

## Not the Story of Canadian Literature

Nick Mount, *Arrival: The Story of CanLit*. Toronto: Anansi, 2017. 374 pp.

Eleven years ago now, Douglas Gibson published an opinion piece in *The New York Times* titled “What is CanLit?,” and in the second sentence wrote “Basically, but not always, CanLit is when the Canadian government pays you money to write about small towns and/or the immigration experience.” Later in the piece he added that “CanLit is the literary equivalent of representational landscape painting, with small forays into waterfowl depiction and still lifes.”<sup>1</sup> Both these understandings are reflected in Nick Mount’s *Arrival: The Story of CanLit*, but with Mount appearing to like representational landscape painting much more than Gibson does. Both date the term’s usage to the 1960s, with Gibson writing “CanLit was invented in the late 1960’s and early 1970’s,” and Mount that

The first recorded use of the term “Can.Lit.” is the title Earle Birney gave one of his poems in 1962 – a poem about its absence .... The next use is in a 1969 *Globe and Mail* column by William French ... “All of a sudden,” says French, “we’ve got CanLit coming out of our ears.” (293)

There is some faint sarcasm attached to the term in both of Mount’s instances – the Birney points to the totalizing glibness of university jargon, and to the fact that in the case of Canadian literature even that was lacking (in his 1969 *Collected Poems* he dates the poem 1947/1966), and the French suggests that “we”-Canadians were being force-fed some dubious food. Both instances also correspond to my memory of the term’s usage – that it often carried some hint of contempt, especially when the writer was addressing a general readership.

When the subtitle of Mount’s book became known this past summer, one of my colleagues thought its focus might be “the establishment of Canadian literature as a subject of academic study.” But – perhaps

fortunately – it is not. Instead the focus is the transformation of Canadian writing into what William French had evocatively suggested: an object of national popular consumption.

“CanLit” for Nick Mount is not synonymous with “Canadian literature.” Rather “CanLit” was a “boom” (1) that happened in a “long decade between the late 1950s and the mid-1970s.” It was an “explosion” (5) of writing enabled by a post-war prosperity that gave Canadians leisure in which to read and write and enjoy things “unnecessary to life” (25) and brought potential Canadian writers and publishers government arts councils bearing money (42). It was also in his view an uncritically nationalist, enthusiastic, over-confident, self-mythologizing but eminently understandable response to the imminent “loss” (290) of a partly formed nation to global economics. He agrees with Matt Cohen who, he reports, in 1979 “declared CanLit dead, displaced by the desire of agents and publishers for commercial international fiction” (293).

As Mount describes it here, “CanLit,” was less a body of texts than a zeitgeist of national creative possibility that included gossip, rumour and publicity as much as it did books, magazines, and radio broadcasts. It was intently serious, and often unintentionally entertaining. It grew eventually into the present multi-dimensional multi-nationally inflected “Canadian literature” – “just the sum of its parts, a useful abstraction” (294). Mount writes here about the culture of the former because it was “a literary explosion unlike anything Canada has experienced, before or since” (5), but he prefers – without much enthusiasm – the books of the latter. They are “higher” he says in “average quality” (293).

By defining “CanLit” as a period and a zeitgeist, Mount has to some extent fudged it, and enabled himself to incorporate into it writers for whom “CanLit” was an Ontario conception that had little to do with their own understanding of culture or audience. There were writers in Canada at this time whose goals did not include hearing their poems on the CBC, reading them to a Bohemian Embassy audience, or publishing them with McClelland & Stewart. They were in Canada and writing literature, not CanLit. Some of these lived in the west, some in the Atlantic provinces, some in Toronto. But any of them can appear in Mount’s book.

