Remembering George Woodcock, Canadian Critic, and the Origins of *Canadian Literature*

"…and I began to learn about Canadian literature as I went along." – George Woodcock

by W.H. New

George Woodcock, the person—as distinct from George Woodcock, the author, the imposing name on so many book jackets—I first met under unprepossessing circumstances over thirty years ago. I had just finished my Master's thesis on the work of Frederick Niven, the Chilean-born Scots-Canadian novelist who used to live in Nelson, B.C., and who in the early years of this century wrote romances of emigration, adolescent rebellion, and high adventure. Uttering to myself those apposite lines from Earle Birney's "Candidate's prayer before master's oral"—"protect my line from Things Unread/ & pump me down what Coleridge said/ guard me from blackout in the Gulf/ & the abysmal Beowulf/ …/ Minerva speed! All now is night./ The sharks encircle—/ Send me LIGHT!" (Collected Poems I, 139)—I mounted the steps in the UBC Library to a small room on the eighth floor, there to meet with my oral examination committee: among them, Donald Stephens, Roy Daniells, William Hall, and George Woodcock.

I didn't know then that I would later become their colleague, and George's assistant with the magazine Canadian Literature, which had only just recently begun publishing. Nor did I know what George would later still write about his sense of what constituted Canadian writing before he actually returned to Canada in the 1940s: Mazo de la Roche, Grey Owl, Leacock, and Paul Potts—he said, "[Charles G.D.] Roberts was for me the writer about animals I had read as a child, and my father had brought back Ralph Connor's novels and Frederick Niven's early books when the family returned to Canada from England in 1913. (My first ideas of British Columbia were shaped by Niven's Lost Cabin Mine.)" (World 11) As The Lost Cabin Mine is a sort of Deadwood Dick western, the kind of book that my classmate George Bowering would later satirize in Caprice, this knowledge might not in any event have helped me with my Master's exam, but it would at least have provided a context for the examiners.

As it was, when it came to George's turn to ask me a question, he ignored Niven entirely and said: "Can you think of any Canadian Utopias?" Birney's Minerva abandoned me in an instant. I thrashed around for awhile, thinking about Acadia, making the best of things, and the land that God gave Cain, and finally said "No." Woodcock replied, "Neither can I." It was the beginning of our friendship.
It was also the beginning of an interesting conversation—one that has gone on for thirty years, in a way—about the relations between literature and politics: or perhaps (given George's "rejection of politics," as the title of one of his books has it) the relations between literature and history. It became clear that George's question had been immediately motivated by his interest in James De Mille's A Strange Manuscript Found in a Copper Cylinder, a novel he later wrote about as "well-written and boldly speculative" (World 24) and placed in the company of Butler, Verne, and Bulwer Lytton. But the question about utopia implied still more. For the desire to make the world a better

place in which to live—what is this except a utopian impulse?—has touched George's thought, one suspects, all his life. The conscientious pacifism, the engagement with Read and aesthetics and with Orwell and economic activism, the fascination with Tolstoy, Merton, the Doukhobours, and Gabriel Dumont, the enquiry into alternative cultures, the Sooke experiment that brought him and Inge to Canada in 1949, the insistent intellectual-anarchist refusal of centralized political bureaucracies: these have marked his life and constituted the subjects of his more than 150 books. It would be nothing short of amazing if these subjects did not also surface in his comments on Canadian writing. And, of course, they do, perhaps most obviously in The Meeting of Time and Space, a 1981 rejection of Pierre Elliott Trudeau that turns into a celebration both of regionalism in Canadian writing and of an idea of Canada as a kind of Switzerland, a "confederation of regions" (38). The comments on De Mille, with their concern for good writing and their allusions to Butler and Verne, reveal something else as well, however. They show the degree to which George Woodcock has been a man of his time—one who was influenced by his European upbringing and by his concern for aesthetic quality (he has not been afraid to make judgments, and his willingness to hold strong opinions has meant that his critical writings characteristically present reasoned cases, all of them open to counter-discussion); these comments at the same time indicate how George's writings on Canadian literature serve as a kind of intellectual diary, the notes of a man engaging as an immigrant with his "native culture," in search all the time of his own region of words. Founding and editing the journal Canadian Literature was a significant part of this process. And it's important to emphasize, I think, that during the eighteen years George edited the journal, it was very much a one-man show. Donald Stephens had become Associate Editor early on, of course—and served as Acting Editor when George was away—and Don made many important suggestions about directions the journal might take. Almost a decade later, I joined these discussions, as Assistant Editor. But George made all the final decisions.

