

## Resurrecting Daniells

Sandra Djwa. *Professing English: a Life of Roy Daniells*. Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2002. xii + 474 pp.

In the Prologue to *Professing English: a Life of Roy Daniells*, Sandra Djwa articulates the difference between biographical writing about the “large public figure of general interest” (14)—like F. R. Scott, the subject of her earlier biography, *The Politics of the Imagination*—and that about “minor poets” or “lesser dignitaries” (qtd. in Djwa, *Professing* 14)—like Roy Daniells:

The semiprivate life has the great advantage of illuminating two aspects of cultural history at once: the public life of large figures and events, and the hidden drama of disciplines and ordinary private lives. . . . [Daniells’] public life as teacher, scholar, and university administrator illustrates large and continuous changes in the humanities, while his private life illustrates the hidden drama of both individual and discipline. (14)

Djwa’s new work will have wide usefulness and appeal because it serves the dual purpose of tracing the emergence of Canadian literature and the development of literary studies in Canada over five decades while renewing interest in a relatively obscure figure whose pioneering work in *Milton, Mannerism and Baroque* and exquisitely crafted sonnets in *Deeper into the Forest* and *The Chequered Shade* tend to be studied today only by specialists. *Professing English* is, as the author puts it, “cultural and institutional biography with a human face” (12).

Especially in the book’s opening chapters, Djwa draws generously but judiciously from Daniells’ unpublished letters and autobiographical short fiction to show how his upbringing in the Plymouth Brethren, “a fundamentalist Christian sect” (21), was responsible for his crippling feelings of anxiety and guilt and his subsequent emotional disintegration. Djwa concludes, however, that the young Daniells’ “vivid . . . literary imagination” (34) was indicative of his remarkable spiritual self-awareness and creative potential:

the boy was too intelligent for the wholehearted submission that [a Plymouth Brethren] salvation required: at the incipient moment of conversion, Hamlet-like, he began a mental soliloquy that erased the possibility of belief. It was a catch twenty-two situation. (35)

Djwa sees Daniells' life as a "conversion-narrative" (95); in addition to Hamlet, she compares him to other characters from world literature, such as Christian from *The Pilgrim's Progress* (34) and Edmond Dantès from *The Count of Monte Cristo* (56), to foreshadow how "the study of literature" will enable Daniells to "escape from [the] prison" of his "religious fears" into "a new world of freedom" (63) as an academic.

Djwa points out that Daniells' enrolment at the University of Toronto in 1930 came at a time when "religion was giving way to morality and culture through the study of literature" (68) and the ideas of T.S. Eliot and English humanists like Irving Babbitt were becoming increasingly influential (73). She sees Daniells' gradual rejection of religious fundamentalism and acceptance of a more moderate secular humanism informed by the "modernist revolution" of the 1920s (100) as an ordainment into "the priesthood of academe" (104) and a rebaptism into the church of "social action" (136). Djwa reproduces some of Daniells' "politicized and subversive" 1930s satires from the *Canadian Forum* to illustrate this evolution (154), but she is quick to point out that Daniells' spiritual "*sturm und drang*" (162) reflected an ideological shift that was transforming the entire academy:

The whole group [of Daniells' colleagues] recognized that a great spiritual void had been opened by the failure of nineteenth-century standards and beliefs and that "the economic system under which we lived was in a state of disintegration." What Eliot [and the modernists] offered was a catharsis—a way of dealing with chaos in poetry. (155)

Daniells' time at the University of Toronto prepared him, Djwa shows, to make significant contributions to the modernisation of literary studies in Canada (173).

Daniells' radical transformation of the University of Manitoba's troubled English department (182-83), combined with his reputation for being a "captivating" lecturer (177), inspired an entire generation of students to pursue graduate studies in Canada (178). The "shift in university demographics" that accompanied the Second World War provided opportunities for women that had not previously existed (194), and Djwa observes that Canadian women writers such as Adele Wiseman, Patricia Blondal, Fredelle Bruser Maynard, and Margaret Laurence "emerge[d] from Daniells' revised English program at the U of M to become major figures in the Canadian literary community" (214). Djwa draws from a number of their works to show how these writers internalised some of Daniells' ideas and made a "psychological study of Daniells himself" (214). Laudable as was

Daniells's proficiency as a professor and administrator, however, Djwa points out that academic publishing was becoming increasingly important:

the arguments [Daniells raises in a 1943 letter to Sidney Smith, then president of the U of M]—large enrolments in English, huge classes, inadequate faculty, long teaching and marking hours, no time for research—give us some idea of the practical problems faced by professors and administrators who were increasingly expected to be good scholars as well as good teachers. (204)

Daniells' emphasis on the importance of "good teaching" (327) should serve as an important reminder to academics today, whose advancement is increasingly dependent upon their volume of scholarly publishing. "We are missionaries," Daniells writes, "and missionaries are seldom theologians" (qtd. in 203).

Division and tumult marked Daniells' time at the University of British Columbia, mainly owing to his bitter conflicts with Earle Birney over curricular and administrative issues. Although Elspeth Cameron devotes several pages to the infamous rivalry in *Earle Birney: a Life*, Djwa is the first critic to offer a comprehensive investigation of the turbulent relationship from Daniells' point of view. Her study reveals much about both men, but more importantly, it offers a disturbing glimpse into the often brutal world of academic power-politics. At a time when a younger generation of professors was dismissing as passé the "gentlemanly concerns" (327) of Daniells' generation and dividing English departments into aggressively competitive "left" and "right" factions (326), department heads had to be effective mediators. Daniells' long list of accomplishments is a testament to his success. Not only did he revitalise the English department at UBC despite the distraction of Birney (358), increase his output of scholarly writing (341), make important contributions to the Humanities Research Council (306-07) and the Kingston Conference (310-11), and establish the journal *Canadian Literature* (316-17), but more importantly, he maintained his dedication to his students and continued to profess a stalwart commitment to good teaching:

Daniells had the essential qualities of an inspiring teacher: he was emotionally involved with his subject, loved to teach, and genuinely wanted to know what his students thought. He asked probing questions and entertained answers (even foolish ones) kindly. Students went away from his classes, not just informed, but impelled by the urge to discover more. (359)

Although *Professing English* will be of greatest use to readers interested in the life of Roy Daniells, Djwa's engaging style and breadth of research will provide all readers with a fascinating perspective on the development of literary studies in Canada.

## Works Cited

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