



Wacousta

John Richardson



the readist

Reading Guide Volume I, issue 2

This guide is your companion through Richardson's foundational and unsettling Canadian Gothic. Inside: historical context, thematic explorations, discussion prompts, and a theoretical framework that invites you to ask who gets to write the past, and at what cost.

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Cover art: Detail from **William Armstrong (Canadian 1822-1914) 'Early Settlement 1859'**

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Let's Get Started

John Richardson's *Wacousta* (1832) is the founding novel of Canadian literature and one of its most unresolved. A Gothic tale of siege, revenge, and wilderness terror set during Pontiac's uprising of 1763, it remains largely unread outside university courses. This is why it rewards attention.

In this guide, you'll find historical and genre context, major themes, discussion prompts, and a theoretical companion to help you read deeply and critically.

How to Use This Guide

- Reflect on prompts during or after reading
- Jot down responses in a notebook
- Return to key themes after finishing the book

Historical Romance and its Colonial Logic

To read *Wacousta* well, you first need to understand the genre Richardson was working in, and what that genre was designed to do.

Walter Scott invented the historical romance in 1814 with *Waverley*. More than simply a way of telling stories set in the past, the historical romance was a mechanism for processing cultural anxiety about modernization, conquest, and the disappearance of the peoples being displaced by both. Scott's genius was making that process feel elegiac rather than violent. His Highland Scots are noble, doomed, and ultimately complicit in their own marginalization. The reader grieves them. The reader also, quietly, accepts the inevitability of their passing.

James Fenimore Cooper imported the formula to the American frontier in 1826 with *The Last of the Mohicans*. He added new ingredients: the frontier as a space where civilization proves itself through contact with savagery, the figure of the noble savage whose tragic nobility justifies his vanishing, and the white hero (Hawkeye, not of M*A*S*H* fame) whose moral authority derives precisely from his position between worlds. Uncas dies so that Hawkeye can feel something. The sympathy is genuine. The structure is colonial.

Richardson read both and in 1832 wrote the Canadian version. He inherited Scott's Gothic atmosphere and Cooper's frontier logic, but his wilderness is darker and less resolved than either model. *Wacousta* doesn't vanish gracefully. He erupts. The garrison doesn't civilize the landscape; it barely survives it. Where Cooper's frontier is contested but the outcome is predetermined by the genre, Richardson's fort feels genuinely besieged by the forest, by Indigenous forces, and by the unacknowledged violence of the colonial project itself.

That progression from Scott to Cooper to Richardson is itself an argument. Each text is more anxious than the last. The Canadian version can't quite hold the form together. Knowing this going in changes how you read the novel and what you notice about what it can't say.

Context for *Wacousta*

Wacousta arrives at an odd angle to the tradition it inaugurates. Richardson was writing from London, reconstructing a Canadian landscape he had left behind, drawing on a genre invented by a Scotsman and popularized by an American, to tell a story set seventy years before his own time. The geographical, temporal, and generic distance shapes what the novel can see and what it can't.

The historical setting matters, too. Pontiac's Uprising of 1763 was a coordinated resistance by a coalition of Indigenous nations against British colonial expansion following the Seven Years' War. It was, by any measure, a significant military and political event. Richardson's novel does not treat it as such. The uprising is backdrop — a source of Gothic terror and siege atmosphere — rather than a subject in its own right. This is a structural feature of the historical romance genre, and requires the defeated party to be sympathetic but ultimately incomprehensible: a force of nature rather than a political actor.

Wacousta himself is Richardson's most original contribution to the form. Unlike Cooper's noble savages, *Wacousta* is a white man — a British officer turned against colonial civilization by personal betrayal. He leads Indigenous forces not out of political solidarity but out of private vengeance. This displacement is revealing: the novel can't quite give Indigenous characters political agency, so it routes that agency through a white character who has, in the novel's logic, gone native. The result is a figure who is both the most compelling character in the book and the most troubling symptom of its ideological limits.

At a Glance

- Published in 1832, written in London
- Set during Pontiac's Uprising, 1763
- First major novel by a Canadian-born author
- Richardson was born in Queenston, Upper Canada
- Influenced by Scott's *Waverley* and Cooper's *Leatherstocking Tales*
- Northrop Frye used it as primary evidence for his "garrison mentality" thesis

- The title character is a white man turned against colonial civilization
- Largely out of print for much of the 20th century
- Revived by Canadian literary nationalism in the 1960s–70s
- Richardson served in the War of 1812 — the siege mentality is biographical
- Indigenous characters are present but filtered entirely through settler consciousness
- The novel has never been adapted or widely taught outside Canada

Key Themes & Discussion Prompts

The Garrison and the Wilderness

The fort is more than a military installation in Richardson's novel. It is a psychological condition. The garrison mentality (Northrop Frye's term, derived largely from this novel) describes a settler consciousness perpetually under siege, defined by what surrounds it rather than what it contains. The wilderness is not neutral landscape but active threat: dark, ungovernable, and morally contagious. To leave the garrison is to risk becoming what surrounds you.

- ▶ *What does the fort protect, and what does it fail to protect?*
- ▶ *Why does Richardson's wilderness feel like a psychological state as much as a physical space?*
- ▶ *What is the relationship between the garrison mentality and the colonial project it enables?*

Revenge, Betrayal, and the Gothic Double

Wacousta's revenge plot is the engine of the novel, but the Gothic doubling is the interesting mechanism. Wacousta and De Haldimar, the British commander, were once alike: officers, gentlemen, rivals in love. The betrayal that sets the plot in motion is intimate and personal. What Richardson's Gothic structure reveals is that the terror outside the garrison has a source inside it: colonial authority generates its own monsters. Wacousta is not an external threat but a repressed one.

- ▶ *How does the doubling of Wacousta and De Haldimar implicate the colonial project in the violence it claims to oppose?*
- ▶ *What does it mean that the most compelling character in the novel is a white man who has switched sides?*
- ▶ *How does Gothic form — doubling, repression, the return of the buried — function as a mode of colonial critique that Richardson may not have intended?*

Race, Representation, and the Limits of the Form

Indigenous characters in *Wacousta* are present but filtered entirely through settler consciousness. They embody threat, landscape, and atmosphere. They are never given

interiority in the way Wacousta or the De Haldimar family are. This is not simply Richardson's personal failure; it is the genre working as intended. Historical romance requires the Other to be sympathetic but ultimately opaque — a mirror for settler anxieties rather than a subject with its own perspective. Reading the novel critically means reading the silences as much as the text.

- ▶ *What would the novel look like told from an Indigenous perspective? What would have to change structurally, not just in terms of character focus?*
- ▶ *How does the form of historical romance prevent Richardson from giving Indigenous characters political agency?*
- ▶ *Where do the novel's representations of Indigenous peoples tell you more about 1832 settler anxiety than about the 1763 historical moment?*

Nature as Moral Landscape

Richardson's Canadian wilderness is not the Romantic sublime — awe-inspiring and transcendent. It is Gothic: dark, ungovernable, morally threatening. To be in the forest is to be in danger of losing yourself. The landscape doesn't offer freedom; it offers dissolution. This is a profoundly different relationship to land than either the Romantic tradition or Indigenous cosmologies would suggest, and it tells you something specific about the colonial imagination: land is property to be controlled, or wilderness to be feared. There is no middle ground.

- ▶ *How does Richardson's treatment of the Canadian landscape differ from the American sublime in Cooper?*
- ▶ *What does it reveal about the colonial imagination that wilderness is experienced primarily as moral threat?*
- ▶ *How might Indigenous readers of this period — had they encountered it — have understood Richardson's representation of the land?*

Close-Reading Moments

"The dark and dreary forest which lay stretched out before them, was to their excited imaginations peopled with a thousand lurking foes."

How does Richardson use collective perspective here? Whose imagination is "excited," and what does that reveal?

What does it mean that the forest is "peopled" — and by whom, in whose mind?

How does this passage exemplify the garrison mentality Frye identifies?

"There was a time when I was as you are now — a man of honour, a soldier, a gentleman."

What does Wacousta's use of the past tense reveal about Richardson's moral geography?

How does the category of "gentleman" function as both social rank and moral condition in the novel?

What has to happen to a man of honour for him to become what Wacousta has become? And who is responsible?

Theoretical Companion

The Garrison Mentality

Northrop Frye, from *The Bush Garden* (1971)

This text gives you the critical vocabulary for reading *Wacousta* as a symptom as much as a novel. Frye's concept of the garrison mentality is built directly from Richardson's fiction — and from the broader tradition of Canadian writing that followed it.

Why It's Included

Frye argues that the defining feature of the Canadian literary imagination is not the Romantic sublime of American writing, nor the domestic pastoral of English writing, but a consciousness of siege. The settler self is defined by what surrounds it: a wilderness that is not transcendent but threatening, a landscape that does not invite expansion but resists it. More than a simply geographical, this observation is a psychological and ideological one, and it has consequences for how Canadian literature represents both the land and the people who were living on it before the garrison arrived.

Reading *Wacousta* through Frye allows you to see the novel as the founding document of a particular colonial anxiety, and one that is still legible in Canadian culture today.

Where It Comes From

The Bush Garden: Essays on the Canadian Imagination (1971) is Frye's major collection of Canadian literary criticism, developed over decades of writing for academic journals and the *Literary History of Canada*. The garrison mentality thesis appears most fully in the provided excerpt, the conclusion to the *Literary History* (1965), which Frye revised and reprinted in *The Bush Garden*. Frye was writing during the height of Canadian literary nationalism — the period when *Wacousta* was being rediscovered after a century of neglect.

Occasion of Its Writing

Frye's intervention into the critical conversation surrounding Canadian literature provided a framework at a moment when Canada was actively trying to define a national literary tradition. The garrison mentality concept served that nationalist

project, but it also, less intentionally, described the colonial logic embedded in the tradition it was celebrating. It is a useful framework precisely because it is honest about the anxiety at the centre of the literature, even if Frye himself did not fully pursue what that anxiety reveals about the colonial project that produced it.

From the Bush Garden

The following passages are drawn from Northrop Frye's conclusion to the *Literary History of Canada* (1965), as revised in *The Bush Garden* (1971). They are the primary statement of the garrison mentality thesis.

"The settlers... seem to have built their forts first and cultivated the land second. The human values are the values of a people under siege. The garrison keeps the enemy out, but it also keeps the prisoner in."

"Small and isolated communities surrounded with a physical or psychological 'frontier,' separated from one another and from their American and British cultural sources: communities that provide all that their members have in the way of distinctively human values, and that are compelled to feel a great respect for the law and order that holds them together, yet confronted with a huge, unthinking, menacing, and formidable physical setting — such communities are bound to develop what we may provisionally call a garrison mentality."

