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First published 2008
by Camden House

Camden House is an imprint of Boydell & Brewer Inc.
668 Mt. Hope Avenue, Rochester, NY 14620, USA
www.camden-house.com
and of Boydell & Brewer Limited
PO Box 9, Woodbridge, Suffolk IP12 3DF, UK
www.boydellandbrewer.com

ISBN-13: 978-1-57113-359-5
ISBN-10: 1-57113-359-3

Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data

History of literature in Canada : English-Canadian and French-Canadian /
edited by Reingard M. Nischik.

p. cm. — (European studies in American literature and culture)

Includes bibliographical references and index.

ISBN-13: 978-1-57113-359-5 (alk. paper)

ISBN-10: 1-57113-359-3 (alk. paper)

1. Canadian literature — History and criticism. 2. French-Canadian literature — History and criticism. 3. National characteristics, Canadian, in literature. 4. Group identity — Canada. I. Nischik, Reingard M. II. Title. III. Series.

PR9184.3.H56 2008
810.9'—dc22

2008025359

A catalogue record for this title is available from the British Library.

This publication is printed on acid-free paper.
Printed in the United States of America.

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Introduction: Writing a History of Literature in Canada

Reingard M. Nischik (University of Constance)

“Canadian” has been broadly used for whatever is native, or has been naturalized, or has a distinct bearing on the native — that is, on people, events, and writings which had their focus in our “environment,” as Northrop Frye has put it. . . . That which is distinctly Canadian-French in language, thought, culture, and literary production has been left, in accord with their own wishes, to the French scholars of Québec. The time will come, one may hope, when it will be possible to have a French series of books paralleling our English ones — and translations in each of the languages — to facilitate a much-needed comparative study.

Carl F. Klinck, introduction, volume 3
of *Literary History of Canada* (2nd ed., 1976)

Even if we assume smooth relations on the political level . . . another generation will probably pass before we see a healthy and mutual interchange between the two literatures. At the present time, English- and French-Canadian writing are best discussed separately.

William Keith, introduction,
Canadian Literature in English (1985)

The Project in Brief

LITERATURE IN CANADA, particularly the booming cultural production from the 1960s onwards, has arrived at the center stage of world literature. Books by English-Canadian authors today make regular appearances on international bestseller lists, both through established writers such as Margaret Atwood (1939–) and Michael Ondaatje (1943–) and through new talents such as Yann Martel (1963–) and Madeleine Thien (1974–). Atwood, Ondaatje, and Martel, for instance, won the prestigious annual

Man Booker Prize in the space of just one decade.¹ “CanLit,” the institutionalized canon of Canadian literature, has likewise developed into a staple of academic interest, pursued in Canadian Studies programs in Canada and around the world. At the same time, with the help of the Quiet Revolution (*Révolution tranquille*)² and a remarkable network of cultural institutions, French-Canadian literature has found its own voice in the North American and francophone worlds, a voice that, as the recent surge of transcultural *écriture migrante* in French Canada shows, further transforms the multicultural scope of literature in Canada. Esteemed for its high literary quality as well as for the different perspectives it provides on North American realities when compared to the literary tradition of the United States, literature in Canada has generated a wealth of scholarly critical responses representing, among others, postcolonial, multicultural, transcultural,³ feminist, and eco-critical approaches.

It seemed high time, then, to provide a history of literature in Canada for the international market, a compendium that interweaves the various

¹ Ondaatje won the prize in 1992, Atwood in 2000, Martel in 2002. Due to a change in sponsorship the award, originally called the Booker Prize, was renamed the Man Booker Prize in 2002.

² The Quiet Revolution/*Révolution tranquille*, dating from roughly 1960 until 1966, was a period of rapid and sweeping change in Quebec society that followed the eighteen-year reign, known as “la grande noirceur,” of conservative Union nationale Premier Maurice Duplessis. Duplessis had left the province industrialized but not modernized, and the Quebec people, ripe for change in 1960, elected Liberal Jean Lesage as their new premier. Among Lesage’s vast reforms were the reformation of the Catholic Church-run education system, nationalizing Quebec’s important hydro-electric industry, setting up the Quebec pension plan, universal health care, and establishing a new ministry for federal-provincial relations. The arts also flourished at this time, as the previously agrarian and church-controlled society became secularized and modernized. Although it involved no violent upheavals, the period of the Quiet Revolution truly revolutionized Quebec’s social values, economy, and government.