He edited the journal for the University of B.C., but really edited it out of his own house on McCleery Street. Once a quarter, when it came time to prepare the paste-up, Don and I took turns helping, at George and Inge's dining-room table—academics armed with scissors and Scotch tape, ankle-deep almost in trimmed galley pages, and smudged with printer's ink, exchanging enthusiasms for the latest insights the journal would be printing. "Who's Anthony Appenzell?" I once asked, naively, about one critic I thought wrote well. "A Vancouver writer," George blithely replied, and it was some months later before I realized it was a pseudonym George himself occasionally adopted. There was a kind of community established during these afternoons, and for me it proved to be an editorial apprenticeship as well. George would talk about writing, talk about government policy and its impact on the publishing industry, talk about ideas and writers and style, wittily and with passionate commitment. After he retired in 1977 and the journal moved onto the university campus, these "paste-up sessions" no longer happened, but fortunately the exchanges of ideas continued, as did the conviviality and the sense of community.

In its first eighteen years, of course, the journal moved from its days as a fledgling publication to become the pre-eminent journal in the field; it acquired an active role in Canadian literary history, helping to confirm what a few people had long known but that

public institutions were less willing or ready to recognize, that Canadian writing was substantial and varied, worth stocking, worth writing about, and worth reading. In the years that I've been editing Canadian Literature—often coaxing it in different directions from those that George had set, and often pursuing directions that I had not anticipated, making room for the critical approaches and opinions of yet another generation—I've tried to be sensitive to this history, and to the journal's role in public education. For it seems to me that moving intelligently into the culture's future is a process that asks a critic always to be aware of the cultural past.

When I was gathering information on the early history of the journal, for this talk, I turned to the pages of the UBC Alumni Chronicle to see how those who had set the journal up thought it was doing. When the journal was first announced, back then, many people even doubted that Canadian Literature would survive its first issue, let alone its first year: "IS there a Canadian literature" was regarded as a comic question. A 1959 editorial did confidently declare: "The journal will print studies of established and lesser-known writers, essays on new writers and current literary movements, articles by poets, novelists and dramatists on their own arts, and discussions of Canadian writing by English, French and American critics." And yet, in retrospect, isn't it curious to see how Canadians of the 1950s attached our cultural independence so firmly to European and American approval? The fact that the journal's first issue got noticed in New York papers was itself cause for subsequent comment in the UBC Alumni Chronicle; it was perceived as a sign of success.

Two successful years later, George Woodcock reflected that the "infant mortality among literary magazines is high indeed, but those which survive the first critical months usually do so because the standards they establish attract both readers and writers." While this declaration of survival asserted the presence of both a market and a function (as Woodcock remarked after ten years had gone by, the journal was not just "getting away with survival" but actually establishing "a place in the world"), it gives one pause now to read the recurrent metaphor of birth and infancy in these early commentaries. (After five years of publication, another reviewer called the journal a "planned child" whose "gestation period was elephantine," adding "I cannot recall now where the original seed came from.") Comments such as these reveal a good deal about the social norms of the time, and about the attitudes towards language that for a while at any rate would show up in critical commentary.

To mark the tenth year of publication, the journal published a special issue on the literature of the 1960s, an issue that also appeared separately as one of George's more than twenty books specifically about Canadian writing, under the title The Sixties: Canadian Writers and Writing of the Decade. Surveys of the decade's writing joined with separate essays and poems by writers who had now become famous names: Margaret Laurence (whose "Ten Years' Sentences," on Africa and Manawaka, is now everywhere cited in Laurence studies), P.K. Page (writing about images), Mordecai Richler (writing about social uncertainty), Hugh MacLennan (summing up his career), Dorothy Livesay, Norman Levine, James Reaney, Al Purdy, Miriam Waddington, Dorothy Livesay, A.J.M. Smith.