"When the garrison mentality is in control, everything that is non-human becomes a sinister contrast to the human community, which feels imprisoned in a world it can see but cannot enter... The threatening, mysterious forces outside are represented as chaotic, violent, and demonic."



**Canada
Commons**



Conclusion to the First Edition of *Literary History of Canada*

1965

From Literary History of Canada: Canadian Literature in English, ed. Carl F. Klinck, Alfred G. Bailey, Claude Bissell, Roy Daniells, Northrop Frye, and Desmond Pacey (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1965), 821-49, reprinted in 2nd ed. (1976), 2:231-61. Also in the French version, *Histoire littéraire du Canada: Littérature canadienne de langue anglaise*, trans. Maurice Lebel (Quebec: Les Presses de l'Université Laval, 1970), 971-1005. Reprinted in edited form in BG, 213-51, in RCLI, 65-99, in ECLI, 63-95, in *An Anthology of Canadian Literature*, ed. Russell Brown and Donna Bennett (Toronto: Oxford University Press, 1982), 1:536-65, and in *Towards a Canadian Literature: Essays, Editorials, and Manifestos*, ed. Douglas M. Daymond and Leslie G. Monkman (Ottawa: Tecumseh Press, 1985), 2:460-93. Printed in an edited version in StS, 279-312 (the source of the notes labelled [NF]), and (in part) in *Canadian Writing Today*, ed. Mordecai Richler (Baltimore: Penguin, 1970), 312-22. For the new conclusion Frye wrote for the second edition, see no. 68.

The scholars Frye refers to and the chapters they wrote are as follows: David Galloway, University of New Brunswick, "The Voyagers"; William H. Kilbourn, York University, "The Writing of Canadian History"; Kenneth Windsor, Trent University, "Historical Writing in Canada (to 1920)"; Matthew Scargill, University of Victoria, "The Growth of Canadian English"; Carl F. Klinck, Middlesex College, University of Western Ontario, two essays on literary activity in the Canadas, 1812-80; Alfred Bailey, University of New Brunswick, "Overture to Nationhood"; Elizabeth Waterston, Middlesex College, two essays on travel books; Michael Tait, Ryerson Polytechnical Institute, "Drama and Theatre"; Fred Cogswell, University of New Brunswick, "Haliburton"; Desmond Pacey, University of New Brunswick, "The Writer and His Public"; John Irving, Victoria College, University of Toronto, "The Achievement of G.S. Brett";

Victor G. Hopwood, *University of British Columbia*, two essays on explorers; Millar MacLure, *Victoria College, University of Toronto*, "Literary Scholarship"; James S. Thomson, *McGill University*, "Religious and Theological Writings"; Frank Watt, *University College, University of Toronto*, "Literature of Protest"; Edith Fowke, *Canadian Folk Music Society*, "Folktales and Folk Songs"; Hugo McPherson, *University College, University of Toronto*, "Fiction (1940-1960)"; Gordon Roper, *Trinity College, University of Toronto*, three essays on fiction, 1880-1920; Alec Lucas, *McGill University*, "Nature Writers and the Animal Story"; and Marjorie McDowell, *City of Saint John*, "Children's Books."

I

It is now several years since the group of editors listed on the title-page met, under Carl Klinck's leadership, to draw up the first tentative plans for this book. What we then dreamed of is substantially what we have got, changed very little in essentials. I expressed at the time the hope that such a book would help to broaden the inductive basis on which some writers on Canadian literature were making generalizations that bordered on guesswork. By "some writers" I meant primarily myself. I find, however, that this book tends to confirm me in most of my intuitions on the subject: the advantage for me is that this attempt at conclusion and summary can involve some self-plagiarism.

The book is a tribute to the maturity of Canadian literary scholarship and criticism, whatever one thinks of the literature. Its authors have completely outgrown the view that evaluation is the end of criticism, instead of its incidental by-product. Had evaluation been their guiding principle, this book would, if written at all, have been only a huge debunking project, leaving Canadian literature a poor naked *alouette* plucked of every feather of decency and dignity. True, the book gives evidence, on practically every one of its eight hundred odd pages, that what is really remarkable is not how little but how much good writing has been produced in Canada. But this would not affect the rigorous evaluator. The evaluative view is based on the conception of criticism as concerned mainly to define and canonize the genuine classics of literature. And Canada has produced no author who is a classic in the sense of possessing a vision greater in kind than that of his best readers (Canadians themselves might argue about one or two, but in the perspective of the world at large the statement is true). There is no Canadian writer of

whom we can say what we can say of the world's major writers, that their readers can grow up inside their work without ever being aware of a circumference. Thus the metaphor of the critic as "judge" holds for the Canadian critic, who is never dealing with the kind of writer who judges him.

This fact about Canadian literature, so widely deplored by Canadians, has one advantage. It is much easier to see what literature is trying to do when we are studying a literature that has not quite done it. If no Canadian author pulls us away from the Canadian context toward the centre of literary experience itself, then at every point we remain aware of his social and historical setting. The conception of what is literary has to be greatly broadened for such a literature. The literary, in Canada, is often only an incidental quality of writings which, like those of many of the early explorers, are as innocent of literary intention as a mating loon. Even when it is literature in its orthodox genres of poetry and fiction, it is more significantly studied as a part of Canadian life than as a part of an autonomous world of literature.

So far from merely admitting or conceding this, the editors have gone out of their way to emphasize it. We have asked for chapters on political, historical, religious, scholarly, philosophical, scientific, and other non-literary writing, to show how the verbal imagination operates as a ferment in all cultural life. We have included the writings of foreigners, of travellers, of immigrants, of emigrants—even of emigrants whose most articulate literary emotion was their thankfulness at getting the hell out of Canada. The reader of this book, even if he is not Canadian or much interested in Canadian literature as such, may still learn a good deal about the literary imagination as a force and function of life generally. For here another often deplored fact also becomes an advantage: that many Canadian cultural phenomena are not peculiarly Canadian at all, but are typical of their wider North American and Western contexts.

This book is a collection of essays in cultural history, and of the general principles of cultural history we still know relatively little. It is, of course, closely related to political and to economic history, but it is a separate and definable subject in itself. Like other kinds of history, it has its own themes of exploration, settlement, and development, but these themes relate to a social *imagination* that explores and settles and develops, and the imagination has its own rhythms of growth as well as its own modes of expression. It is obvious that Canadian literature, whatever its inherent merits, is an indispensable aid to the knowledge of Canada. It records

what the Canadian imagination has reacted to, and it tells us things about this environment that nothing else will tell us. By examining this imagination as the authors of this book have tried to do, as an ingredient in Canadian verbal culture generally, a relatively small and low-lying cultural development is studied in all its dimensions. There is far too much Canadian writing for this book not to become, in places, something of a catalogue; but the outlines of the structure are clear. Fortunately, the bulk of Canadian nonliterary writing, even today, has not yet declined into the state of sodden specialization in which the readable has become the impure.

I stress our ignorance of the laws and conditions of cultural history for an obvious reason. The question, Why has there been no Canadian writer of classic proportions? may naturally be asked. At any rate it often has been. Our authors realize that it is better to deal with what is there than to raise speculations about why something else is not there. But it is clear that the question haunts their minds. And we know so little about cultural history that we not only cannot answer such a question, but we do not even know whether or not it is a real question. The notion, doubtless of Romantic origin, that "genius" is a certain quantum that an individual is born with, as he might be born with red hair, is still around, but mainly as a folk-tale motif in fiction, like the story of Finch in the *Jalna* books.¹ "Genius" is as much, and as essentially, a matter of social context as it is of individual character. We do not know what the social conditions are that produce great literature, or even whether there is any causal relation at all. If there is, there is no reason to suppose that they are good conditions, or conditions that we should try to reproduce. The notion that the literature one admires must have been nourished by something admirable in the social environment is persistent, but has never been justified by evidence. One can still find books on Shakespeare that profess to make his achievement more plausible by talking about a "background" of social euphoria produced by the defeat of the Armada, the discovery of America a century before, and the conviction that Queen Elizabeth was a wonderful woman. There is a general sense of filler about such speculations, and when similar arguments are given in a negative form to explain the absence of a Shakespeare in Canada they are no more convincing. Puritan inhibitions, pioneer life, "an age too late, cold climate, or years"²—these may be important as factors or conditions of Canadian culture, helping us to characterize its qualities. To suggest that any of them is a negative cause of its merit is to say much more than anyone knows.

One theme which runs all through this book is the obvious and unquenchable desire of the Canadian cultural public to identify itself through its literature. Canada is not a bad environment for the author, as far as recognition goes: in fact the recognition may even hamper his development by making him prematurely self-conscious. Scholarships, prizes, university posts, await the dedicated writer: there are so many medals offered for literary achievement that a modern Canadian Dryden might well be moved to write a satire on medals, except that if he did he would promptly be awarded the medal for satire and humour. Publishers take an active responsibility for native literature, even poetry; a fair proportion of the books bought by Canadian readers are by Canadian writers; the CBC and other media help to employ some writers and publicize others. The efforts made at intervals to boost or hard-sell Canadian literature, by asserting that it is much better than it actually is, may look silly enough in retrospect, but they were also, in part, efforts to create a cultural community, and the aim deserves more sympathy than the means. Canada has two languages and two literatures, and every statement made in a book like this about "Canadian literature" employs the figure of speech known as synecdoche, putting a part for the whole. Every such statement implies a parallel or contrasting statement about French Canadian literature. The advantages of having a national culture based on two languages are in some respects very great, but of course they are for the most part potential. The difficulties, if more superficial, are also more actual and more obvious.

Some of the seminal facts about the origins of Canadian culture are set down with great clarity near the beginning of this book. Canada began, says Mr. Galloway, as an obstacle, blocking the way to the treasures of the East, to be explored only in the hope of finding a passage through it. English Canada continued to be that long after what is now the United States had become a defined part of the Western world. One reason for this is obvious from the map. American culture was, down to about 1900, mainly a culture of the Atlantic seaboard, with a western frontier that moved irregularly but steadily back until it reached the other coast. The Revolution did not essentially change the cultural unity of the English-speaking community of the North Atlantic that had London and Edinburgh on one side of it and Boston and Philadelphia on the other. But Canada has, for all practical purposes, no Atlantic seaboard. The traveler from Europe edges into it like a tiny Jonah entering an inconceivably large whale, slipping past the Straits of Belle Isle into the Gulf of St. Lawrence, where five Canadian provinces surround him, for the most

part invisible. Then he goes up the St. Lawrence and the inhabited country comes into view, mainly a French-speaking country, with its own cultural traditions. To enter the United States is a matter of crossing an ocean; to enter Canada is a matter of being silently swallowed by an alien continent.

