

First We Took Manhattan

Nick Mount. *When Canadian Literature Moved to New York*. Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2005. x + 218 pp.

In a 1998 article that misreads Northrop Frye as describing Canadian literature to 1965 as being “as innocent of literary intention as a mating loon” (contrast Frye 214 and Mount, “In Praise” 77)—as if there were no distinction between the explorers and E.J. Pratt—Nick Mount concludes: “There is no shame in not having a literature; there is in inventing one” (93). In the meantime, he was hired to teach early Canadian literature by the University of Toronto, which reveals much about how nationalism works, or fails to work, in Canada. In his fine new book, Mount has nothing of which to be ashamed. After an amusing account of the burial of Bliss Carman, first in Connecticut, and then in New Brunswick, he considers William Dean Howells’ 1891 move from Boston to New York, “home to almost a thousand book publishing and printing firms,” and “the undisputed leader of the magazine boom of the 1880s and 1890s.” With his facts in place and his mind alert to the numerous anecdotes that will enliven his writing, Mount states his thesis: “By far the largest single group of Canada’s literary expatriates of the 1880s and 1890s made the same choice Howells did, and this book is mostly their story—the story of why they left Canada, of what they did in New York, and of what happened to them afterward” (10). Occasionally he overstates his case, as when he concludes that “Ironically, it took moving to New York to produce the communities of authors necessary to fulfil the literary promise of Confederation” (160), or when he allowed the dust jacket to claim that “Canadian literature began not in the backwoods of Ontario or the salt flats of New Brunswick, but in the cafés, publishing offices, and boarding houses of late nineteenth-century New York.” His best points are more modest and more compelling: he rightly calls Charles G.D. Roberts’ move to New York in 1897 “the most important symbolic loss for Canadian literature of his day” (135-36), and there would have been nothing to lose if Canadian literature really began in New York.

The main reason that the expatriates left Canada was “the inability of post-Confederation Canada to sustain and thus retain its writers” (12). That much has been common knowledge since E.K. Brown’s “The Problem of a Canadian Literature,” the opening chapter of *On Canadian Poetry* (1943), if not before. Although he does not refer to Brown, Mount adds to that classic account some surprising details, starting with the fact that

“Canadian emigration to the United States between 1880 and 1900 exceeded any twenty-year period in Canadian history” (21). Mount differs from Brown in his attitude to continentalist pressures. What was for Brown a “problem” is not so for Mount: “From a national perspective, Canadian writers of this period lacked literary cultures; from a transnational perspective, they were surrounded by such cultures.... Bread could be had in Canada; fame was the province of elsewhere. And Canadian writers chose elsewhere” (31). Brown knew that the “wall” that separated Canadian writers from an American audience in 1944 was “new,” or at least “much higher and firmer than it used to be. In the last twenty years of the nineteenth century the best of the Canadian poets appeared regularly in the best of the American magazines” (79). Mount uses censuses, indices, and journalism of all sorts to provide in abundance the details that Brown only sketches. And he not only shares Brown’s desire to destroy the “wall” that separates Canadian from American culture, he also recognizes that the barriers of nationalism are not unique to Canada: the 1960s witnessed the disappearance of expatriate writing from both Canadian literary history and “American studies of the period’s literature” (140). Anyone familiar with the vagaries of Bliss Carman’s reputation will appreciate the point.

