

**Richler, Mordecai. *Oh Canada! Oh Quebec!: Requiem For A Divided Country*. Toronto: Penguin, 1992. Pp. 277**

**Sandra Campbell**

Volume 21, Number 2, March 1993

URI: <https://id.erudit.org/iderudit/1016798ar>

DOI: <https://doi.org/10.7202/1016798ar>

[See table of contents](#)

Publisher(s)

Urban History Review / Revue d'histoire urbaine

ISSN

0703-0428 (print)

1918-5138 (digital)

[Explore this journal](#)

Cite this review

Campbell, S. (1993). Review of [Richler, Mordecai. *Oh Canada! Oh Quebec!: Requiem For A Divided Country*. Toronto: Penguin, 1992. Pp. 277]. *Urban History Review / Revue d'histoire urbaine*, 21(2), 118–121.  
<https://doi.org/10.7202/1016798ar>

early twentieth century architecture is a rapidly shrinking resource that we suspect may have some value if we can only find it before it vanishes. Most Canadian cities still have some left despite the widespread destruction since the 1950s. What remains is highly valued because it projects an image of richness, craftsmanship, pride, care, and worth that speaks of civic virtues, and represents the kind of community we want to build.

These dear old, knobby relics, from the dawn of Canadian urbanism, possess wonderfully enjoyable features that seem no longer accessible either to our current construction industry or to our architects and designers. Recent attempts to apply similar forms in large scale commercial and civic buildings by conspicuous display of historically derived detail emerge as artificial and insincere despite, or perhaps because of, their largeness and their glitter. This particular brand of Post-Modernism seems to think that a few paste-on pediments can achieve instant historical and cultural continuity. But unfortunately, architecture has a relentless way of always telling the truth. No matter what we do, our buildings always show what we really believe, whatever we may intend.

The designers of the buildings presented in *Music of the Eye* probably did not have to wrestle with such thorny issues in the self-conscious way we must face them today. Perhaps this innocence is one of the qualities that endears their work to us and that we are inclined to envy. However it came about, whether by intent or inadvertence, their work has a ring of authenticity that we would sell our souls for, and a capacity to engender love that we can scarcely hope to gain. They were the first generation of Canadian architects. Twenty of their number, active in St. John from 1822 to 1914, are represented in this collection by 42

black and white drawings and 16 in colour. One of the designers is anonymous and three have no bibliographical information. Of the other thirteen, only three were immigrants, the other ten were all St. John native sons or at least New Brunswegans. None had formal, academic training in architecture. Nine of the thirteen became professional architects through some form of office apprenticeship. The others were able to establish themselves as architects based on credibility earned in a related field such as building, engineering, carpentry, or masonry. In other words, as Hughes emphasizes in his introductory text, these men contributed to establishing architecture in Canada by setting up themselves as architects individually, proceeding from a craft to a profession, in exactly the way that the profession itself had done somewhat earlier in Europe.

*Music of the Eye* is a catalogue written to accompany a travelling exhibition of architectural drawings. Each drawing is accompanied by a short essay concerning issues adhering to the graphic, its author, and the project. Subjects discussed are various, ranging from possible sources of stylistic influence to historic sketches of building types, and patterns of urban development in St. John. Some drawings are more or less everyday office products, but nearly all are satisfying merely as drawings, and some are very fine. It is difficult to avoid the inference that quality of drawing and quality of architecture may be related. Text references imply that many more such drawings have been preserved in various archives and suggest the possibility of a more comprehensive publication that would be very valuable indeed. Hughes' introductory essay focuses on architectural drawings as one of the means by which former builders, carpenters,

masons and engineers were able to acquire professional credibility as architects in the days before the establishment of current regulations. In nearly every drawing, architectural content is based on well-known stylistic conventions, though a few are freely interpreted. Initial establishment of an architectural profession in Canada is seen to have been deeply indebted to traditional forms and styles. At that time these were the traditions of the community, not just of the profession. Since then, the profession has lost this grounding in widely-shared formal conventions, and must somehow seek to regain it. *Music of the Eye* does not tell us how to do this, but certainly shows very clearly that it once did exist. The book is as deeply enjoyable as the architecture, an outstanding exhibition catalogue, rich in local knowledge. It is a pity that the colour plates could not have been printed at full page size, as the drawings deserve, and it is to be hoped that more comprehensive publication of such material will be possible in the future.