It is an unforgettable and intimidating experience to enter Canada in this way. But the experience initiates one into that gigantic east to west thrust which, as Mr. Kilbourn notes, historians regard as the axis of Canadian development, the "Laurentian" movement that makes the growth of Canada geographically credible. This drive to the West has attracted to itself nearly everything that is heroic and romantic in the Canadian tradition. The original impetus begins in Europe, for English Canada in the British Isles, hence though adventurous it is also a conservative force, and naturally tends to preserve its colonial link with its starting point. Once the Canadian has settled down in the country, however, he then becomes aware of the longitudinal dimension, the southward pull toward the richer and more glamorous American cities, some of which, such as Boston for the Maritimes and Minneapolis for the eastern prairies, are almost Canadian capitals. This is the axis of another kind of Canadian mentality, more critical and analytic, more inclined to see Canada as an unnatural and politically quixotic aggregate of disparate northern extensions of American culture—"seven fishing-rods tied together by the ends," as Goldwin Smith, quoted by Mr. Windsor, puts it.³ Mr. Kilbourn illustrates the contrast in his account of the styles, attitudes, and literary genres of Creighton and Underhill.

The simultaneous influence of two larger nations speaking the same language has been practically beneficial to English Canada, but theoretically confusing. It is often suggested that Canada's identity is to be found in some *via media*, or *via mediocris*, between the other two. This has the disadvantage that the British and American cultures have to be defined as extremes. Haliburton seems to have believed that the ideal for Nova Scotia would be a combination of American energy and British social structure, but such a chimera, or synthetic monster, is hard to achieve in practice. It is simpler merely to notice the alternating current in the Canadian mind, as reflected in its writing, between two moods, one romantic, traditional, and idealistic, the other shrewd, observant, and humorous. Canada in its attitude to Britain tends to be more royalist than the Queen, in the sense that it is more attracted to it as a symbol of tradition than as a fellow nation. The Canadian attitude to the United

States is typically that of a smaller country to a much bigger neighbour, sharing in its material civilization but anxious to keep clear of the huge mass movements that drive a great imperial power. The United States, being founded on a revolution and a written constitution, has introduced a deductive or *a priori* pattern into its cultural life that tends to define an American way of life and mark it off from anti-American heresies. Canada, having a seat on the sidelines of the American Revolution, adheres more to the inductive and the expedient. The Canadian genius for compromise is reflected in the existence of Canada itself.

The most obvious tension in the Canadian literary situation is in the use of language. Here, first of all, a traditional standard English collides with the need for a North American vocabulary and phrasing. Mr. Scargill and Mr. Klinck have studied this in the work of Mrs. Moodie and Mrs. Traill. As long as the North American speaker feels that he belongs in a minority, the European speech will impose a standard of correctness. This is to a considerable extent still true of French in Canada, with its campaigns against "joual" and the like. But as Americans began to outnumber the British, Canada tended in practice to fall in with the American developments, though a good deal of Canadian theory is still Anglophile. A much more complicated cultural tension arises from the impact of the sophisticated on the primitive, and vice versa. The most dramatic example, and one I have given elsewhere,⁴ is that of Duncan Campbell Scott, working in the Department of Indian Affairs in Ottawa. He writes of a starving squaw baiting a fish-hook with her own flesh, and he writes of the music of Debussy and the poetry of Henry Vaughan. In English literature we have to go back to Anglo-Saxon times to encounter so incongruous a collision of cultures.

Cultural history, we said, has its own rhythms. It is possible that one of these rhythms is very like an organic rhythm: that there must be a period, of a certain magnitude, as Aristotle would say, in which a social imagination can take root and establish a tradition. American literature had this period, in the northeastern part of the country, between the Revolution and the Civil War. Canada has never had it. English Canada was first a part of the wilderness, then a part of North America and the British Empire, then a part of the world. But it has gone through these revolutions too quickly for a tradition of writing to be founded on any one of them. Canadian writers are, even now, still trying to assimilate a Canadian environment at a time when new techniques of communication, many of which, like television, constitute a verbal market, are

annihilating the boundaries of that environment. This foreshortening of Canadian history, if it really does have any relevance to Canadian culture, would account for many features of it: its fixation on its own past, its penchant for old-fashioned literary techniques, its preoccupation with the theme of strangled articulateness. It seems to me that Canadian sensibility has been profoundly disturbed, not so much by our famous problem of identity, important as that is, as by a series of paradoxes in what confronts that identity. It is less perplexed by the question, "Who am I?" than by some such riddle as, "Where is here?"

Mr. Bailey, writing of the early Maritimes, warns us not to read the "mystique of Canadianism" back into the pre-Confederation period. Haliburton, for instance, was a Nova Scotian, a Bluenose: the word "Canadian" to him would have summoned up the figure of someone who spoke mainly French and whose enthusiasm for Haliburton's own political ideals would have been extremely tepid. The mystique of Canadianism was, as several chapters in this book make clear, specifically the cultural accompaniment of Confederation and the imperialistic mood that followed it. But it came so suddenly after the pioneer period that it was still full of wilderness. To feel "Canadian" was to feel part of a no-man's-land with huge rivers, lakes, and islands that very few Canadians had ever seen. "From sea to sea, and from the river unto the ends of the earth"—if Canada is not an island, the phrasing is still in the etymological sense isolating.⁵ One wonders if any other national consciousness has had so large an amount of the unknown, the unrealized, the humanly undigested, so built into it. Rupert Brooke, quoted by Mrs. Waterston, speaks of the "unseizable virginity" of the Canadian landscape.⁶ What is important here, for our purposes, is the position of the frontier in the Canadian imagination. In the United States one could choose to move out to the frontier or to retreat from it back to the seaboard. The tensions built up by such migrations have fascinated many American novelists and historians. In the Canadas, even in the Maritimes, the frontier was all around one, a part and a condition of one's whole imaginative being. The frontier was primarily what separated the Canadian, physically or mentally, from Great Britain, from the United States, and, even more important, from other Canadian communities. Such a frontier was the immediate datum of his imagination, the thing that had to be dealt with first.

After the Northwest Passage failed to materialize, Canada became a colony in the mercantilist sense, treated by others less like a society than

as a place to look for things. French, English, Americans plunged into it to carry off its supplies of furs, minerals, and pulpwood, aware only of their immediate objectives. From time to time recruiting officers searched the farms and villages to carry young men off to death in a European dynastic quarrel. The travellers reviewed by Mrs. Waterston visit Canada much as they would visit a zoo: even when their eyes momentarily focus on the natives they are still thinking primarily of how their own sensibility is going to react to what it sees. Mrs. Waterston speaks of a feature of Canadian life that has been noted by writers from Susanna Moodie onward: "the paradox of vast empty spaces plus lack of privacy," without defences against the prying or avaricious eye. The resentment expressed against this in Canada seems to have taken political rather than literary forms: this may be partly because Canadians have learned from their imaginative experience to look at each other in much the same way: "as objects, even ultimately as obstacles," to quote Miss Macpherson on a Canadian autobiography.⁷

It is not much wonder if Canada developed with the bewilderment of a neglected child, preoccupied with trying to define its own identity, alternately bumptious and diffident about its own achievements. Adolescent dreams of glory haunt the Canadian consciousness (and unconsciousness), some naive and some sophisticated. In the naive area are the predictions that the twentieth century belongs to Canada,⁸ that our cities will become much bigger than they ought to be, or, like Edmonton and Vancouver, "gateways" to somewhere else, reconstructed Northwest passages. The more sophisticated usually take the form of a Messianic complex about Canadian culture, for Canadian culture, no less than Alberta, has always been "next year country."⁹ The myth of the hero brought up in the forest retreat, awaiting the moment when his giant strength will be fully grown and he can emerge into the world, informs a good deal of Canadian criticism down to our own time.

Certain features of life in a new country that are bound to handicap its writers are obvious enough. The difficulties of drama, which depends on a theatre and consequently on a highly organized urban life, are set out by Mr. Tait. Here the foreshortening of historical development has been particularly cruel, as drama was strangled by the movie just as it was getting started as a popular medium. Other literary genres have similar difficulties. Culture is born in leisure and an awareness of standards, and pioneer conditions tend to make energetic and uncritical work an end in itself, to preach a gospel of social unconsciousness, which lingers long

after the pioneer conditions have disappeared. The impressive achievements of such a society are likely to be technological. It is in the inarticulate part of communication, railways and bridges and canals and highways, that Canada, one of whose symbols is the taciturn beaver, has shown its real strength. Again, Canadian culture, and literature in particular, has felt the force of what may be called Emerson's law. Emerson remarks in his journals that in a provincial society it is extremely easy to reach the highest level of cultivation, extremely difficult to take one step beyond that.¹⁰ In surveying Canadian poetry and fiction, we feel constantly that all the energy has been absorbed in meeting a standard, a self-defeating enterprise because real standards can only be established, not met. Such writing is academic in the pejorative sense of that term, an imitation of a prescribed model, second-rate in conception, not merely in execution. It is natural that academic writing of this kind should develop where literature is a social prestige symbol, as Mr. Cogswell says. However, it is not the handicaps of Canadian writers but the distinctive features that appear in spite of them which are the main concern of this book, and so of its conclusion.

II

The sense of probing into the distance, of fixing the eyes on the skyline, is something that Canadian sensibility has inherited from the *voyageurs*. It comes into Canadian painting a good deal, in Thomson whose focus is so often farthest back in the picture, where a river or a gorge in the hills twists elusively out of sight, in Emily Carr whose vision is always, in the title of a compatriot's book of poems, "deeper into the forest."¹¹ Even in the Maritimes, where the feeling of linear distance is less urgent, Roberts contemplates the Tantramar marshes in the same way, the refrain of "miles on miles" having clearly some incantatory power for him.¹² It would be interesting to know how many Canadian novels associate nobility of character with a faraway look, or base their perorations on a long-range perspective.¹³ This might be only a cliché, except that it is often found in sharply observed and distinctively written books. Here, as a random example, is the last sentence of W.O. Mitchell's *Who Has Seen the Wind*: "The wind turns in silent frenzy upon itself, whirling into a smoking funnel, breathing up top soil and tumbleweed skeletons to carry them on its spinning way over the prairie, out and out to the far line of the sky." Mr. Pacey quotes the similarly long-sighted conclusion of *Such Is My Beloved*.

