Introduction

A History of Canadian Fiction identifies the major trends and problems that aided – and sometimes damaged – the steady growth of fiction in Canada. It also includes reflections on the British and American inspirations behind the blossoming of original and distinctive fiction writers within the Canadian borders. An overarching account of the development of fiction, this book records its growth from colonial times to the present, where Canadian-born and naturalized Canadian writers combine to create our country's fiction.

In February of 1982 I was lecturing on Canadian fiction in Sweden. Per Gedin, head of the publishing firm Wahlström & Widstrand, the foremost publisher of English-language titles in Swedish, and author of *Literature in the Marketplace* (1975), explained to me that his agents used to fan out to London and New York to learn what was happening every fall season. Now, however, he had stopped sending them. He was more interested in Australia, South Africa, and Canada. Australian Patrick White, he stated, had won the Nobel Prize for Literature in 1973; consequently, Australian literature was being discovered. South Africa had apartheid, and this precarious situation was commanding attention to itself and its writers. Canada, on the other hand, had no defining interest to the outside world – it had never won a war, it had no major problems to demand world attention, yet Canadian fiction was growing without the steady and sometimes overpowering gaze of the outside world. This last fact merited Per Gedin's attention.

As I put together this *History of Canadian Fiction*, the first detailed history, I have often thought of his wise reflections about the steady and unnoticed growth of Canadian fiction. Today we have major authors, Margaret Atwood and Rohinton Mistry, Alice Munro and Michael Ondaatje, and so many others, reaching out to national and international audiences. This book brings together the many individuals who have created this impressive history, using their texts, their words, and relevant

criticism. Many writers comment on their fiction-writing background, and I have utilized their reflections as I write this story.

Much more than a century ago, a few fiction writers published highly regarded and incredibly popular books. Writers such as Ernest Thompson Seton and Marshall Saunders, Ralph Connor and Stephen Leacock, Nellie McClung and Mazo de la Roche had enormous sales. In his first three books, Connor, for example, registered sales of more than five million copies, though not in Canada alone.

Then came the early-to-middle years of the twentieth century when the outside world knew little about what was developing in Canadian fiction. The writings of Morley Callaghan, rooted firmly but not avowedly in his native Toronto, appealed to American audiences; the writings of Sinclair Ross and Hugh MacLennan, W.O. Mitchell and Ernest Buckler, whose first novels appeared from American publishers, were coming forward. And Ethel Wilson bordered the line between these writers and the new writers of the 1950s. Much of the writing was done inside Canada with the rest of the world paying little attention.

In the 1950s, Robertson Davies and Mavis Gallant, Mordecai Richler, Abraham Moses [A.M.] Klein, and Sheila Watson launched their literary careers with singular works which summoned praise inside and even outside the country. The 1960s saw first books by Atwood, Munro, and Ondaatje, the explosion of fiction that decade also producing the first fiction by Austin Clarke, Leonard Cohen, Marian Engel, Timothy Findley, Robert Kroetsch, Margaret Laurence, Jane Rule, Audrey Thomas, and Rudy Wiebe, and anticipating Richler's permanent return to Canada. The 1970s brought forward such new writers as Alistair MacLeod, Carol Shields, and Richard B. Wright. During this time the outside world began to heed what was happening in Canadian fiction. By 1982 it had developed steadily, as Gedin said, without the outside world's interfering gaze.

After World War II, writers from outside Canada began to arrive. Although there had been few immigrant writers coming to the country, such newcomers as Henry Kreisel, Clarke, and Rule became part of native-born Canadians as well as foreign-born Canadians, the two groups melding into fiction's multicultural world.

Since – and even before – 1982, Canadian fiction was slowly commanding attention from internal and then external sources. The Governor General's Awards were first presented in 1937, for example, the Writers' Trust Awards in 1973 and the Giller Prize in 1994. Fiction also began to reap international awards. Established in 1969, the Booker finalists often

include Canadian writers, the award won four times by them. Established in 1994, the Dublin IMPAC Literary Award, later called the International Dublin Literary Award, has had even more Canadian finalists, the award being given twice to Canadian novels. And the Nobel Prize to Alice Munro is final testimony to the stature of contemporary Canadian fiction.

