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# “Guy Talk”: An Interview with Guy Vanderhaeghe

SCL/ÉLC INTERVIEW BY NICOLA A. FAIETA

**B**EFORE ENTERING THE WRITING LIFE and eventually becoming one of Canada’s pre-eminent fiction writers, Guy Vanderhaeghe wanted to be a historian. Born and raised in Esterhazy, Saskatchewan, Vanderhaeghe studied history at the University of Saskatchewan in Saskatoon, where he completed a BA with high honours in 1972 and an MA in 1975. He later completed a BEd at the University of Regina in 1978. A former researcher and archivist, Vanderhaeghe was writer-in-residence at the Saskatchewan Public Library in 1983 and writer-in-residence at the University of Ottawa in 1985-86. He also taught creative writing at the Banff Centre for the Arts, Booming Ground, the Humber School for Writers, and the Sage Hill Writing Experience. Currently he lives in Saskatoon, where he is the St. Thomas More Scholar at St. Thomas More College, University of Saskatchewan.

Vanderhaeghe’s novels and short stories are well known in Canadian literary circles. His first collection of short stories, *Man Descending* (1982), won the Governor General’s Award and in the United Kingdom, the Faber Prize. His novel *The Englishman’s Boy* (1996) also won the Governor General’s Award and was shortlisted for the Giller Prize and the IMPAC Dublin Literary Award. *The Last Crossing* (2002), his most recent novel, won an array of prizes including the CBC’s Canada Reads competition, the Canadian Booksellers Association Libris Award for Fiction Book of the Year, the Saskatchewan Book Award for Fiction and for Book of the Year, and the Saskatoon Book Award. Central to his fiction are themes of loss and redemption. His novels and short stories explore how history and fiction are used to construct cultural myths, and how masculine identities are easily destabilized by larger political and ideological forces.

Vanderhaeghe has also written and overseen the production of two plays. *Dancock’s Dance* (1996) depicts a First World War veteran struggling with neurasthenia in the North Battleford asylum during the 1919

Spanish flu pandemic. In *I Had a Job I Liked. Once.* (1992), which won the Canadian Authors' Association Award for Drama, a by-the-book RCMP officer must decide who is at fault when the crown attorney's daughter accuses a young man of rape.

This interview was recorded on 15 February 2010 in Fredericton. The following evening, Vanderhaeghe gave his Trudeau Foundation lecture, entitled "Apprehending the Past: History versus the Historical Novel," at the University of New Brunswick.

*NF* In the abstract to your lecture, you ask several provocative questions about the relationship between history and the historical novel. I'd like to put one of those questions to you now: If the historical novel has a role in the apprehension of the past, what is it?

*GV* Intimacy, I think. Also the difference in narrative stances. The historian is expected to be acknowledging the subjectivity of history: to be objective, to appeal to the evidence, to appeal to interpretation, and to be questioned on all of those grounds. For me, the historical novel treats the past as lived experience and texture. And, in that sense, it actually leads to a greater identification with the past than a historical work does. I mean, the historian's voice is judgmental, reserved, and distant. The novelist's voice is intimate. It also tends to be serial in that each of the characters should be given the opportunity to have their say, though, of course, whatever they say is necessarily a part of the novelist's overall project. But characters in a novel get an opportunity to speak out of conviction.

The other thing about the historical novel is that, in terms of the character's life, it's immediate. But history has a temporal distance, so it reflects back on the past. One of my arguments is that the historical novel actually allows the present to understand that the past was as complicated as our present, and that it was as unknown or as unforeseeable to individuals living that life in the past as it is for us in the present.

Historians bring a large degree of subjectivity to their work. On the other hand, they're questioned on the basis of evidence and interpretation the way novelists seldom are. One of the popular ideas is that history is merely the writing of history and that it's a way of worldmaking, a way to think of history more as historiography. Well, if that's the case, then should *Mein Kampf* be considered a work of good historical scholarship? Certainly not. The only way to disqualify that book is to

make an appeal to the interpretation of the evidence. Were the Jews poisoning wells? As far as I can see, there was no evidence that they were poisoning wells. You make an appeal to some kind of evidence on all of these kinds of questions. Yeah, the evidence may be flawed, it may be open to interpretation, but you approach history differently from how you approach fiction.

