

“If you’re in quest of the Folk, you’ve come to the wrong place”: Recent Trends in Atlantic Canadian Literary Criticism

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REVIEW ESSAYS/NOTES CRITIQUES

“If you’re in quest of the Folk, you’ve come to the wrong place”: Recent Trends in Atlantic Canadian Literary Criticism

IT IS COMMONPLACE TO READ IN NEWSPAPER REVIEWS and scholarly journals that Atlantic Canadian literature is experiencing a renaissance. The same is certainly true for Atlantic Canadian literary criticism. Janice Kulyk Keefer published *Under Eastern Eyes: A Critical Reading of Maritime Fiction* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press) in 1987, the first comprehensive study of its kind. This was an important moment; however, Keefer’s work went unanswered in terms of comparable extended analyses for 16 years. The publication of David Creelman’s *Setting in the East: Maritime Realist Fiction* (Montreal & Kingston: McGill-Queen’s University Press) in 2003, on the other hand, kicked off a decade that has seen two more comprehensive studies on Atlantic Canadian writing, three special issues in national critical journals on East Coast literature, numerous articles and interviews with Atlantic writers, and an ever-growing number of papers at scholarly conferences. The works reviewed here are Danielle Fuller’s *Writing the Everyday: Women’s Textual Communities in Atlantic Canada* (Montreal & Kingston: McGill-Queen’s University Press, 2004); a special issue of *Studies in Canadian Literature* – 33, no. 2 (2008) – “Surf’s Up: The Rising Tide of Atlantic Canadian Literature”; Tony Tremblay’s *David Adams Richards of the Miramichi: A Biographical Introduction* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2010); and Herb Wyile’s *Anne of Tim Hortons: Globalization and the Reshaping of Atlantic-Canadian Literature* (Waterloo, ON: Wilfrid Laurier University Press, 2011). In the words of optimistic politicians describing the Halifax Shipyard, Atlantic Canadian literary criticism is “booming,” and it seems like an opportune time to assess what has transpired since 2003.

Setting in the East serves as a very effective starting point for this crucial decade. While the critics who came after him almost exclusively favour contemporary literature, Creelman begins by looking backwards – situating his study within the economic and cultural history of the Maritimes and then charting the emergence and trajectory of the realist form in the region since the early 20th century. Creelman suggests that the comparatively late arrival of realism in the Maritimes reflects the region’s cultural marginalization relative to more centralized urban spaces, but the realist genre might also be appropriate for a literary tradition interested in political questions that require a degree of faith in the ability of writing to convey lived experience effectively. For Creelman, the dislocating rise of industrialization in the early part of the 20th century and an equally dislocating period of deindustrialization several decades later inspired moments of creative tension from which the region’s great writers emerged. Creelman’s main contention is that Maritime writing is marked by “broad patterns of nostalgia and hesitation”: authors such as Ernest Buckler and Frank Parker Day searched for an idealized past that could offer a reprieve from the confusion of the present and the uncertainty of the future (15).

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One significant development in Atlantic Canadian literary criticism during this decade is the systematic way it has incorporated the book that sits in the most hallowed space on many Atlantic Canadianists' shelf (and one that is, of course, very familiar to *Acadiensis* readers): Ian McKay's *Quest of the Folk: Antimodernism and Cultural Selection in Twentieth Century Nova Scotia* (Montreal & Kingston: McGill-Queen's University Press, 1994), a groundbreaking examination of middle-class appropriation of "local" culture, the cultivation of folk stereotypes to elide social or economic turmoil, and the state and tourism industry's push to define Nova Scotia as an innocent and pre-modern space during the middle of the 20th century. Each of the works under review grapples in one way or another with understanding the relationship between writers from Atlantic Canada and the stereotypes about the region that circulate both outside and within it. Building on *Quest of the Folk*, for instance, Creelman suggests that cultural producers in the Maritimes both contribute to and must contend with a reconstituted and innocent version of the past pushed by the state and the tourism industry; he writes that "if there is a common ethos in the Maritimes, it lies not in a 'sense of a shared community' but in the *memory* of a shared community" (11).

