

The Progressive Tradition in Canadian Literature

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The Progressive Tradition in Canadian Literature

David Frank

James Doyle, *Progressive Heritage: The Evolution of a Politically Radical Literary Tradition in Canada* (Waterloo: Wilfrid Laurier University Press, 2002)

THE CONVENTIONAL WISDOM in Canadian literary history tells us that the tradition is dominated by themes of exile and ambivalence. In Northrop Frye's famous metaphor, Canadian culture is seen as a garrison of civilization, gradually extending its influence over a resistant landscape.¹ A few years later even a relatively critical nationalist such as Margaret Atwood failed to find much evidence of a literature of social protest arising from the Canadian experience.² In this context, James Doyle has produced a very useful survey that demonstrates the existence of a substantial tradition of literary radicalism in Canada.

For some years now, Doyle's informative studies of individual writers associated with the 20th-century Canadian left have been appearing in the pages of journals such as *Canadian Literature*, *Canadian Poetry*, and *left history*.³ Now we have a full-length book that introduces many more names, and places the writers in the context of a larger tradition that reaches back into the 19th century and that has had a large influence in the 20th century. The scope is not as inclusive as the subtitle

¹Northrop Frye, "Conclusion," in Carl F. Klinck, ed., *Literary History of Canada* (Toronto 1965), 821-49.

²Margaret Atwood, *Survival: A Thematic Guide to Canadian Literature* (Toronto 1972).

³James Doyle, "The Canadian Worker Poet: The Life and Writings of Joe Wallace," *Canadian Poetry*, 35 (Fall-Winter 1994), 80-101; James Doyle, "Margaret Fairley and the Canadian Literary Tradition," *Canadian Literature*, 147 (Winter 1995), 77-92; and James Doyle, "Science, Literature and Revolution: The Life and Writings of Dyson Carter," *left history*, 5 (Fall 1997), 7-29.

David Frank, "The Progressive Tradition in Canadian Literature," *Labour/Le Travail*, 52 (Fall 2003), 245-51.

may imply, for this is not a comprehensive survey of all anti-establishment or even anti-capitalist writers in the Canadian literary tradition. Indeed, months after the book was published it was still appearing on the Chapters-Indigo website with the subtitle *Communism and Canadian Literature*, which presumably belonged to an earlier draft. As Doyle explains in his introduction, “[M]y main interest is in the achievement of writers connected or sympathetic to the Communist Party of Canada,” (Doyle, 11) and he has used their work to “give a clear and specific idea of the overall form and content of the progressive tradition in Canadian literature.” (Doyle, 15) Nonetheless, this tradition is broadly constructed, largely by accepting the view of Margaret Fairley that “progressive culture” was defined by the “energetic expression of our life of social struggle, directed to positive, creative, fruitful ends.” (Doyle, 1) The reader needs to bear in mind that there is an understated but recurring tension in the book between the purpose of documenting the cultural practice of a limited number of literary activists and the more general one of documenting the “progressive tradition” in Canadian culture.

Although *Progressive Heritage* is primarily about literary activity in the era from the 1920s to the 1940s, when the Communist Party was a rising and sometimes influential force, the book begins with two chapters on earlier antecedents that are, unfortunately, the weakest sections of the book. The discussion is strongly influenced by Fairley’s 1945 anthology, *Spirit of Canadian Democracy: A Collection of Canadian Writings From the Beginnings to the Present Day*, which boldly identified a variety of radical democrats such as William Lyon Mackenzie and Alexander McLachlan as forerunners of the popular front Marxism of her own day. An account of this book and its selections stands to reveal much about the optimistic expectations for a “Canadian people’s culture” in the 1940s, but it is less reliable as a guide to the oppositional popular culture of the 19th century. The author is on stronger ground when he draws on F.W. Watt’s influential unpublished dissertation, which helped to identify the numerous contributors of prose and poetry to the labour press of the late 19th century, among them such literary activists as Phillips Thompson who supported in turn the Knights of Labor, the Socialist Party of Canada, and the Communist Party.⁴ References to writers influenced by populist themes (Archibald Lampman), social gospel ideas (Agnes Maule Machar), realist aesthetics (Bertrand Sinclair), rural nostalgia (Peter MacArthur), and urban satire (Stephen Leacock), help to create a generalized impression of social concern in the literary tradition. More names could just as easily have been added, including such very popular writers as Robert Service, whose work was known to Bertolt Brecht and his collaborators (who appear to have modelled their mythical centre of frontier capitalism, Mahagonny, on Service’s Klondike)⁵ and Pauline Johnson, whose

⁴Frank W. Watt, “Radicalism in English Canadian Literature Since Confederation,” PhD dissertation, University of Toronto, 1957.

