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REGIONAL SHORT STORIES: The literary highway

Canada was first linked by natural highways: trails, rivers, lakes and sea. As the country became populated the links were by rail, highways, ferries, bridges and bigger boats and eventually by air, via planes or electronic means. Along the way, thoughts and ideas appeared. Words and phrases were dropped or picked until a voice was heard. One voice grew into many and a national voice was heard. A Canadian voice, and then a Canadian Literary voice, but was it really Canadian? Is there one Canadian voice? This essay will show that there is one voice but that voice is all of the voices put together. Collections of short stories by region and one national collection will be looked at which lie along this literary "Trans Canada Highway" from East to West, North to South to show that we are one in our diversity. At the time of this writing, Quebec was struggling with its identity and voting to separate from Canada so it will not be included until it can control its own identity. Stories From Atlantic Canada (Thompson, 1973) is a collection from the Atlantic Provinces. One would think there would be more cohesiveness here than in other sections of the country, this small area consisting primarily of ocean, islands and forest pulled together by roads and boats. There is an accepted cohesiveness but it is not that way in reality, there is a visible diversity here.

Kent Thompson feels strongly that this is reflecting the complex variety of life (xi). The stories he has chosen are down to earth life and death among a diversity of cultures (French, English, Native etc.) intermixed with the history of the region. It is a region being bypassed in the present age and brought to our attention in A1 Pitman's humorous piece Consume and Coca Cola. Gander is a town in Newfoundland. But most people know it as an airport. As a matter of fact it used to be known as the crossroads of the world one time. That was before the jets came along. The Maritime Provinces are to Canada what Canada is to the United States. It should not be that way but it is. These stories are welcome stopping points along the Trans Canada, east of the St. Lawrence.

Life before Confederation was speckled with literature, much sparser and not yet Canadian. The material that came out of pre-Confederation Canada originated in the Maritimes but the road less traveled wound back to Europe, particularly England. In *The Book Of Canadian Prose: Early Beginnings to Confederation* (A.J.M. Smith, 1965) a recurrent theme is brought to light that makes a secondary connecting thread throughout the collections in this essay. A literary thread glaring by its omission. From *The History of Emily Montague* by Frances Brook, we learn through a series of letters from Colonel Rivers that:

An old Indian told me, they had also songs of friendship, but could never procure a translation of one of them: pressing this Indian to translate one into French for me, he told me with a haughty air, the Indians were not used to make translations, and that if I chose to understand their songs I must first learn their language.

The letters, as with the remaining prose pieces in the book are not short stories but a realistic representation of pre-Confederation times, an account of life in the Maritime's, Upper and Lower Canada, and biographies of two of the Fathers of Confederation, Sir John A. MacDonald and Thomas D'Arcy McGee.

The literary highway stretches up the St. Lawrence and into Ontario. *Stories From Ontario* (Walkerton, 1974) is a collection divided into six sections: Prologue, In The Clearings, Is This The Way to Sunshine, Men And Women, Where The Myth Touches us, and, Epilogue. All of the authors in this collection were born or presently reside [at the time of this book in 1974, ed.] in Ontario. The road continues to weave itself throughout the province and as Walkerton states in her Introduction:

Highway 400 stretches out across the Ontario countryside ... Threading a way through the confluence of roads at the end of the journey, the traveller experiences a shock ... the highway enters another world, and one moves ... across an unexpected boundary.

Linking this "Literary Highway" are stories about: 'Mariposa' in *The Marine Excursion of the Knights of Pythius* by Stephen Leacock; *Peterborough, On a Journey to the Woods* by Susanna Moody; *Toronto, Where The Myth Touches Us* by Hugh Hood, and more. These stories, lacking any Native contributions, are stories of humor and pathos, life and death, history and place. They portray not so much the blending of cultures but one culture:

Ontario is not a region in Canada ... No historical experience confines its unity ... No obvious way of life defines it ... Even in Canadian terms, Ontario is new. In these stories, a sense of what Ontario is, defines the story itself,

Rudy Weibe (1972) has put together a collection of twenty, *Stories From Western Canada* divided into five sections: Such People, Land, Dream and Live, Strange Love, and Fantasies. In the Introduction to the collection Weibe sets the tone of the book:

One Thursday morning near the end of May, 1971, I walked through the bush to the homestead where my mother says I was born. "

History and a tie to the land holds this collection together. The authors, upon a first reading of the names, are from all over Canada but the Bibliographic Notes tells a different story. All of the authors except Gabrielle Roy were born in or moved to Western Canada. Weibe has chosen wisely between Western Canadian writers and the stories were written in the decades from 1920-1970, four are appearing for the first time in print.