Creelman suggests that the nostalgic realism characteristic of mid-century writers faded away by the 1970s; Alden Nowlan and David Adams Richards, most notably, began to focus on the experience of poverty, cultural alienation, and the impact of mass consumer culture on the supposedly closed society of the East Coast. *Setting in the East* ends with two chapters on contemporary writers, many of whom feature prominently in the subsequent texts reviewed here – Lynn Coady, Ann-Marie MacDonald, Leo McKay, and Sheldon Currie – whose work abandons the nostalgic impulse that earlier writers struggled with reconciling. Instead, fiction at the beginning of the 21st century depicts Maritimers as dislocated from their cultural heritage and increasingly pessimistic about the region's economic prospects.

Beginning with Danielle Fuller's 2004 *Writing the Everyday: Women's Textual Communities in Atlantic Canada*, post-Creelman Atlantic literary critics focus almost exclusively on writers who are still active. Fuller's text represents a relatively significant break from Creelman's analysis in that it questions many of the assumptions inherent in the regionalist model earlier critics employed. Fuller insists that authors do not produce literary texts in isolation; instead, they emerge out of a constellation of interactions between writers, publishers, and readers. She defines a textual community as a group of "people engaged in dialogue and negotiation with one another in order to generate the best possible narrative expressions of their lives" (10). Her exploration of textual communities highlights the diversity of the region's literary output but, more importantly, her study treats "region" as a shifting category that is socially constructed and contested. Building on the work of critics such as Allison Calder and Herb Wyile, Fuller's approach in *Writing the Everyday* is theoretically informed by "strategic regionalism" – a concept that privileges "social rather than political geographies" (37) and demonstrates that the writers she examines occupy different – often radically different – standpoints. Thus, her study suggests "Atlantic writing articulates a situated knowledge of economic marginality, regional disparity, geographic isolation, and various forms of social exclusion" (246). While regionalist ideology often glosses over or minimizes difference, Fuller's approach looks to uncover heterogeneous responses to Atlantic Canada and

the role of textual communities in shaping the region. Fuller argues that in a world of shifting identities, outmigration, new understandings of gender, and increased communication technologies the concrete borders of regions suggested by political maps are inadequate. Fuller notes that, for the writers she examines, less tangible markers of regional identity, including accents and familial ties, are more important.

Writing the Everyday also suggests that one of the key elements of Atlantic Canadian women's writing is the way in which it re-configures our understanding of the home place. While the home place traditionally appears in Maritime literature as a symbol of comfort and stability in the face of change, Fuller argues that contemporary women authors deconstruct this idea – often equating home with violence, exclusion, and the imposition of patriarchal authority. For writers such as Helen Porter and Joan Clark, “home is the site of complex social and psychological relationships as well as an arena situated within wider economic and political relations that impact directly on the activities that take place there” (33).

Shortly after *Writing the Everyday* was published, Acadia University hosted a conference entitled “Surf's Up: The Rising Tide of Atlantic Canadian Literature.” The papers from this conference, edited by Herb Wyile and Jeanette Lynes, appeared in a special issue of *Studies in Canadian Literature* in 2008. This issue provides a nice cross-section of the state of Atlantic Canadian literary criticism in the middle of this crucial decade, bringing together all of the authors whose works are discussed in this essay as well as several other important names. Not surprisingly, the introductory essay brings McKay's influence on the field into sharp focus. In it, Wyile and Lynes argue that the defining feature of contemporary East Coast writing is the discrepancy between the bucolic, pleasing, and innocent version of Atlantic Canada found in the work of L.M. Montgomery and the cynical and satirical rendering of the region typical of writers such as Edward Riche. Instead of the “retreat from modernity” supposedly characteristic of the region's literature (6), contemporary authors present a scathing portrait of Atlantic Canada in which resource extraction has gutted the landscape and inhabitants rely on precarious employment in the service sector. Wyile and Lynes suggest that contemporary Atlantic Canadian writers embrace cutting-edge literary techniques, display a more sophisticated treatment of language and form, and construct the region (particularly Newfoundland), as an urban and cosmopolitan space deeply impacted by postmodern consumer culture.