The same thing applies to theories about the reader. Every reader brings a different perspective on a work, a different experience to a work. That's absolutely given. However, did the writer have an intention? Quite likely. You might ask, "Did he or she achieve that intention?" That may be more debatable. But a work is not merely the product of a reader. It's the product of a reader and a writer. What weight should you give to each? That might be debatable. I think that the general configuration of anything owes more to the writer than to the reader. After that, in terms of nuances, more to the reader than to the writer. The writer can create an environment in which the reader can interpret or assign meaning, but the onus is on the reader to interpret within the bounds of plausibility.

*NF* So it's an intimacy between reader and subject, between us and a representation of what life was perhaps like "back then."

*GV* Yes. If history in and of itself has difficulty representing the past, then a novelist makes psychological and emotional guesses about the past. And his or her representation of the past is almost necessarily more personal. Before we turned the recorder on, we were talking about [Timothy] Findley's *The Wars*. Findley famously said that he went and crawled around in the mud to help him in the writing of the book. The book is more visceral than a history would be because it's more intimate in terms of sensory experience. From a historical perspective, I think that book actually shifts the war to focus on the Canadian context. An historian would, of course, say that France, Britain, even Russia, perhaps even the United States, were bigger players in that war than Canada. But Findley shifts that book to a Canadian perspective and to an emotional perspective. So I think that the identification, particularly for Canadian readers, becomes more intimate and more personal in the sense that it's experiential.

*NF* I know that you're familiar with teaching history. American historian and theorist Hayden White put forth a thesis that was radical

at the time but that has since become rather conventional in the academy. The thesis was that historians and fiction writers use many of the same techniques when constructing narratives of the past. What are your thoughts on the use of narrative as an integral part of both history and historical fiction? Do the lines blur, or are they separate?

GV They certainly blur. I would never be as radical as White. One of the ideas behind White is the construction of texts and subjectivity. I think one of the things that his argument ignores when it comes to history is that something called “fact” doesn’t become the skeleton of a historian’s text. Sure, it’s obviously the case that, in the writing of history and in the writing of historical fiction, subjectivity enters into it. But there is a difference of degree. The historian is more likely, and properly so, to focus on, for lack of a better word, what you would call “forces”: causation — what led to the war, the material forces gathered to conduct the war, the strategic and tactical mistakes, or the correct decisions. All of those kinds of things. All of those tend to be abstract. A novelist is likely not going to engage in those things, so that war becomes more a matter of the experience of the characters who find themselves in that moment and in experiencing that moment.

For example, I would argue that both history and literature are important for an understanding of the First World War. If you look at First World War poetry, that gives you one sense of the war. If you look at a military history, it gives you another sense of the war. If you look at diplomatic history that led to the kind of entanglements that made it very difficult to stop mobilization, you get another sense of the war. Put together, you get a more complete understanding of all the forces that produced that particular event. So you have the emotional force of Rupert Brooke’s poetry, which you can follow through from the beginning of the war. Then you have Siegfried Sassoon and all the other war poets, and then you can look after the war and you can see Robert Graves’s *Good-bye to All That*. Put together, they give a totality of perspective that actually broadens and enriches our understanding of this seminal, gargantuan, horrific event. Each genre or approach glances at it in oblique, odd gazes from many different directions which illuminate different aspects. But no one of them can completely get it. If you relied on any one of those approaches, you’d only get a piece of the puzzle. In my public lecture at UNB, I use the fable about the three blind men touching the elephant. One’s got the tail, one’s got the leg, and all the

rest of it. From each of their perspectives, they describe the animal very differently. It seems to me the more complete picture that you can get of any event or phenomenon will lead to a fuller understanding of it.

*NF* To what extent does the historical record inform your work and your novels specifically?

*GV* I don't depart hugely from the historical record. I'm aware of it, but for me the main point is to convey the psychological and emotional force of a moment. To make it emblematic rather than historically factual — as opposed to metafiction or other varieties of historical writing. At one time in my life, I thought I was going to become an academic historian, and that sort of constrains me now to a certain extent: following the record. I do a lot of research, but I try to ascribe to what Mark Twain said: first get your facts straight and then do with them what you will. I would argue that I don't make huge departures from the historical record, but if it means sacrificing fact for the demands of a novel, or artistic demands, then I sacrifice them. My overruling concern is the novel itself. I have frequently said that I'm not writing history. For example, in the talk I mention that while I was writing *The Englishman's Boy*, I knew that there were reports that between two and four native women were raped after the Cypress Hills Massacre, and I conflated that to one young woman for what I thought would be the growing emotional power and significance of that event.

