

**REVIEWS****Honouring Early Canadian Literature**

Janice Fiamengo, ed. *Home Ground and Foreign Territory: Essays on Early Canadian Literature*. Ottawa: University of Ottawa Press, 2014. 297 pp.

Edited and introduced by Janice Fiamengo, *Home Ground and Foreign Territory* comprises the papers presented at “Reconsidering Early Canadian Literature,” a Canadian Literature Symposium held at the University of Ottawa in 2010. As Fiamengo notes, the conference emerged from her sense that “ideological approaches (feminist, Marxist, postcolonial)” to early Canadian literature were both “exhausted and even destructive to the object of study” (2). Fiamengo hosted the conference because she thought that a crossroads had been reached, indeed, that “a turning of the tide” had occurred within the Canadian academy, making it possible to “regain the historical and the beautiful in literary study” so that scholars might find footing again to “approach literature as an imaginary universe that opens up worlds for us to inhabit where we are invited to live differently and to learn the languages, beliefs, and customs of a land at once familiar and foreign” (10).

This last pair of terms recalls the volume’s title, which quotes Margaret Atwood’s *Surfacing* (1972)—“home ground and foreign territory”—in order to signal the places navigated by early Canadian literature scholars when they work from the present into the past to understand the “forms, contexts, and cultural traditions” animating historic texts at the same time as they seek to locate the texts’ significance within the present (1). In effect, Fiamengo identifies a hermeneutical problem, for her Introduction and the chapters that follow attend to matters of perception and understanding as well as to the principles, procedures, methods, and limitations of interpretation operative in attempts to apprehend the significance of early Canadian texts. If this description suggests that *Home Ground and Foreign Territory* contains some pretty turgid stuff then a corrective is in order: this volume’s contents combine to form a species of *festsschrift*, one presented to honour not any single respected and notable scholar but, rather, the field of early Canadian literature itself. The erudition on view not only demonstrates the scholarship of the contributors but also acknowl-

edges a host of Canadian scholars who have for some generations devoted themselves to the study of early Canadian literature. Moreover, many of the essays overcome the containment of literary periodization—*early* Canadian literature—by a variety of means that make this text worthy and required reading for anyone who wishes to engage thoughtfully with Canadian literature and criticism as a whole.

The prospect that the book's contents form a kind of *festschrift* suggests that the efforts of the contributors arise from very commonplace methods of literary inquiry, ones which manifest a good deal of methodological continuity over a number of decades. Fiamengo's argument that it is time for "new approaches" and "new vantage points" (2) to be taken up by scholars of early Canadian literature, then, is plainly at odds with her later observation that "it is time to stop using our literary past *primarily* as a staging ground for radical politics" (10). This insistence is my chief criticism with Fiamengo's opening essay: she calls iteratively for the "new" in scholarship yet esteems traditional methods (11). Immediately after observing that inquiry fueled by "radical politics" must cease, Fiamengo says "our scholarship" should proceed by the use of "literary-critical, bibliographical, and historical methods" (11). The contributors' essays exemplify such work, but to suggest that the new and fuller understanding of early Canadian literature on view in the papers collected by *Home Ground and Foreign Territory* must issue from novel methods is to blur ends and means.

In order of formal appearance, the volume's contributors are D.M.R. Bentley, Carole Gerson, Cecily Devereux, Andrea Cabajsky, Thomas Hodd, Christa Zella Thomas, Albert Braz, Joel Baetz, Wanda Campbell, Cynthia Sugars, Ceilidh Hart, Jennifer Chambers, and Mary Jane Edwards. Thirteen papers thus comprise the volume, with Fiamengo's Introduction making the total number of chapters reach fourteen. As Fiamengo notes, the papers within *Home Ground and Foreign Territory* do not "represent a coherent approach or formulation about what it means to study early Canadian literature," yet the essays can be organized and discussed by means of two large, reasonably useful categories (13). The essays by Bentley, Devereux, Campbell, and Edwards all foreground and proceed by historical reflection, while the essays by Gerson, Cabajsky, Hodd, Zeller Thomas, Braz, Baetz, Sugars, Hart, and Chambers belong to the realm of critical practice with an emphasis on genre. To varying degrees, each of the essays displays the approaches that Fiamengo enjoins, for each combines text—or texts, in some instances—and context to unfold the significance

of the method adopted and thus the contribution made to a fuller understanding of early Canadian literature.

