

*The Immediate
Present in Canadian
Literature*

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Title: The Immediate Present in Canadian Literature

Date of first publication: 1933

Author: E. K. Brown (1905-1951)

Date first posted: July 31, 2023

Date last updated: July 31, 2023

Faded Page eBook #20230751

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by E. K. Brown

THE IMMEDIATE PRESENT IN CANADIAN LITERATURE

The Sewanee Review Oct-Dec. 1933, Vol. 41 No. 4

The present state of Canadian literature is economically unsound. No poet or critic or even novelist could live decently on the Canadian sales of his works. No dramatist could exist at all on the proceeds of the Canadian performances of his plays. Three alternatives are before the literary artist who has had the doubtful luck to be born in Canada. He may, like Grant Allen or Bliss Carman, emigrate and become a part of another culture. Or he may, like Mazo de la Roche or Morley Callaghan, become, economically at least, a part of another culture without emigrating. This is a precarious thing to do and it is doubtful whether it can be successful, artistically, or economically, in the long run. The third alternative is to earn one's living in an unliterary, or semi-literary, occupation and to create only in one's leisure. Such a solution was permanently satisfactory for Charles Lamb in the office of the East India Company or for Joris Karl Huysmans in the French Ministry of Foreign Affairs. In North America the tempo of commercial and financial life is too swift and too exhausting to permit of such achievements as Lamb's unless the artist be a man of prodigious vitality. The writing of Canadian literature, then, goes on under economic difficulties almost overpowering.

Canadian attitudes to Canadian literature are also unsound and disabling. There is, first of all, the attitude of the small but precious group of Canadians of cosmopolitan culture. These people are to be found in small numbers in almost every city or large town in Canada and in somewhat larger numbers in our musical, dramatic, political, and educational centres. Nowhere are they powerful enough to exert an open influence. Nowhere do

they determine the form or the flow of local life. These citizens of the world care for good books; they read them as closely as they are read in London or New York; they are, many of them, excellent judges of literary values. They do not care particularly where a book is published. Many of them have never read *Jalna*, some of them know Morley Callaghan only by vulgar report, very few of them knew even the name of the man whom I esteem our greatest living poet, Abraham Klein. There is, perhaps, a drop or two of hostility in their attitude to Canadian literature. So often at the suggestion of enthusiastic friends have they wasted an evening with a mediocre Canadian novel or volume of verse!

In direct contrast to the attitude of this group is that of another, scarcely, if at all, larger, the group of the truculent advocates of Canadian literature. This is a more coherent group. "Nothing is more pleasant to man than incorporation", said Lord Shaftesbury the essayist. The members of this group are incorporated in many local and national societies; and they have an open if not very extensive influence upon the Canadian public. A colleague of mine, addressing one such group a year or two ago, ventured to suggest that our lyric poets, of the last generation, Carman, Lampman, and Roberts, were not quite the equals of the masters of English romantic poetry in whose school they learned most of their best lessons. He was taken to task as a traitor. Now anyone who believes that our lyric poets are the equals of Shelley, Keats, and Wordsworth will believe anything. In Lewis Carroll's phrase, he will believe as many as seven impossible things before breakfast. It would, however, be a grievous injustice to dismiss the advocates of Canadian literature as merely or mainly unreasonable. Their tone is the result of a natural and justified resentment of the somewhat scornful indifference of our cosmopolitans and, even more, of the attitudes of the third group now to be considered.

This third group is the general reading public in Canada. If the present state of Canadian literature is economically unsound, as I asserted at the beginning of this paper and as I could easily prove if proof were necessary, the chief responsibility lies here, with what Virginia Woolf calls, with no hint of disparagement, the common readers, the immense number of men and women whose main concern in life is not with literature. The Canadian public is not hostile to Canadian literature but it is indifferent. It does not know good prose from spineless sprawling prose, and therefore it endures the Canadian press. It does not know great drama from infantile melodrama and hoodlum comedy, and therefore it endures the English and American movies. It does not know competent and stirring painting from sentimental wash of color and therefore it endures the pictures sold in our emporia. The

