

A Nation of Code-Keepers

Robert Lecker. *Keepers of the Code: English-Canadian Literary Anthologies and the Representation of Nation*. Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2013.

The subtitle reads “Anthologies” but the book is equally about “the canon” and canonicity, a third Lecker book about the Canadian canon, and his fifth major publication about it in twenty-three years. In the first, the article “The Canonization of Canadian Literature: An Inquiry into Value” (1990), he had questioned the undergraduate academic canon and mistakenly argued that it had received little analysis or challenge. In the second, his Introduction to the edited collection *Canadian Canons* (1991), he acknowledged those who had done research on the subject and the possibility that these could be multiple competing canons. In 1993 in the article “A Country without a Canon?” he lamented that the presence of multiple canons might mean that there was in Canada no flagship canon and that Canada might thus be a lesser nation. In 1995 in *Making It Real: The Canonization of English-Canadian Literature* he collected this and other essays into a book that argues that the primary task of canon-making in Canada is to make the nation “real.”

The title of this new book, *The Keepers of the Code*, with both its vague suggestions of Knights Templar and echoes of Charles G.D. Roberts’s *The Watchers of the Trails*, *The Watchers of the Campfire*, *The Haunters of the Silences* and *The Feet of the Furtive*, suggests some new and different ambivalence in Lecker toward the canon-making enterprise. On the one hand it is secret, protective, conspiratorial and perhaps atavistic; on the other it is a noble attempt to “bear...witness to the nation” (340) done “out of a profound sense of nationalism” (341). Here Lecker surveys and appraises in considerable detail 175 years of anglophone-Canadian attempts “at imagining the country, imagining a community, imagining an identity” (7) by creating anthologies of the nation’s literature.

It’s an enterprise that requires literature to be understood as writing that is “about knowing the country” (9). Lecker tends to use the word “country” in contexts in which one could also use “nation” or “nation state,” and probably does so deliberately because of the literary “realism” which he is also arguing that these anthologies have favoured. “Country” understands the nation-state as a landscape or territory—from sea to sea to sea—as a material entity that can be evoked or visualized. “Nation” understands it as an abstraction—a people or a sovereign government.

His gesture in his title to Roberts is probably also deliberate, placing his keepers within a textual tradition that contains the work of the Confederation Poets and the animal story, sometimes argued as having been a Canadian genre. His anthologists are thus as much defenders as they are expanders, and as much British North American as they are North American. The title is subliminally readable as “watchers of the code” and “keepers of the silences”—quite possibly of silences that recent scholars, such as Daniel Coleman in *White Civility*, have sought to break.

Lecker’s understanding of what is a national anthology is not entirely narrow; it leaves some possibility for a collection to be national by synecdoche—John Garvin’s *Canadian Poems of the Great War* or Smaro Kamboureli’s pan-ethnic *Making a Difference*, or a generational anthology such as Eli Mandel and Jean-Guy Pilon’s *Poetry 62*—but it excludes regional and similar single-constituency collections. But by seeking some reference to an attempted representation of Canada it risks tautology—are all important Canadian anthologies attempts at “verifying the existence of the nation” (191) or has an assumption that they are blinded both editors and readers, including Lecker himself, to other possibilities?

Nevertheless, this is a very well researched and useful study of its subject, the nationalist anthology of Canadian literature from John Simpson’s of 1837 to the latest Donna Bennett and Russell Brown anthology of 2010. As well as detailing its prevailing ideologies and preference for realism, Lecker notes the relevant cultural shifts that have taken place in this period – how, for instance, the major anthologies which were once Canadian-produced are now published only by large multinational corporations. Nationalistically inflected Canadian literature has evidently become a lucrative commodity that can be narrowly defined and widely marketed. He notes the changing audience—how the voluntary middle-class readership assumed by Simpson, Edward Hartley Dewart, and William Douw Lighthall in the nineteenth century has become the captive freshman and sophomore readership assumed by current editors—Bennett and Brown, Cynthia Sugars and Laura Moss, Lecker himself, and the market researchers employed by their publishers to assist their efforts. In his concluding chapter he discusses these and similar material changes to the production of Canadian anthologies (and canons) at some length, but remains almost sentimentally sanguine about the process. Such editors, he writes, still attempt “to unite the literature and bring it home. Their anthologies tell a story. They move together in the name of a nation. Together they keep the code” (341).

Quite possibly a nation needs such sentiment. Without it could there be Canadian literary institutions to publish Lecker’s and other views? But I do

wonder whether writers now hoping to have work included in such anthologies are doing their own market research, or at the very least studying how to write nationalistically marked realist texts that might appeal to 19- and 20-year old readers, and thus become 'canonical.' I wonder also about the effects of that recent anthology variant, the college coursepack, which Lecker probably could not have studied because it has left so few and such dispersed records, and will leave even fewer after the last year's Supreme Court decision on 'fair dealing.' The coursepack has allowed individual postsecondary instructors to construct their own Canadian canons in relative invisibility, and now without leaving records of royalties paid and permissions granted. Greater use of the coursepack offers the strange possibility of canonicity without publicity, profit or glory, and the possibility also that Lecker's impressive study marks the end of his subject and its code. Not having to pay royalties may give the coursepack a potentially devastating financial advantage over the commercially produced anthology.

A second possible new competitor for the anthology is the on-line database, the model that Wikipedia could represent. Reviewing the second edition of the Norton anthology, *Postmodern American Poetry* (2013), and the selection difficulties encountered by its editor, Paul Hoover, Ron Silliman recently suggested that the establishment of an "anthology-like website" for such writing was likely inevitable. He added, "The minute something like this comes into existence—call it Wikipoets or whatever—then I suspect that these larger (but never large enough) omnibus books will rapidly go the way of the *Encyclopedia Britannica*." Here perhaps Robert Lecker's well-kept code could also face an end, or a new and much larger future.

Works Cited

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Frank Davey