The history of Canadian fiction is not so old – not so old as that of European countries, not so old as that of American fiction. It begins in the nineteenth century, it blossomed in the mid-twentieth century, and it accepted its position on the world stage in the later twentieth century.

For the earliest writers, Canada was a colony, where *there* must be the centre for the colonial mind. For them, *here*, unknown and undefined, remained unexplored, a colonial and a critical preoccupation. Late nineteenth- and early twentieth-century attempts to probe the meaning of *here* were grounded in the colonial understanding of Canada's place as a settler colony in relation to its mother country. By the mid-twentieth century, there were constant denials of the existence of this colonial status. Then, as the twentieth century moved to its close, there was now a multicultural and multiracial world in Canada where Canadian-born writers were increasingly augmented by naturalized voices unafraid to write about their own chosen landscapes far from the supposedly safe world that is Canada.

CHAPTER 1

The Beginnings

Where does Canadian fiction find its beginnings? Not so far back as about 11500 BC when Indigenous people, the first inhabitants of the land that would become Canada, moved across the Bering Plain to settle in the new land. Not so far back as about 1000 AD when the Vikings set up a small settlement at L'Anse aux Meadows in what would become Newfoundland. Not so far back as the late fifteenth century when Jean Cabot sailed to Newfoundland, or the sixteenth century when Jacques Cartier sailed to the Gulf of St. Lawrence in 1534, or even the early seventeenth century when Samuel de Champlain founded Port-Royal in Acadia in 1605 and Quebec City in 1608. Canada was a young country, beckoning settlers in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries to plunder its plentiful natural resources for their own benefit. Fishing, forestry, and furs attracted many ravenous newcomers, the land itself seeming void of a cultural life. Canada was a country which, according to its possible Portuguese derivation, meant "nothing here."

The eighteenth century witnessed the political machinations of the French and the English to control the country. Identified as New France, the land became a battleground between the reigning French and the ascendant English. In 1759 the Battle of the Plains of Abraham outside Quebec City saw the English defeat the French. This engagement sealed the fate of New France and established English authority, the land becoming the new colony of British Canada. By the Treaty of Paris of 1763, when the colony's total settler population was about sixty thousand, France officially ceded it to England, gaining distinctive recognition and status within the colony; a policy of assimilation was rejected in favour of separate identities for the two peoples. The question of Indigenous cultural recognition was not raised.

Frances Brooke (1724–89), the wife of the Anglican chaplain to the British garrison in Quebec City, sailed from England in July 1763 to join her husband at Sillery outside Quebec City. Already an accomplished

novelist and translator, she stayed for five years and wrote *The History of Emily Montague* (1769), her experiences in the new land providing material for a tale set against the backdrop of the colony. Enlivened by descriptions of the Canadian landscape and its inhabitants, this epistolary novel of sensibility centres on courtship and its many complications in the lives of three sets of lovers. By the end, the three couples are happily married and settled in England. Inaccurately termed the first "Canadian" novel, more accurately the first novel using, at times, a Canadian setting, *The History of Emily Montague* – by a temporary resident – is written and published for a British readership and employs the Canadian background to enhance its authenticity. Canada was still a country to be plundered.

The Beginning of Satire

The Atlantic provinces, specifically Nova Scotia, witnessed the beginning of satire. Born in Renfrewshire, Scotland, Thomas McCulloch (1776–1843), an ordained minister in the Secessionist Presbyterian Church, came to Nova Scotia in 1803 and accepted Pictou's call to establish a Presbyterian congregation there; he eventually set up Pictou Academy, a liberal, non-sectarian college which boasted standards of teaching and programs of study as demanding as those of Scottish universities.