H. STANLEY LOTEN  
School of Architecture  
Carleton University

**Richler, Mordecai. *Oh Canada! Oh Quebec!: Requiem For A Divided Country*. Toronto: Penguin, 1992. Pp. 277.**

"A man without land," goes the refrain of Mordecai Richler's satirical novel *The Apprenticeship of Duddy Kravitz* (1959), "is nobody." After reading Richler's *Oh Canada! Oh Quebec!*, we can only conclude that a man who writes on his land is vilified. The book is a long essay on the state of the nation, an amplification of Richler's piece for *The New Yorker* in the fall of 1991. Richler's astringent account of the state of Canada, with its harsh picture

of Francophone/Anglophone/Allophone relations in Quebec, has evoked, among much else, an angry response from Lise Bissonnette, editor of *Le Devoir*, and an indignant petition from a primarily anglophone group of intellectuals sympathetic to Quebec, headed by Patricia Smart, a critic of Quebecois literature active with *Canadian Forum*. The petition denounced Richler for arousing partisan animosities in Quebec. In the interests of harmony it seems that Richler should have presented his analysis nicely or not at all (or eschewed uncharitable references in his text to the literary quality of Lise Bissonnette's prose and that of *Canadian Forum*). Readers of *Le Devoir*, for their part, were bemused to encounter Lise Bissonnette's heated rejoinder to Richler's indictments of racism against *Le Devoir* in the Thirties, only to read her stereotype of Richler and the late Barbara Frum as on-screen evocations of evenings in old Salisbury (Rhodesia).

The book has sold well in Canada, primarily in Ontario and Quebec. Amid all the vituperation and mutual recrimination, what can be said of *Oh Canada! Oh Quebec!?* Certainly the book is thoroughly researched: Richler has read all the documents of twentieth century federalism and sovereignty from Pierre Vallières' *White Niggers of America* (Was he the object of petitions asking him to be more *gentil*?) to Reed Scowen's *A Different Vision: The English in Quebec in the 1990s*. Richler provides a chronology of the last three decades of Quebec history, and related federal developments (Meech, the Spicer Commission and much else) and his claims about anti-Semitism in Quebec—whether by Adrienne Arcand, Abbe Groulx, or *Le Devoir* of the Thirties—are bolstered with quotations, citations and surveys, some of which aroused less anxiety and denial when published in other media.

The book's strength—and paradoxically its great weakness—is its tone. Richler's visceral prose exudes and evokes passion, not reason. As a writer, Richler has always been a moralist, and like many moralists, he favours the satiric mode. Satire holds vice or folly up to ridicule, often through exaggeration, and there is no doubt that Richler feels that the current state of the country is culpable folly. His conclusion is succinct: "Our continuing quarrel [between anglophones and francophones]—still unresolved, as I write—could yet lead to the dismemberment of this incredibly rich but ineptly governed country" (236). Even the title *Oh Canada! Oh Quebec!* is a satiric echo not only of Canada's national anthem but of Samuel Butler's nineteenth-century satiric poem about the foolish philistinism and puritanism of Montreal where classical Greek statuary was banished to a dusty storeroom for "vulgarity":

Stowed away in a Montreal lumber room  
The Discobolus standeth and turneth his  
face to the wall;  
Dusty, cobweb-covered, maimed and  
set at naught,  
Beauty crieth in an attic and no man  
regardeth:

Oh God! O Montreal!<sup>1</sup>

There must have been days this winter—weeks even—when Richler envied the Discobolus his hide-out. The affront of the Discobolus was to wear no clothes: Richler's was to sneer that the Emperor wore none. He makes copious use of his gift for choosing the absurd or bathetic detail to ridicule his targets, be they Quebec's language laws or Joe Clark. Camille Laurin is described as "a psychiatrist who dies his hair black"; the true common denominator between English and French Canadians is "bad taste". There is no doubt that Richler sometimes makes cheap shots, and goes on about absurdities that fascinate him even if they have little or no relevance

to his subject matter. What relevance, for example, have the Christ Coin scheme of Sinclair Stevens fame or the RCMP's Fruit Machine to the current national debate?

If Richler never uses a neutral adjective where a loaded one can be found, the book is nevertheless grounded not in sensationalism, but in deep-seated passion and outrage. *Oh Canada! Oh Quebec!* is no light-hearted, nose-tweaking look at the current state of a city (Montreal), a province (Quebec) and a country (Canada) but a savage *cri de coeur*. Anyone who has followed Richler's career as an essayist (*Shovelling Trouble, Home Sweet Home*) knows that the view of his country presented in this book is part and parcel of his lifelong view of the nation, not some splenetic aberration cynically penned for pelf. Richler is angry, but he is not phony. As a young man, he scorned Canada to make a literary career elsewhere, a view point he later softened:

Certainly I...sailed away from Canada without regrets in 1951. Like many of my contemporaries, I was mistakenly charged with scorn for all things Canadian. For the truth is, if we were indeed hemmed in by the boring, the inane, and the absurd, we foolishly blamed it all on Canada, failing to grasp that we would suffer from a surfeit [of these] wherever we eventually settled.<sup>2</sup>

A periodic visitor to Canada between 1954 and 1972, he twice returned to serve as writer-in-residence before his return to live here permanently. He wrote of the decision to return in *The Great Comic Book Heroes And Other Essays*:

Doomed always to be a foreigner in England, I was in danger of finding

Canada foreign too. After thirteen almost uninterrupted years abroad, I now realized the move I had made with such certainty at the age of twenty-three had exacted a considerable price.<sup>3</sup>

His best novels—such as *The Apprenticeship of Duddy Kravitz* and *St. Urbain's Horseman* show his deep engagement with Montreal and with Canada, the home of his youth and later adulthood, and its centrality to his psyche and creativity.

