

Introduction: Past Matters/Choses du passé

Herb Wylie, Jennifer Andrews et Robert Viau

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Introduction: Past Matters/Choses du passé

HERB WYILE
JENNIFER ANDREWS
ROBERT VIAU

History is a party to which Canada has not been invited.

— Robert Fulford

Dull as our history unquestionably is, I happen to be proud of it — precisely because it is dull. After all, what does exciting history mean? Only that a country has failed to live up to the ideals of a normal human society.

— Michael Bliss

THESE TWO QUOTATIONS, which appear back-to-back in John Robert Colombo's *Famous Lasting Words: Great Canadian Quotations*, capture a paradoxical but not uncommon reaction to Canadian history — that there is little of it but that a little history can be a good thing. Certainly, both inside and outside Canada, the first part of the equation predominates; that is, for most people, Canadian history is essentially an oxymoron, because Canada's past lacks the drama, upheaval, and geopolitical impact that mark the past of those countries that *have* been invited to the party. Paradoxically, however, that very lack is perhaps part of Canada's appeal. While Canada's reputation as a "peaceable kingdom" has always had a whiff of hyperbole about it, Canadian society (at least compared to the more heavily partying nations) has achieved an enviable degree of affluence, community, and tolerance that suggests that dullness has its advantages.

At the same time, both quotations tend to reinforce the idea that Canadian history is uneventful, an attitude at once frank and yet potentially symptomatic of a colonial cringe, a tendency to see one's national heritage as inferior to the more sweeping, epic (and publicized) histories of England, France and the United States. Dismissals of, or outright ignorance of, Canadian history are hardly in short supply, which suggests

the prevalent influence of a conscious or unconscious deference to those imperial powers that have loomed over Canada, not so much stunting its history as casting long, shrouding shadows over it. The stereotype of Canada as historically shallow contributes, furthermore, to a pervasive and pernicious sense that bland Canada is somehow rootless, identity-less, little more than a market for larger players or (as many Americans already think and too many Canadians secretly wish) a fifty-second state, and therefore ripe for the picking.

But it is impossible to be outside of history — and you don't need critical theory to grasp that — so Canada's problem is less a lack of history than a lack of appreciation of it. As a character in Jane Urquhart's novel *The Whirlpool* laments, "This country buries its history so fast people with memories are considered insane" (83). Amnesia, though, has its costs, and at the end of a century in which the world witnessed perhaps too much history and wearied of it, there are signs of a renewed and reconfigured appreciation of it — not less in Canadian literature and literary criticism. Such a trajectory is reflected in the title of this special issue of *SCL/ÉLC*, "Past Matters/Choses du passé," which is not so much a *double entendre* as a call-and-response, in which one reading of the phrase "past matters" — suggesting the irrelevance of what has transpired, the past as so much water under the bridge — is countered by another affirming its importance: the past indeed matters. Canada does have an eventful, relevant history. Furthermore, Canadians are increasingly coming to appreciate the importance and complexity of that history — perhaps as a reaction to the cultural domination first of England and France and more recently of the United States. For all their limitations, the appearance of the CBC's television series *Canada: A People's History*, the founding of non-governmental organizations concerned with history such as HISTOR!CA and the Dominion Institute, and, not least of all, the current proliferation and popularity of Canadian literature on historical subjects, suggests a very public concern with increasing Canadians' consciousness of their history.

The motives behind that concern, however, vary significantly from concerned party to concerned party, pointing to larger fissures in the growing preoccupation with history. If Canadian history is enjoying a kind of revival hour, not everybody is singing the same uplifting tune. So, for instance, where the Dominion Institute and prominent historians such as J.L. Granatstein promote a renewed appreciation for traditional political and military history and a desire for a unifying narrative of the nation's past, there are many others more inclined to apply to Canada Nietzsche's maxim

that “Every past is worth condemning; this is the rule in mortal affairs, which always contain a large measure of human power and human weakness” (20). Especially in conjunction with the proliferation of social history in Canada, historians have been increasingly interested in the division, strife, and hardship behind that image of the peaceable kingdom.