Letters of Mephibosheth Stepsure, McCulloch's humorous letters published serially in the *Acadian Reporter* from 1821 to 1823 and as one volume in 1862, reflect his deep concern with the morals of Nova Scotian society. In creating his persona of Stepsure, supported by Dean Drone, who extols the virtues of domesticity, he makes him the ideal settler: pious, prudent, and thrifty, who overcomes poverty in his farming vocation, while his neighbours are often slovenly, spendthrift, and troublesome; Stepsure could well see what they failed to accomplish by not building up a strong basic economy, dreaming instead of becoming rich quickly. For Nova Scotians, their land, so rich in natural resources, allows good farmers to produce quality products. Family values and religious piety contribute to the well-being of individuals and communities.

Episodic in narrative form, the letters map society's virtues and vices; they are thinly disguised sermons which promulgate fidelity to society's traditional values. Establishing on Canadian soil the satirical sketch as a way of looking at his world, "McCulloch is the founder of genuine Canadian humour," commented Northrop Frye, "which is based on a vision of society and is not merely a series of wisecracks on a single theme.

The tone of his humour, quiet, observant, deeply conservative in a human sense, has been the prevailing tone of Canadian humour ever since."[1]

For Thomas Chandler Haliburton (1796–1865), born in Windsor, Nova Scotia, and graduating from King's College, Windsor, McCulloch's *Letters* were the direct antecedent and inspiration for his own episodic study of Nova Scotian manners. A distinguished lawyer and Supreme Court judge, who sought, among much else, to give a permanent grant to Pictou Academy, Haliburton wrote a series of sketches, *The Clockmaker; or, The Sayings and Doings of Samuel Slick, of Slickville*, first published in the *Nova Scotian* in 1835 and 1836 and revised and augmented as a single volume in 1837. He invented Sam Slick, a brash, loquacious, and itinerant Yankee clockmaker who meets the narrator, a reasonable Nova Scotian squire, and both ride together to Windsor. As they converse, Slick's American self-confidence contrasts with perceived Nova Scotian indolence. While he laments Nova Scotians' failure to realize their land's potential, offering unsolicited views in heavily accented Yankee English, he wants them to leave aside their lethargy to institute material reforms. At the same time he exposes and undercuts his supposedly perfect American society. The squire, meanwhile, lambasts the United States as a failed experiment that has "disappointed the sanguine hopes of its friends."[2]

The second series of sketches (1838) introduces Slick's recollection of his conversations with Rev. Hopewell, his ninety-five-year-old minister back home in Slickville, Connecticut. Hopewell has serious reservations about the direction American society has travelled since the Revolution, qualifying Slick's rosy view with his yearnings for a lost America. In the third series of sketches (1840), Hopewell presents his pre-revolutionary and pro-British view of America in contrast to Slick's passionate championing of the virtues of unimpeded progress. One has to weigh the alternative visions of these three men to appreciate Haliburton's own conservative view, which favoured a British system of government adapted to North American conditions.

Haliburton sought to raise the standard of living for Nova Scotians. Like McCulloch, he showed disdain for wayfarers who would not go about their traditional roles, refusing to applaud their agrarian world; he made a Yankee clock-peddler underscore the delinquencies and the strengths of the countryside. Like McCulloch, he believed that indolence was a feature

[1] "Introduction," *The Stepsure Letters* (Toronto: McClelland & Stewart, 1960), p. ix.
[2] All quotations from the texts, unless otherwise identified, are taken from their first editions.

of their citizens, though he wanted Nova Scotia to learn economically from the United States while ignoring its political ideology.

Haliburton's three volumes of sketches are another step towards a role for satire in the slowly accumulating literature of pre-Confederation Canada. Both McCulloch and Haliburton, deeply entrenched in Nova Scotia and writing for the progressive change of their rural economies, let satire be laced with irony to enhance their vision of an improved life.

The third satirist is James De Mille (1833–80). Born in Saint John, New Brunswick, and educated with a master's degree in 1854 from Brown University, he penned more than twenty-five popular novels. Filled with improbable coincidences and predictable people, his corpus included boys' adventure novels and light travel comedies. He was enamoured of Haliburton's writings, his *Dodge Club; or, Italy in 1859* (1869) revealing the comic exploits of American tourists in Italy and his own indebtedness to the figure of Sam Slick. *A Strange Manuscript Found in a Copper Cylinder* (1888), written as early as the mid-1860s and published posthumously, stands out from his many books as an exceptional piece of satire, influenced by Jonathan Swift's *Gulliver's Travels*.