Several important Canadian writers of his generation—Norman Levine (a McGill graduate) and Montrealer Mavis Gallant—also believed that they had to leave Canada to best develop their talent. *Oh Canada! Oh Quebec!* should be viewed in light of the ambivalent love with which some of Richler's literary peers and contemporaries, patriots and expatriates, have regarded Montreal in particular and Canada in general. One thinks of Paris-based Mavis Gallant's crisp introduction to *Home Truths*, a collection of short stories, several set in her native Montreal. Like Samuel Butler and Mordecai Richler, she often seems perplexed or exasperated by the Canadian psyche:

I often have the feeling with Canadian readers that I am on trial. The accusation has nothing to do with style or structure or content or imagination or control of subject and form—nothing that has any connection with literature in the usual sense—but with what are taken to be my concealed intentions. I am suspected of using language to screen a deep and disobliging meaning, or to perpetrate a fraud. ... The tone of the questioning suggests something more antagonistic than simple curiosity, and I wonder if there is still not somewhere a distrust of imagination.<sup>4</sup>

Three decades earlier, A.M. Klein's *The Rocking Chair* (1948) took a gentler but no less dualistic look at the spirit of place. Klein, a generation older than Richler, paid bittersweet poetic tribute to his province from the spell of Montreal's Mount Royal to the goons of the Duplessis era to the compassionate nuns of the Hotel-Dieu. Klein even wrote a poem "Montreal" that can be read in either official language—with mixed success in each:

O city metropole, isle riverain!  
Your ancient pavages and sainted  
  routes  
  Traverse my spirit's conjured avenues!  
Splendour erabic of your promenades  
  Foliates there, and there your maisonry  
  Of pendant balcon and escalier'd  
  march,  
  Is vivid Normandy!<sup>5</sup>

Richler's book is thus no orphan. Its most memorable antecedent, one Richler admires, is Norman Levine's travelogue/memoir *Canada Made Me* (1957), an account of the bleakness and cultural poverty of 1950s Canada, written by a self-styled "prodigal son", an Ottawa-born, McGill-educated writer struggling with ultimate success to establish himself in England about a bleak return visit to the land of his birth:

I didn't want to run away from the country as I had originally when I sailed in that freighter on that hot June day in 1949 from Montreal.<sup>6</sup>

Levine's book also provoked outrage, and covers some of the same subject-matter as Richler's. Like Richler, Levine discusses *Le Devoir*, recounting an interview with Andre Laurendeau, then its editor, as well as vignettes of rich Montreal WASPs and Jews and Francophones. But Levine's bitterness and alienation is usually displaced onto climate and streetscape and landscape.

He is not as savage as Richler nor as vituperative. It is worth noting that Levine, too, returned to Canada and is now based in Toronto.

While Richler's long absence from Canada gave him a wealth of experience, it also exacted a price, one evident in this volume. If Richler can view Canada with the partial detachment of a long-time expatriate, he also finds it difficult to reconcile the province of his adolescence with that of his mid-life. The arrogant WASP Westmount, the rickets-ridden slums of his youth on the Main—all had changed, changed utterly in his absence, and he is hard-pressed to bridge the gap emotionally, if not intellectually. Throughout the book, one is haunted by the thought that deep within himself, Richler on his return wished to strut his stuff for a Westmount no longer there, and for a Jewish community that is not as it was when he left. The anti-Semitism he saw as a youth in Ste.-Agathe has left its taint on the political and cultural landscape of Quebec, a taint he understandably cannot ignore or overlook or discount—and there is no reason he should. Moreover, "now" is fused with "then" for the novelist. The fusion has created fine novels but explosive political commentary. That is to say, Richler is here essayist, not historian, and the lens of another Montreal, another Quebec, filters his view of the present. The perspective is not false, but it produces a very particular and highly-coloured portrait. And the very degree of his passion is bound to distract or alienate many readers of whatever stripe. Richler uses literary devices that animate the book: the setting of Woody's Bar gives way to happy hour at Grumpy's watering hole when Woody's goes out of business. The vignettes of weekly lunches or cocktail hour gatherings where Richler and Co.

ponder the latest social and political absurdities at once enliven the book and suggest its unabashed subjectivity. Richler speaks only for Richler, and Quebecois are they, not we (though sometimes oui). He largely approves of Trudeau and Levesque: his list of the hapless and the venal is long.

