

A Springtime Look at Canada's Books

[THE FIRST OF TWO PARTS]

Is there such a thing as Canadian Literature?

The fact that a country can produce a distinctive type of wheat or whiskey does not necessarily mean that it can also produce a distinctive type of literature.

ELIZABETH WATERSTON's *Survey: a Short History of Canadian Literature*, Methuen, says Yes. She contends that Canada has produced books as distinctive if not always as exhilarating as the whiskey since the 17th century, when Canadian writers were "practical men" — scouts, explorers and traders — who kept journals and set the tone. In Ms. Waterston's words, "Canada is a northern place. It is sea-bound on three sides and deeply indented by waterways on the fourth. It is a series of regional pockets, savagely separated by natural barriers. The climate is extreme — too hot in summer, too cold in winter; and the winter breathes heavily in the background all through the fall and spring."

She pursues the thesis into the 20th century when Morley Callaghan returned from "that summer in Paris" to write "sharp clear accounts of people at home," but then she comes up against the inevitable question, if literature is to be called "Canadian", then who qualifies as a Canadian writer? Callaghan certainly. But what of the Canadians who leave never to return and who write about all manner of things, and what of those who arrive to stay but write of other times in other places? Brian Moore came from Ireland to write *The Lonely Passion of Judith Hearne*. Is this a part of Canadian literature? The passion is universal and Ms. Hearne is a very Irish spinster. Michael Ondaatje came as a teen-ager from Ceylon to write *The Collected Works of Billy the Kid*, which, as Ms. Waterston readily allows, is "a curious book based on the life of a folk-hero — or anti-hero — of the United States." Ms. Waterston includes both. She contends that the artist, wherever he's from, is influenced by the place where he lives, that Moore, for example, tells Irish stories, but that his life in Montreal "contributes special labyrinthine tones to his novels."

MARGARET ATWOOD has more precise and personal answers to the question, first in *Survival, a Thematic Guide to Canadian Literature*, Anansi, \$8.50 cloth, \$3.25 paper, and second in a novel that is certainly both Canadian and literature, *Surfacing*, Simon & Schuster, \$6.95.

Ms. Atwood, an established poet, who is now being hailed both at home and abroad as a novelist of extraordinary power, is also an essayist of parts. In *Survival* she takes a hard view of what she sees as the Canadian literary tradition: a constant preoccupation with losers, or, in her word, "victims" — victims of one thing or another, of geography, of the power of the United States or of social strangulation.

If we accept her perceptions, we arrive at a definition of Canadian literature which can include both Moore and Ondaatje. "The question then (she writes) is not whether boy should meet girl in Winnipeg or in New York: instead it is, what happens in Canadian literature when boy meets girl? And what sort of boy, and what sort of girl? . . . you may predict that when boy meets girl she gets cancer and he gets hit by a meteorite. . ."

Ms. Hearne is not a Canadian (she fails to meet her boy in Belfast), but she is certainly a victim.

Ms. Atwood advises Canadians to meet the tradition and triumph over it. "You need not discard the tradition nor do you have to succumb to it. That is, you don't have to say, 'The Canadian tradition is all about victims and failures, so I won't have anything to do with it', nor need you decide that in order to be truly Canadian you have to give in and squash your hero under a tree. Instead you can explore the tradition — which is not the same as merely reflecting it — and in the course of the exploration you may find some new ways of writing."

In *Surfacing* Ms. Atwood takes her own ad-



The Fence, Harold Town, oil and lucite on linen, 80 1/4" X 108", 1959-60, Robert McLaughlin Gallery, Oshawa.