public of the American Middle West and Far West is much the same. American critics, attempting to explain the aesthetic insensitiveness of this public, invoke the concept of the frontier, evolved a generation ago by Professor Turner. Most Canadians live at some distance, physical and mental, from the frontier; but their attitude to life has still many elements natural to the frontiersman. Attitudes to life change much more deliberately than the material conditions of life. There is always what the sociologists call a cultural lag. Now, the material conditions at the frontier place a premium on action, physical strength, will, patience. Not only was there no function for the artist on the frontier; the desires in people which appeal to the artist for satisfaction, the desire for beauty, the desire for knowledge of life in general, the desire for the representation of complex and subtle relationships between individuals, were out of place on the frontier and tended to atrophy. The material conditions of the frontier have passed away from most Canadian towns and cities, but we have not attained the balance of mind which exists at the centres of civilization. We are, most of us, in the frontiersman's attitude to literature. Literature is a luxury. The reading of books is primarily a means of killing time, a substitution for a cigar, or a rugby game, or a movie. The cultivated and observant mind of Mr. Louis Bromfield states the North American cultural dilemma in these words:

Life is hard for our children. It isn't as simple as it was for us. Their grandfathers were pioneers and the same blood runs in their veins, only they haven't a frontier any longer, they stand . . . these children of ours . . . with their backs toward this rough-hewn middle west and their faces set toward Europe and the East and they belong to neither. They are lost somewhere between.

Most Canadians have not yet squarely turned their backs on the frontier, but they are turning them. When they have done so they will begin, as so many Americans have already done, to perceive the great and indispensable function of the artist, the priest of truth and beauty, and I venture to prophesy great artists will then be born.

In our present phase, in which the artist is not an integral part of the national life, the attitude of sincere and profound writers will and must be one of protest and revolt. The few living masters of Canadian literature dare not accept the present mould of Canadian life. One of the greatest of them, and one of the most reflective, Frederick Philip Grove, remarked a year ago in the *University of Toronto Quarterly* that "as far as the general public goes Canada is a non-conductor with regard to any kind of spiritual current." That is the gravest indictment that any artist can make against a community, for,

as a great American expatriate wrote to James Russell Lowell, the artist's first need is "an audience which can understand what is good and what is bad." Without such "a sounding board", he continues, "the heart grows into stone". The hearts of our Canadian masters have every excuse for stoniness: but the fact is that the best of them are turbulent and indignant rather than petrified.

I should serve no useful end by passing in rapid review the names and works of the worthy Canadian writers of to-day. I prefer to select three writers who appear to me to justify hopes for Canadian literature and who exemplify the attitude of protest and revolt in the three literary types which seem to me the richest and most significant in Canada to-day,—the novel, the lyric, and the critical essay.

II.

Any serious reader of Canadian fiction of the past decade will admit that its three masters are Mazo de la Roche, Frederick Philip Grove, and Morley Callaghan. I shall pass over Mr. Grove despite my high regard for his fiction. His best work seems to me to lie outside the novel in such books as *Over Prairie Trails* and *The Turn of the Year*, books in which his bleak, grim power is extremely impressive. I shall also pass over Miss de la Roche. I believe that *Jalna* is the most neatly constructed novel ever written by a Canadian, and I also believe that in that novel and the sequel *Whiteoaks of Jalna* the grandmother Whiteoaks is the most memorable character created by a Canadian artist. For two reasons, however, I prefer to deal with Mr. Callaghan. The *Jalna* novels, the best of Miss de la Roche's work, are in their manner somewhat antiquated, written in the way consecrated by Thomas Hardy, and in their matter somewhat foreign, dealing as they do with an English family curiously self-contained, and living in southern Ontario much as they might live in the English Midlands. In an absolute sense neither of these peculiarities is a defect; but in an examination of tendencies in the present literature of Canada it is natural to choose something more characteristic of the present and more characteristic of Canada.