⁵See John Fuegi, *Brecht and Company: Sex, Politics, and the Making of the Modern Drama* (New York 1994), 186.

unique voice articulated aboriginal and feminist concerns alongside her nationalism and imperialism.⁶ Moreover, promoters of working-class history would also want to draw attention to Marie Jousseye⁷ and Charles McKiernan, a.k.a. Joe Beef,⁸ as exponents of a proletarian lyric within Victorian society. Most of these writers, however, were relatively disconnected from contemporary anti-capitalist social movements and presented only a limited legacy of political engagement. This was not the case with Socialist Party of Canada activist writers such as Wilfrid Gribble and Colin McKay; in the case of the latter his Jack Londonesque sea stories are discussed as “parables of rebellion or revolution,” (Doyle, 40) but without reference to McKay’s prolific writings as a cultural theorist and advocate of social change.⁹ Instead, these chapters culminate somewhat predictably in a discussion of Gustavus Myers, *A History of Canadian Wealth* (1914) and the founding of *The Rebel* (1917-20) by Toronto intellectuals. These first chapters tend to tell us less about the political conditions of literary production than about how latter-day Canadian Marxists used the limited information available to them to construct a tradition that could be understood as part of the “progressive heritage” they wished to celebrate.

Doyle moves into a more focussed and original discussion in the following chapter. Although literary activity remained a minor concern for the newly established Communist Party in the 1920s, the party press offered early outlets for writers such as Joe Wallace, who was to become Canada’s best-known communist poet. Another pioneer was the war veteran and party organizer Trevor Maguire, who wrote with a bleak realism about trench warfare in a short story (“Over the Top”), urban poverty in a one-act play (“Unemployment”), and the travails of an immigrant worker in a serialized novel (“O Canada! A Tale of Canadian Workers’ Life”). Meanwhile, a local scribe such as Cape Breton’s Dawn Fraser, poised between the oral traditions of his community and the opportunities for print circulation, identified himself with radical agitations and documented local episodes in the class struggle, some of it collected in the original 1926 edition of *Echoes from Labor’s War*.¹⁰ Although also presented as anti-capitalist, possibly Marxist, writers of

⁶Veronica Strong-Boag and Carole Gerson, *Paddling Her Own Canoe: The Times and Texts of E. Pauline Johnson (Tekahionwake)* (Toronto 2000).

⁷Carole Gerson, “Marie Jousseye Fotheringham: Canada’s First Woman Labour Poet,” *Canadian Notes & Queries*, 44 (Spring 1991), 21-3.

⁸According to Peter DeLottinville, “Joe Beef of Montreal: Working Class Culture and the Tavern, 1869-1889,” *Labour/Le Travail*, 8/9 (Autumn 1981/Spring 1982), 39, “the satiric verses, engravings or cartoons by McKiernan and others about Joe Beef contributed in a minor way to the nineteenth-century radical literature in Canada.”

⁹These are amply introduced and documented in Ian McKay, ed., *For a Working-Class Culture in Canada: A Selection of Colin McKay’s Writings on Sociology and Political Economy, 1897-1939* (St. John’s 1996).

¹⁰For the most recent edition see Dawn Fraser, *Echoes from Labor’s Wars: The Expanded Edition* (Wreck Cove, NS 1992).

the 1920s, it is not so clear that A.M. Stephen (*The Gleaming Archway*) and Charles Yale Harrison (*Generals Die in Bed*), moved in the same political circles as the other authors discussed in this chapter.