Interviewed after seventeen years of editing the journal, Woodcock clarified how it was that he could attract so many famous writers to his pages. The plain fact is that he asked them, and they agreed. Which says three things about the journal and Canadian criticism: (1) the journal helped confirm the intellectual viability of the field of study, (2) editing the journal had brought George into contact with other creative people in the country, and they worked together to affirm the necessity of cultural expression, and (3) the journal's reputation had been established in part because of George's integrity. The journal got going with the support of the university and the Koerner Foundation, he recalls, and somewhat laconically adds "and I began to learn about Canadian literature as I went along." "'I had to badger people to write for us in the early days,' he says, 'the point being that we were asking for criticism from people who'd never written anything of that sort in their lives.'" Ethel Wilson for one, in remarkable essays that called for a rethinking of how words behaved and what they could do. But other factors were also at work during these decades, which meant that the journal could now draw on a huge number of "over-the-transom" submissions; it no longer had to depend on special commissions. For by the mid-1960s, the sheer number of Canadian publications was increasing. This development was taking place at the same time as 1940s children were coming of age. Separate Canadian Literature courses were also being established in universities, and advances in publication technology were permitting small (and often anti-Establishment) presses to flourish outside the main centres of Canadian commerce. Not to be underestimated either was the powerful emotional sweep of the new nationalism.

All of these factors created opportunities—and sometimes problems as well. One problem rapidly became how—or whether—to review everything. Issue no. 1 had reviewed 22 books, one of which was a reprint of Susanna Moodie's Life in the Clearings, and the journal at the time found it could reflect current publications in quite leisurely fashion; Issue no. 73, the last one George edited, reviewed a much more selective group of 29, including works by Jack Hodgins, Jane Rule, Michael Ondaatje, and Robertson Davies—it was no longer attempting to be all-inclusive, though it was still conscious of its effort to be, in George's words, "an on-going literary history of Canada." For contrast's sake, Issue no. 140, from Spring 1994, reviewed 121 books, had to be even more selective, and the journal no longer thinks of itself as a deliberate or representative history; it's more of a record of a range of some of the critical attitudes of the present time (but of course that's perhaps all that history ever can be). The editorial desire to find out about—and represent—what was good in Canadian writing, however, meant that the early decades of the journal's publication are marked by their documentary impulse. Later criticism would take different directions, but in a time when so little was widely known about the country's literature, critics had first of all to share information. They perhaps thought of it as documentary objectivity. But what they wrote was a subjective history, one that was shaped in large part by a shared belief in the power of language and a shared aspiration for a liberal society.

Part of this history involves George's personal relationships with Canadian authors, relationships that are reflected in the contributions to the journal but also recorded in his voluminous correspondence—with Margaret Laurence, Al Purdy, Hugh MacLennan,

Margaret Atwood, Phyllis Grosskurth, Doug Fetherling, and many others—and tangibly expressed in the encouragement that the intellectual anarchist offered the young and the unestablished. That said, George also had his preferences. He admired MacLennan's narrative sweep but not what he considered to be MacLennan's puritanical coyness; he found Callaghan's moral niceties laboured, a judgment that divided the two writers for many years; he has never warmed to Davies' mythologizing or what he saw as Hodgins's extravagances; but he praised Laurence's social compass, Atwood's incisive wit, John Glassco's decadent satires, Pat Lowther's integrity. Even when he didn't wholeheartedly endorse a writer's work, he undertook to examine why, and from these reflections emerged some of his most enduring essays: "A Nation's Odyssey," "Lost Eurydice," "Diana's Priest in the Bush Garden," "McLuhan's Utopia."