*NF* Some scholars (Herb Wyile, for instance) argue that many English-Canadian historical novels self-reflexively set characters in true historical events in order to articulate stories of previously marginalized subjects (i.e., women, the working classes, and racial, ethnic, and sexual minorities). To what extent, if any, do your novels aim for any kind of social renovation or redress?

*GV* I think that there certainly is an element of that in my work. I would argue that you write out of your roots and your own experiences. I live in Western Canada where relations between Aboriginal peoples and Europeans are more fraught and more evident, and those cultural tensions are in the background in my novels. As well, I think that there's also a class component, perhaps more in my earlier work than in my historical fiction. I certainly did not grow up in a middle-class environment, and having experienced what it means to do without,

I think that my early work has this element of certain groups of people being voiceless.

*NF* One of your historical novels *The Englishman's Boy* dramatizes both the *product* of history — that is, a story that can be told from multiple perspectives or gazes and yet cannot render a complete picture — and the *process* of historiography — the narrative strategies that historians and fiction writers alike use to emplot a coherent narrative. How does your process of selection — what stories to tell, how to tell them — affect your product?

*GV* I think of the novel as a personal medium, as opposed to history, which is a more analytical, synthetic medium. When I choose a topic for a novel, I'm not even conscious of the possibilities inherent in it. I begin with something that's kind of purely instinct and intuition and then I discover the possibilities in it. So with *Englishman's Boy*, I'm not even sure I understood it when I began writing it.

*The Englishman's Boy* has a long history. I started it probably in about 1983 and then abandoned it because I didn't know exactly what I wanted the book to be about. I initially thought it was going to be all about the Cypress Hills Massacre. And then I read an article in an academic sociological journal which talked about the fact that at the beginning of film there were actually people who had participated in events who were fictionalizing their lives. Like Al Jennings who was a famous Arkansas bank robber who then, in Hollywood, began making stories about his life. Or the fact that Wyatt Earp actually appeared in certain early films. And it struck me; two ideas came to me. One of them was the power of film in the twentieth century to form our ideas about the past and to form our ideas about ourselves. The other was the fact that people who had lived through events were reconfiguring what they had lived, sometimes fifty years later. So I took this leap and thought, "There is an historical event called the Cypress Hills Massacre. What would happen to that in Hollywood in 1923, fifty years after the event, and how would a participant in that event, as opposed to an Al Jennings, react to a possible portrayal?" So that kind of intrigued me. But when I set out to write the book, I had no idea where I was going. I was following my nose.

*NF* And in the novel, Shorty McAdoo does not respond well to having his story appropriated and twisted around in Damon Ira

Chance's film, *Besieged*, which depicts the band of Assiniboine peoples as the ferocious instigators and the wolfers as the white-hat heroes. What are you trying to say there about how history is written?

*GV* I think that one of the things that the film industry did, and I'm saying this with qualifications, but Hollywood film was largely mythmaking. Now you can point to any number of American writers and historians who were also mythmakers, whether it was James Fenimore Cooper or the making of Manifest Destiny. I think one of the differences was the audience that they could reach and the way that the medium worked in a different way on the audience. In *The Englishman's Boy*, I make reference to the fact that totalitarian governments learned very early the power of film. So you have [Sergei] Eisenstein in Russia, you have Leni Riefenstahl in Nazi Germany. They understood the power of visual media to influence perceptions. I wanted to draw a distinction between how we think about history and how we feel about history and how sometimes the thinking can be pushed out and obscured by the power of the image. In a culture that's becoming, obviously, more and more visual and in a culture that's dominated by images, I wanted to look at the frontier of the image by going back to a different frontier and sort of draw parallels.

*NF* Speaking of ideas that get disseminated into a culture, you said in a 2008 interview that most Canadians sense that there is a "Canadian consciousness," and that the work of trying to understand what that consciousness entails or represents "isn't done and never will be done" (Gordon and Willis 79). I view that statement as a hopeful one — one that leaves much room for the production of more art and criticism that seeks to say something about the culture at large. Why do you think that "Canadian consciousness" or identity is so difficult to pin down?

