

## Re: Confederating Canada: Nineteenth-Century Canadian Literature, Forward and Back

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Volume 42, Number 1, 2017

URI: [https://id.erudit.org/iderudit/scl42\\_1int01](https://id.erudit.org/iderudit/scl42_1int01)

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Publisher(s)

The University of New Brunswick

ISSN

0380-6995 (print)

1718-7850 (digital)

[Explore this journal](#)

Cite this document

Keen, P. & Sugars, C. (2017). Re: Confederating Canada: Nineteenth-Century Canadian Literature, Forward and Back. *Studies in Canadian Literature / Études en littérature canadienne*, 42(1), 5–12.

# Re: Confederating Canada: Nineteenth-Century Canadian Literature, Forward and Back

PAUL KEEN AND CYNTHIA SUGARS

Not so many years ago, in the wake of Tom Nairn's essay in the *New Left Review*, it became popular to speak of nations as Janus-faced: gazing forward and back simultaneously, moving into the future in directions that were influenced by powerful narratives of the past, and recalling that past in ways that reflected contemporary pressures, assumptions, and values. Few occasions offer more vivid examples of the doubled nature of this sort of collective memorialization, caught between self-congratulation and politically charged introspection, than national anniversaries. It should come as no surprise, therefore, that Canada's 150<sup>th</sup> sesquicentennial has reverberated with these dynamics, embracing an appeal to national origins as a way of replenishing an understanding of collective identity, but also confronting the ways that the darker elements of that past trouble national traditions and affiliations. Buoyed by the optimistic spirit of a new government preaching the progressive ethos of "sunny ways," 2017 has afforded a powerful moment to consider the ways one understands Canada's "beginnings," or at least how one construes its colonial roots.

Fraught with controversy from the outset, the public commemorations of the 150<sup>th</sup> anniversary of Canadian Confederation were met with countering responses from Indigenous people and communities who called into question what was effectively a celebration of Canada as a Euro-Canadian nation-state, a state founded on the expected erasure of Indigenous cultures in Canada. Following the closing of the Truth and Reconciliation Commission (TRC), whose "Calls to Action" were announced in 2015, and the ongoing inquiry into missing and murdered Indigenous women, the celebratory impetus behind the anniversary celebrations rang hollow as critics observed that the official creation of Canada in 1867 had gone hand in hand with a process of "cultural genocide" of Indigenous peoples. Indeed, item 79 of the TRC

“Calls to Action,” under the heading “Commemoration,” calls upon the Canadian government to revise the framework of commemoration in Canada by “[r]evising the policies, criteria, and practices of the National Program of Historical Commemoration to integrate Indigenous history, heritage values, and memory practices into Canada’s national heritage and history” (9).

Critiques of the official rhetoric of national self-congratulation and patriotism that marked the “Canada 150” banner emerged well before the 150<sup>th</sup> year itself. This dispute was emblemized in the controversy that arose in response to the design of the official “Canada 150” logo. The logo was chosen following the federal government’s launching of a student contest to design the emblem, a decision that sparked extended critique of the government’s apparent exploitation of students for free labour and its snubbing of professional Canadian designers nation-wide. Somewhat anti-climactically, the winner of the contest, nineteen-year-old Ariana Cuvin, asserted that her design was “not representative of anything in particular”: “I just wanted to go with something very simple,” she told the *Ottawa Citizen* (Butler). However, the federal government soon repackaged the design on the official “Canada 150” website (<http://canada.pch.gc.ca/eng/1469537603125>). The various lozenges in the design were repurposed to signify (in red) the four original provinces that formed Confederation, surrounded by the (multicoloured) remaining provinces and territories. As the government website states, “The possible uses of the symbol are as unlimited as the spirit and imagina-



Figure 1: The official “Canada 150” logo. The logo is free for public or private use from the Government of Canada’s official website: <http://canada.pch.gc.ca/eng/1469537603125>

tion of the Canadian public.” This prediction turned out to be true, in some unexpected ways. Not only was the logo plastered on countless commercial products and businesses across the country, from the Tim Hortons coffee franchise to the Hudson’s Bay Company, but Canadians were eager to impose their own “unlimited” readings on the maple leaf. One letter to the *Ottawa Citizen* defending the design praised its “three-pointed crown indicative of our British ancestry, which doubles as a stylized fleur-de-lis,” which could also “be interpreted as the feathers of an Aboriginal headdress” (Leroux). It would seem that the logo — like Canada 150 itself — could be used to assimilate everyone.