By the time the party's numbers and influence were on the rise in the 1930s, it is possible to identify a distinct radical literary tradition associated with the Communist Party. It was found especially in organizations such as the Progressive Arts Club (1931) and in the pages of periodicals such as *Masses* (1932-34) and *New Frontier* (1936-37), which published dozens of short stories experimenting with various forms of what were referred to in the controversies of the time as social, critical, and socialist realism, and sometimes as the literature of fact. The poet Dorothy Livesay and novelist Ted Allan were the most famous of the literary figures to emerge from this period of political and cultural engagement, and Doyle singles out Livesay's short stories and poetry and Allan's novel of the Spanish Civil War, *This Time a Better Earth* (1939), as superior examples of the genre. Other notable short-story writers included Harold Griffin ("Indian Strike") and Dyson Carter ("East Nine"), both of whom went on to make substantial additional contributions to the tradition as writers of fiction while continuing to associate themselves with the Communist Party — Griffin as a union newspaper editor and Carter as a promoter of Canadian-Soviet friendship. Opportunities to combine literary activity and political agitation arose as well in the realm of theatre, where the best-known play was the collaborative agitprop production *Eight Men Speak*, staged in 1933 by the Toronto Progressive Arts Club as a protest against the trials of the Communist leaders (and promptly suppressed after the first performance). Beyond party circles, much more was happening in the wider world of Canadian literature, and Doyle is able to assimilate at least some of this activity to his theme by pointing to the radicals' critical appreciation of, and possibly influences on, other novels of the Great Depression such as Morley Callaghan's *They Shall Inherit the Earth* (1935) and Irene Baird's *Waste Heritage* (1939).¹¹

The tradition was further consolidated in the 1940s with the establishment of a party publishing house, Progress Books, under the direction of John Stewart, who envisaged a wide-ranging programme that would contribute to the redefinition of Canadian culture in the postwar world, although in fact very little fiction or poetry was published over the years. Meanwhile, as book review editor at the new *Canadian Tribune*, Margaret Fairley was an articulate proponent of what Doyle describes as "an inclusive historical tradition that ranged from early colonial social record to modernist literary experiment," although she inevitably favoured those texts that could be reconciled with the Marxist conception of "the struggle for democratic rights and the liberation of the worker from exploitation." (Doyle, 170) This theme led directly to the publication of *Spirit of Canadian Democracy*, which it was

¹¹ For a contemporary discussion, see Ruth I. McKenzie, "Proletarian Literature in Canada," *Dalhousie Review*, 19 (1939), 49-64.

even hoped would gain some support in the school curriculum.¹² Fairley's cultural leadership continued with the founding of *New Frontiers* (1952-56), which along with the *Tribune* and related publications such as *En Masse*, *Combat*, and *Champion*, provided opportunities for a new generation of poets such as Patrick Anderson, Miriam Waddington, Irving Layton, Milton Acorn, Louise Harvey, and George Ryga. Even as the party's political influence entered into a sharp decline with the coming of the Cold War and the anti-Stalinist upheavals of 1956, the novels of the 1950s included titles such as Hubert Evans, *Mist on the River* (1954), Dyson Carter, *Fatherless Sons* (1955), Jean-Jules Richard, *Le feu dans l'amiante* (1956), and Pierre G  linas, *Les vivants, les morts et les autres* (1959). These texts demonstrated the continuity of political engagement in the literary tradition by focusing on working-class and anti-capitalist themes at a time when it was increasingly unfashionable to do so.

As the author freely indicates, the emphasis in this study is on biography, chronology, and description rather than on the theories and politics of cultural practice. Some of the more severe critics such as the young radicals Stanley Ryerson in the 1930s and Nathan Cohen in the 1950s expressed concerns about writers who pursued middle-class themes and individualist solutions in their art. They advanced claims for a more directly proletarian and socialist art that, implicitly at least, challenged the broader construction of a "progressive heritage." The sectarian atmosphere of left politics was also evident, as in the hostile reception accorded to Earle Birney's half-satirical, semi-nostalgic novel of politics and culture in the 1930s, *Down the Long Table* (1955), which went unreviewed in the pages of *New Frontiers*, apparently because of his prior Trotskyist affiliations. Meanwhile, writers associated with other parties of the left, notably the Cooperative Commonwealth Federation, were making their own cultural contributions, such as Frank Scott and A.J.M. Smith's anthology *The Blasted Pine: An Anthology of Satire, Invective and Disrespectful Verse, Chiefly by Canadian Writers* (1957). Although Communist Party politics were obviously coloured by an assertive pro-Soviet mentality, Doyle takes little interest in reductionist claims that cultural policy was derivative of Soviet policy interests or subversive of the class struggle. From the point of view of Fairley and her associates, it no doubt appeared that the united front strategy was largely a success in advancing the status of organized labour and the working class in Canadian society and that an equivalent cultural strategy could be expected similarly to lead in the direction of a democratic reconstruction of Canadian culture. This idea of an evolving "democratic people's culture" was hardly an agenda for revolution or socialism, but it appealed to individual writers and its influence on the literary tradition as a whole cannot be denied. For his part, Doyle finds that his subjects were men and women who took seriously the prospect of promoting the