Mount appears to have wanted *Arrival* to be seen as a 21<sup>st</sup>-century supplement to Atwood’s “thematic guide” *Survival*, published by House of Anansi Press in 1972 – a book in which the word “CanLit” does not appear but which he characterizes here in his brief history of that press as a “CanLit for Dummies” (161). He concludes his “Acknowledgements” by declaring himself glad it is Anansi’s “name on this next chapter in the

story” (297); earlier he has attempted to make readers notice the rhyme between “Arrival” and “Survival” by titling his first chapter “Surfacing” – the title of Atwood’s second novel that was released the same spring as *Survival*. Like Atwood, he writes down to his readers, using frequent colloquialisms and noun-phrase sentences. The *Toronto Star* reviewer calls his style “breezy” (1 September 2017). The Anansi publicists call it “dazzling.” (Warning: this book contains flash photography.) He also makes recommendations similar to *Survival*’s lists of recommended reading by attaching 109 very brief “sidebar note” reviews of notable books from the period, awarding each one-to-five stars as if he were evaluating them for *Consumer Reports*. None of these reviews, however, are tied to the arguments of the book.

The implied “Dummies” of *Survival* were teachers who might want to teach Canadian writing and need the book’s guidance. *Arrival*’s implied audience appears to be Canadian readers in general: readers who may want to know the gossip behind the books they have read (such as that *Survival* was partly written by Anansi staff rather than by Atwood alone [15]), or non-literary readers curious about possible scandals behind books – Cohen’s *Beautiful Losers*, Marlatt’s *Steveston* – that they will never consider reading. Like *Survival*, Mount’s book is sociological in its approach, much more focused on culture than text. But while Atwood at least introduced her readers to texts by deriving her sociology mostly from novels and poems, Mount derives his sociology mostly from anecdotes preserved in biographies, memoirs, interviews, book reviews, and newspaper archives, placing his readers at an additional remove from the actual writing.

As for Canadian writing as an academic subject, Mount makes very few comments about the development of Canadian literature courses and their implied canons, announcing accurately on page one that this “is not an academic book.” He devotes one 15-page chapter to high schools and universities, and eight of those pages (69-75) to Canadian literature at universities. He gives most of those not to the history of Canadian literature curricula but to how universities supported literary creation by purchasing manuscripts for their archives, hiring young writers to sessional teaching positions, and engaging older ones as writers-in-residence. He notes that the latter appointments “yielded mixed returns,” but cites only the negative ones: the pile of empty beer bottles that melting snow revealed under Al Purdy’s office window at Loyola (72); Mordecai Richler’s preparing “for class by drinking gin and tonics”; and John Metcalf’s tale of “having dealings with [only] three students” during

four writer-in residence appointments (73). Mount prefers re-telling anecdotes about male writers well-known for their endorsements of anti-academic irresponsibility to inquiring into perhaps more productive approaches to being a writer “in residence.” George Bowering, for example, whom Mount interviewed for this book, was hired to a full-time position by Sir George Williams after his 1967-68 writer-in-residence term – a term during which he took, according to Jason Camlot, a “leading role” on the committee that organized the university’s series of literary readings.<sup>2</sup> (Mount’s account of that Bowering year climaxes with Atwood’s memory of him “quacking like a duck” at a Montreal party [214].) Biographer Ruth Panofsky observed that Adele Wiseman’s several terms as an unselfish writer-in-residence at various universities were so well received that they led to her appointment as head of the writing program at the Banff Centre.<sup>3</sup>

In his methodology, then, Mount is a selective aggregator, one who combines the primary research of others to create a secondary aggregate study, similar to a medical researcher who combines a large number of clinical studies of a drug or diet and (unselectively, one hopes) derives conclusions which those studies did not necessarily seek. He outlines the method in his preface:

We have excellent biographies of the writers who emerged during what came to be called the CanLit boom. We also have some good histories of the publishing side of the story in both English and French Canada, and a great many books about the time itself. What we don’t have is a book that puts all those stories together. This is the first book to try to do that, to tell the whole story, for both those who know parts of it and those who know none of it. (1)

Thus Mount joins together two-to-three page condensations of biographies, memoirs, and popular histories, contextualizing them with each other and with a handful of interviews he or his research assistants have conducted. Even though many of the events recalled happened before Mount was alive or old enough to take notice, he manages to cast what I think most of the participants would consider to be a nostalgic, semi-romantic light on them. The events – sexual betrayals, near bankruptcies, periods of poverty, easily-obtained jobs at the CBC, over-

indulgence in drugs and alcohol, misspent grants, well-spent grants, gerrymandered prizes, Robert Weaver charity to writers, refused prizes, suicides, thoughts of suicide, illnesses, irrational hatreds, listening to duck-quacks – often seem much more interesting to him than they could have been to those who are being described experiencing them.