Yet the objections gained momentum. In Vancouver, “Canada 150+” launched its own alternative to the national 150 celebrations (see <https://canada150plus.ca/>). Led by the Urban Aboriginal Peoples Advisory Committee (UAPAC), the city hosted its own celebrations by staging a series of 2017 events to challenge the nation’s “collective amnesia” (MacDonald). In May 2017, Kiera Ladner and Myra Tait published their own response to Canada 150 with the edited collection *Surviving Canada: Indigenous Peoples Celebrate 150 Years of Betrayal*, a collection of reflections and essays about Canada’s unfulfilled commitments to Indigenous people. Tanya Kappo, Isaac Murdoch, Maria Campbell, and Christi Belcourt created the Twitter account “#Resistance150” as a social media project to collect shared histories of colonialism. These challenges to “Canada 150” culminated on June 28<sup>th</sup>, three days before the sesquicentennial celebration opened on Canada Day (July 1<sup>st</sup>), when a group of protestors from Sault Ste. Marie set up a teepee on Parliament Hill as a “reoccupation” to counter the celebrations and to highlight the fact that Parliament is located on unceded Algonquin land (Ballingall). Even the National Arts Centre in Ottawa embraced this spirit of resistance, commissioning Drew Hayden Taylor’s latest play, *Sir John A: Acts of a Gentrified Ojibway Rebellion*, as part of their Fall 2017 line-up (Hayden Taylor), a choice whose timeliness was underscored by the controversy generated by the Ontario Elementary Teachers’ Federation’s call to have Sir John A. Macdonald’s name removed from all schools in the province. Eric Ritskes’s design, “Colonialism 150,” which literally turned the official symbol on its head, offered a parodic alternative to Nairn’s image of the Janus-faced nation, not so much gazing forward and back in time, as open to competing perspectives that radically invert official narratives of collective identity (see Figure 2).



Figure 2: Designed by Eric Ritskes. Used with permission.

Not surprisingly, given the longstanding tendency of the arts to be part of the larger debates and struggles of their age, these tensions have also been at the forefront of critical debates about Canada's literary and cultural history. Ironically, however, this critical appreciation of literature's immersion in the controversies of its age has itself been a source of controversy. In her introduction to the most recent collection of essays on nineteenth-century Canadian literature, *Home Ground and Foreign Territory*, Janice Fiamengo laments the "destructive" effects of the "ideological approaches" that have dominated criticism in the field (2). These approaches, Fiamengo argues, have impoverished our understanding of literary history by subordinating any genuine or sustained interest in the hard work of engaging with historical texts on their own terms to critics' interest in predetermined agendas about the effects of "neo-liberal hegemony," "environmental damage," "class exploitation," "the ongoing urgency of Indigenous land claims," and "colonial norms that have been violently imposed upon this land" (quotations that Fiamengo takes from recent work by leading critics in the field) (6). Where these critics believe that knowing more about the influence of larger historical dynamics can help us to be more attentive to textual complexities, Fiamengo finds only a dispiriting monotony rooted in the intellectual dishonesty of this tendency to impose our own agendas onto texts rather than remaining alert to their highly nuanced nature: "all those years of study to produce the same sort of reading over and over again," a malaise that is "deeply dispiriting to a critic interested in literature rather than radical politics" (5).

Ironically, for many critics these politicized approaches have in part been inspired by a sense that canonical approaches were themselves

asking the same questions over and over again at the expense of many other historical dimensions, and about a corresponding limited number of texts and authors. Debates about aesthetic issues were always political, and never more so, perhaps, than when they insisted on their own pre-political status. The argument that “aesthetic” and “ideological” concerns are fundamentally distinct, and that any attempt to yoke these together can only be at the expense of a more sensitive awareness of the internal richness of literary texts, assumes an implicitly non-ideological position that is belied by the highly oppositional tone of many of these denunciations of politically inflected approaches.

Fiamengo’s dismissal of these various approaches echoes larger arguments by historians such as Jack Granatstein about the need to protect Canadian history from the corrosive approaches of politically motivated agendas (a stance which assumes that any approach that foregrounds the political aspects of art must be part of some larger agenda), but not all critics agree. The four editors of another recent collection, *ReCalling Early Canada: Reading the Political in Literary and Cultural Production*, argue that, quite the opposite, insisting on the need to recover the implicitly or explicitly political nature of early Canadian texts can help to foster an active sense of cultural richness in direct opposition to the homogenizing effects of traditional forms of nationalism. As the editors suggest, arguments by critics such as Granatstein about the kinds of history that critics *should* engage in quickly reveal their own politicized and ideological nature even in their call for a turn to what they would classify as non-political or ideologically acceptable forms of critical interpretation.

