Half a Story in Double-Quick Time

Richard J. Lane, *The Routledge Concise History of Canadian Literature*. New York: Routledge, 2011. xx + 250 pp.

Surprisingly little published work exists on methodologies for writing literary history. While I presume that narratives of a literary past should attempt to name and discuss texts significant to the development of the culture in which they were written, there is no agreement about the criteria for a "significant" text. Are texts worthy because the historian judges them to capture the zeitgeist of a society at a given time or the prevailing aesthetic of a given period? How big a role should the opinions of subsequent generations of readers and critics play in deciding their merit? Should the number of copies sold, editions printed, or reviews written help determine the choice of texts discussed? To which political, economic, and social events should an account call attention, and why?

I suspect that literary histories are more idiosyncratic than many literary studies specialists would be comfortable admitting. The still widely-read essay on the long sweep of Canada's literary production, Northrop Frye's Conclusion to the first edition of the *Literary History of Canada*, is as famous for making statements about the state of Canadian letters in the author's present as it is for summarizing the *History*'s chapters on their past. When Frye declares that "In surveying Canadian poetry and fiction, we feel constantly that all the energy has been absorbed in meeting a standard" (348), he describes not the country's yesteryear but the situation he believes his present has inherited from bygone eras. His summation of Canadian literature as "academic in the pejorative sense of that term, an imitation of a prescribed model, second-rate in conception, not merely in execution" (348) challenges contemporary Canadian letters to do better. The frequency with which the above assertions have been quoted rivals that of the essay's other aphoristic statements, such as Frye's admission that he has "long been impressed in Canadian poetry by a tone of deep terror in regard to nature" (350), an observation that appears in close proximity not to comments on early Canadian literature but to a quotation from E.J. Pratt's comparatively recent *Towards the Last Spike*, published in 1952.

Frye rated Canadian literature as an expression of national identity, and his idea of "nation" involved greater political and cultural independence than he believed Canada had in 1965. He did not intend his Conclusion as an introduction for those who were coming to Canadian literature for the

first time, which may explain why he made the case for his understanding of it without making much reference to national history. He "hope[d] that such a book [the *Literary History*] would help to broaden the inductive basis on which some writers on Canadian literature were making generalizations that bordered on guesswork" (340). If he was sincere in his admission that "[b]y 'some writers' [he] meant primarily [him]self" (340), then his target audience consisted of literature teachers who might, like him, have reason to include Canadian writers and works among their topics of instruction. Although an increased knowledge of historical context would undoubtedly benefit them and their students, such instructors already possess some awareness of it.

The Routledge Concise History of Canadian Literature is clearly written for the student rather than the teacher, as author Richard J. Lane's frequent in-text definitions of terms such as "sublation" (104) and "phallogocentric" (122) indicate. The idea that readers need to know these terms to read the book, but probably do not, suggests that his intended audience is registered at the postsecondary institutions where students may expect to hear something about Canadian writing beyond *The Stone Angel* or whatever novel was assigned in Grade 12 English class.

Lane submits that a double discourse pervades Canadian literary history from the earliest contact-zone encounters between First Peoples and Europeans to the present day. On one hand, this history features a dominant and more or less self-conscious attempt to articulate experiences of the land and the peoples upon it in a variety of literary modes, as that experience unfolds across periods of exploration, trading, conflict, and migration. On the other, there are stories suppressed by this narrative that continuously disrupt it with uncanny reminders of the marginalized and persecuted others whom it silences, beginning with the First Peoples and including, at different stages of Canada's past, women, ethnic and visible minorities, and the poor. Their struggles to be heard help drive the national literature.

Complementing Lane's thesis at a structural level are the double themes that organize the *History*, as several chapter titles indicate: "Literatures of landscape and encounter: Canadian Romanticism and pastoral writing," "Feminist literatures: New poetics of identities and sexualities from the 1960s to the twenty-first century," "Contemporary indigenous literatures: Narratives of autonomy and resistance." In each chapter the author explores the subjects named in the title as historically simultaneous developments. The dialogic relations he usually identifies between his two chosen terms gives this double focus its logic, as when he points out in "*In Flanders Fields*: Gender and social transformation in the First and Second

World Wars" that the staggering human and material resources devoted to trench warfare overseas during World War I led to a "raw and powerful critique of…masculine attitudes," while at home new forms of labour for women and government restrictions on free speech and information generated "subversive questionings of gender roles" (82). Social and gender-role transformations went hand in hand owing to the war.

Psychoanalytic theory, from Freud's essay on the uncanny to Kristeva's work on abjection and the chora, guides the author towards interpretations of Canadian poetry, fiction, and drama in terms of the repressed self (or empire or nation) paired with the abject other (or colony or minority). Efforts to silence liminal voices or to peripheralize (if not eradicate) non-colonizing populations, and the perceived threat these voices and populations pose to official narratives of empire, colony, and nation, extend well beyond European-aboriginal contact to the relations between the Euro-settler population and myriad migrant groups, setting the stage for the continuous haunting of Canadian literature signaled in the text by Lane's repeated use of the term "uncanny" to refer to the return of the repressed across different historical periods.