That something is the work of Morley Callaghan. He is no less bleak than Mr. Grove, but his bleakness is less frankly revealed. His characters swear and drink and misconduct themselves in an extremely brutal, in an oddly inarticulate, way, like people deadened by a misery too great to be borne. That misery is the mere fact of being alive. If they had the analytical mind of George Eliot they would say, as she did, that in their birth an

irreparable injury was done them. They are ordinary folk, however, and they merely feel what George Eliot defined. Such characters do not make good material for a full-length novel, unless that novel is to be sensational melodrama. Mr. Callaghan is too modern, that is to say, too serious, too austere, to tolerate melodrama. He has wisely confined his novels to a remarkable brevity. Still it is in his novelettes and his short stories that he has done his best work. The novelette *In His Own Country* seems to me to be the very best of Mr. Callaghan; and on it I wish to pause.

It is an episode in the life of Bill, a young journalist in a town on the shore of Georgian Bay. Bill is very ignorant and very ambitious. One day he reads in a Sunday Supplement of the achievement of Saint Thomas Aquinas in reconciling the philosophy of Aristotle with the dogmas of the Christian Church. "Bill understood readily that Saint Thomas was the superman of the Middle Ages." It occurred to Bill that "a man like himself, willing to work hard, might become the Saint Thomas of to-day" if he could "make a plan of different fields of science and show definitely that it could become one fine system in accordance with a religious scheme". Bill loses interest in the card games and movies which had occupied him and his wife Flora in the evenings. Flora, completely unable to comprehend what Bill is doing, is slowly alienated. Bill loses his job, neglects his wife, and, unforgivable sin, becomes in the view of his townsmen an eccentric, a "nut". His wife leaves him, his health gives way, and still his progress with Christian theology and the principles of science is negligible. The story ends with Bill an invalid, his wife returning to nurse him and assuring the priest's housekeeper "You may be sure he'll not bother again with studyin' and too many books."

Even if one does not inquire into the ultimate meaning of *In His Own Country*, the novelette is a striking achievement, a life-like record of a Canadian town. It is for its deeper meaning, however, that I have chosen it as a sample of Morley Callaghan. Bill, with his pathetically grandiose ambition, is an emblem of the creative spirit, and Bill's relation with his wife, and his community, is an emblem of the artist's relation with Canada. Even if Bill's wife and the townsmen of that little railway junction on Georgian Bay had known what it was Bill wanted to do, what was the nature of the vast and intricate system evolved by Saint Thomas, what were the issues between religion and science, his task would still have been an arduous one. The task of the great creative and critical minds is always arduous, whether it is carried on in a Canadian town or in the British Museum or the halls of the Sorbonne. But after all, as Emerson cheerfully says, "Cicero, Locke, and Bacon were only young men in libraries when they wrote these books" of theirs. The history of thought and of art is full of

the stories of men who grew up and lived in remote villages, and yet added to the world's store of knowledge and beauty irreplaceable treasures. They have not, any of them, lived in Canadian villages. There, admirably hidden behind Mr. Callaghan's scrupulously dispassionate presentation of an episode in the life of Bill, whom his wife and his townsmen deemed a "nut", is the proper gesture of protest and revolt against the present form of Canadian life.

III.

Among critics and in the reading public at large there is no unanimous, or even current, opinion of the relative importance of the dozen worthy Canadian poets of the day. Our important poets, it seems to me, are of two kinds: those who work in the manner and with the matter of Lampman and Carman, and those who, feeling in themselves moods unknown to the gentle minds of Lampman and Carman, seek a matter and manner more modern, new to Canada, or in one or two instances, almost absolutely new. It is in poets of this latter sort that one finds most clearly revealed the tendencies of the immediate present. Among these poets I single out as the most original, Wilson Macdonald, E. J. Pratt, Dorothy Livesay, and Abraham Klein. Wilson Macdonald the most versatile of the four, seems to me imperfectly modern: side by side with strident scornful poems, comparable with the work of Sandburg and Masters, are suave and graceful lyrics which might have been the work of Carman, for whom Mr. Macdonald has a tender admiration. E. J. Pratt, born on the rock-bound Newfoundland coast, shows his disdain of contemporary Canadian life by escaping in his greatest poems to the sea and to the primitive immensities of the emotions it nourishes and satisfies in those who live on and by it. Like Mazo de la Roche, he is not fully a part of Canadian culture; and in the rare poems in which he deals with modern life on the land he lacks, so it appears to me, both the emotional force and the fierce blasting rhythms, which make him, in such a poem as *The Cachalot*, one of the great poets of the sea. The work of Dorothy Livesay is no less original than his. She has found in the lyrics of Emily Dickinson and Elinor Wylie, or perhaps simply in a mind akin to theirs, something which has no precedent in Canadian poetry, an oddity of imagery, an artfully simple ease of expression, and a startling alternation of ecstasy and cynicism.