Does he tell “the whole story”? – of course not, as his writers-in-residency accounts amply testify. A “whole story” might be approximated, but it can never ever fully known or told. Even the outlines of Mount’s aggregated story, as above, can be problematic. On page 27, for example, he writes that in the 1970s “Canadians had more spending money than ever before, but most of them spent their entertainment dollars on entertainment, especially American entertainment.” On page 31, he writes that “affluent North Americans ... turned to art for comfort. Books especially.... Affluence didn’t just make the CanLit boom possible: it made it necessary, the therapist and companion to a society.” Just as these two passages do not quite match, so too do many of the elements that Mount tries to bring together as “CanLit.”

One problem is that much of the writing that he treats as “CanLit” nationalist is much more local in its emphases than are intentionally nationalist works such as *Survival*, John Redekop’s *The Star-Spangled Beaver*, Dave Godfrey’s *Death Goes Better with Coca-Cola*, Dennis Lee’s *Civil Elegies*, or Ray Smith’s *Cape Breton is the Thought Control Centre of Canada*. Assisted by a general North American zeitgeist of perceived affluence and leisure, it occurs concurrently with the nationalist “explosion” in Ontario, through the work of writers who may not have heard of a Massey Commission. Another is that many of the actors who had heard of the commission – Phyllis Webb and Robert Weaver at the CBC, and possibly Don Cullen, organizer of Toronto’s Bohemian Embassy coffee house – appear even in Mount’s accounts to have been much more interested in literature itself than in the flowering of Canada.

A third, and perhaps the most important problem, is that much of what he names in both his text and sidebars as “CanLit” was motivated more by desire for radical stylistic innovation than by desire to expand explosively a national literature. This is certainly true of bpNichol, to whose *The Martyrology Books 1 & 2* Mount awards a full five stars (24) – one of eight “CanLit” books which he judges in his sidebars to be what he calls a “world classic” (2). This is true also of the *Tish* writers, whose emergence Mount identifies as one of the founding elements of CanLit (11), and whom he manages to incorporate in part by identifying Daphne Marlatt as a writer who protests the bulldozing of the potential heritage-village of

*Steveston* rather than as the creator of that book's unusual prose-poetry line which she theorized as an antidote to the profit-directed periodic sentence of contemporary capitalism.<sup>4</sup> He portrays Bowering's career as both the product of Canada Council awards and publication by McClelland & Stewart, *The Globe & Mail*, and Oxford University Press (214) and the product of a *Tish* poetics that taught him to "pay attention to where you are" (225), a paradoxical portrayal which does have some hybrid truth to it. He has no comment about Bowering's Oulipo-influenced procedural poems, however, or about any writing by Fred Wah.

Reflected here is Mount's self-admitted inability to appreciate what he sardonically calls "the wonders of the avant-garde" (296). It is a significant handicap for someone attempting to write about a period in which literary excitement wasn't always overtly political. It limits his ability to discuss the publications of Coach House Press except as having been enabled by Canada Council largesse (154) and by 1970s government social programs funded by Canada's affluence: "Old Coach House books aren't just artifacts, they're art" (156). It appears to limit his ability to write about Quebec literature of the 1960s and early 1970s, which he can understand if it is writing motivated explicitly by nationalism and anti-clericalism. But if it is writing by Automatiste writers such as Pierre Gauvreau, Jacques Ferron, or Madeleine Ferron, or by the language-and-form-focused writers of *Les Herbes rouges* and *La Barre du jour* such as Jean-Yves Collette, Nicole Brossard and Madeleine Gagnon, many of whom were published in English by Coach House (as were Gauvreau and Jacques Ferron), he has nothing to say. Perhaps there were no biographies of them that he could condense. But the result is that his Quebec chapter is quite isolated from his diffuse "CanLit" thesis.