The essays in this collection demonstrate that the increasingly complex nature of contemporary Atlantic Canadian writing is matched by a regional literary criticism that is theoretically and methodologically innovative. The collection brings together a wide range of critical approaches, including postmodern readings of space, examinations of the connections between regionalism and post-colonialism, and ecocriticism. One of its recurring themes is the way in which critics read Atlantic Canadian texts, particularly outside of the region. For example, Tony Tremblay's essay, “‘Lest on too close sight I miss the darling illusion’: The Politics of the Centre in ‘Reading Maritime,’” contends that regionalism is a “construction of the centre rather than the margins” (24). He argues that the reception of literature in Canada works to uphold a colonial centre-periphery relationship and serves the interests of the national rather than regional community. This has a profound effect on the literary community of Canada, a country that is challenged by the “illogic of its

federalism” and is in constant need of consolidating national narratives in the face of internal tensions from the regions and from politicized cultural groups (29).

Several other articles in this collection pick up on Tremblay’s focus on the reception of Atlantic Canadian writing. Fuller, for example, examines the reasons why novels such as *No Great Mischief*, *The Colony of Unrequited Dreams*, and *Fall on Your Knees* bubble up to the surface in a culture that privileges the writer-as-celebrity and looks for potential blockbusters that might replicate previously successful texts. Creelman explores the failure of *Middletown* and *The Republic of Nothing* to gain traction, suggesting that the experimental styles of these novels make them unique in the tradition of Maritime literature and, as a result, difficult to sell to readers who have pre-formed expectations about the region. He suggests that received stereotypes about cultural life in the Maritimes constrain writers from the region; instead of fostering experimentation, this environment awards success to authors who choose not to take chances.

Cynthia Sugars’s article, “Repetition with a Difference: The Paradox of Origins in Alistair MacLeod’s *No Great Mischief*,” considers the role of time in the construction of regional and familial identity. She suggests that MacLeod’s novel plays with the complexities of “chance, destiny, origins, and genealogy” (133). Working from a Freudian reading of heredity, Sugars argues that part of the appeal of MacLeod’s characters comes from the way in which they both embrace or even yearn for genetic ties yet also struggle with the idea that their fate is predetermined. His work focuses on hereditary traits such as hair colour at the same time as it is preoccupied with cultural traditions such as stories and songs that change over time. Sugars links this obsession with family and community history to a broader set of post-colonial anxieties in Canada. Like the citizens of other settler nations, Canadians are up against the problem that their “originary moment” emerges out of a systematic mistreatment and marginalization of Aboriginal peoples and a lack of an authentic sense of belonging in the space of Canada.

Perhaps the most significant turn that took place during the last decade in Atlantic Canadian literary criticism is the shift away from understandings of region invested heavily in political economy and geographic determinism in favour of a reading of regional space as contested and dynamic. Many of the authors in *Surf’s Up* cite theorists, such as David Harvey and David Jordan, who consider regions to be social constructions that are constantly reimagined. Susanne Marshall, for instance, argues that Lisa Moore’s fiction accentuates the “instability” of Newfoundland identity. As much as her characters are shaped by the immediate environment and society in which they grew up, they are connected to a larger global culture – a culture that is increasingly present in the local milieu. Marshall notes that Moore’s work constructs a faceless suburban space complete with fast food restaurants (such as Don Cherry’s Sports Grill), and “juxtaposes the utopic ideal of an exclusionary, yet mass culture with its opposite, the utopic ideal of an exclusionary, yet communal regional identity” (84).

