

Canadian Books: Crocuses in the Snow?

[A BRIEF REVIEW OF SOME OF WHAT'S BEEN GOING ON]



FOR DECADES it may have appeared to non-Canadians (and even, heaven forbid, to some Canadians) that the only creative writing man in all that land was Stephen Leacock. He was pictured, perhaps, sitting on the edge of his campus, facing a neat Canadian village which looked rather English, with an elk, a forest, and a Royal Canadian Mounted Policeman standing behind. Mr. Leacock was, to be sure, a very funny man and a credit to the hemisphere, but he was not the sum total of all Canadian writing.

Those few readers who got beyond Leacock seldom got beyond Hugh MacLennan or Morley Callaghan. Indeed, with the books on display in U.S. book stores (and even, heaven knows, in many Canadian book stores) there was not much further to go.

By the fifties, things began changing — gradually. Canadians who were writers began to achieve fame outside of Canada, but there was now a difficulty of definition. Some were not thought of as writers, certainly not primarily as writers; and some, in fact, were marginally Canadians.

John Kenneth Galbraith, born a Canadian, now a U.S. citizen, arrived as an interpreter of western society and Marshall McLuhan as its prophet. Writers of fiction, especially, seemed to prove the notion that Canada is a place people go to or come from. Leonard Cohen, for example, travelled all over and wrote about himself and the men and women he found there (in hundreds of poems and songs and a novel, *Beautiful Losers*). The highly regarded Margaret Laurence, author of *A Jest of God*, which became the movie *Rachel, Rachel*, lived in Somaliland and Ghana and now lives in England. Mordecai Richler (*The Apprenticeship of Duddy Kravitz*, and *Son of a Smaller Hero*, and many other things) went to London and wrote sometimes about home and sometimes not. Many other writers whom Canada could at least make a reasonable claim for — Brian Moore and Arthur Hailey, for example, were born elsewhere and now live elsewhere.

In the last few years, however, Canadian writing appears to have been coming home, and blooming, if not booming — at least part of the

reason being the intense new cultural nationalism in Canada.

Writers are writing in English and French, and the fiction writers in French, especially, are producing books that are particularly Canadian. Much of the new writing, born of the new nationalism, is nonfiction — political and social analysis and history. A best seller in Quebec, for example, is a slim Marxist history called *Petit manuel d'histoire du Quebec*.

Canadian publishers in both languages meanwhile are finding themselves with full lists, good sales, and, unfortunately, a critical shortage of cash.

The picture is not all bright, but let's look at the bright side first. The writers of Quebec are perhaps the most suddenly fruitful. French Canada has been culturally isolated and this, a disadvantage in many ways, has worked to the authors' advantage. Writing in French, they have the world of their interest near at hand with little temptation to look South.

Perhaps the best known French Canadian novelist is Marie Claire Blais and her subject is the Quebec in which she grew up, dated already in this time of rapid change. *A Season in the Life of Emmanuel* gives a rich, emotive picture of French Canadian life twenty or thirty years ago.

As William Roiter of the University of Montreal points out, French Canada is particularly rich in women writers and the modern French Canadian woman, a newly significant force outside the home, is the focal point of much current fiction.

Ann Hebert's novel *Kamouraska*, which won a number of literary awards in France after its publication last October, is unusual in that it looks backwards, to the Quebec of 1839, being based on a murder that occurred in that year.

Claire Martin has a recent novel of significance in *Les Morts*, and her two-volume autobiography, *Dans un Gant de Fer* (translated as "In an Iron Glove"), which concerns growing up in a Quebec convent, won the Prix France-Quebec, the Prix de la Province de Quebec, and the Governor General's Award.

Monique Bosco won the Governor General's Award with *La femme de Loth*, a novel about