Also disconnected is his chapter on Atlantic Canada, in which his sense of "CanLit" as a communal project breaks down into a discussion of three unrelated writers – Alistair McLeod, Alden Nowlan, and Tom Dawe. MacLeod was unknown as a writer until the very end of Mount's "CanLit" period when he published his first collection, the 1976 *The Lost Salt Gift of Blood*. Dawe and poet Al Pittman became publically known also late in the period, when they founded Breakwater Books in 1973.

Mount's penultimate chapter, "Lives of Girls and Women," addresses feminism in the Canadian 1960s and 70s. It too is precariously linked to his overall "CanLit" thesis, since there is no necessary link between caring about feminist causes and the unity of the Canadian nation-state. It discusses the experiences of women writers in the long decade, and the

irony of it being a period in which men labored as publishers and editors to found and maintain Canadian magazines and presses for which women wrote most of the now-remembered writing. Only at the end does Mount tie it to his argument that “CanLit” was the product of unaccustomed national affluence: “It wasn’t just affluence that created the CanLit boom; it was also one of affluence’s most powerful and lasting by-products: women with the time and need for books” (277). It’s a remark that could be read as cynical – that only in an affluent society can women enjoy a modicum of gender equality. Men may read this chapter with its recalling of Layton and Bowering poems that “contain a lot of tits and asses” (267) and an Atwood memory of male writers who “‘didn’t know whether to shake my hand or grab my ass” (270), with some wistfulness. Mount seems to have enjoyed writing it. Between its last two pages he inserts a photo section that contains portraits of fifteen men – including Layton and Bowering – and four women. Layton is looking as pleased with himself as his laughing rooster must have sounded.

In sum, Mount’s story, of adventurous creation and collaboration and nationalist “CanLit” pride is primarily one of Toronto, possibly Vancouver, parts of British Columbia, and of the western provinces between. Its positing of a period that ends around 1976 works well for the explicitly nationalist writers of Ontario but poorly for those for whom the 1960-76 period was one of formal innovation and adventure. The former – Lee, Godfrey, Gibson – often became silent after 1976, or in the case of Atwood became more international and commercial. But the trajectories of the latter – Nichol, Bowering, Marlatt, Kroetsch – continued into the 1990s and beyond. If their innovativeness in the 1960s and 70s made them “CanLit,” its continuation into later books such as *Truth: A Book of Fiction*, *Ana Historic*, *Kerrisdale Elegies*, and *The Hornbooks of Rita K* certainly troubles both the boundaries and the cultural arguments that Mount tries to establish. In Quebec the persistently innovative writing of Brossard, Victor-Lévy Beaulieu, Madeleine Gagnon, Geneviève Amyot, Claude Beausoleil, Yolande Villemaire, Jean-Yves Collette and many others has shown a similar continuity of focus and development. Even the non-nationalist writing of commercially successful writers such as Richler, Munro, Ondaatje, and song-writer Cohen, whom Mount includes in his “boom,” troubles his 1976 cut-off by having continued to develop past that date much as it had developed before.

One final thought that I have about *Arrival* is that in some disconcerting ways its populist conservatism – literary history for “dummies” – echoes many of the regrettable ideological threads of our

times. There's its ingratiatingly colloquial style, its simplifying generalizations, its pretense to tell it like it is (or was), the claim to tell the "whole story," and that shocking disdain for *Survival's* readers – and by implication for his own. Pervading all is the anti-academicism that is implicit in its author's proclaiming it not to be academic, and the anti-intellectualism implicit in his being baffled by "the wonders of the avant-garde," or in the Quebec instance being seemingly unaware of them.

## Notes

- 1 <https://coupland.blogs.nytimes.com/2006/08/22/what-is-canlit/?mcubz=1>. Accessed 21 Sep 2017.
- 2 Camlot, Jason, "The Sound of Canadian Modernisms: The Sir George Williams University Poetry Series, 1966-1974." *Journal of Canadian Studies / Revue d'études canadiennes* 46.3 (Fall 2012): 28-59.
- 3 Ruth Panofsky, *The Force of Vocation: The Literary Career of Adele Wiseman*. Winnipeg: U of Manitoba P, 2006. 100, 130.
- 4 George Bowering, "Given This Body: An Interview with Daphne Marlatt." *Open Letter* 4:3 (Spring 1979): 81.

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