Fiamengo rightly calls Bentley's essay "exemplary in its historical capaciousness and range of reference" (11). In this vein, Bentley underscores the continuity of Canadian literature by locating its beginnings some two centuries before Confederation and thus refusing to make the past a foreign country, one too much defined by "pastness" (21). Among the many riches of Bentley's essay are his first principles or premises: he says that his own research has been "undertaken on the premise that, no matter who its author or what its date, a text must be assumed at the outset of study and analysis to possess intellectual, formal, and aesthetic interest and integrity as well as historical and cultural significance and value" (18). Bentley also advances remarks with the ring of a manifesto proposing "an approach to Canadian writing that is phenomenological and, in the widest and most inclusive sense of the word, environmental—a way of thinking and writing that neither ignores nor fetishizes the injustices and abuses that flow from inequalities of power and failures of sympathy" (33).<sup>1</sup>

Gerson's "Periodicals First: The Beginnings of Susanna Moodie's *Roughing It in the Bush* and Pauline Johnson's *Legends of Vancouver*" foregrounds genre and mode in its approach, examining the first periodical appearances of texts that were subsequently gathered as books. Research into methods of print culture and book history informs Gerson's examination of the collected sketches that form *Roughing in the Bush* and *Legends of Vancouver*. Gerson's essay examines books that were first serialized for local audiences, so the serial forms predate the presentation of Moodie for British readers and Johnson for national ones. In this way, Gerson's careful and clear tables showing the variant ordering of the sketches under consideration probe the question of authorial intention and what Gerson calls the "hegemony of the material book" (46).

Devereux situates her historical reflection in a specific context, from 1990 to 2010, by undertaking a reception and influence study of a single text, *Re(Dis)covering our Foremothers: Nineteenth-Century Canadian Women Writers*, edited by Lorraine McMullen and published in 1990 as the proceedings of the Reappraisals: Canadian Writer's conference held at the University of Ottawa in 1988. Serving to "recall and reconsider" *Re(Dis)covering our Foremothers* because of its fortuitous historical placement at the seam between the second and third waves of academic feminism, Devereux's paper treats the possibility that third-wave feminism—more properly postfeminism—may not have taken up the promise held out by the first ever text attending exclusively to nineteenth-century

English Canadian women writers. Devereux concludes against this prospect and says “the study of early English-Canadian women writers can be seen not to have failed but to have flourished over the past two decades” (77). In part, Devereux supports this claim by adducing the increase in research on pre-1920s Canadian women’s writing as measured by the number of master’s theses and doctoral dissertations completed in Canada from 1990 to 2009. Devereux notes that despite an initial increase the numbers begin to drop in 2004 and decrease incrementally in 2009 (81-82). Speculating on the cause of this, Devereux raises a number of good questions and takes the decline in completed graduate work on early Canadian women writers as “indexical” of a broader erosion of gender equity in society and the academy in terms of numbers of jobs and rates of financial compensation (83). In this sense, then, Devereux’s essay takes *Re-Discovering* within its academic context but then leverages it into a wider societal application and ends by arguing that “there is need in 2010 for the kind of vigilance and activism that motivated the 1990 volume” (84).

Much like Devereux, Campbell pinpoints her historical reflection by surveying the critical reception of *Hidden Rooms*, the anthology of Canadian women’s poetry she edited and published in 1990 with Canadian Poetry Press. Campbell’s paper reflects on the generic, critical, and thematic diversity of women writers represented in this collection. These three diversities serve as Campbell’s structure for her essay, but more importantly they allow Campbell to explain the “undiminished critical presence” of Susanna Moodie, Isabella Valancy Crawford, and Pauline Johnson in Canadian academic discourse (199). Campbell’s essay shows one more instance of the good balance *Home Ground and Foreign Territory* strikes by ensuring that poetry, not simply fiction, receives attention.

In her essay entitled “CEEECT’s Scholarly Editions,” Edwards reflects historically by giving an overview of the Centre for Editing Early Canadian Texts, beginning in the early 1980s and concluding in 2012 with publication of William Kirby’s *Le Chien d’or/The Golden Dog: A Legend of Quebec* (published by McGill Queen’s University Press, which took over the CEEECT series in 1999 when Carleton University Press closed). The challenges that she sees ahead, as well her remarks on the adequacy of research into early Canadian literature, also appear in this essay.