Much of the controversy is generated by Richler's power to both pique vanity and pinch a nerve. The country is troubled and Richler has overlaid a largely cogent analysis with venom and hurt. This is no surprise: Richler has never been a respecter of the Law of the Father, whether in family, religion, or country. *Oh Canada! Oh Quebec!* is a significant artifact in the current national debate, but it does make one wonder if Uncle Benjy was not ultimately correct in his deathbed advice to Duddy Kravitz:

You've got to take them to your heart no matter what. They're the family remember, and to see only their faults (like I did) is to look at them like a stranger.<sup>7</sup>

As a postscript, there is one vignette that Richler does not include in this book, one meaningful to this reviewer, an Anglophone who grew up in a northern Quebec mining town in the Fifties and Sixties. (Best to declare one's biases on this topic.) At the memorial service for Hugh McLennan in the Birks Chapel at McGill University in the fall of 1990, an end-of-an-era feeling was in the post-Meech air, melancholy hovering over the dark-suited, mostly elderly mourners redolent of an earlier era in WASP Montreal. Mordecai Richler was there, and one eulogist solemnly declared that with the death of the author of *Two Solitudes* and *Return of the Sphinx*, the mantle of Anglophone Montreal writer had passed to Mordecai Richler. It was a moving moment, and there was a pal-

pable feeling in that shadowy, crowded chapel that this was so. The mantle surely streams from very different shoulders, and its gifted wearer must wonder if it is not really a hair shirt.

SANDRA CAMPBELL  
Department of English  
University of Ottawa

### References

1. Samuel Butler, "A Psalm of Montreal" in *The Blasted Pine*, ed. F.R. Scott and A.J.M. Smith (Toronto: Macmillan, 1967) 62.
2. Richler, "Home Is Where You Hang Yourself," *Home Sweet Home* (Toronto: McClelland and Stewart, 1984).
3. Richler, "Expo 67," *The Great Comic Book Heroes And Other Essays* (Toronto: McClelland and Stewart, 1978) 106.
4. Mavis Gallant, "An Introduction," *Home Truths* (Toronto: Macmillan, 1982) xii.
5. A.M. Klein, "Montreal," *The Collected Poems of A.M. Klein* (Toronto: McGraw-Hill Ryerson, 1974) 316.
6. Norman Levine, "Author's Note," *Canada Made Me (1958)* (rep. Ottawa: Deneau, 1979) 9.
7. Richler, *The Apprenticeship of Duddy Kravitz* (Markham: Penguin, 1959) 278.

**Donald B. Freeman. *A City of Farmers: Informal Urban Agriculture in the Open Spaces of Nairobi, Kenya*. Montreal and Kingston: McGill-Queen's University Press, 1991. pp. xxiv, 159. Illustrations. \$34.95.**

The centrality of agriculture to an understanding of African society, as well as to hopes for that continent's economic development, is gradually gaining growing recognition in scholarly literature. Industrialization, which was seen by many in the 1960s and '70s as the primary instrument of the search for prosperity, has clearly failed to realize the hopes for it. Even urbanization, a much more durable and genuinely influential phenomenon, has not cut the ties of the

majority of Africans to their rural origins, or diminished the importance of agriculture to economic survival and prosperity.

*A City of Farmers* underlines this point by drawing attention to the widely-neglected fact that agriculture permeates even urban society. In a fascinating and long-overdue study, Prof. Freeman reports the results of two investigations of urban agriculture in Kenya, focussing on a questionnaire administered to a random sample of urban cultivators in Nairobi. The study yields a substantial body of information on the urban farmers, their agricultural practices, their previous occupations, their other activities and the importance of agriculture in their lives. The information is presented effectively and yields important insights into the society and economy of a major African city. The author points out, for example, that the majority of urban cultivators are women, and that their position in the city reflects the burdens imposed upon them in a patriarchal society. He presents evidence of the extreme poverty of many urban farmers and shows that urban agriculture is often desperately important to their survival. He shows how traditional land usages have helped to shape a distinctly African approach to land rights and social responsibilities. He catalogues the reasons for engaging in urban agriculture, gives a great deal of information about the agriculturalists, and details crops and locations. In the process he offers much insight into the society of Nairobi and, undoubtedly, many other African cities. All of this is done well.

The least satisfying part of the study is a brief, somewhat unfocussed history of the development of the city of Nairobi, the purpose of which is apparently to describe how open space currently devoted to urban agriculture escaped urban development. The study raises too many interesting questions to justify this side trip. Another shortcoming, perhaps