

irving layton

The French Canadians are really asking us what we mean by being Canadians, what is Canada, what is the destiny of this country, have we got a shape, a character, a scope; what is the color of our skins?

They're the only ones who are asking these questions, and they're forcing the rest of the country to ask the same questions.

WHYTE: Do you think it's going to have any effect on English letters, as it has had on French letters?

LAYTON: No, I don't think so. The wall between the two cultures is pretty thick. It's going to be a missed opportunity.

There should be cross-fertilization, but I don't think there will be, because the rest of the country is not really interested in the kind of fight they are fighting.

To understand what is going on in Quebec is to be aware that three revolutions are taking place concurrently—the French revolution, the industrial revolution, and a socialist revolution.

Now, these revolutions are not of great interest to the rest of Canada, except possibly the socialist revolution, and even here the English Canadians are only mildly interested.

So the French Canadians feel very intensely about problems that the rest of the country do not feel. On top of that, of course, add nationalism.

You see, they really are nationalistic, but they are French Cana-



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dians before they are Canadians.

And they're not really interested in biracialism or biculturalism, you know.

What they want is to be masters in their own house.

They've got a territory, they don't want to be assimilated, and they feel this is the only way to prevent assimilation. I just spoke to an NDP candidate in Calgary; he's on the English staff . . .

THOMPSON: Ian Adam?

LAYTON: Yes, that's right. Now, he's a French Canadian. Of course he says, "With my name, Ian Adam, you'd think I come from good Scottish stock."

And he says, "You see, I'm a good example of what could happen to a French Canadian. I barely speak my language, I don't identify myself with French Canadians."

And people like Lesage think this is wrong.

They want to keep the identity of the French Canadian, and the only way to do it is to have control over education, possibly even over immigration and things like that.

So that's what they're fighting for, while we think of biracialism or biculturalism or bilingualism, and imagine that if everybody in Calgary speaks French as well as English (which we know won't happen) the problem will be solved.

Nonsense! I think the French are a lot more realistic on this matter than the English are, and I can't for myself see ourselves stopping them.

Because the French Canadian intellectual wants this sort of thing!

It's given him a tremendous sense of purpose, which the English Canadian has not got.

What ideals have the English Canadians got to fight for? They haven't got any.

What have you offered your students beyond success, a good job, a bungalow—that sort of thing?

Perhaps the French Canadians

able to travel from Halifax to Vancouver, and of having a status as a Canadian poet.

After all, I feel I've made a contribution even to Canadian unity. Along with anti-Americanism, I'm the greatest force keeping this country together.

THOMPSON: Speaking of anti-Americanism, do you feel a little worried by the American influence which is very strong in Canadian poetry today?

Do you think there has been too much emphasis on Ezra Pound and William Carlos Williams?

LAYTON: Yes, but that's more true, I think, in the west, and in particular in Vancouver, than in the east. The poets in Toronto or in Montreal are not influenced that much by the Black Mountain crowd. As you know, I've been identified with that crowd, but very wrongly.

THOMPSON: You were one of the people named in Frank Davie's "Tamarack Review" article that had a good long hearty laugh at being identified with that crowd?

LAYTON: Exactly, exactly. He got his information all wrong. It's true that they were the first to appreciate my immense talents when the Canadians were quite determinedly ignoring them.

You know, the first book that I had published by any publisher was by Robert Creeley, who brought out "In the Midst of My Fever" in 1954.

That was the first book that I did not have to take money from my own pockets to pay for.

And then Jonathan Williams, another Black Mountain boy, brought out "The Improved Binoculars," and he got William Carlos Williams to write the introduction to the book, and then Charles Olson asked me to come down and lecture there, and when they brought out the Black Mountain Review they put me on the editorial masthead.

So it's understandable that Davie would think that I was identified with them, and that I accepted their school of thought, this emphasis on the breath.

But right from the beginning in my arguments with Cid Corman and Creeley and so on I said, "OK," talking about breath, "but what if your poet has halitosis?"