Alexander MacLeod’s essay, “‘The Little State of Africadia Is a Community of Believers’: Replacing the Regional and Making the Real in the Work of George Elliott Clarke,” takes the idea that regions are social constructions a step further, suggesting that Clarke’s work in documenting and constructing an Africadian literary canon reorients our understanding of the distinction between “real and imagined social space” and sheds light on the role of regionalist literary discourse in

more tangible arenas such as politics (96). MacLeod argues that the experience of developing his writing voice outside of Nova Scotia, his home and the setting for his work, drives Clarke's obsession with the distinction between concrete and imagined geography. As an "exile" from his home province, Clarke has a complex relationship with the "real" space of Nova Scotia: he constantly looks to "expand his definition of the 'home place' and to extend his geographical range over an ever-broadening cultural space" (103). MacLeod maintains that instead of simply commenting on and mirroring the world they encounter, regionalist writers are participants in constructing that world. Clarke's writing, particularly his work as a critic, focuses not only on documenting and promoting Africadian literature, but also on reinterpreting the history of the Maritimes with an eye towards naming a home place and willing it into existence. Clarke's work demonstrates, for MacLeod, that "a collective desire for the home place is infinitely more powerful than the passive defence of a real geographic site" (111).

Tony Tremblay's extremely readable and informative study, *David Adams Richards of the Miramichi: A Biographical Introduction*, also addresses the complex role that an author plays in constructing space. Paying attention to both the environmental and intellectual influences that shaped Richards's unique voice, Tremblay provides an in-depth examination of Richards's life experiences and literary influences as well as extended readings of the texts that comprise the first half of his career, up to his Governor General's Award-winning *Nights Below Station Street* (1988). Tremblay pays particular attention to the reception of Richards's work, suggesting that critics from both central Canada and from the Miramichi often judged his work harshly or unfairly. Tremblay argues that for "professional readers" and keepers of the Canadian canon, Richards's particular brand of social realism is problematic as it fails to match up with their expectations of what life in the Maritimes might or should look like. Tremblay maintains that examining the reception of Richards's work tells us relatively little about the author himself, but provides deep insight into the power structures that govern the production and circulation of regional literature in Canada. Tremblay argues that in judging Richards in this way, Canadian reviewers reinscribe a colonial bias that casts regional literature as second-rate (250). One of the achievements of Tremblay's work is his painstaking examination of the stylistic and technical changes that Richards has undertaken throughout his career. Although critics often pigeonhole Richards as a conservative writer who stubbornly refuses to "move beyond" the Miramichi, Tremblay reminds his audience that Richards has always experimented heavily with language and perspective and that his novels are often radically different from one another.

While the trend in recent Atlantic Canadian criticism has been for critics to focus on less tangible and shifting markers of regional space, Tremblay explores the impact of the environment in which Richards grew up on his sensibility; for Tremblay, Richards's "investigations of the sinewy ties of family and tribe reflect, at base, the preoccupations of a river poet. If the island writer's prevailing sense is of isolation and circumscription, Richards's is of restlessness and motion – of tension, moodiness, change, and flux. His syntax has always been that of a river poet, his moods always coloured by the sombre greys and browns of a moving waterway" (xii). Working from extensive interviews with Richards, his friends, and

members of his family, Tremblay's text weaves together various tensions and challenges that influenced (and continue to influence) Richards: his upbringing and ancestry, his relationship with literary heavyweights Ernest Buckler and (especially) Alden Nowlan, his struggle with alcoholism and subsequent sobriety, the extreme poverty he experienced for much of his early career, his political views, and his reactions to issues as wide-ranging as shifts in gender roles, the Vietnam War, and changes to hunting and fishing regulations in central New Brunswick.

