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FRENCH CANADIAN LITERATURE COMES OF AGE

A lecture by Mr. G. Sylvestre, Private Secretary to the Secretary of State for External Affairs, at University College, Toronto, February 20, 1948.

The literary life of a people is in no way limited to the publication and assimilation of the works of its most popular writers, and it is not necessarily the most representative books of the native authors which are the most widely read and constitute the spiritual nourishment of the community. While foreign works provide a seasoning for the native culture of great countries the works of native writers generally are the main diet of the public. But in such countries as Canada which are the inheritors of previously established cultures, the general public often reads and discusses the works of the mother countries' writers in preference to those of native authors. Since our early days - and this is a fairly normal development - we French-Canadians have always looked to Paris, rather than to Montreal, as you English Canadians have looked to London for nourishment for the mind.

For some years however, and particularly since the last war, we French-Canadians have been less indifferent to the efforts of our own writers. In isolating us from Paris, the war had the effect of forcing us, almost in spite of ourselves, to take more thought of our national values. The unprecedented success achieved recently by some of our writers in France and in the United States give reason for hope that their works will be accorded as much attention at home as abroad.

Yet it is still true that the general French-Canadian public prefers the works of great, and sometimes lesser English, French and American authors to even the best works of our own writers. Although French-Canadian literature has recently been enriched with several works that have achieved very good sales at home and abroad, we must not forget that publishers and booksellers in Montreal, as in Toronto and elsewhere in Canada, produce and sell many more European books than Canadian.

In French-Canada, the general public reads much more now than it did ten years ago, while Canadian literature has considerably increased in popularity, so also has that of France and other countries. And strange to say, French letters have never been so widely read in Canada as during and since the time we have been isolated from France. In 1939, for instance, Canadian bookstores were selling a few dozens or, at the most, a few hundred copies of the most successful French books. During and after this last war, French-Canadian publishers and booksellers have republished and sold thousands of copies of the best contemporary French novels and books of poetry.

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