

Anthologies as Historical Objects

Lecker, Robert, ed. *Anthologizing Canadian Literature: Theoretical and Cultural Perspectives*. Waterloo, ON: Wilfrid Laurier University Press, 2015. 334 pp.

Literature is not only a mirror; it is also a map, a geography of the mind. Our literature is one such map, if we can learn to read it as *our* literature, as the product of who and where we have been

—Margaret Atwood (*Survival* 18-19)

Forty-four years after *Survival*, Atwood's insight still animates the study of 'Canadian' literature in this new collection which aims "to open up a conversation about anthologies, to see them as historical objects that have contributed to our contemporary and historical understanding of Canadian literature" ("Introduction," 31). That conversation has been going on for some time with Robert Lecker's own *Keepers of the Code* representing the culmination of a forty-year career as both a shaper and critic of Canadian canon formation. With this study, he draws together new material by other writers which adds substantially to the scholarship on anthologies.

There is enough diversity in the collection to suggest that the study of anthologies is no longer a debate about canonicity but a lens with which to view Canadian society. In *Keepers of the Code*, Lecker places literary nationalism in the context of real crises of unity in Canada's federation, describing anthologies of Canadian literature as "allegories of order, safe havens in the midst of a perpetual storm" (313). Like the anthologies themselves, studies of this kind contribute much to literary, cultural, and social history. Many of the essays use case studies to reconstruct a literary or social moment or movement and successfully chart the conceptual and the material conditions for anthologizing. Stating that he wants to "resist the usual observations about anthology-making that have been disempowered by their inevitable invocation in books of this kind" (2), Lecker dispenses with the origin and etymology of canon in a few lines, leaving meditation on the nature of anthologizing to pieces like Richard Cavell's "Anthems and Anthologies" and "Confessions of an Unrepentant Anthologist" by Gary Geddes. From A. J. M. Smith onwards, reflections by anthologists often seem to ask the reader's absolution for the sins of selection, or, as is the case for Geddes, to feel the need to unburden while remaining agnostic on the question of the reader's approbation. Even the most devoutly canonical collection bears its editor's stamp, making many literary anthologies

more like art works or found poems of literary experience than textbooks, yet as the introduction notes, “[t]he idea that anthologies are narratives in their own right has scarcely been explored” (30).

Discussions of anthologists and anthologies tend to circle the questions of feeling and taste, looking for them to represent something larger than a personal choice: the canon, the nation, who is in, who is out. It is intriguing to see how the period since the 1980s has reshaped the contemporary field and how many award-winning authors have vanished—like Paulette Jiles, a poet fallen so far out of favour that her name is misspelled in this volume! If the focus on prominent editors and publishers in history always risks leaving women out, Lecker himself gives due attention to Donna Bennett, Wanda Campbell, Nathalie Cooke, Laura Moss, and Cynthia Sugars among others in *Keepers of the Code*, and in this volume, Anne Compton’s “The Poet and Her Library: Anthologies Read, Anthologies Made” also provides a gender counterweight. By narrating her personal history and usefully detailing the process leading to *Coastlines*, which she edited with Robin McGrath, Laurence Hutchman, and Ross Leckie, Compton speaks as poet, teacher, and anthologist. Unless an editor, like Carmine Starnino, is “determined to create a new canon of personal favourites, rather than building on a recognized base” (*Keepers* 315), studying the individual anthologist remains a fruitful approach to literary history. Thus, two excellent essays, Joel Deshayes’s “Anthology on the Radio: Robert Weaver and CBC Radio’s Anthology” and Karis Shearer’s “The Poet-Editor and the Small Press: Michael Ondaatje and *The Long Poem Anthology*,” use an individual’s work to enrich our understanding of both text and context. As these authors show, the many different pressures on an editor’s work make tenuous the idea of editors as autonomous arbiters or creators of taste.

D. M. R. Bentley’s thorough archival investigation in “The Poetry of the Canoe: William Douw Lighthall’s *Songs of the Great Dominion*” reveals the influences and attitudes working on the anthologist by following the development of the book from idea to reception. By reconstructing the role played by Charles G. D. Roberts, who seems always to have been sticking his oar in, Bentley offers ample evidence of the national ideal driving Lighthall’s selections and traces the contours of an emerging Canadian modernism behind them. Before the advent of what he calls “those hard-eyed epistemologies of feminism and postcolonialism” (95), Bentley also shows that contemporaries like G. Mercer Adam took Lighthall to task for ignoring female writers. That anthologies are always fields for contestation is vigorously expressed through such evidence, and Bentley’s expert map-

ping of the exclusion of women is further documented in other essays in the collection.