What did the expatriates do in New York? Most of them started by writing for New York’s newspapers, and as Mount notes parenthetically, there were fifty-eight of these in 1900 (43). His main interest is in the figures who rose to literary prominence: Charles G.D. Roberts and his younger brother William, who from approximately 1908 to 1938 was the managing editor of the *Literary Digest*, which had by the 1920s “a circulation of a million and a half, second among American weeklies only to the runaway *Saturday Evening Post*” (52); Palmer Cox, whose Brownie stories for children “sold more than a million copies in his lifetime,” and whose celebrity led to a three-act musical that toured North America and to “toys, card games, clocks, stationery, stamps, handkerchiefs, Christmas ornaments, gold jewellery, silver and china tableware, humidors, candlesticks, and many other products” (63-65); Carman, who worked as an editor for several periodicals, whose *Vagabondia* books (co-authored with Richard Hovey) became a vogue, and who played a key role in “the therapeutic cult that would come to be known as the New Thought” (84); Craven Langstroth Betts, an editor and writer whose *The Perfume Holder: A Persian Love Poem* (1891) was, in Mount’s words, “the poetic equivalent of the Turkish Corner, a section of one’s apartment draped off with thick red fabrics and decorated with vaguely Eastern curios that was then *de rigueur* among New York’s smart set” (78); Almon Hensley, a protégé of Charles

G.D. Roberts who had a lively career as a poet and feminist; and such other writers as Peter McArthur, Ernest Thompson Seton, Arthur Stringer, and Norman Duncan.

So has Mount changed his mind about early Canadian literature? Not entirely. In the last chapter, he makes a candid admission: "I try to resist judging anything but modernism by modernist values, but I'm not always successful, and in any event I'm not going to try to make a case for an overlooked Gertrude Stein or even a Morley Callaghan among Canada's literary expatriates" (137). As a result, Mount is better with ironic deflation than appreciation, as when he notes that Seton's animals are often heroic figures: "Readers of the day noticed, even if latter-day critics have not, that these were the superlatives of romance, not the metonymies of realism" (104). That's fine for Seton, but Mount is less convincing when he turns to Roberts' animal stories: "Like the other new romantics, Roberts was more interested in telling a dramatic story than in telling the truth, and his romanticism saved him from criticisms of his realism" (135). Like many an anti-Romantic before him, Mount confuses "romance" with Romanticism, and that will never do for a body of work that includes "The Tantramar Revisited" and "Low Tide on Grand Pré" along with the best poetry of the European Romantics. A similar bias appears in a summary of T.J. Jackson Lears' *No Place of Grace: Antimodernism and the Transformation of American Culture, 1880-1920* (1981). Mount writes that "Like Lears's American antimodernists, Canadian contributors to the rebellion unintentionally helped their audiences not to remedy but to accept modernization...." (14). Lears says as much, but he also argues that the "tradition of antimodern dissent has survived most conspicuously in avant-garde art and literature—the cultural 'modernism' that has so often protested the effects of modernization" (309). Mount comes close to such a dialectical insight in his conclusion:

By participating in international cultures of letters, by writing and publishing in the literary centres of their world, and by achieving the recognition of their American and English contemporaries, the expatriate poets of the 1880s and 1890s provided the early modernists with a domestic model of precisely the cosmopolitanism to which they aspired—which, as much as their no longer fashionable romanticism, perhaps explains why they and their contemporaries were rejected so strenuously. (161-62)

If he had realized that Romanticism was more than a fashion, Mount might have provided the close readings of the best expatriate works that his book

lacks. As it is, his concluding remarks on Palmer Cox take a different direction: “Both Cox and [Lucy Maud] Montgomery had skill: it takes a rare talent to create characters so many readers embraced. But both are also marred by such descents into cliché and formula that I can neither respond to their work aesthetically nor make an aesthetic judgment between them” (152). “His point,” as W.J. Keith writes, “is not that Cox ought to be brought into the canon but that Montgomery should never have been admitted in the first place” (18).

So which is the real Nick Mount, the literary historian who recovers a fascinating episode from a century ago, or the ironist who thinks that most early Canadian writing is not worth recovering? I predict that his future work will take one of two directions: either he will continue to revise his approach to early Canadian literature by elaborating the changing values that distinguish the past from the present; or he will return to his earlier iconoclasm, perhaps by arguing that few contemporary Canadian writers are worth reading, and that Canadian Postmodernism was born in California. In either case, his future is assured.

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