Richards's unyielding vision of the economic and social life of the Miramichi set the stage for the current generation of subversive Atlantic Canadian writers, many of whom feature in Herb Wyile's 2011 *Anne of Tim Hortons: Globalization and the Reshaping of Atlantic-Canadian Literature*. Following closely on the heels of his extensive work on Canadian historical fiction in *Speculative Fictions: Contemporary Canadian Novelists and the Writing of History* (Montreal & Kingston: McGill-Queen's University Press, 2002) and *Speaking in the Past Tense: Canadian Novelists on Writing Historical Fiction* (Waterloo, ON: Wilfrid Laurier University Press, 2007), Wyile's study brings together much of his previous work on Atlantic Canadian literature (and adds a great deal of new material). In addition to a fantastic title, which always causes a stir when people come in my office and see the book on my desk, *Anne of Tim Hortons* provides a comprehensive examination of the relationship between contemporary English writers in Atlantic Canada and what he calls the "folk paradigm." Leaning heavily on McKay's *Quest of the Folk* as well as Thom Workman's analysis of the impact of globalization on Atlantic Canada's economy, Wyile suggests that contemporary Atlantic Canadian writing is characterized by a defiant tone in which writers call attention to the disparity between the expectations of outsiders and the conditions of life in the region. While visitors to Atlantic Canada might look for a quaint region steeped in history and free of the pressures of modern society, Wyile suggests that contemporary writers such as Lynn Coady and Edward Riche insist that Canada's East Coast has been, like every other place in the world, reshaped by globalization, the expansion of consumer culture, and an increasingly neo-liberal climate – all of which seem to counteract received ideas about the region.

Wyile's critical introduction blends the work of Atlantic Canadian scholars from a variety of disciplines, including history, literary studies, and political economy, and employs them alongside major international theorists such as Edward Soja and Henri Lefebvre. Wyile's study focuses on three key elements in the changing nature of life in the region: the rise of a service sector that pushes "flexible" employment, the influence of tourism (an economic strategy that he suggests has actually commodified underdevelopment in the region at the same time as it has inspired writers to satirize the pre-packaged version of regional culture it creates), and the role of historical fiction in charting "the region's tenuous place in Confederation, the impact of economic trends and the restructuring of work, the experience of marginalized groups, and the commodification of culture and heritage" (169). The wide range of texts that Wyile selects demonstrate a collective resistance to the folk paradigm and the commodified, over-simplified, and romanticized version of Atlantic Canada that circulates outside the region and to a certain degree within it as well.

I think it is safe to say that, for the most part, Atlantic Canadian literary criticism is in a very good place. There are, however, a few general comments about the

current state and future direction of the field that I would like to make. One of the most interesting questions facing Atlantic Canadian critics at this moment is that there is still a degree of uncertainty about the basic parameters of their field of study. In the first pages of *Setting in the East* Creelman makes a compelling case that the history of the three Maritime provinces is completely distinct from that of Newfoundland, justifying his decision to limit his study to the literature of Nova Scotia, New Brunswick, and Prince Edward Island. Fuller, Wyile, and Lynes, however, insist on considering Newfoundland along with the three Maritime provinces. Directly addressing Creelman's decision to separate the Maritimes and Newfoundland based on historical connections between the three Maritime provinces and the significantly different political history of Newfoundland, Lynes and Wyile suggest that grouping Maritime writers with their Newfoundland counterparts makes sense given that the four provinces now have in common "a resource crisis, continuing out-migration, a shared reliance on tourism, and a fractious relationship with the rest of the country" (10). Atlantic Canadian literary critics seem to remain unsure, however, about the extent to which these shared characteristics outweigh the historical differences that exist between the Maritimes and Newfoundland, although Wyile and Fuller convincingly argue that contemporary writing from the four provinces is sufficiently similar to justify this focus on Atlantic Canada. While in that sense the field seems to be expanding, the revised label "Atlantic Canadian" – at least in the way these texts deploy it – is limited in scope to literature written in English, which means that the current wave of Atlantic Canadian criticism does not include Acadian writing.