*GV* I think that there are obvious reasons that have been said many times. One is that the Canadian identity has been slow and evolutionary. We didn't have a revolution like the Americans did that said, "Here's the break from what we are, and this is what we're going to become." And then it's been a question of readjustment all along. When I went to high school, we went through "Responsible Government," "Representative Government," "Confederation," all of those kinds of things. Those are evolutionary movements in a political sense. But it's also true of the waves of newcomers, the non-British newcomers, who



have been coming to Canada since shortly after the First World War. And, oddly enough, it was the Canadian West that received most of those people because of the Homestead Act land grants, those kinds of things. My grandfather came from Belgium in about 1910. I grew up in a town that was called, mispronounced, Esterhazy, which was all Hungarian. Twelve miles down the road, there was a place called Stockholm. Then there was another town called St. Eszterhas, which was Czech; there was something called the Finnish colony; there was a place called Langenburg, which was all German. By 1925, a third of the population of Saskatchewan was German. It was really multi-ethnic. When I was a kid in the 1950s, when I went downtown on a Saturday night, I heard Czech, I heard Polish, I heard Finnish, I heard Hungarian. Then, after the Second World War, you had another succession of immigrants who basically went to Ontario: Italians, Portuguese. All of those people were later succeeded by East Asians, other Asians, people from the Caribbean. Canadian history is really mutable and fluid. The same is true of the United States too, but I think that because of our evolutionary ideas about what our history is, we've made more accommodations to that mutable idea of what the country is. It strikes me that this country is more a work in process and as conditions change, so do definitions. Our definition of ourselves is very fluid, and it will continue to be worked out for God knows how long.

*NF* I'd like to switch gears now and talk about your two plays, *I Had a Job I Liked*. *Once* (1992) and *Dancock's Dance* (1996). *Dancock's Dance* seems to be a study of performances of masculinity, and it suggests that male identity and sexuality are easily destabilized. All through the play we're led to believe that the Soldier wants Dancock to "dance" with him, i.e., to kill himself as atonement for killing one of his own men. However, in the climactic scene, the Soldier forces himself on Dancock with a kiss that is both intimate and violent. How does the play build on myths or constructions of masculinity and then tear them down?

*GV* In some sense, I hope the play recognizes older constructions of masculinity which revolve around physical courage, honour, chivalry, and what happens when those collide in incredibly stressful circumstances. Which means that 99.9% of males are not going to live up to the ideals that they have in their minds. But I think the

play also engages with the idea that soldiers don't necessarily fight for their country — they fight for each other. I don't mean to suggest that this is homoerotic. But what it points out is that when you have this really powerful group identity melding with another, the odd man out — the man who does not go over the parapet when the whistle's blown — becomes an oddly significant figure to which at least the officer in this case who killed him did it as much out of emotional stress as [out of] any sort of militaristic code. Dancock has to acknowledge his own guilt and reconcile himself to it and has to, in Christian terms, get the kiss of peace. And this was something instinctual to me when I wrote it. For Dancock, it doesn't feel like a kiss of peace. But for him, facing the horrors of what he's done, that kiss can only be the kiss of peace.

*NF* One idea that comes out of that is the sense of a masculine identity that, speaking very generally, is vexed. And that comes through in a lot of your short fiction — not just in *Man Descending*. I'm also thinking of "The Trouble With Heroes" and "The King is Dead" from *The Trouble With Heroes and Other Stories*.