George's books on Canadian literature testify to his enquiring mind; they stand also as a model of the way he has educated others to appreciate where their culture derives some of its values from. These studies are essentially essays in book form—books of his own essays, books of criticism edited primarily from contributions to Canadian Literature, books edited on assignment, books written out of a passionate intellectual commitment to the ideas of creativity and freedom. The books connect with all his other books into a large canvas of libertarian thought, but the essay has provided him with the medium of choice as far as Canadian criticism is concerned; it is the medium of enquiry, the medium of the trial idea, the medium of sharing the thoughts that follow from reflective learning. These are his titles:

• A Choice of Critics, 1966
• The Sixties, 1969
• Hugh MacLennan, 1969
• Mordecai Richler, 1970
• Odysseus Ever Returning, 1970
• Malcolm Lowry: The Man and His Work, 1971
• Wyndham Lewis in Canada, 1971
• The Rejection of Politics, 1972
• Colony and Confederation, 1974
• Poets and Critics, 1974
• The Canadian Novel in the Twentieth Century, 1975
• The World of Canadian Writing, 1980
• Taking It to the Letter, 1981
• The Meeting of Time and Space, 1981
• A Place to Stand On, 1983
• Strange Bedfellows: The State and the Arts in Canada, 1985
• Northern Spring, 1987
• Introducing Margaret Laurence's The Stone Angel, 1989
• Introducing Margaret Atwood's Surfacing;
…Mordecai Richler's The Apprenticeship of Duddy Kravitz;
…Sinclair Ross's As For Me and My House, [all 1990]
• George Woodcock's Introduction to Canadian Poetry… and Canadian Fiction, [both 1993]

It’s an impressive list. And I’m still leaving out any reference to the substantial essays formulated as forewords and afterwords, the occasional and uncollected sketches and reviews, and even the two essays he’s contributed to Canadian Literature in 1994: one of them a memoir of his encounter with Cambodia, as poet and travel writer, and the other a study of his Latin American travel books and what they have to say about literature, social policy, and Native participation in New World cultures.

His recent writings show him often in a reflective mood, thoughts travelling back over ideas and encounters, but making of them something fresh and clear. His 1992 essay "On Purdy’s Galapagos," for example (in Inside the Poem), engages not only with Purdy’s travel poetry, but also with his own travels in the South Pacific and with his intellectual travels through the history of ideas. Purdy’s Galapagos takes Woodcock to Charles Darwin and the Voyage of the Beagle, but also to W.H. Hudson and Jorge Luis Borges, to Lucretius and Kenneth Rexroth, to George Orwell and Edward Aveling, Genesis and Albert Camus. A lifetime’s worth of learning goes into the reading of the next book and the next, till the reader to whom Woodcock speaks comes away illuminated—able to engage more fully with his subject (in this instance Purdy’s poetry) and also invigorated by the connections among ideas. George Woodcock’s criticism is always asking readers to make such connections, asking the present to shape the future by connecting critically and constructively—and contextually—with the past. Hence to see the Purdy essay also mentioning the poetry of a younger generation still—specifically, the work of Christopher Dewdney—is to see Woodcock continuing to tune in to the voices of the new, and continuing to respond to those writers who are eager to say their minds.

In some ways this is the same spirit of enquiry that took Woodcock into Canadian writing in the first place, in search of Utopia perhaps, but settling for the freedom to speak. It’s also a gift that he’s offered the rest of us: a commitment to the creativity of culture in Canada, a commitment of time and intelligence, that has helped make it possible for those who have come along after also to enjoy cultural freedoms. We have easier access to Canadian writing now than people did in 1959; we find it easier to locate Canadian books in bookstores and think it axiomatic that they will be studied and discussed in schools; and if there truly is anyone still around who wonders if the words "Canadian literature" declare an oxymoron, such a person would now be widely and wisely dismissed as absurd. It will be clear from what I have already said that I think George Woodcock is an extraordinary person in a particularly influential generation. He is a person who has helped clarify some of our more fundamental cultural possibilities and helped make us think seriously about what we are capable of in this place, in our time. Canada, he has argued, may not be Utopia—but nor is it Cain’s barren ground, and it is important to remember that these are not the only two options we have. Canada is, by contrast, a place for human settlement, glorious and flawed; and its writers, like its people—as a community—are worthy of respect.

We would honour George’s gift to us most faithfully by continuing to insist on people’s right to speak freely about history, society, individuality, and words.

[This essay is provided with the permission of George Woodcock’s long-time collaborator and friend W.H. New and Canadian Literature. A free eBook version of George Woodcock's editorials from the journal Canadian Literature is available at http://canlit.ca/woodcock/editorials]