In her foreword to *ReCalling Early Canada*, Carole Gerson identifies this homogenizing influence of ideologically driven approaches not with these sorts of politically inflected methodologies but with the national orthodoxies that many of these approaches are seeking to unsettle. For Gerson, this determination to resist the “unifying story of two founding nations . . . has yielded to the multicultural, postcolonial, and pluralistic analysis that prevails at the opening of the third millennium” (ix). In doing so, it has helped to strengthen “a dialogue with earlier canons of thought and text” that “breathes new life into topics that might have remained moribund, and adds vital new dimensions to our never-ending discussion of Canadian nationhood” (x). What for some critics is a depressing monotony — “the same sort of reading over and over

again” — is for these other critics an opportunity to foster a new sense of cultural heterogeneity, breathing “new life” into familiar debates by opening them up to these larger political dimensions. As Jennifer Welsh argues in her 2016 Massey lectures, *The Return of History*, there is a strong ethical argument for doing so beyond the legitimate appeal of rejuvenating debates that can too easily become stale. Far from trying to insulate our historical understanding from present concerns, Welsh argues that

the crises facing today’s liberal democracies suggest that we need to re-read our history, to learn more about how our societies coped with both global and domestic challenges, and about the particular battles fought in the name of creating the world’s best political system. And then we need to take that history into the present and give it our own modern twist. (295)

As critics such as Edward Said have demonstrated, literature and other forms of cultural expression offer a valuable reflection of these struggles, both in their potential to evoke the global and domestic battles of their age and in the irreducibly complex mixture of resistance and (often unwitting) complicity they reveal. Giving literary history our own modern twist does not amount to distorting or ignoring its nuances, but quite the opposite, to understanding those nuances in ways that can help us to better appreciate both the value of these texts and, through them, the complexities of our own historical moment.

Like the celebrations, protests, and debates that have marked Canada’s sesquicentennial, this issue of *Studies in Canadian Literature* is itself Janus-faced, looking back to the last 150 years of Canadian literature and beyond to take stock of the field of early Canadian literature and to chart emergent critical perspectives on the field. Essays such as Sarah Wylie Krotz’s discussion of the affective geography of wild rice as a vital element in Anishinaabe struggles to resist the culturally genocidal effects of European-settler invasion, and Shelley Hulan’s study of the homoerotic dimension of *The Forest of Bourg-Marie*, which sustains a double level of analysis in order to reflect on the ways that the novel unsettles “the nation’s heteronormative basis,” demonstrate the depth of the connections between aesthetic concerns and political issues. D.M.R. Bentley’s subtle reading of the ways that Aristotle’s definition of metaphor highlights tensions inherent in both the dangers

of colonial epistemologies and the theoretical challenges of historical analysis generally, exemplifies in very different ways just how expansive these connections can be. For Sergiy Yakovenko, Charles G.D. Roberts's "The Tantrammar Revisited" offers a prime instance of the ability of literary texts to dramatize the centuries-old debate about whether we can ever really escape the limitations of our own situation in order to engage with the effects of historical change, or, more radically, whether we ultimately even want to.

Insisting on the shaping influence of larger political contexts, Misao Dean's study of the contrast between the NFB film adaptation of Archibald Lampman's 1888 poem, *Morning on the Lièvre*, and the poem itself offers a unique perspective on these tensions between the goal of historical fidelity and the influence of the pressures of our own day by exploring the ways that the film's revision of the poem reflects not just the mandate of the NFB in its early years, but more fundamentally, "a mid-twentieth-century discourse of nationalism." Set within this longer historical context, these debates about the distortions imposed by the influence of the present day turn out to be curiously palimpsestic. The presentist bias of each generation soon enough becomes part of the historical sedimentation whose layers become the focus of our own archeological impulses. Nor, as Laurel Ryan's account of James Martin Cawdell's dream of imposing a medieval political structure on Upper Canada emphasizes, should we forget that these earlier eras were themselves engaged in strikingly similar debates which, in turn, frequently pivoted on their own politically charged alignment with imagined relations to earlier histories.

As Gerson's study of the "patterns of reception and reconception, formulated in part through the lens of book history," that characterize the legacy of Samuel Hearne reminds us, these negotiations between "the familiar and the strange, the intimate and the unknowable," which marks our past must be understood as an ongoing process rather than some sort of decision that can be rendered once and for all. Gerson's point that these dynamics can best be grasped through an awareness of the ways that they were mediated by the material realities of print culture has important affinities with Honor Rieley's analysis of Canadian magazines of the 1820s and 1830s and Chantal Richard's extensive history of Acadian newspapers. But as Thomas Hodd's discussion of William Kirby's interest in Emanuel Swedenborg and Valerie Legge's



account of the conflicted patriotic impulses of Agnes C. Laut demonstrate, this focus on the internal dynamics of the literary field have only increased the significance of questions about authorial influence and biographical detail. As a whole, these essays demonstrate both the extraordinary variety that continues to distinguish the field of early Canadian literature, and the many ways that recognizing the deep affinities between aesthetics and ideology can help to illuminate urgent historical dimensions of today's national debates in ways that will, in turn, help to position Canadians as they struggle to articulate their possible futures. Like the sesquicentennial, the essays in this volume raise important questions about who "we" are and what the future (or futures) might be by situating these questions within a clearer sense of the radical complexity of the past.

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