Such divisions over the nature and significance of Canadian history reflect larger and perhaps even more intense debates in the discipline about the very possibility of writing history. In the wake of postmodern-ism and poststructuralism, history is one of many beleaguered meta-narratives, as its traditional role as an authentic and instructive chronicle of the past has been subjected to often blistering scrutiny. Elizabeth Ermarth rightly argues that “history itself is the most powerful construct of realistic conventions as we have known them since about 1400” (56) and thus has been a principal target for deconstruction. Poststructuralist critiques of traditional rationalist models of interpreting historical evidence and representing the past have precipitated an epistemological and political upheaval among historians, throwing into question the very possibility of accurately representing the past. As Alun Munslow observes, history has largely been stripped of its empiricist objectivity and re-configured as a contingent and contextual discursive construct: “We have now lost the old, modernist sense of history as the fount of wisdom or teacher of moral or intellectual certainty. What this means is that any study of what history is cannot be other than located within its social and cultural context. History, as a form of literature, is like music, drama and poetry, a cultural practice” (15).

Contributing further to this atmosphere of upheaval has been the supplementation or, more often, challenging of a traditionally exclusive history by historians energized by feminist, Marxist, and postcolonial theories, among others. In Canada as elsewhere, historians are increasingly throwing light on what Veronica Strong-Boag describes as “Left in the shadows”: “Native peoples, non-charter ethnic/racial groups, geographical areas outside Central Canada, the inner lives of Canadians, most members of the working class, issues of sexual orientation, the meaning of (dis)abilities, and almost all women” (2-3).

Works such as Alison Prentice’s *Canadian Women: A History* (1988, 1996) and Strong-Boag and Anita Clair Fellman’s *Rethinking Canada: The Promise of Women’s History* (1997) are part of a burgeoning corpus of women’s history and feminist responses to the patriarchal tendencies of traditional economic and political history. Bryan Palmer’s *Working-Class Experience: Rethinking the History of Canadian Labour, 1800-1991* (1992)

and Gregory Kealey's *Workers and Canadian History* (1995) reflect the growing concern with labour history and considerations of class. Finally, much recent historiography — Margaret Conrad and Alvin Finkel's *History of the Canadian Peoples* (1998) and Franca Iacovetta's *A Nation of Immigrants: Women, Workers, and Communities in Canadian History, 1840s-1960s* (1998) among others — has underscored the ethnic diversity and richness of Canadian history and the assumptions about race, culture, ethnicity and immigration that have played such a huge role in structuring Canada's past. This historio-graphical diversification has often been marked by an underscoring of how that exclusiveness, indeed, how history itself has been structured by questionable assumptions about gender, race, and class, which are in turn inscribed in the very shape of history — as reflected, for instance, in Beverly Boutilier and Alison Prentice's *Creating Historical Memory: English-Canadian Women and the Work of History* (1997).

Contemporary debates in Canadian history and in the discipline at large, then, reflect how much is at stake in understanding the politics and the machinery of what Elizabeth Tonkin, wary of the ambiguity of the term “history,” has called “representations of pastness” (3). What kinds of figures, events, and eras historians choose to write about and how they choose to write about them are by no means pedestrian considerations but rather debatable and ideological choices that participate in the construction of history. The slogan of Orwell's ubiquitous Party in *1984* is especially apt: “Who controls the past controls the future: who controls the present controls the past” (199). Such insights into history are conspicuously dramatized in much contemporary fiction; indeed, Ermarth argues that, “at least in terms of temporality and language, novels articulate the postmodern critique more fully and certainly more accessibly than do most theoretical texts” (55). In Canada, historical fiction explores the fundamental aspects of both Canadian history, specifically, and the writing of history, more generally.

Indeed, historical fiction has played a crucial role in the development of a distinctively Canadian literature. In the nineteenth century, the historical romance was not only ubiquitous but also played a huge role in the development of a domestic literature and in debates about Canadian identity. As Carole Gerson argues, both scholarly and imaginative writing about history was of tremendous importance in the formation of “a distinct national identity” over the course of the century; the contribution of historical fiction to the surge of nationalism in Europe impressed upon Canadians “that the development of a recognizable literary tradition was

inseparable from the establishment of a distinctive historical identity” (94). Many of the key literary figures of the century were writers of historical fiction, including Major John Richardson, Agnes Maul Machar, Philippe-Joseph Aubert de Gaspé, Gilbert Parker, Rosanna Leprohon, and William Kirby. Although most lack the self-consciousness that permeates contemporary historical fiction, nineteenth-century texts nonetheless raise epistemological and ideological questions that have much in common with their modern counterparts, as Janice Fiamengo’s essay in this collection aptly illustrates.