Four friends and yachtsmen, sailing in 1850 "upon the ocean between the Canaries and the Madeira Islands," come upon a copper cylinder containing the curious handwritten report of Adam More, dated 1843, the first mate of an English sailing ship bound for home from Tasmania. Entering by a vortex near the South Pole a strange subterranean, semi-tropical land, More writes down his adventures among the foreign, cave-dwelling Kosekin people of Antarctica. A simple-minded spokesperson for Western civilization, he watches their extremism, their choice of poverty over money, their preferred darkness over light, their capacity to kill their natural instincts for an absurd ideal denying their humanity. He never realizes that their values are no less arbitrary than those of his home culture. De Mille maintains that people must choose the *via media* between More's simplicity and Kosekin extremism. *A Strange Manuscript Found in a Copper Cylinder* ends abruptly, the four men going off to dinner, the reading of the manuscript interrupted. Whether De Mille wished to end here or to add more is open to question, the novel being published eight years after he died. What remains is a satire on the ills of the Victorian world, where hypocrisy, materialism, and self-indulgence are everywhere.

At the turn of the next century, Stephen Leacock, who knew the writings of at least the first two of these Maritimers, develops satire and irony in his vision of contemporary life.

The Beginning of Romance

Romance, the literary form that, bypassing realism, chooses climes often remote from ordinary life, finds its earliest expression in *St. Ursula's Convent, or The Nun of Canada, Containing Scenes from Real Life* (1824), the first work of fiction by a native-born Canadian. Written at the age of seventeen by Julia Catherine [Beckwith] Hart (1796–1867), born in Fredericton, the daughter of a French Canadian father and an English Canadian mother, the novel, a historical, sentimental, and melodramatic romance, is set at the French defeat in Quebec City and the years immediately following the English victory. The complicated and tedious plot involves the central character who is taken prisoner at the siege and believed dead, and the plot follows his travels until he is back in Quebec where all ends surprisingly happily. Hart borrowed the style of the British romances, including their plot embellishments and their character stereotypes. The romance in Canada has begun.

At the same time, John Richardson (1796–1852), born in Queenston Heights, Ontario, began his military career at the age of fifteen by enlisting as a volunteer in the war with the United States; he would pursue this career intermittently for the next twenty-five years. As a militarist, military historian, and journalist, he penned several novels and Canadian histories. His major works, *Wacousta; or, The Prophecy* (1832) and *The Canadian Brothers; or, The Prophecy Fulfilled* (1840), combine historical realism with a penchant for elements from sentimental romances.

Wacousta acknowledges Richardson's two major influences, Sir Walter Scott, the father of the historical novel, and James Fennimore Cooper, the American author of frontier life, seeking to make his own country a setting for fiction by emulating what Scott had done for Scotland and Cooper for the United States. Following Cooper, he turned his setting to the North American frontier, the attacks carried out on the British forts at Detroit and Michilimackinac, furnishing the background for a fictional plot of love and revenge. Forsaking his European past, Wacousta, an outcast obsessed with vengeance, aligns himself with Indian savagery in order to take revenge against a man who once betrayed his trust. In the wilderness of this new landscape is the eternal struggle between good and evil, where the ostensible villain later gains sympathy while his worthy opponent has a chequered past. The conventions of Gothicism are present throughout this seemingly realistic novel, including, as its subtitle suggests, prophecies as well as mysterious coincidences, hidden identities, and fleeing maidens. Set two generations later than *Wacousta*, *The Canadian Brothers* employs the

historical background of the War of 1812 for another study of revenge, this time with descendants of a character from *Wacousta*, and once again their fates lead them into another Gothic tragedy. In this war, Canada rejected the republican democracy of the United States, and once again were heard cries for Canadian freedom.

Richardson creates his historical and fictional plots and overlays them with all the trappings of the Gothic novel, making his fiction more romantic and sentimental than realistic. Yet he finds little in his own country to praise: "Should a more refined and cultivated taste ever be introduced into the matter-of-fact country in which I have derived my being, its people will decline to do me the honor of placing my name in the list of their 'Authors.'"[3] In 1849 he moved to New York City, where he continued to write. Dying penniless in 1852, he was buried in an unmarked grave.