Cabajsky in “*Lady Audley’s Secret* versus *The Abbott*: Reconsidering the Form of Canadian Historical Fiction through the Content of Library Catalogues” works with nineteenth-century Canadian library data—data on holdings and circulation—to show that Canadian historical fiction would be better understood as mediating rather than imitating metropolitan

European and British novels. Moreover, Cabajsky uses statistical evidence to suggest that supposedly more canonical and influential texts such as Sir Walter Scott's *The Abbot* had less purchase on early Canadian reading habits than fiction such as Mary Elizabeth Braddon's *Lady Audley's Secret*. The essay contests two critical truisms: first, that early Canadian novelists aimed to corroborate rather than to subvert privileged accounts of history; second, that they attempted to imitate not innovate novelists such as Sir Walter Scott, Victor Hugo, and James Fenimore Cooper. That is, as Cabajsky notes, Canadian novelists were regarded as "straightforwardly nationalistic and imitative of European models" (90). Cabajsky's essay focuses in part on library catalogues and borrowers' records to survey the availability and circulation of novels in three Canadian libraries between the 1860s and 1890s: the Toronto Public Library, the Montreal Free Library, the library of the Mechanics Institute of Montreal, and the French-language library of the Institut canadien de Montréal (91). The inclusion of the latter library—as well as criticism by Réjean Beaudoin, Luc Bonenfant, and Michel Biron—distinguishes Cabajsky's essay as the only one in this collection to consider French Canada in its argument. This inclusion affords Cabajsky the opportunity to argue via Beaudoin and Bonenfant (who cite Biron) that the early Canadian pattern that conceives of nineteenth-century French Canadian writing as dominated by European and metropolitan literature should be replaced by one that views the Canadian writers as mediating between local sensibility and metropolitan influences (91).

Hodd's "Not Legitimately Gothic': Spiritualism and Early Canadian Literature" identifies a notable absence in critical discourse on the gothic mode in early Canadian fiction: namely, the "socio-religious" influence of nineteenth-century spiritualism (116). Methodologically, Hodd displays one of the habits Fiamengo calls for in her introductory essay: he makes history his guiding influence as he examines Susanna Moodie's participation in spiritualism as a means of explaining her abiding interest in the supernatural. Hodd also considers Flora MacDonald Denison's *Mary Melville, the Psychic* (1900) to argue that it shows the way to a broader literary mode that he calls Canadian supernaturalism (130). This move promises to shift critical discourse away from wondering whether Canadian manifestations of the occult are, in the words of Gerry Turcotte, "legitimately gothic" (qtd. in Hodd 130). In this way, Hodd does not so much split a taxonomic hair—substituting supernaturalism for gothicism—as work to provide a corrective and more ample critical model that allows investigation of movements such as Spiritualism and Theosophy not as failed or imita-

tive efforts at a British or European gothicism but as a “discernible tradition” within Canadian literature (131).

As the title of Zeller Thomas’s essay, “The Canadian Canon, Being ‘*On the Other Side of the Latch*’ and Sara Jeanette Duncan’s Anglo-Indian Memoir,” suggests, this contribution also works with genre—the memoir, or more generally, life writing—in combination with “the body of theorizing of (women’s) autobiography that has emerged in the last two to three decades” to display the shortcomings of applying what Thomas calls a “nationalist paradigm” to Duncan’s non-journalistic fiction (138). The use of theory associated with women’s autobiographical writing allows critical consideration of Duncan’s work with respect to its “geographical, national, cultural, artistic and psychological situatedness” (139), and this very work unfolds in Thomas’s essay, which argues that *The Other Side of the Latch* (1901) cannot be understood fully in a “one-dimensional paradigm such as the Canadian nationalist approach to early writing” (151).

Braz’s “The Duelling Authors: Settler Imperatives and Agnes Laut’s Denigration of Pierre Falcon” makes genre incidental insofar as race, ethnicity, and culture are his focus. That is, Braz takes Agne Laut’s *Lords of the North* (1900) not as the occasion to examine genre—he says that he is “not persuaded that form is the main problem with Laud’s novel”—but as the opportunity to identify “an ideological division at the heart of the novel” (164). This division shows itself in Laut’s contradictory romantic treatment of Pierre Falcon, Métis, and Indigenous people that simultaneously esteems them and regards them as savages. Braz arrives at this conclusion by virtue of criticism informed mainly by settler theory, so he reads Laut’s work as an effort to sanitize the act of land appropriation at work in the denomination Selkirk Settlers (168). In this way, Braz’s essay shows that Fiamengo’s cautionary words against ideological criticism are not meant to foreclose entirely on such work. Rather, as Fiamengo notes in her Introduction, some essays show the “ongoing significance of feminist and postcolonial approaches” to early Canadian literature (12).