*GV* It's very confused business. I was born in 1951. I was surrounded by uncles who had fought in the Second World War. Some of them had been wounded. A lot of my uncles left home when they were fourteen years old to get jobs during the Depression. So I was raised by an incredibly stoical generation who accepted hardship and would never be caught bitching and whining. I had that one template in my mind. And then in the 1960s, suddenly men were supposed to become loving flower children, which was a huge clash in emotional and philosophical temperament. And though I certainly didn't immerse myself in that, I could see the value of it. I was never really a hippie, unlike other people who went off in communes and did that kind of thing. So there was one set of beliefs that I was raised with that was challenged by another set of beliefs through the 1960s and 1970s, and then there was a kind of regression to materialism in the 1980s, which also folded into the 1990s. For me, given my age, it's almost like there were three decades of confusion. The demands and assertions of feminism had to be negotiated, had to be accepted. Actually, what I'm talking about here is historical forces that impinge on individuals. Since the women's movement, 95% of the change in men has been great. I'm sure my father never changed a diaper in his life. I'm sure my father never

gave me a bottle. I'm sure that my father did none of those nurturing things. So the way I was raised was almost a preternaturally masculine way, which was not good. But then I think that one of the things that men, particularly young men, encountered was "What does it mean to be a male when these 'old things' are set aside?" You can go through a whole list of things. I remember, when I was very young, women saying of men, "He's a good provider." Men stopped being good providers in the sense that women also became good providers, just in the way that men contributed to housework, child nurturing — though maybe not as much as they should have [*laughter*] — while women went to work. My generation was often described as particularly masculine, which meant physical prowess (sometimes regrettably associated with violence) and tended to be thought of as atavistic in some sense. So there were a whole series of things considered to be male identity markers that suddenly disappeared. Then the question that arrived was "What is left to define a male over and against what defines a female?" The women had, I think, arrived at a very strong definition of themselves. The men weren't sure what it meant to be male. Now, I grant that's a huge, sweeping generalization. But it came to be a question of "What are masculine virtues that are valuable virtues?" And that's very problematic.

NF Well, the two plays certainly ask that question, present that problem, though in two very different ways.

GV Well, I have no answers for the problem. [*laughter*]

NF Continuing on this theme of masculinity in the plays, in *I Had a Job I Liked*, there is a tension between a slavish adherence to the law as written, and a more subjective, "up in the air" sense of justice (88). Sergeant Finestad's by-the-book approach initially protects Les Grant from Crown Attorney Tolbertson's bloodlust. Yet Tracy Tolbertson, the alleged victim, uses the law (and the advantages of her social status) to falsely accuse Les of rape. Why is justice so important to your work?

GV I think probably because I understand the necessity for the codification of behaviour. Things can't lapse into subjectivity. But it's also clearly necessary for some kind of natural or proper justice to operate. And I admit maybe that's for the hereafter, if a hereafter exists. But we also continually encounter things that we feel are unjust but which are lawful. And the law can't be about a perfect justice. I wish it could be, but it can't manage that feat. I'm interested in people who are

caught between the requirements of their job, like the Superintendent who's running the asylum in *Dancock's Dance* or an RCMP officer like Finestad.

NF Where does his "up in the air" sense of justice come from?

GV Well, there was a huge debate among theologians in the 1960s and 1970s about situational ethics. If you look at any situation and you weigh the rights and wrongs of it, people may deviate on what the outcome should be. But it strikes me that most human beings have a sense of natural justice. I mean, you can reduce this in a very simple-minded kind of way: Should Martin Luther King have been arrested for marching in Selma, Alabama about something that was clearly unjust even though he was breaking a municipal or civic law in doing so? Most human beings would say "No." And you can move through a whole sweep of these kinds of things. It's only the people who refuse to admit the justice of the law that get the law changed. I guess that, in part, is what those plays are about. Or, if not a change in law, a change in attitude. The germ of *Dancock's Dance* came while I was reading about the asylums in Saskatchewan at the turn of the century. At the time, they were operating under the Department of Public Works. I read one of their annual reports in which there was a muted thank you to the patients of the North Battleford asylum for taking on the duties of the staff during the Spanish flu pandemic. And that sort of struck me: if they could take on the duties in a moment of crisis, why were their activities so restricted when there wasn't a crisis? In fact, I had read some of the rules of the asylum. In many ways, given the time, it was very progressive. They did have tea dances, but they made very sure that patients didn't dance with patients. Male patients had to dance with nurses and things like that. Just the sort of incongruity of it. When there's an enormous crisis that puts pressure on everybody and people are dying wholesale, the patients step up to the marks. But in a time in which you could say things are fairly "normal," then their activities are restricted. It was kind of like, "Well, that's sort of interesting."

NF Would there not be a thematic correlation in both plays between notions of justice and constructions of masculinity or an aspect of a performed masculinity in terms of the "lawgiver," which itself brings us back to your historical novels? Might there be in your

work a sense that the dispensing of justice was something historically done by males?