In twentieth-century Canadian fiction, history has, if anything, played an even greater role. Many of Canada’s prominent novelists have repeatedly worked in the genre — Timothy Findley, Anne Hébert, Rudy Wiebe, Michael Ondaatje, Louis Caron, Joy Kogawa, Madeleine Ouellette-Michalska, George Bowering, Antonine Maillet, Jack Hodgins — while many others have turned an eye to history, including Margaret Atwood, Robert Kroetsch, Audrey Thomas, Pierre Turgeon, Susan Swan, and Daphne Marlatt. The past ten years have seen a further proliferation of acclaimed novels about history by Canadian writers. Novelists such as Jane Urquhart, Wayne Johnston, Louise Simard, and Guy Vanderhaeghe have more recently established themselves as significant voices in Canadian literature with novels about history, as have Thomas Wharton, Margaret Sweatman, John Steffler, Sky Lee, Fred Stenson and others. Furthermore, as this special issue demonstrates, these novels reflect the wider reconfiguration of the field of history. Not only do they concern themselves with the politics of historical representation, addressing some of the darker corners of Canadian history and occupying themselves with characters quite different from the usual leaders of the historical pageant — Sky Lee’s marginalized Chinese immigrants, Guy Vanderhaeghe’s outcast Englishman’s boy, John Steffler’s historically suppressed Mrs. Selby, and Suzette Mayr’s historically repressed Hannelore Schmitt. They also draw attention to the mechanics of historical representation — the conventions and textual devices that both permit and complicate the representation of pastness.

In taking stock of the significance of Canadian historical fiction both old and new, “Past Matters/Choses du passé” continues a trend in Canadian literary criticism towards an increasingly specific and theoretically informed focus on historical fiction, a focus that reflects the enormous contribution that writing about history has made to Canadian literature. Linda Hutcheon’s chapter on historiographic metafiction in *The Canadian Postmodern* (1988) situates the increasing self-consciousness of contemporary writing of history in the context of postmodern aesthetic

and political strategies. While Frank Davey directs his attention to the eclipse of the national polity in *Post-National Arguments: The Politics of the Anglophone Novel Since 1967* (1993), most of the novels with which he deals are, significantly, novels about history. Martin Kuester's *Framing Truths: Parodic Structures in Contemporary English-Canadian Historical Novels* (1992) and Manina Jones's *That Art of Difference: 'Documentary-Collage' and English-Canadian Writing* (1993) offer useful theoretical frameworks for articulating and exploring the intertextual and metafictional qualities of so much contemporary fiction about history. Providing an indispensable comparative approach to Canadian historical novels in French and English, Marie Vautier's *New World Myth: Postmodernism and Postcolonialism in Canadian Fiction* (1998) examines the ways in which postcolonialism and postmodernism inflect the reworking of myth in contemporary Canadian fiction. Finally, Herb Wyile's *Speculative Fictions: Contemporary Canadian Novelists and the Writing of History* (2002) explores the political concerns and textual strategies of the wealth of historical fiction published over the last decade and a half.

"Past Matters/Choses du passé" brings together a wide array of analyses on nineteenth- and twentieth-century English- and French-Canadian texts, attesting to the fact that questions of the relationship of history and fiction cross the borders of language, space, and time. The issue begins with Janice Fiamengo's study of Agnes Maule Machar, a late Victorian Christian writer who produced historical fiction about Canada for children and young adults. Though Machar has subsequently been "consigned to literary obscurity," in Fiamengo's words, her desire to articulate an accessible national vision to a wide range of readers and her strategic use of key moments in Canadian history to frame her narratives demonstrate how historical fiction was a crucial tool for negotiating some of the key political, social, economic, and religious debates of the era, including Canadian-American trade relations, the rights of French-Canadians and Native peoples, and Britain's intricate ties to Canada. As Fiamengo makes clear, Machar saw history as a source of morality and truth, a conservative vision that does not accord with more recent trends in Canadian historical fiction. Nonetheless, Machar's writing deserves attention precisely because she uses the preoccupations of late nineteenth-century Canadians as the basis for her own stories about nation and national identity.