A vast country sparsely inhabited naturally depends on its modes of transportation, whether canoe, railway, or the driving and riding "circuits" of the judge, the Methodist preacher, or the Yankee peddler. The feeling of nomadic movement over great distances persists even into the age of the airplane, in a country where writers can hardly meet one another without a social organization that provides travel grants. Pratt's poetry is full of his fascination with means of communication, not simply the physical means of great ships and locomotives, though he is one of the best of all poets on such subjects, but with communication as message, with radar and asdic and wireless signals, and, in his war poems, with the power of rhetoric over fighting men. What is perhaps the most comprehensive structure of ideas yet made by a Canadian thinker, the structure embodied in Innis's *Bias of Communication*, is concerned with the same theme, and a disciple of Innis, Marshall McLuhan, continues to emphasize the unity of communication, as a complex containing both verbal and non-verbal factors, and warns us against making unreal divisions within it. Perhaps it is not too fanciful to see this need for continuity in the Canadian attitude to time as well as space, in its preoccupation with its own history (the motto of the Province of Quebec is *je me souviens*) and its relentless cultural stock-takings and self-inventories. The Burke sense of society as a continuum—consistent with the pragmatic and conservative outlook of Canadians—is strong and begins early. Mr. Irving quotes an expression of it in McCulloch, and another quotation shows that it was one of the most deeply held ideas of Brett.¹⁴ As I write, the centennial of Confederation in 1967 looms up before the country with the moral urgency of a Day of Atonement: I use a Jewish metaphor because there is something Hebraic about the Canadian tendency to read its conquest of a promised land, its Maccabean victories of 1812, its struggle for the central fortress on the hill at Quebec, as oracles of a future. It is doubtless only an accident that the theme of one of the most passionate and intense of all Canadian novels, A.M. Klein's *The Second Scroll*, is Zionism.

Civilization in Canada, as elsewhere, has advanced geometrically across the country, throwing down the long parallel lines of the railways, dividing up the farm lands into chessboards of square-mile sections and concession-line roads. There is little adaptation to nature: in both architecture and arrangement, Canadian cities and villages express rather an arrogant abstraction, the conquest of nature by an intelligence that does not love it. The word conquest suggests something military, as it should—one thinks of General Braddock, preferring to have his army annihilated

rather than fight the natural man on his own asymmetrical ground.¹⁵ There are some features of this generally North American phenomenon that have a particular emphasis in Canada. It has been remarked—Mr. Kilbourn quotes Creighton on the subject—that Canadian expansion westward had a tight grip of authority over it that American expansion, with its outlaws and sheriffs and vigilantes and the like, did not have in the same measure. America moved from the back country to the wild West; Canada moved from a New France held down by British military occupation to a Northwest patrolled by mounted police. Canada has not had, strictly speaking, an Indian war: there has been much less of the “another redskin bit the dust” feeling in our historical imagination, and only Riel remains to haunt the later period of it, though he is a formidable figure enough, rather like what a combination of John Brown and Vanzetti would be in the American conscience. Otherwise, the conquest, for the last two centuries, has been mainly of the unconscious forces of nature, personified by the dragon of the Lake Superior rocks in Pratt’s *Towards the Last Spike*:

On the North Shore a reptile lay asleep—
A hybrid that the myths might have conceived,
But not delivered. [ll. 870–2]

Yet the conquest of nature has its own perils for the imagination, in a country where the winters are so cold and where conditions of life have so often been bleak and comfortless, where even the mosquitoes have been described, Mr. Klinck tells us, as “mementoes of the fall.” I have long been impressed in Canadian poetry by a tone of deep terror in regard to nature, a theme to which we shall return. It is not a terror of the dangers or discomforts or even the mysteries of nature, but a terror of the soul at something that these things manifest. The human mind has nothing but human and moral values to cling to if it is to preserve its integrity or even its sanity, yet the vast unconsciousness of nature in front of it seems an unanswerable denial of those values. I notice that a sharp-witted Methodist preacher quoted by Mr. Cogswell speaks of the “shutting out of the whole moral creation” in the loneliness of the forests.

If we put together a few of these impressions, we may get some approach to characterizing the way in which the Canadian imagination has developed in its literature. Small and isolated communities sur-

rounded with a physical or psychological "frontier," separated from one another and from their American and British cultural sources: communities that provide all that their members have in the way of distinctively human values, and that are compelled to feel a great respect for the law and order that holds them together, yet confronted with a huge, unthinking, menacing, and formidable physical setting—such communities are bound to develop what we may provisionally call a garrison mentality. In the earliest maps of the country the only inhabited centres are forts, and that remains true of the cultural maps for a much later time. Frances Brooke, in her eighteenth-century *Emily Montague*, wrote of what was literally a garrison; novelists of our day studying the impact of Montreal on Westmount write of a psychological one.

A garrison is a closely knit and beleaguered society, and its moral and social values are unquestionable. In a perilous enterprise one does not discuss causes or motives: one is either a fighter or a deserter. Here again we may turn to Pratt, with his infallible instinct for what is central in the Canadian imagination. The societies in Pratt's poems are always tense and tight groups engaged in war, rescue, martyrdom, or crisis, and the moral values expressed are simply those of that group. In such a society the terror is not for the common enemy, even when the enemy is or seems victorious, as in the extermination of the Jesuit missionaries or the crew of Franklin¹⁶ (a great Canadian theme, well described in this book by Mr. Hopwood, that Pratt pondered but never completed). The real terror comes when the individual feels himself becoming an individual, pulling away from the group, losing the sense of driving power that the group gives him, aware of a conflict within himself far subtler than the struggle of morality against evil. It is much easier to multiply garrisons, and when that happens, something anticultural comes into Canadian life, a dominating herd-mind in which nothing original can grow. The intensity of the sectarian divisiveness in Canadian towns, both religious and political, is an example: what such groups represent, of course, vis-à-vis one another, is "two solitudes,"¹⁷ the death of communication and dialogue. Separatism, whether English or French, is culturally the most sterile of all creeds. But at present I am concerned rather with a more creative side of the garrison mentality, one that has had positive effects on our intellectual life.

They were so certain of their moral values, says Mr. Cogswell, a little sadly, speaking of the early Maritime writers. Right was white, wrong black, and nothing else counted or even existed. He goes on to point out

that such certainty invariably produces a sub-literary rhetoric. Or, as Yeats would say, we make rhetoric out of quarrels with one another, poetry out of the quarrel with ourselves.¹⁸ To use words, for any other purpose than straight description or command, is a form of play, a manifestation of *homo ludens*. But there are two forms of play, the contest and the construct. The editorial writer attacking the Family Compact, the preacher demolishing imaginary atheists with the argument of design, are using words aggressively, in theses that imply antitheses. Ideas are weapons; one seeks the verbal *coup de grâce*, the irrefutable refutation. Such a use of words is congenial enough to the earlier Canadian community: all the evidence, including the evidence of this book, points to a highly articulate and argumentative society in nineteenth-century Canada. Mr. MacLure remarks on the fact that scholarship in Canada has so often been written with more conviction and authority, and has attracted wider recognition, than the literature itself. There are historical reasons for this, apart from the fact, which will become clearer as we go on, that scholarly writing is more easily attached to its central tradition.

Leacock has a story which I often turn to because the particular aspect of Canadian culture it reflects has never been more accurately caught. He tells us of the rivalry in an Ontario town between two preachers, one Anglican and the other Presbyterian. The latter taught ethics in the local college on weekdays—without salary—and preached on Sundays. He gave his students, says Leacock, three parts Hegel and two parts St. Paul, and on Sunday he reversed the dose and gave his parishioners three parts St. Paul and two parts Hegel.¹⁹ Religion has been a major—perhaps the major—cultural force in Canada, at least down to the last generation or two. The names of two Methodist publishers, William Briggs and Lorne Pierce, recur more than once in this book, and illustrate the fact that the churches not only influenced the cultural climate but took an active part in the production of poetry and fiction, as the popularity of Ralph Connor reminds us. But the effective religious factors in Canada were doctrinal and evangelical, those that stressed the arguments of religion at the expense of its imagery.

Such a reliance on the arguing intellect was encouraged by the philosophers, who in the nineteenth century, as Mr. Irving shows, were invariably idealists with a strong religious bias. Mr. Irving quotes George as saying that civilization consists “in the conscience and intellect” of a cultivated people, and Watson as asserting that “we are capable of knowing Reality as it actually is Reality when so known is absolutely

rational."²⁰ An even higher point may have been reached by that triumphant theologian cited by Mr. Thomson, whose book I have not read but whose title I greatly admire: *The Riddle of the Universe Solved*.²¹ Naturally sophisticated intelligence of this kind was the normal means of contact with literature. Mr. MacLure tells us that James Cappon judged poetry according to whether it had a "rationalized concept" or not—this would have been a very common critical assumption. Sara Jeannette Duncan shows us a clergyman borrowing a copy of Browning's *Sordello*, no easy reading, and returning it with original suggestions for interpretation.²² Such an interest in ideas is not merely cultivated but exuberant.

But using language as one would use an axe, formulating arguments with sharp cutting edges that will help to clarify one's view of the landscape, remains a rhetorical and not a poetic achievement. To quote Yeats again, one can refute Hegel (perhaps even St. Paul) but not the *Song of Sixpence*.²³ To create a disinterested structure of words, in poetry or in fiction, is a very different achievement, and it is clear that an intelligent and able rhetorician finds it particularly hard to understand how different it is. A rhetorician practising poetry is apt to express himself in spectral arguments, generalizations that escape the feeling of possible refutation only by being vast enough to contain it, or vaporous enough to elude it. The mystique of Canadianism was accompanied by an intellectual tendency of this kind, as Mr. Daniells indicates. World-views that avoided dialectic, of a theosophical or transcendentalist cast, became popular among the Canadian poets of that time, Roberts and Carman particularly, and later among painters, as the reminiscences of the Group of Seven make clear. Bucke's *Cosmic Consciousness*, though not mentioned by any of our authors so far as I remember, is an influential Canadian book in this area. When minor rhetorically minded poets sought what Samuel Johnson calls, though in a very different context, the "grandeur of generality,"²⁴ the result is what is so well described by Mr. Beattie as "jejune chatter about infinity," and the like.

Mr. Watt's very important chapter on the literature of protest isolates another rhetorical tradition. In the nineteenth century the common assumption that nature had revealed the truth of progress, and that it was the duty of reason to accommodate that truth to mankind, could be either a conservative or a radical view. But in either case it was a revolutionary doctrine, introducing the conception of change as the key to the social process. In those whom Mr. Watt calls proletarian social Darwinists, and who represented "the unholy fusion of secularism, science and

social discontent," there was a strong tendency to regard literature as a product and a symbol of a ruling-class mentality, with, as we have tried to indicate, some justification. Hence radicals tended either to hope that "the literature of the future will be the powerful ally of Democracy and Labour Reform," or to assume that serious thought and action would bypass the creative writer entirely, building a scientific socialism and leaving him to his Utopian dreams.

