the same time as they extol the virtues of the ordinary, modern, and racially sensitive Canadian who has been let down in some way.' This is Richler's country, what's yours, he asks provocatively in his title.

Given these glum conditions, one might expect a glum book – the effect of prolonged exposure to Frederick Philip Grove, perhaps – but instead his compilation of travels, interviews, and opinions is lively and entertaining. He keeps the reader on the move as he criss-crosses the country, weaving each chapter into a fabric of conversations reported (or reconstructed) verbatim, quotations from contemporary novels, and speculations about 'our national psyche.' He is fond of anecdotes and drawn to extremities: to the far north with its arctic mystique, to the interior of Newfoundland or the vastness of the prairies, to a 'forgotten Black hole of a district' in Vancouver's downtown East Side. A photo on the back flap shows him buried in winter gear, his eyelashes frosted with ice. In most places he presents himself as an inquisitive outsider, with the ironic effect that in 'his' Canada, Richler is an intruder, although a welcome one, as he is greeted with warmth, irony, and humour by a remarkable range of Canadian writers (he lists ninety-eight authors interviewed) who share their stories with him. The two focal points of his commentary are story and place, and how each inspires the other through an interweaving of fact and fiction. We define ourselves through narratives that arise from geographical, cultural, and ethnic locales, each with its own grounds for complaint. Richler is a