The question of what counts and does not count as Atlantic Canadian literature gets at another tension present in these texts. The authors seem to struggle with the issue of how much we can assume that the region is home to a uniform culture. On the one hand, Fuller, Creelman, Wyile, and others go out of their way at the beginning of each of their arguments to talk about Atlantic Canada's history of economic and racial diversity; but they also search for at least one shared experience that unites Atlantic Canada's inhabitants. While these authors seem uncomfortable with making sweeping generalizations about the region, preferring instead to talk about Atlantic Canada as a fractured and contested idea, they use the same rationale to ultimately group the texts together: that reading them in tandem gives us insight into the wider cultural experience of the region. Creelman, for example, maintains that while the literary responses to this experience have been diverse, the region's writers "return to the same territory of nostalgia and hesitation [and] such similar impulses begin to connect these disparate parts into a larger literary whole . . . they tell us about the East Coast's particular sense of its past and its uniquely troubled relationship with the future" (215). Wyile acknowledges that Atlantic Canada is a contested idea and claims that the region is fundamentally a social construction rather than a product of environmental or cultural determinism. With an appropriate level of qualification, though, Wyile, like Creelman, argues that writers from the region internalize economic and social forces; for Wyile, the impact of globalization and the neoliberal agenda has prompted writers such as Leo MacKay and Lisa Moore to depict communities and individuals who rely on "flexible" and low-paying jobs in the service sector and suffer from a sense of cultural alienation. While it is clear that Atlantic Canadian literary criticism is deeply impacted by changes in our

understanding of regionalism, particularly the assertion that the region itself is a dynamic and unstable category and that a variety of experiences exist within Atlantic Canada, critics often return to the idea that there are certain essential characteristics that inhabitants of the region share – many of which are reflected in its cultural production.

As noted above, one of the greatest achievements of Atlantic Canadian literary criticism between 2000 and 2011 is a heightened awareness and consistent deployment of cutting-edge literary criticism. Many of the authors discussed within this review engage productively with post-modern critiques of regionalism and others use post-colonial approaches to understand Atlantic Canadian writers' relationship with history, space, the rest of Canada, and the increasingly globalized world. Where this engagement with theory falls a little flat, however, is in these authors' treatment of perhaps the most important problematic in this field: the relationship between writers from the region and what McKay and Wyile call the folk paradigm. These texts provide a thorough examination of Atlantic Canadian writers' response to folk stereotypes, but a much less developed sense of how people from outside the region actually perceive the East Coast or where these images appear. In other words, there is a seemingly unquestioned assumption that people in central Canada or elsewhere want Atlantic Canada to be quaint and backwards, but little evidence employed to back up this claim. McKay's insights have become so central that virtually every study on Atlantic Canadian writing cites his work, but there seems to be little fieldwork being done on perceptions of the region from outside of it or on how the images that constitute these stereotypes circulate either at home or elsewhere. Considering the 20th anniversary of *Quest of the Folk* is quickly approaching, it is possible that the field needs to revisit McKay's observations and begin to explore tourism brochures, television features, newspaper stories, and other sites where perceptions of Atlantic Canada might emerge.

In the past decade, though, critics have advanced the field of Atlantic Canadian literary criticism dramatically. Scholars working in this area have capitalized on the energetic resurgence of Atlantic Canadian literature and have submitted a body of work that is critical, wide-ranging, easy-to-read, and reorients our understanding of a literary tradition that many have long assumed was conservative and sentimental. Perhaps more significantly, the texts are all, in their own way, interdisciplinary, and (even if critiques of regionalism make them cautious in doing so) all the authors intertwine their analyses with observations about the economic and social conditions of life in Atlantic Canada. Thus, this group of texts provides a snapshot not only of a rapidly changing and expanding literary tradition, but also of a region that is, as always, in the midst of upheaval. As the field continues to grow, the insights offered by these texts provide points of departure and contention for critics in the coming decade – one I hope will be equally productive and transformative. It is a great time to be writing about Atlantic Canadian literature.

PETER THOMPSON