Over the last few decades the uncanny has become a conventional means of describing the nation's literary past, at least in Anglophone Canada (see Sugars, ed. *Unhomely States*). One of the risks of instrumentalizing it as a guide to reading literary history is that it allows a slide into a progressivism that does not so much illuminate different eras in Canada's literary yesteryear as reproduce its key divisions. An early warning sign appears in Chapter 4, when Lane suggests that "Victorian" writing on the world wars resembles the "government-led jingoism" (73) that contrasted sharply with the more experimental, fragmented narratives of writers to whom Lane refers as modernist. Strangely for someone who defines terms like "cleave" (92) for his readers, Lane never explains exactly what constitutes "Victorian" as opposed to "modernist" writing, nor what if anything differentiates them in a specifically Canadian literary environment. Perhaps he (or his editors) regards the meaning of these terms as axiomatic, but I doubt that's the case for his target audience. Of course, no reader needs to know what these terms mean to grasp from the statements just quoted that it's much better to be a modernist than a Victorian: Clearly only the first possesses originality, formal innovativeness, and critical distance. The Canadian literary establishment initially rejected it because it unmasked the true horrors of war. The implicit contrast has a ring of the familiar about it, since it echoes mid-century modernists' own assessments of themselves and of their difference from pre-war generations of writers.

As the *Concise History* continues, it maintains its double focus less by discussing selected texts in an historical context than by reading those texts through the theories Lane has chosen as his guide. Whereas Chapter One devotes six pages to a review of key events in the emergence of British North America, historical context-building in "Canadian modernism 1914-60" lasts less than a page (103). In this and other chapters, Lane deals with this context primarily by confining his discusssion to shaded information boxes that briefly define significant terms (Canadian Victory Loan Bonds [75], the Battle of the Somme [78]), while references to theory expand to inform the readings of texts the author has chosen to represent the period. By the penultimate chapter on Canadian postmodernism, the "Overview" section at the start of the chapter contains almost no reference to the history around the works to be discussed aside from Marshall McLuhan's prophetic description of the coming information age (180). McLuhan's pronouncements were received as oracles in his own time as well as later ones, and it's fair to give them a prominent place in discussions of Canadian postmodernism; they are a part of history as well as a theory of communications. But do they obviate the shaping influence of the FLQ Crisis, Trudeau's use of the War Measures Act, or the arrival of official bilingualism, none of which receives a mention? Is it possible to write about postcolonial elements in Canadian literature (Chapter 9) without referring to the Immigration Act of 1976?

I don't mean to suggest that the answers to these questions are self-evident. The substitution of theory for a more substantial historical framework complements the chapters' predominantly thematic organization, enabling the author to flag connections among texts from different moments in time and adding some flexibility to history's chronological imperative, as when he groups together a decades-strong body of "foundational feminist drama" (1930s–1980s) that spans the "modernist" and "contemporary" periods (152-3). And Lane's decision to pursue the *Concise History* through a series of fairly detailed readings of individual texts, extending anywhere from one to four pages, generates some standout discussions that, while focusing on single texts, provide insights applicable to the analyses of many others; among these, his explication of the coquette's role in *The History of Emily Montague* deserves a mention for its adroit introduction of other provocative concepts from "New World sensibility" to "resemblance" to (yes) the "double," all of which may be used with reference to any number of eighteenth- and nineteenth-century texts. Explanations in the subsection "Embodying theory from postmodernism to postcolonialism" in Chapter 6 might add value to classes on contemporary

Canadian literature and on twentieth-century feminist theory both (145-57).

The author takes care to warn readers at the start of his book that the restrictions of the genre mean that concise histories can never aim for comprehensiveness. However, the cost of dedicating considerable space to a very small number of texts in the truncated form of a concise history is that the texts and authors Lane must exclude become more noticeable, his choices more controversial. The motivation behind his selection may be a desire to rethink the canon, a goal that many in the discipline, myself included, find useful as a potential up-ender of stale literary orthodoxies. But what the brevity of the "concise" means for a teacher of Canadian literature is that there may come a point in the text when exclusion makes the difference between recommending this *History* to students or not. A *History* that devotes two pages to Katherine Hale and Louise Morey Bowman but never once mentions Mavis Gallant, Gwendolyn MacEwen, Earle Birney or, for that matter, John Marlyn or Howard O'Hagan assumes that readers already have a context for the discussion of literature on offer, a context that recognizes these authors' prominence both in their own time and in the present, where students are likely to encounter their work and where Hale's and Bowman's *oeuvres* are unlikely to displace that work anytime soon. For field specialists, it probably doesn't matter that A.M. Klein's *The Rocking Chair* is discussed almost exclusively in terms of its modernist imagery, its intimate portraits of Montreal, and the historical backdrop of the Shoah. But for undergraduates, a nod to mid-twentieth-century French-Canadian nationalism is indispensable.

I have taught Hale's work in my Modern Canadian Literature class together with that of MacEwen, Gallant, and Birney. *A Concise History of Canadian Literature* includes a few writers whose work I haven't taught and perhaps should, such as Gwen Pharis Ringwood, and overlooks writers I believe deserve a much larger place in the canon, such as Marjorie Pickthall. No matter: If I used this text in class, students would profit by learning that people argue over literary merit, since doing so signals that literature matters. But if I did teach with it, I think I would soon find that whatever the title suggests about the contents' pith, this *History* wouldn't save *me* much time. I don't relish the prospect of correcting forty essays that repeat its misspellings of Bliss Carman, Sara Jeannette Duncan, John McCrae, Drew Hayden Taylor, Beatrice Culleton Mosionier, and Armand Garnet Ruffo. To be genuinely useful as well as compact, concise literary histories have to refresh readers' view of the past while respecting its details.

107

Work Cited

Frye, Northrop. "Conclusion to the First Edition of *Literary History of Canada*." *Northrop Frye on Canada*. Ed. Jean O'Grady and David Staines. Toronto: U of Toronto P, 2003. 340-72.

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