Like Zeller Thomas, Baetz puts a theoretical and critical model—a Freudian understanding of mourning—together with genre, in this case women’s war writing, more specifically elegiac poetry, and even more specifically the device of prosopopoeia, in his “Anna’s Monuments: The Work of Mourning, the Gender of Melancholia and Canadian Women’s War Writing.” This essay examines Anna Durie’s *Our Absent Hero* (1920) and her son’s monument (complete with photos of the memorial in St. James Cemetery in Toronto). Baetz’s thesis stands clearly: in its “subtle management of and obvious challenge to common modes of expression, Anna

Durie's poetry ... provides the opportunity to reorient our dominant and national narratives about the war and its literature, and their rendition of the relationship between men and women, past and present, living and dead" (190).

If the question of text—especially its form—and context animates the study of early Canadian literature then Sugars clearly displays this configuration in her essay, "Judging by Appearances: Thomas Chandler Haliburton and the Ontology of Early Canadian Spirits." Haliburton's *The Old Judge; or, Life in a Colony* (1849) serves as the occasion for Sugars to make this "mongrel of a text"—"part novel, part cultural history, part compendium of local politics and legend, part ghost story" (216)—into her sample of generic complexity and its ability to display "transmutation of a British literary form," by which she means the gothic (218).<sup>2</sup>

In "Hallowed Spaces/Public Places: Women's Literary Voices and *The Acadian Recorder* 1850-1870," Hart also examines genre in context by studying women's sentimental newspaper poetry. Hart's essay gives the lie to any supposition that sentimental poetry published anonymously in Canadian newspapers might be insignificant, for it argues convincingly that when placed within the charged politics of newspaper circulation and readership women's sentimental poetry functions as a microcosm of national sensibilities. Because Hart appends four sample poems from the *Acadian Recorder* and includes numerous passages of these and other poems to support her argument, her paper to some degree enacts its very argument by inviting readers of *Home Ground and Foreign Territory* to conceive of the poetry on view not merely as a text but as a text within a context.

Chambers in "Who's In and Who's Out: Recovering Minor Authors and the Pesky Question of Critical Evaluation" considers the tension between criticism more focused on cultural history and criticism more bent on asking after the value and aesthetic worth of literature. By drawing attention to the way that minor and major are used to denominate the stature of a writer, Chambers emphasizes the implicit valuation at work even in seemingly routine descriptions. Chambers adopts a case study approach by using Susan Frances Harrison as an example of a minor writer and in so doing displays one of the cumulative effects of reading *Home Ground and Foreign Territory*. Namely, when Chambers draws attention to the fact that Harrison wrote poetry, sketches, short fiction, novels, music, and journalistic articles she recalls Campbell's argument that generic diversity constitutes one of the grounds for the sustained study of an author. However, in her necessarily brief survey of Harrison's writing, Chambers finds both

“demerits” and merits, diversity in this instance not so much demarcating a richer field of inquiry as raising the spectre of negative aesthetic valuation (271).

At just under three-hundred pages, *Home Ground and Foreign Territory* displays a rich variety of critical approaches and perspectives and thus teaches a good deal about the study of early Canadian literature. The lesson on view is quite simple: one needs to be something of a pluralist to be productive in this field. As Bentley puts it, “what is needed in early Canadian literary studies is not the hasty and opportunistic insertion of fingers into different pies that passes for interdisciplinarity in many corners of our discipline but a broadening and deepening of awareness of all the environments—national, aesthetic, social, scientific, economic, political, national, international ...—in which writing occurs” (22). Fiamengo quite accurately notes, however, that scholarship of this kind is difficult to attain, for it is slow, painstaking, and, potentially, unrewarding vocationally (4). Nevertheless, the book’s pluralism stands, indeed, beckons, and finally shows one thing: the study of early Canadian literature involves a scholarly community, one whose riches form not only a continuity but also a composite picture of a robust field, wherein work is nowhere near saturation or completion. This attraction surely explains the energy displayed in this fine volume of essays.

#### Notes

- 1 D.M.R. Bentley’s “Preamble” to his *The Gay]Grey Moose: Essays on the Ecologies and Mythologies of Canadian Poetry 1690-1990* comes to mind here, for Bentley’s effort to define Tory in its best sense, as a way of being in the world that emphasizes preservation and conversation, merits revisiting (6-7).
- 2 It is worth saying that Hodd and Sugars part company on the spelling of gothic (the former preferring lower case, the latter upper case).

#### Works Cited

Bentley, D.M.R. *The Gay]Grey Moose: Essays on the Ecologies and Mythologies of Canadian Poetry 1690-1990*. Ottawa: U of Ottawa P, 1992.

Tim Heath