The radicalism of the period up to the Russian Revolution was, from a later point of view, largely undifferentiated. A labour magazine could regard Ignatius Donnelly, with his anti-Semitic and other crank views, as an advanced thinker equally with William Morris and Edward Bellamy.²⁵ Similarly, even today, in western Canadian elections, a protest vote may go Social Credit or NDP without much regard to the difference in political philosophy between these parties. The Depression introduced a dialectic into Canadian social thought which profoundly affected its literature. In Mr. Watt's striking phrase, "the Depression was like an intense magnetic field that deflected the courses of all the poets who went through it." In this period there were, of course, the inevitable Marxist manifestos, assuring the writer that only social significance, as understood by Marxism, would bring vitality to his work. The *New Frontier*, a far-left journal of that period referred to several times in this book, shows an uneasy sense on the part of its contributors that this literary elixir of youth might have to be mixed with various other potions, not all favourable to the creative process: attending endless meetings, organizing, agitating, marching, demonstrating, or joining the Spanish Loyalists. It is easy for the critic to point out the fallacy of judging the merit of literature by its subject matter, but these arguments over the role of "propaganda" were genuine and serious moral conflicts. Besides helping to shape the argument of such novels as Grove's *The Master of the Mill* and Callaghan's *They Shall Inherit the Earth*, they raised the fundamental issue of the role of the creative mind in society, and by doing so helped to give a maturity and depth to Canadian writing which are a permanent part of its heritage.

It is not surprising, given this background, that the belief in the inspiration of literature by social significance continued to be an active force long after it had ceased to be attached to any specifically Marxist or other political programs. It is still strong in the *Preview* group in the 1940s, and in their immediate successors, though the best of them have developed in different directions. The theme of social realism is at its most attrac-

tive, and least theoretical, in the poetry of Souster. The existentialist movement, with its emphasis on the self-determination of social attitudes, seems to have had very little direct influence in Canada: Mr. Beattie's comment on the absence of the existential in Pratt suggests that this lack of influence may be significant.

During the last decade or so a kind of social Freudianism has been taking shape, mainly in the United States, as a democratic counterpart of Marxism. Here society is seen as controlled by certain anxieties, real or imaginary, which are designed to repress or sublimate human impulses toward a greater freedom. These impulses include the creative and the sexual, which are closely linked. The enemy of the poet is not the capitalist but the "square," or representative of repressive morality. The advantage of this attitude is that it preserves the position of rebellion against society for the poet, without imposing on him any specific social obligations. This movement has had a rather limited development in Canada, somewhat surprisingly considering how easy a target the square is in Canada: it has influenced Layton and many younger Montreal poets, but has not affected fiction to any great degree, though there may be something of it in Richler. It ignores the old political alignments: the Communists are usually regarded as Puritanic and repressive equally with the bourgeoisie, and a recent poem of Layton's contrasts the social hypocrisy in Canada with contemporary Spain. Thus it represents to some extent a return to the undifferentiated radicalism of a century before, though no longer in a political context.

As the centre of Canadian life moves from the fortress to the metropolis, the garrison mentality changes correspondingly. It begins as an expression of the moral values generally accepted in the group as a whole, and then, as society gets more complicated and more in control of its environment, it becomes more of a revolutionary garrison within a metropolitan society. But though it changes from a defence of to an attack on what society accepts as conventional standards, the literature it produces, at every stage, tends to be rhetorical, an illustration or allegory of certain social attitudes. These attitudes help to unify the mind of the writer by externalizing his enemy, the enemy being the antcreative elements in life as he sees life. To approach these elements in a less rhetorical way would introduce the theme of self-conflict, a more perilous but ultimately more rewarding theme. The conflict involved is between the poetic impulse to construct and the rhetorical impulse to assert, and the victory of the former is the sign of the maturing of the writer.

III

There is of course nothing in all this that differentiates Canadian from other related cultural developments. The nineteenth-century Canadian reliance on the conceptual was not different in kind from that of the Victorian readers described by Douglas Bush, who thought they were reading poetry when they were really only looking for Great Thoughts.²⁶ But if the tendency was not different in kind, it was more intense in degree. Here we need another seminal fact in this book, one that we have stumbled over already: Mr. Hopwood's remark that the Canadian literary mind, beginning as it did so late in the cultural history of the West, was established on a basis, not of myth, but of history. The conceptual emphasis in Canadian culture we have been speaking of is a consequence, and an essential part, of this historical bias.

Canada, of course, or the place where Canada is, can supply distinctive settings and props to a writer who is looking for local colour. Tourist-writing has its own importance (e.g., *Maria Chapdelaine*), as has the use of Canadian history for purposes of romance, of which more later. But it would be an obvious fallacy to claim that the setting provided anything more than novelty. When Canadian writers are urged to use distinctively Canadian themes, the fallacy is less obvious, but still there. The forms of literature are autonomous: they exist within literature itself, and cannot be derived from any experience outside literature. What the Canadian writer finds in his experience and environment may be new, but it will be new only as content: the form of his expression of it can take shape only from what he has read, not from what he has experienced. The great technical experiments of Joyce and Proust in fiction, of Eliot and Hopkins in poetry, have resulted partly from profound literary scholarship, from seeing the formal possibilities inherent in the literature they have studied. A writer who is or who feels removed from his literary tradition tends rather to take over forms already in existence. We notice how often the surveyors of Canadian fiction in this book have occasion to remark that a novel contains a good deal of sincere feeling and accurate observation, but that it is spoiled by an unconvincing plot, usually one too violent or dependent on coincidence for such material. What has happened is that the author felt he could make a novel out of his knowledge and observation, but had no story in particular to tell. His material did not come to him in the form of a story, but as a consolidated chunk of experience, reflection, and sensibility. He had to

invent a plot to put this material in causal shape (for writing, as Kafka says, is an art of causality),²⁷ to pour the new wine of content into the old bottles of form. Even Grove works in this way, though Grove, by sheer dogged persistence, does get his action powerfully if ponderously moving.

This brings us nearer the centre of Mr. Hopwood's observation. Literature is conscious mythology: as society develops, its mythical stories become structural principles of story-telling, its mythical concepts, sun-gods and the like, become habits of metaphorical thought. In a fully mature literary tradition the writer enters into a structure of traditional stories and images. He often has the feeling, and says so, that he is not actively shaping his material at all, but is rather a place where a verbal structure is taking its own shape. If a novelist, he starts with a story-telling impetus; if a poet, with a metaphor-crystallizing impetus. Down to the beginning of the twentieth century at least, the Canadian who wanted to write started with a feeling of detachment from his literary tradition, which existed for him mainly in his school books. He had probably, as said above, been educated in a way that heavily stressed the conceptual and argumentative use of language. Mrs. Fowke shows us how the Indians began with a mythology which included all the main elements of our own. It was, of course, impossible for Canadians to establish any real continuity with it: Indians, like the rest of the country, were seen as nineteenth-century literary conventions. Certain elements in Canadian culture, too, such as the Protestant revolutionary view of history, may have minimized the importance of the oral tradition in ballad and folk song, which seems to have survived best in Catholic communities. In Canada the mythical was simply the "prehistoric" (this word, we are told, is a Canadian coinage),²⁸ and the writer had to attach himself to his literary tradition deliberately and voluntarily. And though this may be no longer true or necessary, attitudes surviving from an earlier period of isolation still have their influence.

The separation of subject and object is the primary fact of consciousness, for anyone so situated and so educated. Writing for him does not start with a rhythmical movement,²⁹ or an impetus caught from or encouraged by a group of contemporaries: it starts with reportage, a single mind reacting to what is set over against it. Such a writer does not naturally think metaphorically but descriptively; it seems obvious to him that writing is a form of self-expression dependent on the gathering of a certain amount of experience, granted some inborn sensitivity to-

ward that experience. We note (as does Mr. McPherson) how many Canadian novelists have written only one novel, or only one good novel, how many Canadian poets have written only one good book of poems, generally their first. Even the dream of "the great Canadian novel," the feeling that somebody some day will write a Canadian fictional classic, assumes that whoever does it will do it only once. This is a characteristic of writers dominated by the conception of writing up experiences or observations: nobody has enough experience to keep on writing about it, unless his writing is an incidental commentary on a nonliterary career.

The Canadian writers who have overcome these difficulties and have found their way back to the real headwaters of inspiration are heroic explorers. There are a good many of them, and the evidence of this book is that the Canadian imagination has passed the stage of exploration and has embarked on that of settlement. But it is of course full of the failures as well as the successes of exploration, imaginative voyages to Golconda that froze in the ice, and we can learn something from them too. Why do Canadians write so many historical romances, of what Mr. McPherson calls the rut and thrust variety? One can understand it in Mr. Roper's period: the tendency to melodrama in romance makes it part of a central convention of that time, as Mr. Roper's discerning paragraph on the subject shows. But romances are still going strong in Mr. Pacey's period, and if anything even stronger in Mr. McPherson's. They get a little sexier and more violent as they go on, but the formula remains much the same: so much love-making, so much "research" about antiquities and costume copied off filing cards, more love-making, more filing cards. There is clearly a steady market for this, but the number of writers engaged in it suggests other answers. There is also a related fact, the unusually large number of Canadian popular best-selling fiction writers, from Agnes Fleming through Gilbert Parker to Mazo de la Roche.

In Mr. Roper's chronicle not all the fiction is romance, but nearly all of it is formula-writing. In the books he mentions that I have read I remember much honest and competent work. Some of them did a good deal to form my own infantile imagination, and I could well have fared worse. What there is not, of course, is a recreated view of life, or anything to detach the mind from its customary attitudes. In Mr. Pacey's period we begin to notice a more consistent distinction between the romancer, who stays with established values and usually chooses a subject remote in time from himself, and the realist, who deals with contemporary life, and therefore—it appears to be a therefore—is more serious in intention,

more concerned to unsettle a stock response. One tendency culminates in Mazo de la Roche, the other in Morley Callaghan, both professional writers and born story-tellers, though of very different kinds. By Mr. McPherson's period the two tendencies have more widely diverged. One is mainly romance dealing with Canada's past, the other is contemporary realism dealing with what is common to Canada and the rest of the world, like antique and modern furniture stores. One can see something similar in the poetry, a contrast between a romantic tradition closely associated with patriotic and idealistic themes, and a more intellectualized one with a more cosmopolitan bias. This contrast is prominently featured in the first edition of A.J.M. Smith's anthology, *A Book of Canadian Poetry* (1943).

This contrast of the romantic and the realistic, the latter having a moral dignity that the former lacks, reflects the social and conceptual approach to literature already mentioned. Here we are looking at the same question from a different point of view. Literature, we said, is conscious mythology: it creates an autonomous world that gives us an imaginative perspective on the actual one. But there is another kind of mythology, one produced by society itself, the object of which is to persuade us to accept existing social values. "Popular" literature, the kind that is read for relaxation and the quieting of the mind, expresses this social mythology. We all feel a general difference between serious and soothing literature, though I know of no critical rule for distinguishing them, nor is there likely to be one. The same work may belong to both mythologies at once, and in fact the separation between them is largely a perspective of our own revolutionary age.