THOMPSON: Then you wouldn't say that the Black Mountain has been any influence upon you at all?

LAYTON: Not the slightest. On the contrary, it's the other way round.

I'm the one that's influenced Robert Creeley, as a matter of fact . . . I have, shall we say, a guarded respect for some of the things they've done. I don't think they're sensational. For example, I don't really regard Olson as a poet; I think he's an anthropologist, a historian, a pamphleteer and all that sort of thing, and a wonderful, wonderful giant of a man, but I don't think he's written poetry.

I think Robert Creeley has written some choice lyrics; he's a good minor poet. Jonathan Williams has written some superb jokes.

THOMPSON: What do you think of Robert Duncan?

LAYTON: Now, Duncan's poetry I do not know very well, so I can't say anything about him. I really haven't sat down to his things with the attention that people like yourself would assure me it deserves.

Off hand, just looking at it, I find the poetry very cerebral, and I don't believe in cerebral poetry.

I think poetry celebrates, not cerebrates.

That doesn't mean that I rule out the mind or intellect or erudition, but for me the basis of poetry, of living, enduring poetry, remains the human affections, the human emotions; and I don't find much of that in Duncan's poetry.

Now, it may be that there is a bleeding, beating heart underneath the load of logic and information

to that kind of slickness and commercialism and the colossities that their profession demands of them.

THOMPSON: Speaking of commercialism, have you noticed any improvement in the lot of the writer over the years that you have been publishing?

LAYTON: I think Canadians are becoming aware that they've got a literature now: they've got the writers, they've got the books.

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that I just don't see, and I'm going to poke among the embers to see whether there is such a heart.

And if I find it, I'll certainly be the first to shout the good news of my discovery.

THOMPSON: Probably, as far as beating, bleeding hearts are concerned, the only Canadian poet to come up to you would be Leonard Cohen.

LAYTON: That's right, that's right. I think he is a genuine poet. You hear him read his poems, or your hear one of his poems read, and you know that you're in the presence of a Voice.

You're in the presence of a man who feels passionately, feels sensitively, and is able to find the right kind of exciting language and imagery to record those feelings.

Now, I've listened to some of the other boys, both in the United States and down here, who've been influenced by the bardniks and beatniks, and I don't get that sense of a passionate poet, of a passionate man.

THOMPSON: It's curious that you and Cohen, both passionate poets and passionate men, probably get the worst shrift from the Canadian reviewers. You've blasted the reviewers in the past; do you still feel that way?

LAYTON: Oh, they're a dishonest pack, for the most part—ignorant trash. They don't know a poem from a shelled peanut.

Very often they are frustrated would-be poets or writers who just haven't made it; they drift into slick writing, and thereafter take it out on people who haven't sold out

Compared to when I was first beginning to write, I think Canadians have travelled quite a road of cultural sophistication . . .

WOODMAN: Amen!

And we were back at Mrs. Woodman's place. The interview was over. Layton's long day had just begun.

A note on the Black Mountain boys: This refers to a group of contemporary American poets, all of whom taught at, or were influenced by those who taught at, Black Mountain College.

They have had a great influence on the path American poetry has taken in the last ten years.

Their work can be examined, in a rather poor selection, in Donald M. Allen's anthology "The New American Poetry 1945-60."

Better yet, get "The Maximus Poems" (Charles Olson), "For Love" (Roberta Creeley), "The Opening of the Field" (Robert Duncan) and any volume by Denise Levertov.

Another Canadian author will be visiting town this weekend. W. O. Mitchell will appear at the Yardbird Suite this Saturday, and will read from his own works.

Those who did not go to hear Irving Layton, and those who will not go to hear W. O. Mitchell, will never have the satisfaction (so precious to the rest of us) of boring their children and grand-children with stories of having seen the giants of Canadian literature in the flesh.

The time is 9:30 p.m.; the address: corner of 81 Avenue and 102 Street.