More significant than any of these three is, in my opinion, Abraham Klein, whose poetry is so original, that no publisher has as yet brought out a volume of his verse. His work must be sought in collections such as *The American Caravan*, and in such magazines of the *avant-garde* as *The*

Canadian Forum. There is but one contemporary poet whose work Mr. Klein's resembles—T. S. Eliot; and, I imagine, nine out of ten of the younger poets and careful students of poetry in Great Britain, in the United States, and in Canada, would rate Mr. Eliot's poetry higher than that of any other written in our time. Mr. Klein is in no significant sense an echo of Mr. Eliot. In the first place Mr. Klein is a Jew. His culture seems to me to be broader and more intense than that of any other Canadian poet; but in that culture the central element is Jewish. In his great poem on Spinoza he finds words and images and cadences for the philosopher's prayer which recall not the Authorized Version but the literal truth of the Old Testament's art:

The wind through the almond trees spreads the fragrance of
thy robes; the turtle dove twittering offers diminutives of thy love;
at the rising of the sun I behold thy countenance.

Yea, and in the crescent moon, thy little finger's finger-nail . . .

On the swift wings of a star, even on the numb legs of a snail,
Thou dost move, O Lord . . .

A babe in swaddling clothes laughs at the sunbeams on the
door's lintel: the sucklings play with thee; with thee Kopernik
holds communion through a lense.

One of the chief sources of Mr. Eliot's power to move us is his recognition of the city as the best material for the poetry of a civilization which more and more centers in vast confused urban conglomerations. The city is more real to most of us than

The silence that is in the starry skies
The sleep that is among the lonely hills.

Mr. Klein, too, is a poet of the city. After Judaism, Montreal is the most powerful factor in his work. *The Diary of Abraham Segel*, Poet open with these lines:

No cock rings matins of the dawn for me;
No morn in russet mantle clad,
Reddens my window-pane; no melodye

Maken the smalle fowles nigh my bed . . .

No triple braggadocio of the cock,
But the alarm of a dollar clock,
Ten sonorous rivetters at heaven's gate;
Steel udders rattled by milkmen; horns
Cheerily rouse me on my Monday morns.

In the same poem he presents the street-car in which he rides to work; the newspaper "he reads over his neighbor's shoulder"; the fellow workers at the factory; the boss and his fatuous wife; the Northeastern Café and the food he eats there; dinner at the family table; the amusements of the city; and finally the escape in the company of his sweetheart to the top of Mount Royal when:

They see again, the eyes which once were blear,
His heart gets speech and is no longer dumb . . .
Upon the mountain top Abe Segal walks,
Hums old-time songs, of old-time poets talks,
Brilliant his shoes with dew, his eyes with stars.

All this is far removed from Mr. Eliot's view of the city, the view of a jaded, fastidious cosmopolitan, for whom London or Vienna or Alexandria is repulsive merely by its miscellaneous vulgarities, its filthy sights, its raucous sounds, its total consecration to materialism. Mr. Klein's poetry of Montreal is not cosmopolitan but, to take his own epithet, "industrial". The poet is a part of the vulgarity, he cannot escape the filth, he is a victim, in body and intelligence, if not in spirit, of the materialism. His protests are more vehement, his pictures more intimate, since he is infinitely more exposed to what he scorns and hates.

