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## **Rummagings 16: The *Literary History of Canada* and the *Literary History of the United States***

As part of my research for an essay on the three short stories that Alice Munro published while a student at the University of Western Ontario from 1949 to 1951, I e-mailed my colleague Donald Hair to ask if he had any sense of the content of Western's English courses at the time. Since Carl F. Klinck was the "Staff Advisor" to *Folio*, the student magazine in which Munro's stories appeared, I enquired specifically about his ideas and interests when Don was a student at Western in the late 'fifties and early 'sixties. In this connection, I was especially intrigued by one sentence in the ensuing reply: "Klinck often mentioned [Robert E.] Spiller in my class [in 1956-60], and I think he would have done so even more frequently when Spiller's work was 'cutting edge.'" The principal "work" to which this refers is, of course, Spiller's *Literary History of the United States*, which was first published in two volumes in 1948, reprinted three times in that format, and then revised and reissued as one volume, which by 1957 had gone to a third printing. Among the works most conspicuously influenced by the *Literary History of the United States* are Richard Chase's *The American Novel and its Tradition* (1957) and Klinck's *Literary History of Canada* (1965).

In the hit and miss index to Klinck's *Giving Canada a Literary History: A Memoir* (1991), Spiller appears only once in connection with a letter of 3 February 1958 in which Klinck enquires about Spiller's "experience with publication rights" (120). A perusal of Klinck's chapter on the genesis and production of the *Literary History of Canada* points to the volume's close connection to the *Literary History of the United States*. "In 1948," Klinck writes early in the chapter,

Robert E. Spiller, Willard Thorp, Thomas Johnson, and Henry Seidel Canby had produced *Literary History of the United States*, designed so that "we may now understand better the recorders of the American experience." This literary history had as an adjunct a whole volume of bibliography—a very useful thing. The analogy with Canada struck me forcibly. Here was Reg Watters working on a bibliography [*A Checklist of Canadian Literature and Background Materials, 1628-1960*]. Why not a companion volume, a *Literary History of Canada?* (105-06)

The chapter also reveals that when Klinck sent a detailed proposal for the *Literary History of Canada* to March Jeanneret at the University of Toronto Press on 17 October 1956, he included, among other things, “a comparison [of the project] to *Literary History of the United States*” (103).

Klinck’s covering letter to Jeanneret indicates that enclosed with the proposal were a few excerpts from the “Preface,” the “Address to the Reader,” and the “Table of Authors” in the *Literary History of the United States*<sup>1</sup> but it does not state the precise nature of the excerpts; however, the initial draft of the proposal in the Klinck papers at Western reveals that one of the excerpts was all or part of the definition of literature in the “Address to the Reader”<sup>2</sup>:

Literature ... as the term is used in the title of this book, is any writing in which aesthetic, emotional, or existential values are made articulate by excellent expression. It is the record of man made enduring by the right words in the right order. It is a feeling or thought which by some inner necessity has created for itself a form. Literature can be used ... in the service of history, of science, of religion, or of political propaganda. It has no sharp boundaries, though it passes through broad margins from art into instruction or argument. The writing or speech of a culture such as ours ... moves quickly into the utilitarian, where it informs without lifting the imagination, or records without attempting to reach the emotions. History as it is written in this book will be a history of literature written within the margins of art but crossing them to follow our writers into the actualities of American life. It will be a history of the books of the great and the near-great writers in a literature which is most revealing when studied as a by-product of American experience. (xviii-xvix)

“The extracts from *The Literary History of the United States* seemed useful to explain the project to Jeanneret,” Klinck told Northrop Frye on 20 November 1956. No doubt they and the work from which they were drawn were also useful in helping Klinck and his fellow contributors to arrive at their conception of “literature” and “literary history”: “[t]his book treats, not only, works generically classified as ‘literature,’ but also ... other works which have influenced literature or have been significantly related to literature in expressing the culture of the country,” Klinck observes in his Introduction; “Canadian achievements in writing on philosophy, general history, the social sciences, religion and theology, and the natural sciences have been outlined ... Th[e] volume represents a positive attempt to give a history of Canada in terms of writings which deserve more or less attention because of significant thought, form, and use of language”<sup>3</sup> (xi).