In many popular novels, especially in the nineteenth century, we feel how strong the desire is on the part of the author to work out his situation within a framework of established social values. Mr. Roper notes that in the success-story formula frequent in such fiction the success is usually "emotional," i.e., the individual fulfils himself within his community. There is nothing hypocritical or cynical about this: the author usually believes very deeply in his values. Moral earnestness and the posing of serious problems are by no means excluded from popular literature, any more than serious literature is excused from the necessity of being entertaining. The difference is in the position of the reader's mind at the end, in whether he is being encouraged to remain within his habitual social responses or whether he is being prodded into making the steep and lonely climb into the imaginative world. This distinction in

itself is familiar enough, and all I am suggesting here is that what I have called the garrison mentality is highly favourable to the growth of popular literature in this sense. The role of romance and melodrama in consolidating a social mythology is also not hard to see. In romance the characters tend to be psychological projections, heroes, heroines, villains, father-figures, comic-relief caricatures. The popular romance operates on Freudian principles, releasing sexual and power fantasies without disturbing the anxieties of the superego. The language of melodrama, at once violent and morally conventional, is the appropriate language for this. A subliminal sense of the erotic release in romance may have inspired some of the distrust of novels in nineteenth-century pietistic homes. But even those who preferred stories of real life did not want "realism": that, we learn, was denounced on all sides during the nineteenth century as nasty, prurient, morbid, and foreign. The garrison mentality is that of its officers: it can tolerate only the conservative idealism of its ruling class, which for Canada means the moral and propertied middle class.

The total effect of Canadian popular fiction, whatever incidental merits in it there may be, is that of a murmuring and echoing literary collective unconscious, the rippling of a watery Narcissus world reflecting the imaginative patterns above it. Robertson Davies's *Tempest-Tost* is a sardonic study of the triumph of a social mythology over the imaginative one symbolized by Shakespeare's play. Maturity and individualization, in such a body of writing, are almost the same process. Occasionally a writer is individualized by accident. Thus Susanna Moodie in the Peterborough bush, surrounded by a half-comic, half-sinister rabble that she thinks of indifferently as Yankee, Irish, native, republican, and lower class, is a British army of occupation in herself, a one-woman garrison. We often find too, as in Leacock, a spirit of criticism, even of satire, that is the complementary half of a strong attachment to the mores that provoke the satire. That is, a good deal of what goes on in *Mariposa* may look ridiculous, but the norms or standards against which it looks ridiculous are provided by *Mariposa* itself. In Sara Jeannette Duncan there is something else again, as she watches the garrison parade to church in a small Ontario town: "The repressed magnetic excitement in gatherings of familiar faces, fellow-beings bound by the same convention to the same kind of behaviour, is precious in communities where the human interest is still thin and sparse."³⁰ Here is a voice of genuine detachment, sympathetic but not defensive either of the group or of herself, con-

cerned primarily to understand and to make the reader see. The social group is becoming external to the writer, but not in a way that isolates her from it.

This razor's edge of detachment is naturally rare in Canadian writing, even in this author [Duncan], but as the twentieth century advances and Canadian society takes a firmer grip of its environment, it becomes easier to assume the role of an individual separated in standards and attitudes from the community. When this happens, an ironic or realistic literature becomes fully possible. This new kind of detachment of course often means only that the split between subject and object has become identified with a split between the individual and society. This is particularly likely to happen when the separated individual's point of view is also that of the author, as in the stories of misunderstood genius with which many minor authors are fascinated. According to Mr. Tait this convention was frequent in the plays put on in Hart House during the twenties; it certainly was so in fiction. But some of the most powerful of Canadian novels have been those in which this conflict has been portrayed objectively. Buckler's *The Mountain and the Valley* is a Maritime example, and Sinclair Ross's *As for Me and My House* one from the prairies.

Mr. Conron quotes B.K. Sandwell as saying: "I follow it [society] at a respectful distance . . . far enough away to make it clear that I do not belong to it." It is clear that this is not necessarily any advance on the expression of conventional social values in popular romance. The feeling of detachment from society means only that society has become more complex, and inner tensions have developed in it. We have traced this process already. The question that arises is: once society, along with physical nature, becomes external to the writer, what does he then feel a part of? For rhetorical or assertive writers it is generally a smaller society, the group that agrees with them. But the imaginative writer, though he often begins as a member of a school or group, normally pulls away from it as he develops.

If our general line of thought is sound, the imaginative writer is finding his identity within the world of literature itself. He is withdrawing from what Douglas LePan calls a country without a mythology into the country of mythology, ending where the Indians began. Mr. Tait quotes John Coulter's comment on his play, or libretto, *Deirdre of the Sorrows*: "The art of a Canadian remains . . . the art of the country of his forebears and the old world heritage of myth and legend remains his

heritage . . . though the desk on which he writes be Canadian." But the progress may not be a simple matter of forsaking the Canadian for the international, the province for the capital. It may be that when the Canadian writer attaches himself to the world of literature, he discovers, or rediscovers, by doing so, something in his Canadian environment which is more vital and articulate than a desk.

IV

At the heart of all social mythology lies what may be called, because it usually is called, a pastoral myth, the vision of a social ideal. The pastoral myth in its most common form is associated with childhood, or with some earlier social condition—pioneer life, the small town, the *habitant* rooted to his land—that can be identified with childhood. The nostalgia for a world of peace and protection, with a spontaneous response to the nature around it, with a leisure and composure not to be found today, is particularly strong in Canada. It is overpowering in our popular literature, from *Anne of Green Gables* to Leacock's *Mariposa*, and from *Maria Chapdelaine* to *Jake and the Kid*. It is present in all the fiction that deals with small towns as collections of characters in search of an author. Its influence is strong in the most serious writers: one thinks of Gabrielle Roy, following her *Bonheur d'occasion* with *La petite poule d'eau*. It is the theme of all the essayists who write of fishing and other forms of the simpler life, especially as lived in the past. Mr. Conron quotes MacMechan: "golden days in memory for the enrichment of less happier times to come." It even comes into our official documents—the Massey Report begins, almost as a matter of course, with an idyllic picture of the Canada of fifty years ago, as a point of departure for its investigations.³¹ Mr. Bailey speaks of the eighteenth-century Loyalists as looking "to a past that had never existed for comfort and illumination," which suggests that the pastoral myth has been around for some time.

The Indians have not figured so largely in the myth as one might expect, though in some early fiction and drama the noble savage takes the role, as he does to some extent even in the Gothic hero Wacousta. The popularity of Pauline Johnson and Grey Owl, however, shows that the kind of rapport with nature which the Indian symbolizes is central to it. Another form of pastoral myth is the evocation of an earlier period of history which is made romantic by having a more uninhibited expression of passion or virtue or courage attached to it. This of course links the

pastoral myth with the vision of vanished grandeur that comes into the novels about the *ancien régime*. In *The Golden Dog* and *The Seats of the Mighty* the forlorn little fortress of seventeenth-century Quebec, sitting in the middle of what Madame de Pompadour called "a few arpents of snow," acquires a theatrical glamour that would do credit to Renaissance Florence.³² Mr. Klinck gives a most concise summary of the earlier literary romanticizing of this period, and Mr. Pacey studies its later aspects. The two forms of the myth collide on the Plains of Abraham, on the one side a marquis, on the other a Hanoverian commoner tearing himself reluctantly from the pages of Gray's *Elegy*.³³

Close to the centre of the pastoral myth is the sense of kinship with the animal and vegetable world, which is so prominent a part of the Canadian frontier. I think of an image in Mazo de la Roche's *Delight*, which I am encouraged to revert to because I see that it has also caught Mr. Pacey's eye. Delight Mainprize—I leave it to the connoisseurs of ambiguity to explore the overtones of that name—is said by her creator to be "not much more developed intellectually than the soft-eyed Jersey in the byre." It must be very rarely that a novelist—a wide awake and astute novelist—can call her heroine a cow with such affection, even admiration. But it is consistent with what Mr. Pacey calls her belief in the "superiority of the primitive and the instinctive over the civilized and conventional." The prevalence in Canada of animal stories, in which animals are closely assimilated to human behaviour and emotions, has been noted by Mr. Lucas and Miss McDowell particularly. Conversely, the killing of an animal, as a tragic or ironic symbol, has a peculiar resonance in Canadian poetry, from the moose in Lampman's Long Sault poem to the Christmas slaughter of geese which is the informing theme of James Reaney's *A Suit of Nettles*. More complicated pastoral motifs are conspicuous in Morley Callaghan, who turns continually to the theme of betrayed or victorious innocence—the former in *The Loved and the Lost*, the latter in *Such Is My Beloved*. The Peggy of *The Loved and the Lost*, whose spontaneous affection for Negroes is inspired by a childhood experience and symbolized by a child's toy, is particularly close to our theme.

The theme of Grove's *A Search for America* is the narrator's search for a North American pastoral myth in its genuinely imaginative form, as distinct from its sentimental or socially stereotyped form. The narrator, adrift in the New World without means of support, has a few grotesque collisions with the hustling mercantilism of American life—selling ency-

clopedias and the like—and gets badly bruised in spirit. He becomes convinced that this America is a false social development which has grown over and concealed the real American social ideal, and tries to grasp the form of this buried society. He wants to become, to reverse Mr. Lucas's clever phrase, a Rousseau and not a Crusoe of his new world. In our terms, he is trying to grasp something of the myth of America, the essential imaginative idea it embodies. He meets, but irritably brushes away, the tawdry and sentimentalized versions of this myth—the cottage away from it all, happy days on the farm, the great open spaces of the west. He goes straight to the really powerful and effective versions: Thoreau's *Walden*, the personality of Lincoln, Huckleberry Finn drifting down the great river. The America that he searches for, he feels, has something to do with these things, though it is not defined much more closely than this.

Grove drops a hint in a footnote near the end that what his narrator is looking for has been abandoned in the United States but perhaps not yet in Canada. This is not our present moral: pastoral myths, even in their genuine forms, do not exist as places. They exist rather in such things as the loving delicacy of perception in Grove's own *Over Prairie Trails* and *The Turn of the Year*. Still, the remark has some importance because it indicates that the conception "Canada" can also become a pastoral myth in certain circumstances. Mr. Daniells, speaking of the nineteenth-century mystique of Canadianism, says, "A world is created, its centre in the Canadian home, its middle distance the loved landscape of Canada, its protecting wall the circle of British institutions . . . a world as centripetal as that of Sherlock Holmes and as little liable to be shaken by irruptions of evil." The myth suggested here is somewhat Virgilian in shape, pastoral serenity serving as a prologue to the swelling act of the imperial theme. Nobody who saw it in that way was a Virgil, however, and it has been of minor literary significance.