Mr. Klein is in full revolt from Canadian life. In Abe Segal he gives us a symbol of the creative spirit at war with its circumstances, a symbol more powerful than Mr. Callaghan's Bill, for Abe Segal is a conscious accuser as well as a victim. His revolt finds fierce and highly poetical expression in the poem,—a companion piece to the *Diary*,—*Soirée of Velvel Kleinburger*. Here the bemused Velvel, a symbol of the weakness of the worker, reflects on the Canadian form of society, as he fools aimlessly with a pack of cards. The misery of the poor; the hypocrisy of the rich; the chasm between them

so difficult to bridge; the desire of the poor for what the rich flaunt: such are the reflections of Velvel Kleinburger, poor in brains as well as in dollars, envious of the luxurious motors and the Paris-gowned and diamond-jewelled women of the rich. And the bitter voice of the poet breaks in upon his reflections:

Hum a hymn of sixpence
A table-ful of cards
Fingers slowly shuffling
Ambiguous rewards,
When the pack is opened
The pauper once more gave
His foes the kings and aces
And dealt himself the knave.

There is Mr. Klein's comment on the wild hopes of the utopists who go about persuading the millions of Velvels that they have a technique for reshaping Canadian society and settling permanent happiness upon every corner of the land. Mr. Klein knows too much of the mainsprings of life to lose his head: *his* heart is in the house of mourning.

IV.

The outlook is brighter for our poetry and fiction than for our criticism; and since to write great criticism supposes culture, as well as large information and excellent taste, the plight of our Canadian criticism need not surprise us. Culture is not a national god in Canada. [By culture I mean nothing exotic, but only the knowledge and love of the best that has been thought and said, a recognition of the excellent and a resolution to rest satisfied with nothing less, a liberation from the vulgar, the superficial, the provincial. Culture leads one to care more for Lear and the Fool upon the blasted heath than for any tear-sodden film from Hollywood or Elstree, to care more for the last cantos of the *Paradiso* than for the hymns in any of our hymnals, to care more for the sharp, chastening laughter of Molière and Shaw than for the aimless guffawings that make the radio a nuisance. By caring I mean not simply saying that Shakespeare is better than Joan Crawford or the Bennett girls, or Shaw better than Ed. Wynne and Amos and Andy, but feeling that Shakespeare and Shaw are a day-to-day necessity and the others are not. Catch a man hurrying to a cinema or reaching to turn on his radio and he will certainly say that Shakespeare, (if not Shaw), is about the greatest artist in the world's history; but it is not with Shakespeare that he intends to spend the evening. To prefer Shakespeare to the radio and the

movies for the evening's leisure is to invite the label "highbrow". An educated man need not, I admit, be a highbrow. There is an alternative,—he may be a traitor.] We have a reasonable number of scholar-critics, who address a limited international audience, and whose importance is international rather than national. During the past few years our scholar-critics have published important books on subjects as diverse as Plato and Heine, the English lyric and the plays of Henry James. A scholar-critic may have a powerful impact upon the national culture in one of two ways: he may evolve a new critical method which others can then apply to national problems, as Taine did in his history of English literature, or he may devote his scholarship, as most of our historians do, to the study of Canadian culture. No Canadian has, to my knowledge, made an important change in the methods of criticism, nor has any of our scholar-critics, except Professor James Cappon in his elaborate study of Bliss Carman, written a book on a literary Canadian subject which could be compared favorably with the books on Plato or Heine or the others instanced in their company. The primary responsibility of our scholar-critics is international; and it is no reproach to them, if it is a matter for our regret, that they habitually address an international audience.