Upon reading the stories, one gets a sense of the subject, mood and richness of life in Western Canada. These feelings are best described by Stephen Scobie in *Streak Mosaic* when two people, a man from Vancouver and a woman from the Prairies is brought together as they prepare to drive to Alberta: The mountains, there every day, so painfully, incredibly beautiful: you would think something would rub off on the people, some feeling for beauty...

To her, they just filled up air. She said it was a walled city, emotionally under seige. She wanted the walls to fall down, and all that empty air come rushing in. The city exploding to meet it. The limits broken .Into the outside, limitless. Air. ... Her arm flung out across air, to the curtain ... light spilling around her body, edging its curving line. Her skin eager for wind. Her hair like grain .

The second last region of Canada to be connected by the literary "Trans Canada" highway is found in a collection of short stories in two parts. In *Stories From Pacific & Arctic Canada* all the authors are from or presently live in the regions. While the Pacific Canadian

stories are written by 'Pacific' Canadians, the Arctic Canadian stories are more written about the region than by the 'natives' of the region. Weibe (1974) apologizes for this [long standing omission, ed.] in the Introduction: The native people of our half-continent, that is, those who have lived in the North for generations and so have no memory of "discovering" it have not yet told their stories, They have lived them, and sung them in poetry, but they have not told them in a way we explorers understand at our very core. ... The natives have yet taught us our language (since Whites will never learn them) well enough to make their stories intelligible to us. And so we must depend on the visiting white story-makers.

The last region of Canada is the whole of Canada. It is where the historical, literary and asphalt road ends. It Circles back on itself after traversing this continent from East to West, beginning with the trails through the bush and snow, on to the corduroy pathways of the imagination. It stops in towns and cities and open countryside along the way only to end at the beginning after having gone everywhere and nowhere, past and present.

Other Solitudes: Canadian Multicultural Fiction (Hutcheson and Richmond, 1990) explains the cultural diversity of Canada, our one real voice through the eyes and pens of eighteen contemporary multicultural writers. The earliest writers in this country were also multicultural: English, French, Irish, etc. Many writers looked at in this essay could have been lumped into ethnic/multicultural 'short story collections', but they were not. They are to be read as the whole voice of literary Canada. Linda Hutcheson and Marion Richmond (1990) have pulled together current writers who speak for and connect with both the original Canadians and the Native Canadians.

Margaret Atwood wrote in The Journals of Susanna Moody, "We are all immigrants to this place even if we were born here" (1990, Preface). This statement best describes the highway that has connected all the regions of this great country. No matter how large or how wide the information highway is, it branches out into smaller roads and avenues that eventually connect, via sidewalks or paths, to the door of every man, woman and child in Canada. We are no longer the WASP nation. Himani Bannerji pulls the primary and secondary themes together and says it best when she describes the public school teacher's realization of whom she is teaching in her class. She has just had all the children draw the "family" (white, blond, father, mother, son & daughter) for each child to take home to their parents. In the final part of the story The Other Family, Bannerji has the child realize that although she is Canadian [end of the 'highway' - multicultural] she is not the stereotypical Canadian [beginning of the 'highway' - WASP].

... She had her painting from the day before in her hand. ... It's not finished yet,' she said. 'The books I looked at didn't have something. Can I finish it now?'

'Go ahead, ' said the teacher.

The little girl was looking at the classroom. It was full of children of all colours, of all kinds of shapes of noses and of different colours of hair. She sat on the floor, placed the incomplete picture on a big piece of newspaper and started to paint. ... Finally it was finished. She went back to her teacher. It's finished now, ' she said, I drew the rest. '

The teacher reached out for the picture and spread it neatly on a desk. There they were, the blond family arranged in a semicircle with a dip in the middle, but next to them, arranged alike, stood another group - a man, a woman, and a child, but they were dark-skinned, dark-haired, the woman wore clothes from her own country, and the little girl in the middle had a scar on her nose.

'Do you like it?'

'Who are they?' asked the teacher, though she should have known.

But the little girl didn't mind answering the question one bit. 'It's the other family,' she said.

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