We have said that literature creates a detached and autonomous mythology, and that society itself produces a corresponding mythology, to which a good deal of literature belongs. We have found the pastoral myth, in its popular and sentimental social form, to be an idealization of memory, especially childhood memory. But we have also suggested that the same myth exists in a genuinely imaginative form, and have found its influence in some of the best Canadian writers. Our present problem is to see if we can take a step beyond Grove and attempt some characterization of the myth he was looking for, a myth which would naturally

have an American context but a particular reference to Canada. The sentimental or nostalgic pastoral myth increases the feeling of separation between subject and object by withdrawing the subject into a fantasy world. The genuine myth, then, would result from reversing this process. Myth starts with the identifying of subject and object, the primary imaginative act of literary creation. It is therefore the most explicitly mythopoeic aspect of Canadian literature that we have to turn to, and we shall find this centred in the poetry rather than the fiction. There are many reasons for this: one is that in poetry there is no mass market to encourage the writer to seek refuge in conventional social formulas.

A striking fact about Canadian poetry is the number of poets who have turned to narrative forms (including closet drama) rather than lyrical ones. The anthologist who confines himself wholly to the lyric will give the impression that Canadian poetry really began with Roberts's *Orion* in 1880. Actually there was a tradition of narrative poetry well established before that (Sangster, Heavysege, Howe, and several others), which continues into the post-Confederation period (Mair, Isabella Crawford, Duvar, besides important narrative works by Lampman and D.C. Scott). It is clear that Pratt's devotion to the narrative represents a deep affinity with the Canadian tradition, although so far as I know (and I think I do know) the affinity was entirely unconscious on his part. I have written about the importance of narrative poetry in Canada elsewhere,³⁴ and have little new to add here. It has two characteristics that account for its being especially important in Canadian literature. In the first place, it is impersonal. The bald and dry statement is the most effective medium for its treatment of action, and the author, as in the folk song and ballad, is able to keep out of sight or speak as one of a group. In the second place, the natural affinities of poetic narrative are with tragic and ironic themes, not with the more manipulated comic and romantic formulas of prose fiction. Consistently with its impersonal form, tragedy and irony are expressed in the action of the poem rather than in its moods or in the poet's own comment.

We hardly expect the earlier narratives to be successful all through, but if we read them with sympathy and historical imagination, we can see how the Canadian environment has exerted its influence on the poet. The environment, in nineteenth-century Canada, is terrifyingly cold, empty, and vast, where the obvious and immediate sense of nature is the late Romantic one, increasingly affected by Darwinism, of nature red in tooth and claw. We notice the recurrence of such episodes as shipwreck,

Indian massacres, human sacrifices, lumbermen mangled in log-jams, mountain climbers crippled on glaciers, animals screaming in traps, the agonies of starvation and solitude—in short, the “shutting out of the whole moral creation.”³⁵ Human suffering, in such an environment, is a by-product of a massive indifference which, whatever else it may be, is not morally explicable. What confronts the poet is a moral silence deeper than any physical silence, though the latter frequently symbolizes the former, as in the poem of Pratt that is explicitly called *Silences*.

The nineteenth-century Canadian poet can hardly help being preoccupied with physical nature; the nature confronting him presents him with the riddle of unconsciousness, and the riddle of unconsciousness in nature is the riddle of death in man. Hence his central emotional reaction is bound to be elegiac and sombre, full of loneliness and fear, or at least wistful and nostalgic, hugging, like Roberts, a “darling illusion” [*Tantramar Revisited*, l. 63]. In Carman, Roberts, and D.C. Scott there is a rhetorical strain that speaks in a confident, radio-announcer’s voice about the destiny of Canada, the call of the open road, or the onward and upward march of progress. As none of their memorable poetry was written in this voice, we may suspect that they turned to it partly for reassurance. Mr. Daniells remarks of D.C. Scott: “The imprecision of his views is in part the result of having nothing specific to oppose.” The riddle of unconsciousness in nature is one that no moralizing or intellectualizing can answer. More important, it is one that irony cannot answer:

The gray shape with the paleolithic face
Was still the master of the longitudes.

The conclusion of Pratt’s *Titanic* is almost documentary: it is as stripped of irony as it is of moralizing. The elimination of irony from the poet’s view of nature makes that view pastoral—a cold pastoral, but still a pastoral. We have only physical nature and a rudimentary human society, not strong enough yet to impose the human forms of tragedy and irony on experience.

The same elegiac and lonely tone continues to haunt the later poetry. Those who in the twenties showed the influence of the death-and-resurrection myth of Eliot, notably Leo Kennedy and A.J.M. Smith, were also keeping to the centre of a native tradition. The use of the Eliot myth was sometimes regarded as a discovery of myth, as Mr. Beattie notes, but of course the earlier poets had not only used the same myth, but were equally aware of its origins in Classical poetry, as Carman’s *Sappho*

indicates. The riddle of the unconscious may be expressed by a symbol such as the agonies of a dying animal, or it may be treated simply as an irreducible fact of existence. But it meets us everywhere: I pick up Margaret Avison and there it is, in a poem called *Identity*:

But on this sheet of beryl, this high sea,
Scalded by the white unremembering glaze,
No wisps disperse. This is the icy pole.
The presence here is single, worse than soul,
Pried loose forever out of nights and days
And birth and death
And all the covering wings.

In such an environment, we may well wonder how the sentimental pastoral myth ever developed at all. But of course there are the summer months, and a growing settlement of the country that eventually began to absorb at least eastern Canada into the north temperate zone. Pratt's Newfoundland background helped to keep his centre of gravity in the elegiac, but when he began to write the feeling of the mindless hostility of nature had largely retreated to the prairies, where, as Mr. Pacey shows, a fictional realism developed, closely related to this feeling in mood and imagery. The Wordsworthian sense of nature as a teacher is apparent as early as Mrs. Traill, in whom Mr. Lucas notes a somewhat selective approach to the subject reminiscent of Miss Muffet. As the sentimental pastoral myth takes shape, its imaginative counterpart takes shape too, the other, gentler, more idyllic half of the myth that has made the pastoral itself a central literary convention. In this version nature, though still full of awfulness and mystery, is the visible representative of an order that man has violated, a spiritual unity that the intellect murders to dissect. This form of the myth is more characteristic of the second phase of Canadian social development, when the conflict of man and nature is expanding into a triangular conflict of nature, society, and individual. Here the individual tends to ally himself with nature against society. A very direct and haunting statement of this attitude occurs in John Robins's *Incomplete Anglers*: "I can approach a solitary tree with pleasure, a cluster of trees with joy, and a forest with rapture; I must approach a solitary man with caution, a group of men with trepidation, and a nation of men with terror."³⁶ The same theme also forms part of the final cadences of Hugh MacLennan's *The Watch That Ends the Night*: "In the early October of that year, in the cathedral hush of a Quebec

Indian summer with the lake drawing into its mirror the fire of the maples, it came to me that to be able to love the mystery surrounding us is the final and only sanction of human existence."

It is the appearance of this theme in D.C. Scott which moves Mr. Daniells to call Scott one of the "ancestral voices" of the Canadian imagination. It is much stronger and more continuous in Lampman, who talks less than his contemporaries and strives harder for the uniting of subject and object in the imaginative experience. This union takes place in the contact of individual poet and a landscape uninhabited except for Wordsworth's "huge and mighty forms" that are manifested by the union:

Nay more, I think some blessed power
Hath brought me wandering idly here. [Heat, ll. 45-6]

Again as in Wordsworth, this uniting of individual mind and nature is an experience from which human society, as such, is excluded. Thus when the poet finds a "blessed power" in nature it is the society he leaves behind that tends to become the God-forsaken wilderness. Usually this society is merely trivial or boring; once, in the unforgettable *City of the End of Things*, it becomes demonic.

The two aspects of the pastoral tradition we have been tracing are not inconsistent with each other; they are rather complementary. At one pole of experience there is a fusion of human life and the life in nature; at the opposite pole is the identity of the sinister and terrible elements in nature with the death-wish in man. In Pratt's *The Truant* the "genus homo" confronts the "great Panjandrum" of nature who is also his own death-wish: the great Panjandrum is the destructive force in the Nazis and in the Indians who martyred Brébeuf, the capacity in man that enables him to be deliberately cruel. Irving Layton shows us not only the cruelty but the vulgarity of the death-wish consciousness: as it has no innocence, it cannot suffer with dignity, as animals can; it loses its own imaginary soul by despising the body:

Listen: for all his careful fuss,
Will this cold one ever deceive us?
Self-hating, he rivets a glittering wall;
Impairs it by a single pebble
And loves himself for that concession. [Maurer: *Twin Heads*, ll. 6-10]

We spoke earlier of a civilization conquering the landscape and imposing an alien and abstract pattern on it. As this process goes on, the writers, the poets especially, tend increasingly to see much of this process as something that is human but still dehumanized, leaving man's real humanity a part of the nature that he continually violates but is still inviolate.

Reading through any good collection of modern Canadian poems or stories, we find every variety of tone, mood, attitude, technique, and setting. But there is a certain unity of impression one gets from it, an impression of gentleness and reasonableness, seldom difficult or greatly daring in its imaginative flights, the passion, whether of love or anger, held in check by something meditative. It is not easy to put the feeling in words, but if we turn to the issue of the *Tamarack Review* that was devoted to West Indian literature [no. 14], or to the Hungarian poems translated by Canadians in the collection *The Plough and the Pen*,³⁷ we can see by contrast something of both the strength and the limitations of the Canadian writers. They too have lived, if not in Arcadia, at any rate in a land where empty space and the pervasiveness of physical nature have impressed a pastoral quality on their minds. From the deer and fish in Isabella Crawford's *The Canoe* to the frogs and toads in Layton, from the white narcissus of Knister to the night-blooming cereus of Reaney, everything that is central in Canadian writing seems to be marked by the imminence of the natural world. The sense of this imminence organizes the mythology of Jay Macpherson; it is the sign in which Canadian soldiers conquer Italy in Douglas LePan's *The Net and the Sword*; it may be in the foreground, as in Alden Nowlan, or in the background, as in Birney; but it is always there.