Another reason for the poverty of our criticism claims mention here. As Mr. Norris Hodgins remarks in the excellent introduction to his recent collection *Some Canadian Essays*: "Essays are rarely written in bookfuls." Essays flourish where literary periodicals flourish; and literary periodicals do not flourish in Canada. How many of Mr. Paul Elmer More's essays would have remained unwritten had he not edited the *New York Nation*? or of Mr. Middleton Murry's, had he not edited *The Adelphi*, or even of Mr. T. S. Eliot's, without his *Criterion* as a platform? We have no periodicals of importance in which literature is the sole concern, or even the admittedly chief concern. The periodical which seems to me to have done most for the erection and diffusion of critical standards in Canada is *The Canadian Forum*; I dare not enlarge upon that complimentary judgment since for the past three of its thirteen years of life I have been a member of its editorial board. It is in the number of its writers that I should expect to find the best of our critics: and the critic I shall single out for comment was in fact a member of the *Forum* committee from its inception until the present year—Mr. Barker Fairley. In speaking of him I shall not suffer the embarrassment incident to praising a colleague academic or editorial, since, after twenty years in Canada, Mr. Fairley recently resigned his professorship in German at University College, Toronto, (and concurrently his editorship of the *Forum*) to accept the chair of German at Manchester. Mr. Fairley is a

scholar-critic as well as a commentator on Canadian culture. His recent book on Goethe's Poetry takes rank with the best contributions to international culture written in Canada. It falls, however, far outside the scope of this paper in which Mr. Fairley's Canadian importance is what matters.

"Whatever the American men of genius are", says an English critic, "they are not young gods making a new world." Similarly, Mr. Fairley's attitude to Canadian literature may be expressed thus: "The creative spirits of Canada are not the fierce enthusiasts one would expect, revealing the violent beauties of the Canadian landscape and of the Canadian struggle to make a nation." He complains of the lack of intensity in the Canadian:

Sitting daily in the street-car I scan the faces of my compatriots but never a sign do I see of rapture or despair . . . of course if I stay with these countenances I take them for granted, but a trip across the water and a few weeks sojourn among those volatile European faces disaccustoms me again and I return, hungry for the signs of emotional experience in the human features around me. This illogical desire lasts for days and days till at last it dies of starvation and I settle down again, defeated rather than reconciled, and resign myself to the conviction that we have all agreed to play a perpetual game of poker.

Americans of cosmopolitan experience, Henry James and W. C. Brownwell and Edith Wharton, confess to just such disappointments with their countrymen. It would seem that all we North Americans pipe our energy into our work and leave our personal life a shell over a great emptiness. And in a more bitter protest against the complacency of the official eulogists of Canadian literature, Mr. Fairley exclaims against "the notion that if only there is enough soft soap and back scratching all will be well with Canadian literature", a notion the exact opposite of the truth which is that the kind of author we need is an Aldous Huxley, one of "the Mephistophelean type, who will dispel our mists and mirages and let us see this great country of ours—excuse me, it slipped out!—in its true and therefore its best light." Here Mr. Fairley voices the attitude of all who care and hope for Canadian culture; so different a mind as Dr. Lorne Pierce's expresses itself with at least equal vehemence: "The last enemy to be conquered is the rhapsodist, the indiscriminating braggart who deals wholesale in fleece-lined caressive garments of praise". I have done Mr. Fairley an injustice if I have implied that in his rebellion against the attitudes of the Canadian public and the panegyric enthusiasts of Canadian literature

he is merely a specimen of the cosmopolitan Canadian. His hot advocacy of the Group of Seven in the early dangerous days when these painters were commonly regarded as a menace or a laughing-stock, and his immense sympathy with the work of such writers as Mr. Grove, Mr. Klein and the late Raymond Knister, are absolute proof of his difference from the cosmopolitans. Like Mr. Klein and Mr. Callaghan he looks at Canadian life through his own eyes: like them also he is a rebel against it.

So rapid a survey as this requires no conclusion. Instead of a conclusion I wish to add a foot-note. I do not claim that the great artist is always and everywhere essentially a rebel against his community. The greatest artists, a Dante, a Leonardo, a Goethe, a Shakespeare, express not merely a personal attitude to life, but the attitude of the best of their community and generation. What I claim is, merely, that here and now the Canadian artist is properly in rebellion against the Canadian community: that his rebellion is in some sort indispensable to his intellectual and artistic integrity; and that the guilt for his rebellion lies not with him but with the community of which he is, by its own tacit wish, no organic part.

TRANSCRIBER NOTES

Mis-spelled words and printer errors have been corrected. Where multiple spellings occur, majority use has been employed.

Punctuation has been maintained except where obvious printer errors occur.

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