¹²For the banning of the book, see Frank K. Clarke, "'Keep Communism Out of Our Schools': Cold War Anti-Communism at the Toronto Board of Education, 1948-1951," *Labour/Le Travail*, 49 (Spring 2002), 106-8.

anti-capitalist struggle and the interests of the working class through their literary work. As a group, he describes them as “intelligent, sincere, and talented people with an enviable faith in the perfectibility of humanity,” although also “complete with the eccentricities, conventionalities, hypocrisies, and capacity for imagination and artistic expression that characterize the species.” (Doyle, 10, 12)

There was more to follow in the decades of the late 20th century, but the effects of new left, nationalist, feminist, and regionalist movements on Canadian literature are well beyond the scope of this study. Doyle draws attention to the continuing productivity and influence of Livesay, Acorn, and Ryga and the appearance of a number of semi-autobiographical novels by veterans such as Oscar Ryan and Dyson Carter.¹³ There were younger voices such as Pat Lowther, David Fennario, Sharon Stevenson, and Helen Potrebenko, who can be associated with contemporary social movements, and the work of groups such as Theatre Passe Muraille carried on the agitprop tradition in new ways. But by this time the Communist Party’s influence on cultural producers seemed to belong more to history than to the present. By the 1970s there was a developing interest in the recovery of the radical literary tradition, which produced several notable anthologies.¹⁴


In this respect, *Progressive Heritage* itself is primarily a work of reconnaissance and rediscovery. There is much more to be done in examining the cases of individual writers and their relationship to the conditions and practices of cultural production, as well as the activity beyond the English and French languages and in other realms of cultural expression. In due course we may be able to welcome a study that conveys the full scope of oppositional cultural activity in the era from the 1920s to the 1940s, in the way that Michael Denning has undertaken in the American context.¹⁵ His argument, in part, is that a centre-periphery model fails to capture the diversity and spontaneity of cultural history and that studies of the interaction between artists and parties are necessarily incomplete because cultural producers belong to a larger social formation and are themselves engaged in significant interactions with audiences, opportunities, technologies and other influences. Doyle acknowledges the limitations of his own study, while also making the case that the literary activity in and around the Communist Party of Canada has been unduly neglected to date. Accordingly, this is a welcome study that succeeds in its purpose of identifying a literature of social struggle that will have to be taken into account in

¹³Oscar Ryan, *Soon to be Born* (Vancouver 1980); and Dyson Carter, *This Story Fierce and Tender* (Gravenhurst, ON 1986).

¹⁴See Richard Wright and Robin Endres, eds., *Eight Men Speak and Other Plays from the Canadian Workers’ Theatre* (Toronto 1976); N. Brian Davis, ed., *The Poetry of the Canadian People, 1720-1920: Two Hundred Years of Hard Work* (Toronto 1976); N. Brian Davis, ed., *The Poetry of the Canadian People, 1900-1950* (Toronto 1978); and Donna Phillips, ed., *Voices of Discord: Canadian Short Stories from the 1930s* (Toronto 1979).

¹⁵Michael Denning, *The Cultural Front: The Laboring of American Culture in the Twentieth Century* (London 1996).

discussions of the Canadian literary tradition. Perhaps it is already happening, for who can fail to have noticed that Margaret Atwood's *The Blind Assassin* (2000) makes room for a protagonist who is not only a Communist organizer but an inventor of science fiction stories as well?



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