To go on with this absorbing subject would take us into another book: *A Literary Criticism of Canada*, let us say. Here we can only refer the reader to Mr. Beattie's able guidance and sum up the present argument emblematically, with two famous primitive American paintings. One is *Historical Monument of the American Republic*, by Erastus Salisbury Field. Painted in 1876 for the centennial of the Revolution, it is an encyclopedic portrayal of events in American history, against a background of soaring towers, with clouds around their spires, and connected by railway bridges. It is a prophetic vision of the skyscraper cities of the future, of the tremendous technological will to power of our time and the civilization it has built, a civilization now gradually imposing a uniformity of culture and habits of life all over the globe. Because the United States is the

most powerful centre of this civilization, we often say, when referring to its uniformity, that the world is becoming Americanized. But of course America itself is being Americanized in this sense, and the uniformity imposed on New Delhi and Singapore, or on Toronto and Vancouver, is no greater than that imposed on New Orleans or Baltimore. A nation so huge and so productive, however, is deeply committed to this growing technological uniformity, even though many tendencies may pull in other directions. Canada has participated to the full in the wars, economic expansions, technological achievements, and internal stresses of the modern world. Canadians seem well adjusted to the new world of technology and very efficient at handling it. Yet in the Canadian imagination there are deep reservations to this world as an end of life in itself, and the political separation of Canada has helped to emphasize these reservations in its literature.

English Canada began with the influx of defeated Tories after the American Revolution, and so, in its literature, with a strong antirevolutionary bias. The Canadian radicalism that developed in opposition to Loyalism was not a revival of the American revolutionary spirit, but a quite different movement, which had something in common with the Toryism it opposed: one thinks of the Tory and radical elements in the social vision of William Cobbett, who also finds a place in the Canadian record. A revolutionary tradition is liable to two defects: to an undervaluing of history and an impatience with law, and we have seen how unusually strong the Canadian attachment to law and history has been. The attitude to things American represented by Haliburton is not, on the whole, hostile: it would be better described as noncommittal, as when Sam Slick speaks of a Fourth of July as "a splendid spectacle; fifteen millions of freemen and three millions of slaves a-celebratin' the birthday of liberty."³⁸ The strong romantic tradition in Canadian literature has much to do with its original conservatism. When more radical expressions begin to creep into Canadian writing, as in the poetry of Alexander McLachlan, there is still much less of the assumption that freedom and national independence are the same thing, or that the mercantilist Whiggery which won the American Revolution is necessarily the only emancipating force in the world. In some Canadian writers of our own time—I think particularly of Earle Birney's *Trial of a City* and the poetry of F.R. Scott—there is an opposition, not to the democratic but to the oligarchic tendencies in North American civilization, not to liberal but to laissez-faire political doctrine. Perhaps it is a little easier to see

these distinctions from the vantage-point of a smaller country, even one which has, in its material culture, made the "American way of life" its own.

The other painting is the much earlier *The Peaceable Kingdom*, by Edward Hicks, painted around 1830. Here, in the background, is a treaty between the Indians and the Quaker settlers under Penn. In the foreground is a group of animals, lions, tigers, bears, oxen, illustrating the prophecy of Isaiah about the recovery of innocence in nature [11:6-9]. Like the animals of the Douanier Rousseau, they stare past us with a serenity that transcends consciousness. It is a pictorial emblem of what Grove's narrator was trying to find under the surface of America: the reconciliation of man with man and of man with nature: the mood of Thoreau's Walden retreat, of Emily Dickinson's garden, of Huckleberry Finn's raft, of the elegies of Whitman, whose reaction to Canada is also recorded in this book. This mood is closer to the haunting vision of a serenity that is both human and natural which we have been struggling to identify in the Canadian tradition. If we had to characterize a distinctive emphasis in that tradition, we might call it a quest for the peaceable kingdom.

The writers of the last decade, at least, have begun to write in a world which is post-Canadian, as it is post-American, post-British, and post everything except the world itself. There are no provinces in the empire of airplane and television, and no physical separation from the centres of culture, such as they are. Sensibility is no longer dependent on a specific environment or even on sense experience itself. A remark of Mr. Beattie's about Robert Finch illustrates a tendency which is affecting literature as well as painting: "the interplay of sense impressions is so complicated, and so exhilarating, that the reader receives no sense impression at all." Marshall McLuhan speaks of the world as reduced to a single gigantic primitive village, where everything has the same kind of immediacy. He speaks of the fears that so many intellectuals have of such a world, and remarks amiably: "Terror is the normal state of any oral society, for in it everything affects everything all the time."³⁹ The Canadian spirit, to personify it as a single being dwelling in the country from the early voyages to the present, might well, reading this sentence, feel that this was where he came in. In other words, new conditions give the old ones a new importance, as what vanishes in one form reappears in another. The moment that the peaceable kingdom has been completely obliterated by its rival is the moment when it comes into the foreground again, as the eternal frontier, the first thing that the writer's imagination must

deal with. Pratt's *The Truant*, already referred to, foreshadows the poetry of the future, when physical nature has retreated to outer space and only individual and society are left as effective factors in the imagination. But the central conflict, and the moods in which it is fought out, are still unchanged.

One gets very tired, in old-fashioned biographies, of the dubious embryology that examines a poet's ancestry and wonders if a tendency to fantasy in him could be the result of an Irish great-grandmother. A reader may feel the same unreality in efforts to attach Canadian writers to a tradition made up of earlier writers whom they may not have read or greatly admired. I have felt this myself whenever I have written about Canadian literature. Yet I keep coming back to the feeling that there does seem to be such a thing as an imaginative continuum, and that writers are conditioned in their attitudes by their predecessors, or by the cultural climate of their predecessors, whether there is conscious influence or not. Again, nothing can give a writer's experience and sensitivity any form except the study of literature itself. In this study the great classics, "monuments of its own magnificence,"⁴⁰ and the best contemporaries have an obvious priority. The more such monuments or such contemporaries there are in a writer's particular cultural traditions, the more fortunate he is; but he needs those traditions in any case. He needs them most of all when what faces him seems so new as to threaten his identity. For present and future writers in Canada and their readers, what is important in Canadian literature, beyond the merits of the individual works in it, is the inheritance of the entire enterprise. The writers featured in this book have identified the habits and attitudes of the country, as Fraser and Mackenzie have identified its rivers. They have also left an imaginative legacy of dignity and of high courage.

Theoretical Discussion

Northrop Frye's garrison mentality thesis gives us a vocabulary for what Richardson's novel is doing and for what it cannot help but reveal about itself.

The garrison, in Frye's reading, is not simply a fort. It is a structure of consciousness: a way of organizing the self in relation to a threatening outside. Richardson's garrison is literal (Fort Detroit, besieged by Indigenous forces during Pontiac's Uprising) but it is also psychological. The soldiers inside do not merely fear attack. They fear contamination. To be in the wilderness too long, in the novel's moral logic, is to become the wilderness. Wacousta himself is the proof: a British officer who has crossed the boundary and cannot return.

What Frye's framework helps us see is that this logic is not simply Richardson's personal anxiety. It is the founding anxiety of the colonial imagination he is giving literary form to. The garrison mentality requires the land outside to be threatening and requires the people already living on that land to be part of that threat. This is not a description of Indigenous peoples; it is a projection onto them of everything the colonial subject cannot accommodate within the garrison's walls.

Here is where critical reading becomes necessary. Frye identifies the garrison mentality as the defining feature of Canadian literature, and in doing so he is largely correct as a description. But description is not endorsement, and the tradition he describes is one built on a fundamental displacement: the anxieties of the colonizer are centred as the defining Canadian experience, while the peoples who constituted the actual threat to colonial stability — political actors with their own claims, strategies, and worldviews — appear in that tradition as atmosphere. *Wacousta* is the most honest expression of this because it is the most Gothic: the repressed keeps returning, but it returns as horror rather than as history.

Reading Richardson through Frye, and reading both with a critical eye toward what the garrison mentality excludes, is a way of tracing the ideological foundations of a national literary tradition. What gets called the Canadian imagination turns out to be

a very specific settler imagination — anxious, defensive, and constitutively blind to the political agency of the people it fears.

Reflect

- ▶ *How does Frye's garrison mentality concept help explain what makes Wacousta Gothic rather than simply adventurous?*
- ▶ *What would it mean to read this novel from a perspective outside the garrison — and what would have to change in the critical vocabulary to do so?*
- ▶ *Where do you see the garrison mentality operating in contemporary Canadian culture or politics?*

Closing Thoughts from the Readist

Wacousta is not a comfortable read, and it's not meant to be. It is a novel that contains its own critique in compressed form, if you know how to look for it.

Richardson writes a settler colonial anxiety so clearly that the anxiety gives itself away. The garrison that should represent civilization is paranoid and besieged. The wilderness that should represent chaos is where the most compelling character has chosen to live. The Indigenous forces that should be a simple threat turn out to have been provoked by the same colonial authority that claims to represent order. None of this is Richardson's conscious argument. But it is what the Gothic form, working honestly with its material, cannot help but produce.

Pairing Richardson with Frye does something like what the *Brave New World* guide did with Foucault: it gives you a theoretical lens that makes the novel's ideological architecture visible. But this guide pushes one step further. Frye's garrison mentality is itself a product of the tradition it describes: a critical framework that centres settler anxiety as the defining Canadian experience. Reading both the novel and the theory critically means asking not just what the garrison mentality is, but whose interests it serves and what it makes invisible.

That is the kind of reading the Readist is here to cultivate. Not reading that arrives at comfortable conclusions, but reading that makes you sit with the discomfort of a tradition that contains its own evidence against itself. *Wacousta* has been waiting for that kind of reader for nearly two centuries.

I started with *Brave New World* to introduce the kind of reading I like doing. Following up with a virtually unknown piece of Canadian literature doesn't make much marketing sense. But this, too, represents the kind of reading I like doing. Reading work that challenges what we thought we knew is the most important reading we do. Not because it's hard, but because it forces us to question the things we forget to question.

Where to from here?

What to Read Next

Looking for more fiction in this tradition? Try these on for size:

- Sheila Watson's **The Double Hook** (1959) — the Canadian Gothic taken to its modernist extreme
- Margaret Atwood's **Surfacing** (1972) — the wilderness as psychological interior
- Leanne Betasamosake Simpson's **Noopiming** (2020) — Michi Saagiig Nishnaabeg, formally radical, land and relationality from entirely outside the garrison's logic
- Eden Robinson's **Monkey Beach** (2000) — Indigenous Gothic from a Haisla perspective
- Toni Morrison's **Beloved** (1987) — the American equivalent: Gothic as the afterlife of historical atrocity
- **Wide Sargasso Sea** by Jean Rhys (1966) — the postcolonial counter-text to the Gothic tradition

Think Deeper

Want more theory to work with? Check out the following:

- Northrop Frye, **The Bush Garden** (1971) — the full garrison mentality argument
- Daniel Heath Justice, **Why Indigenous Literatures Matter** (2018) — the essential corrective
- Eva Mackey, **The House of Difference** (1999) — Canadian national identity and the colonial imaginary
- Homi Bhabha, **The Location of Culture** (1994) — colonial ambivalence and the uncanny
- Glen Coulthard, **Red Skin, White Masks** (2014) — Indigenous political theory as a lens on the garrison