³ While I am aware of recent debates around the viability of “transculturalism” as an alternative concept to “multiculturalism” (especially in the writings of Wolfgang Iser and Rocio G. Davis), I use the term in the sense conferred by Janice Kulyk Keefer’s phrase “transcultural aesthetics,” implying a kind of de-ethnicization and a cultural politics of inclusion rather than ghettoization. Keefer prefers to see Canadian culture in terms of a kaleidoscope rather than a mosaic; see Janice Kulyk Keefer, “From Mosaic to Kaleidoscope,” *Books in Canada* 6 (1991): 13–16; and Keefer, “From Dialogue to Polylogue: Canadian Transcultural Writing During the Deluge,” in *Difference and Community: Canadian and European Cultural Perspectives*, ed. Peter Easingwood, Konrad Groß, and Lynette Hunter (Amsterdam: Rodopi, 1996), 59–70.

threads making up this multifarious literature, rather than focusing on only one of the Canadian “literatures” or, as in the rare cases in which English-Canadian and French-Canadian literature have been brought together in one volume, clearly privileging one over the other. *History of Literature in Canada: English-Canadian and French-Canadian* traces literature produced in Canada over the centuries. Starting with the indigenous population’s oral tradition, which reaches back some 20,000 years, it then turns to the development of French-Canadian and English-Canadian writing from colonial to contemporary times. While the volume conceives of Canada as a single though multifaceted culture, it accounts for the specific characteristics of English-Canadian and French-Canadian literatures, such as the vital role of the short story in English Canada or the chanson in French Canada. Yet it also pays special attention to Aboriginal literature and to the pronounced transcultural, ethnically diverse character of much contemporary Canadian literature, thus moving the debate about what constitutes literature in Canada clearly beyond the traditions of the two founding nations.

Cultural Contexts, Editorial Principles

While its inclusive approach of encompassing all major cultural traditions of literature written in Canada is innovative, other traits of this book are less surprising, and intentionally so. With hardly an English-language literary history in existence that comprehensively covers both English-Canadian and French-Canadian literature,⁴ a chronological, alternating treatment of both literatures according to genre, enriched by some chapters outside the generic framework, offered the clearest possible overview. Clarity and balance of structure are primary aims of this book,⁵ which devotes equal attention to English-Canadian and French-Canadian literary cultures and allows for and encourages an immediate comparison between the two.

⁴ Altogether, there are only three earlier examples, two of them dating from the 1920s, all of them mentioned below.

⁵ In terms of structural balance, one might have aimed at an even larger symmetry by adding a chapter on the institutionalization of literature in English Canada, yet the sections titled “Politics and Literature between Nationalism and Internationalism” and “Sociopolitical and Cultural Developments from 1967 to the Present” deal with such issues, as do some of the chapters structured according to genre. Then too, French Canada is a special case also in this particular respect. One might also have added a chapter on popular music in English Canada to match the chapter on the chanson from French Canada, but the chanson comes much closer to poetry than much of the popular music from English Canada does. Thus the chanson had an impact on literary production in French Canada that has no counterpart on the English-Canadian scene.

Regarding the title of this book and its implications, the very terms “English-Canadian” and “French-Canadian” or even “Canadian” are contested terms in Canada. In the hope that this controversy excludes the name of the country itself, “Canada,” this book is titled “History of Literature *in Canada*,” not “History of *Canadian* Literature.” As Frank Davey has shown in an article of 1997, there has been a long and more or less intense, sometimes open and sometimes covert cultural battle about such identifying terms in transcultural Canada. At the end of the nineteenth century, when academic study of Canadian literature began, there were no models for studying and theorizing a bilingual or multilingual national literature, and English-speaking Canada largely regarded itself, in Davey’s words, as “a unilingually anglophone country, in which franco-phone culture was a minor phenomenon, something like Welsh in Britain.”⁶ Davey also points out that

anglophone-Canadian literary institutions and their practices have by and large developed less in response to the general field of Canadian cultural conditions and more as adaptations of institutional structures already developed or concurrently developing in Britain and the US [the norm being that one nation has one official language and one national literature]. In this they have differed from many of our country’s federal institutions, like Parliament, the legal system, the Canada Council, or The National Film Board, which have developed bilingual practices not found in similar British and American institutions. (Davey, “‘AND Quebec,’” 9)