Tanis MacDonald's study of Sky Lee's *Disappearing Moon Café* and Nicola Renger's analysis of John Steffler's *The Afterlife of George Cartwright* both explore how the intersections of history and fiction create "in-between" spaces for the voices of otherwise marginalized individuals to

speak. The position of women in these novels is especially complex because of the reproductive capacity (or its lack) in the main female characters. In her article, MacDonald argues that the “female body haunts *Disappearing Moon Café* as a symbol of forbidden sexuality and contamination.” The murdered figure of Janet Smith in Lee’s novel represents the absence of Chinese women in Vancouver (due to exclusionary governmental policies). Conversely, Smith also embodies the untouchable presence of white women in that same city, a contradiction that plagues the novel’s characters and gives a different historical perspective on the racial and sexual politics of the era. Similarly, as Renger contends, Steffler’s Mrs. Selby becomes the catalyst for a “revisiting of Canada’s past” by inscribing her own narrative in the margins of Cartwright’s journal. Mrs. Selby accuses her lover and employer of “tampering with the truth” (185) and in doing so draws attention to the fictive nature of history in its various forms.

Equally relevant to the construction of Canadian history through fiction is the work of French-Canadian writers who also address their complex positioning within — and beyond — the nation from a variety of perspectives. In 1977, John Roberts, then Secretary of State, made the controversial claim that “French Canadians can never forget their history, and English Canadians can never remember theirs” (qtd. in *The Globe and Mail* 26 Nov.). This special issue of *SCL/ÉLC* contests the absolutism of such a statement by both acknowledging the relevance of history and memory for English-Canadian fiction, and perhaps even more importantly, exploring how French-Canadian authors negotiate their links to the past. “Past Matters/Choses du passé” offers a rich collection of Francophone articles that critically engage with fictional representations of historical “truth,” the oft-marginalized stories of women and minorities, the legacy of war, and the relationship between French nationalism and the creation of Canada.

Le Canada français est-il obsédé par son passé? La déportation des Acadiens, la bataille des plaines d’Abraham, la révolte des Patriotes dans le Bas-Canada, la révolte des Métis dans l’Ouest canadien, le Règlement 17, la crise de la conscription et les deux référendums ne sont qu’une sélection d’événements historiques qui ont modelé la psyché collective et qui continuent de susciter des débats. En littérature, Antonine Maillet décrit le retour des Acadiens à la baie Française, Louis Caron humanise la révolte de ceux qui rêvent d’un pays, tandis que Marie Laberge réécrit l’histoire des femmes du vingtième siècle. Dans ces récits d’un pays incertain, l’histoire ne cesse de jouer un rôle prépondérant. Ne pouvons-nous pas affirmer, comme l’écrivait Sartre, que «Nous vivons dans l’histoire comme des poissons dans l’eau»? Les articles qui suivent nous donnent un

aperçu de l'importance de ce «Je me souviens» qui s'affiche dans les pages des romans, sur les plaques commémoratives, et même sur les plaques d'immatriculation.

Jean Vaillancourt a participé à la Deuxième Guerre mondiale et rédigé *Les Canadiens errants*, un des rares romans québécois qui porte sur cette hécatombe. Dans son article, Robert Viau démontre comment cette oeuvre s'inscrit dans un univers de fiction qui exprime l'horreur de la guerre moderne. Le soldat engagé dans ce conflit n'est plus qu'un élément indifférencié, pris dans le mouvement général, confronté à la mort, au sacrifice mécanique et obscur. Pourtant, les personnages qui survivent à la guerre gardent une nostalgie poignante de «la vie dangereuse, grandeur de l'homme». La guerre, comme le souligne l'auteur, est un «terrain de vérité» où l'homme confronte l'image de sa propre mort et révèle ce qu'il vaut. Dans un tel contexte, comment de tels personnages peuvent-ils se réadapter à la société traditionnelle québécoise?

Dans *Cantique des plaines*, Nancy Huston aborde de façon innovatrice une panoplie de thèmes, mais le thème qui suscite l'intérêt de Stephan Hardy est celui de la question du temps. Comme le souligne Hardy, le personnage de Paddon est confronté à une énigme: quelle temporalité précédait les paroles par lesquelles Dieu aurait «mis en marche» le temps? De même, comment un athée peut-il éloigner toute angoisse existentielle? Hardy voit dans le récit de Paddon un cheminement pénible, un lent apprentissage du phénomène du temps par l'art de raconter et par la création artistique.