*GV* Yeah. Historically, men are the judges, the lawgivers, and all the rest of it. In that sense, men, I believe, need to be feminized, at least in the sense of what most people think of as being feminine — as being more forgiving — compared to, say, the image of a Yahweh sitting on a throne in the sky. Males have mostly been associated with rigidity — the rigidity of conceptions.

*NF* One last thing about the plays. In *Dancock* and *I Had a Job*, the potential for wildness and violence seems irresistible to some characters, and we get really great dramatic tension when one or two characters try to stifle that part of themselves or feel guilt for having once succumbed to it. Can you comment a little bit on how or why violence figures so prominently in your work?

*GV* I think it's partly personal, having been brought up in what is now an antiquated code. It was a code that was imbued in me not just by my uncles and my father but by my mother, as well. I'm sort of slipping deep into the past here [*laughter*], but when I was about four years old, we lived in a sawmill camp in the interior of British Columbia. And there was a boy everyday after school who used to thrash me on his way home from school when I was out in the yard. My mother would say "Don't come crying to me. Settle it." [*laughter*] No modern mother that I can think of would make that suggestion. So my father said, "Okay, I'm going to teach you how to fight." Almost no modern father would do that today. So, you know, he gave his four-year-old a few tips. And when this kid was coming home from school, my father said, "Okay you come into the living room and we're gonna settle this." That was the world that I kind of grew up in: if you're backed into a corner, you have to do that sort of thing. Yet I don't approve of that. I don't intellectually approve of that.

In one of the short stories I wrote, I said that sometimes moral courage is basically the greatest virtue, but sometimes moral courage cannot be performed without physical courage. And I said something like, "It wasn't Heidegger who tried to kill the Nazis." Heidegger went to bed with the Nazis. It was a group of army officers and people like Dietrich Bonhoeffer who put their necks on the line in plotting to assassinate Hitler. There are all sorts of people who are morally courageous, and

such a thing can have huge consequences. Bonhoeffer was a theologian, a very deep thinker, a Protestant minister in the German church; yet he was willing to be hanged for what he did. In saying this, I know I sound really primitive, but I think that there is a virtue in courage that risks everything. I wouldn't risk it. I'm not the man to risk it. But I admire those who do.

There's a very old phrase: "right conduct." Part of the old traditional male code, which wasn't lived up to, is that you protected the weak — and those "weak" could also be other males. You did the best for your family, and you attempted to live your life with a certain kind of dignity. All of those ideas can be distorted into caricature. But when I look at my own father's life, a guy who grew up in the Depression. He didn't get any schooling; he can read but he can't write. He can't even write a cheque. His entire life was given over to doing the best he could, given the circumstances that he operated under. So sometimes to me, endurance is more valuable than sensitivity. Somebody once said to me, "Did your father ever say he loved you?" No. But I *knew* it. Therefore, I tend to think that masculine virtues are defined, at least in part, by your actions; they're part behaviour. They're not simply professions — professions of sensitivity, professions of this or that — but how you perform. So if there's a performance of masculinity, for me that's the important performance. Not that I live up to it. I'm not making any claims in that sense. I'm saying that's kind of an ideal standard.

When I was very young I fell into a *Boy's Own Annual* idea of what you should be like. And I got all kinds of lickings for it. [*laughter*] Like the kid who was being picked on, I felt it was imperative that I step in and prevent him from being picked on. And I got all kinds of spectacular lickings for doing that. And I admit — I'm almost sixty years old — I was formed with ideas that might already have been antiquated. All of my uncles who left home at fourteen years old because the family couldn't support them and rode railway boxcars across the country looking for work — it was, in an odd way, to give somebody else a chance. My mother was the only person in her family who got a high school education. Part of the reason that she got a high school education is that all her brothers left home. So there was an element of sacrifice there. And, admittedly, part of it was because the boys could get jobs and the girls couldn't. But they were men when they were fourteen or fifteen years old.