Contemporary with Richardson's writings are the rebellions in Lower (Quebec) and Upper (Ontario) Canada that would lead to Lord Durham's *Report* (1839), a seminal document on the land's growth into nationhood and a further refusal to follow the American form of democracy. In advocating responsible government, which Haliburton opposed and Richardson supported, the *Report* shows preference for a government embodying the principles of the British parliamentary system and rejects American-style revolution. The British North America Act (1867) becomes the realization of the *Report*: set adrift from the mother country of England and fearful of possible annexation from an expanding United States, the four original provinces of New Brunswick and Nova Scotia, present-day Quebec and Ontario, come together in a Confederation to ensure their own continued existence.[4]

Encompassing in time the rebellions and the British North America Act is bilingual Montreal-born novelist and poet Rosanna Mullins, later Rosanna Leprohon (1829–79). Born to Irish Anglophone parents, she married a physician from an old French Canadian family in 1851 and bore thirteen children; she was at home in both cultures. In her early stories and novels, all set in British country homes and London mansions, she is a romantic, the plots filled with melodrama and sentimental yearnings and indebted primarily to Fanny Burney and Jane Austen. But when

[3] *Eight Years in Canada* (Montreal: H.H. Cunningham, 1847), p. 95.
[4] Manitoba joined the Confederation in 1870 along with the Northwest Territories, British Columbia in 1871, Prince Edward Island in 1873, Yukon Territory in 1898, Saskatchewan and Alberta in 1905, Newfoundland in 1949, and the territory of Nunavut, created from the eastern part of the Northwest Territories, in 1999.

she returned after four years from St Charles-sur-Richelieu to Montreal, she began the first of four novels that presented her own land. As she wrote in the preface to the second novel, *Antoinette De Mirecourt; or, Secret Marrying and Secret Sorrowing* (1864),

> Although the literary treasures of "the old world" are ever open to us, and our American neighbors should continue to inundate the country with reading-matter, intended to meet all wants and suit all tastes and sympathies, at prices which enable every one to partake of this never-failing and ever-varying feast; yet Canadians should not be discouraged from endeavoring to form and foster a literature of their own.

Like Richardson, she wants her fiction to focus on her own land. First published in serialized form in 1859–60 and set in the region of Montreal, *The Manor House of De Villerai* uses the backdrop of the British conquest of Quebec between 1756 and 1760 for the first historical novel, in English or in French, to portray the fall of New France from a French Canadian perspective. Blanche De Villerai, the beautiful and wealthy heiress of the Manor House, situated on the banks of the Richelieu, finally frees her childhood betrothed and erstwhile partner so that he can marry her servant, a farmer's daughter from Villerai, whom he loves. Forsaking the battlefield and the patrilineal manor house of Scott's historical writings, Leprohon makes her female manor house the scene for debates among upper-class women on the social value of love-based marriage, especially during the siege. At the end, as Quebec's dream dies, Blanche remains ever virtuous and alone.

Set in Montreal "in the year 176-, some short time after the royal standard of England had replaced the fleur-de-lys of France," *Antoinette De Mirecourt* studies the titular seventeen-year-old French Canadian Catholic heiress as she comes to Montreal and secretly enters a marriage with a Protestant British officer, Major Audley Sternfield, in an Anglican ceremony. A young neighbour, whom Antoinette's father had chosen for her husband, kills Sternfield in a duel, and a third man, himself a Catholic, asks for her hand in marriage, which represents the union of Anglophone and Francophone societies and the emergence of a new order in an "essentially Canadian" novel. An "interracial" marriage can be extremely happy, as Antoinette's promises to be. In advocating proper religious duty and filial devotion, the romance has two male protagonists and an innocent heroine who must learn to read clearly the ways of the world, yet it also is a call-to-arms for young women to avoid the handsome British officers, like Sternfield, on the streets of Montreal, for these same English had thwarted and eclipsed Quebec's destiny a century earlier.