In "Publication, Performances, and Politics: The 'Indian Poems' of E. Pauline Johnson/ Tekahionwake (1861-1913) and Duncan Campbell Scott (1862-1947)," Margery Fee shows how social and cultural attitudes shape Canadian poetry. Though Johnson and Scott were "members of the same small, elite group" working "in the same field of cultural production, producing similar symbolic goods for the same market," in the hands of anthologizers, their careers diverged with Johnson's work rarely anthologized between 1940 and 1990 and Scott's included "more than twice as often" between 1887 and 2008 (51). "Anthologies and the Canonization Process: A Case Study of the English-Canadian Literary Field, 1920-1950" by Peggy Lynn Kelly further demonstrates the systemic discrimination against women revealed in the anthologies published between 1920 and 1950 and "a double standard that marks the Canadian literary field as masculinist and undermines the recognition of nationalist cultural products" (137). "Nation Building, the Literary Tradition, and English-Canadian Anthologies: Presentations of John Richardson and Susanna Moodie in Anthologies of the 1950s and 1960s" by Bonnie Hughes offers a similar set of evidence, despite its opening claim, puzzling in such a richly referenced book, that the subject of anthologies is rarely studied.

While the collection references a wide range of critical and theoretical works on anthologies, it also points to potential new questions and directions. At first, Lorraine York's "Why So Serious? The Quirky Canadian Literary Anthology" seems to deflate anthology criticism, including some in the collection, by examining idiosyncratic works that do not seem to fit the nationalist mold. Her essay permits Lecker his own "quirky editorial digression," but as York reveals, even the silliest anthologies promote the national literature if they are marketed to the world as Canadian. Janet B. Friskney's "Canadian Literary Anthologies through the Lens of Publishing History: A Preliminary Exploration of Historical Trends in 1997" understandably relies almost exclusively on *English-Canadian Literary Anthologies: An Enumerative Bibliography*, compiled by Lecker, Colin Hill, and Peter Lipert, to reconstruct the historical context around publishing in Canada, showing how it has changed over time and repeating several times that more research needs to be done. Indeed, Cheryl Cundell's analysis of the anxiety around writing by explorers like Samuel Hearne in "Excerpts of Exploration Writing in Anthologies of English-Canadian Literature" also shows that there is work to be done on how anthologies update the critical insights on their selections, for it is hard to read Hearne's often antholo-

gized account of the Inuit girl the same way after encountering Robin McGrath's reading of the Stowe manuscript.

The historical breadth of these essays displays the marked difference between anthologies meant to be selected for purchase by a general reading audience and those meant to be taught and therefore to appeal to teachers and to be purchased by students. Throughout the field of anthology studies, there is an assumed correspondence between selling and being read as if one guarantees the other. It is an assumption that a visit to any university bookstore with its stacks of unsold volumes and used ones with immaculate spines will quickly dispel. Frank Davey's materialism in "Reading Anthologies" challenges the assumption by confessing to ownership of anthologies he did not buy and by recognizing that the audience for contemporary anthologies is largely involuntary—the professors whose business publishers court and the undergraduate students for whom their choices become required reading. The study of contemporary anthologies keeps material conditions in view even if hardnosed economic realities still remain unexamined.

Like Davey and the other contributors to this worthwhile and informative collection, I wonder about economics as I open yet another uninvited offering, cursing the environmental scourge of packing peanuts, and assess whether or not this one, as Robert Lecker puts it, might be "backpackable." Those thick, yet somehow floppy, paperback 'introductions to' or 'elements of' literature end up on the pile in the corner while their slimmer colleagues get the second look. But then, I also think of the student who came to visit me before dropping out of university for financial reasons. He wanted to tell me how much he had enjoyed reading the assigned anthology, which he meant not to sell but to always keep and to read all the way through. For him, this book he had been told to buy had come to have a special meaning, and better understanding of that, from a reader's perspective, could be where the study of anthologies will go next.

Works Cited

- Margaret Atwood, *Survival: A Thematic Guide to Canadian Literature*. Toronto: Anansi, 1972.
- Lecker, Robert. *Keepers of the Code: English-Canadian Literary Anthologies and the Representation of Nation*. Toronto: U of Toronto P, 2013.

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