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The impact of the *Literary History of the United States* is apparent in almost every aspect of the *Literary History of Canada*, including the manner in which it was produced and the organization of its contents (and, obviously, its title). Both works are the result of extensive collaboration over several years between and among their editors and associates, albeit in different configurations, and both are organized, not merely and expectedly chronologically, but in sections consisting of individual chapters devoted to specific regions, genres, issues, and, occasionally, individual authors or groups of authors. For example, the first section of the *Literary History of the United States* contains chapters entitled “Writers of the South,” “Writers of New England,” “Jonathan Edwards,” and “Benjamin Franklin” and the second section of the *Literary History of Canada* contains chapters entitled “Literary Activity in the Maritime Provinces (1815-1880),” “Literary Activity in the Canadas” (1812-1841), and both contain bibliographical notes and codas—“Postscript at Mid-Century” and Frye’s “Conclusion.” But the many and large differences between American and Canadian literature are also reflected in the organization of the two histories. Whereas explorer writings are absorbed into the first section in the *Literary History of the United States* (“Reports and Chronicles”) in the *Literary History of Canada* the entire first section, “New Found Lands,” focusses on pre-settlement writing under the headings “The Voyageurs,” “Explorers by Land (to 1860),” and “Explorers by Sea: The West Coast.” Such differences could be multiplied many times over, but that would surely be redundant: the point is that, in Klinck’s words in his letter of 3 February 1958 to Spiller, the *Literary History of Canada* is “patterned upon your excellent *Literary History of the United States*,” but “we have made adaptations in the light of our special conditions.”

One of the major driving forces behind those “adaptations” is the vast difference between American political development and the political development of Canada. Both literary histories relate literature to the growth of the country from colony to nation, but the *Literary History of the United States* is governed by a *telos* in which violent revolution was a crucial stage in the emergence of a culture that regarded itself as exceptional. “We shall set in order the progress from colonies to republic, from republic to democracy, from East to West, from sections and regions to a rational unity,” runs part of a ringing passage in its “Address to the Reader”:

We shall treat at length these regions and sections ... and those strong impulses toward escape and refinement and revolt and the needs of the common man, so characteristic of the United States. We shall correlate American literature with the successive swings of the country, which have sometimes

been toward an ideal of leadership in all human progress, and sometimes have been away from the world we have helped to make smaller by our own energy and into an isolationism where we hoped vainly to solve our own peculiar problems. (xxii)

No such rhetorical flourish is present in Klinck's Introduction to the *Literary History of Canada*, but, on the contrary, a series of much more modest aims: "to publish a comprehensive reference book ... to encourage established and younger scholars to engage in ... critical study ... to show how the best writing in this country has reflected local, national, and universal matters which have engaged our serious thought" (ix, xi). The modesty here is not merely Carl F. Klinck's. It is also the reflection of a culture that in 1965 was modest about its achievements and modest in its ambitions.

## Notes

- 1 This and subsequent quotations from letters by and to Klinck and from other unpublished materials are taken from files 1A: 1, 1A: 2, and 1A: 3 in the Carl F. Klinck Papers.
- 2 A response to the material accompanying the proposal by A. G. Bailey on 22 January 1957 indicates that Klinck also quoted all or part of the first four paragraphs of the second section of the "Address to the Reader," for Bailey identifies a "garbled" sentence from the first paragraph, argues that a passage in the second ("James Fenimore Cooper, for us, is more significant than Sir Walter Scott, etc.") is an example of 'the territorial fallacy,' and vigorously disputes the notion in the third that "mobility" has been a "transforming factor in ... [American] life" (xvi-xvii).
- 3 In the Prospectus one of the aims of the *Literary History of Canada* is "to study Canada historically and critically in terms of its literature—to supplement historical and sociological interpretations of the Canadian in every period by examining the evidence provided by literary works, the vision and the art of those who possessed exceptional powers of expression." Its three other aims are "to issue a standard reference work," "to suggest the possibility of parallel studies in English and French Canadian literature," and "to encourage scholars in th[e] field to do first-hand research." See above for differences in the wording of the published version of aims.

## Works Cited

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