Elena Marchese porte un regard neuf sur l'insertion de l'Histoire dans deux romans québécois: *Le Premier Jardin* d'Anne Hébert et *La Maison Trestler* de Madeleine Ouellette-Michalska. D'après Marchese, l'entrelacement entre l'histoire nationale des grands événements et l'histoire personnelle des protagonistes fictives permet de confronter l'Histoire à une nouvelle vision des choses et de la réactualiser. Ainsi, grâce au recyclage du matériel historique et à la reconnaissance de l'hétéro-généité des discours, les personnages fictifs reconstruisent leur identité et se redéfinissent par rapport à une Histoire plus vaste qu'ils interprètent en fonction de leur perspective personnelle. Dans le cas des romans à l'étude, l'écriture féminine sert à interroger le passé et à intégrer à l'Histoire la voix féminine souvent exclue.

Luc Bonenfant propose un article sur l'oeuvre de Robert de Roquebrune et montre comment celle-ci est tout informée par un projet unique: celui de la récupération nostalgique du passé canadien. D'après Bonenfant, les essais de Roquebrune disposent du passé canadien d'une façon

d'abord et avant tout littéraire et ses romans historiques poursuivent cette littérisation de l'histoire par divers procédés: coups de théâtre, valorisation de la grandeur d'âme des personnages, etc. Roquebrune reconstruit sur le mode nostalgique un monde révolu de sorte que «la vie des humains», comme il l'écrit lui-même, «s'arrange parfois comme un roman bien composé». Cette idéalisation littéraire du passé porte surtout sur les fondements héroïques de la civilisation française en Amérique. Mélancolique et idéalisateur, Roquebrune regrette ce pays disparu qu'est le Canada d'antan.

Romantic constructions of national identity and the desire for historical coherence are also the subject of the latter two English-Canadian articles in this issue. Daniela Janes explores the strategies Guy Vanderhaeghe employs to “throw doubt on the possibility of ever adequately representing history,” including Walter Benjamin’s idea of the aura, which both animates a work of art and ensures the impossibility of its reproduction. In her article, Janes argues that gaining access to the “truth” paradoxically secures its erasure, making the telling of history a tricky task indeed. Yet, for Janes, with *The Englishman’s Boy*, Vanderhaeghe suggests that the piecemeal construction of history — a postmodern montage — has an important role to play in debates over the relationship of fiction and history even as it foregrounds its own inadequacies. And Doris Wolf’s study of Suzette Mayr’s *The Widows* takes on an equally compelling set of issues, by looking at memory as a constitutive act and characterizing the telling of history as a “literary enterprise.” The main character in Mayr’s novel is Hannelore Schmitt, a German war widow who with her sister and sister’s female lover decides to replicate the 1901 plunge of Annie Edson Taylor over Niagara Falls in a barrel. As Wolf contends, *The Widows* not only rewrites the traditional sexist and ageist accounts of Taylor’s feat but also depicts the legacy of Nazism from the perspective of Hannelore, who must face her participation in a historical moment she would rather forget. Notably, Hannelore does so at Niagara Falls, and thus Wolf suggests that Mayr reconfigures questions of national identity in *The Widows* to include an examination of history through Hannelore’s adopted homeland, Canada.

“Past Matters/Choses du passé” concludes with an interview, conducted by Herb Wyle, with Thomas Wharton, the Alberta-born English-Canadian author of two novels that deal explicitly with the intersection of history and fiction. What emerges is a lively and engaging conversation about the challenges of writing a history of the Canadian Rockies (as Wharton does in *Icefields*), the relationship between history, literary modernism, and the role of ecology in Wharton’s fiction. For Wharton,

“the concern isn’t so much to make sure that I stick with one particular truth as it is to explore the story around a truth, perhaps, and see that there are other ways of seeing something.” It is this kind of creative vision that will continue to ensure that history and fiction collide in interesting and provocative ways, expanding the horizons of English- and French-Canadian literature by using narrative to explore a multiplicity of “truths” about the past, present, and future.

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