*NF* I wanted to ask you about your fiction in relation to a very small example from another much older “historical” novel: Sara Jeannette Duncan’s *The Imperialist*, which depicts a bustling Ontario town at the turn of the twentieth century. A burgeoning economy and the rise of Canadian imperialism give us the sense that “we are here at the making of a nation” (37). Some of your fiction is set in just such a time when geographic borders between Canada and America have not yet been drawn, or ideological differences between Canada and Great Britain have not yet been set. What is it about these blurred borderlines between “nations” that lends itself to fictionalizing Canadian history in your work?

*GV* My guess is that it deals with the promise of becoming and the question about choices. What Canada decides it will become. Initially, the impulse among Canadian nationalists is to separate from Britain, which is a very slow process. But even Mackenzie King’s insistence that Canada declare war two or three days after Britain declared war on Nazi Germany was a symbolic assertion of identity. After the Second World War, particularly after George Grant’s *Lament for a Nation*, it becomes a question about how we define ourselves against the United States. Those periods in which we’re hovering, when decisions haven’t been made, I think are interesting.

One of the things that preoccupies me is that incredibly fluid border in the Canadian West in the 1870s, when Americans are making incursions into Canada, when the Hudson’s Bay Company has renounced its claim to the territory, and when Canadian sovereignty is sort of tenuous. It’s a moment, in my mind, when almost anything could have happened. I think it’s quite possible that everything west of Manitoba, with the exception of B.C., might in one way have become American. Which leads to an entirely different configuration of the country.

*NF* Then, the Northwest Mounted Police saddles up . . .

*GV* Right. And they sort of bring their own version of order to the territory. Which is what I’m doing now in the third book of a trilogy about that period.

*NF* Would you care to talk about that third book a bit?

*GV* I could talk about it in a confused way. It’s about the arrival of the Sioux after the Battle of the Little Bighorn in 1876, the polit-

ical difficulties that it caused for the Canadian and American governments, along with the creation of the first Canadian secret service, and Fenian activity. Because the Western United States was a huge hotbed of Fenians. The book is partly about the fear of terrorism on both sides of the border: for the Americans, the Sioux were the terrorists, and for the Canadians, the Irish Fenians were the terrorists.

*NF* To what extent would you characterize the period, including the invasion of the Canadian West by the Northwest Mounted Police and the 1885 Riel Rebellion, as a civil war?

*GV* Very close to it. Though it was also a war between two peoples. There was the Metis nation, and in many ways they still think of themselves as a Metis nation, against an imperial incursion. It was certainly a civil war given the configuration of the country, but it was a war in part between different conceptions of the country. Which is why Quebec took an entirely different attitude towards Riel than Ontario. So, partly civil and partly extramural.

*NF* I want to ask you as a last question about your experiences of being on the advisory board of New Canadian Library with Alice Munro and W.H. New. I want to ask about issues of — and you may or may not be wrestling with these issues, but — issues of canonicity, canon-formation. Is NCL still relevant to Canadian literature?

*GV* Well, in one sense NCL is purely provisional. [*laughter*] In part, it's an attempt to reproduce those books that are likely to be taught and sometimes to nudge in a certain direction. It certainly doesn't have the force that it had forty years ago because now there are so many other series and texts out there. And, obviously, Penguin has *The Wars* and Findley's books and all the rest of it. I would say that it's basically an awkward attempt to provide books that are likely to be taught, and sometimes to suggest that there are books that perhaps should be taught. But it's in the hands of the teachers now. I mean, way back when, when Canadian literature wasn't being taught, people had to find books to teach. It's a very different kind of situation now. And often it breaks down into what books you can get rights for. There might be books that you might want but publishers are not going to surrender them. So it's certainly not anything that's comprehensive or all-encompassing. There are all kinds of really significant writers who are not included in the NCL.



NF What titles do you wish you could get your hands on for NCL?

GV Me? I would like to get *The Studhorse Man* by Robert Kroetsch. I wish we could get some early Richard Wright, like *The Weekend Man*, or Brian Moore's *The Luck of Ginger Coffey*. I'm speaking personally.

NF Of course. You're not speaking for "the nation. . ." [laughter]

GV Or for the board. I might get slapped. But I would love to get *The Studhorse Man*. There are a lot of books out there that were, and are, significant. You know, like Findley.

NF *Not Wanted on the Voyage, Spadework*.

GV Yeah, but publishers aren't going to surrender those works. [laughter]

NF I wouldn't, either.

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