Thus “Canadian Literature” has come to signify increasingly only “anglo-Canadian literature,” whereas scholars from Quebec “renounced their rights to terms like ‘Canada’ or ‘Canadien’ at the very time that English-Canadians have implicitly staked exclusive claim to them.”⁷ In fact, Lucie Robert reported in 1991 that Quebec culture viewed itself as “québécoise” and no longer as “canadienne française.”⁸ As Davey points out, “English-Canadian”

⁶ Frank Davey, “‘AND Quebec’: Canadian Literature and Its Quebec Questions,” *Canadian Poetry* 40 (Spring/Summer 1997): 6–26, here 10.

⁷ Davey, “‘AND Quebec,’” 17. Such issues came to bear on the present project when a contributor from Quebec made it a precondition for his cooperation that the term “Canadian” should not appear in the book’s title because it would slight Québécois literature.

⁸ Davey, “‘AND Quebec,’” 7. Ever since the Quiet Revolution the term “québécois(e)” has been used to refer to Quebec culture after the 1960s, whereas “canadien(ne) français(e)” has come to refer to the time before the Quiet Revolution. Alternatively, “québécois(e)” is sometimes also used retroactively today to refer to Quebec culture both before and after the Quiet Revolution, for example in the *Histoire de la littérature québécoise* by Michel Biron, François Dumont, and Élisabeth

no longer seems to include anglophone Quebecers (7). There is thus an increasing separation between the terms “Canadian” (signifying English Canadian or Canada outside Quebec) and “québécois” (signifying from the province of Quebec, or only French Canadians from the nation of Quebec⁹). This territorialization of language and ethnicity (Quebec vs. “rest of [predominantly English-speaking] Canada”) raises further problems, of course. What about literature from Quebec not written in French? What about literature written in French in a Canadian province other than Quebec?

Such complications present a tremendous challenge to the production of literary histories concerning Canada, which may partly explain why there have been relatively few. In particular, literary histories dealing with both English-Canadian and French-Canadian literature are few and far between, and pretending that there is no francophone Canada (or the other way round) is a frequently employed means of dealing with the challenge. If French-Canadian literature is included at all in literary histories written in English, it is usually done according to what Davey calls the “supplementary” or “peripheral” model: Only a small proportion of the book is devoted to French-Canadian literature in a token, condescending gesture.¹⁰ Similarly, most literary histories written in French concentrate exclusively on French-Canadian literature, although due to a recent widening of the concept of “littérature québécoise” (see note 9), one finds literary histories

Nardout-Lafarge (Montreal: Boréal, 2007), 12. Francophones in Canada had used “canadien(ne)” to refer to themselves until the middle of the nineteenth century, after which the term was changed to “canadien(ne) français(e),” a practice that persisted until the current usage of the terms was established in the 1960s. As late as 1904, however, Camille Roy still employed “canadien(ne)” to exclusively refer to literature written in French in Canada (“La nationalisation de la littérature canadienne”).

⁹ See Davey, “‘AND Quebec’”: “What appears purposefully left ambiguous . . . is whether “québécois” denotes ethnicity and language or whether it is the adjectival form of the name of a Canadian province. . . . The view among francophone-Canadian critics that the literature of Quebec consists (or ought to consist) only of French-language writing became commonplace in the 1980s and ’90s” (24, n. 1). This view, of course, has been contested by, among others, “transcultural” writers from Quebec such as Marco Micone, for whom “les Québécois n’[ont] pas que le français comme langue identitaire” (Micone, “Libre-opinion — Nous, les Québécois,” *Le Devoir*, 28 November 2007). In their *Histoire de la littérature québécoise* (2007), Michel Biron, François Dumont, and Élisabeth Nardout-Lafarge also label anglophone texts written in Quebec as “québécois(e).”

¹⁰ See, for instance, Elizabeth Waterston’s *Survey: A Short History of Canadian Literature* (Toronto: Methuen, 1973), which includes only one chapter on Quebec.

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