

Canada's New-Critical Anthologists

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WHERE ANTHOLOGIES ARE concerned, it should be acknowledged at the outset that the most satisfying is one's own. All others are inevitably flawed. Jerome Rothenberg's revision of William Blake gives some hint as to why this is so: "I must either create my own anthology or be trapped in another's" (139). For it is the case, as Rothenberg realizes, that whatever strategies and devices may be employed to disguise or to mitigate the fact, the making of anthologies, and therefore the response to them, is fundamentally personal. The aim may be, certainly most often is, otherwise, as A. J. M. Smith's *desideratum* reveals:

The ideal anthologist is a paragon of tact and learning. In him an impeccable taste is combined with a completeness and accuracy of information that is colossal. To an understanding of historical development and social upheavals he adds a sensitiveness to the finest nuances of poetic feeling. He is unprejudiced, impersonal, humble, self-confident, catholic, fastidious, original, traditional, adventurous, sympathetic, and ruthless. He has no special axe to grind. He is afraid of mediocrity and the verses of his friends. (474)

But, as Canada's most accomplished and most noted anthologist concluded, this paragon "does not exist." On the other hand, Randall Jarrell's "typical anthologist" does exist (or has existed), at least sometimes:

The typical anthologist is a sort of Gallup Poll with connections — often astonishing ones; it is hard to know whether he is printing a poem because he likes it, because his acquaintances tell him he ought to, or because he went to high school with the poet. But certainly he is beyond good or evil, and stares over his herds of poets like a patriarch, nodding or pointing with a large industrial air. (155)

Between these two extremes fall most anthologists, including the anthologists of Canadian poetry in the 1980s, as represented in this review by Margaret Atwood, Dennis Lee, and the team of Jack David and Robert Lecker. Each of the four is well enough established in the community of Canadian writing to serve as "a sort of Gallup Poll with connections," but whatever patriarchal aim their respective enterprises may implicitly possess, these are not offensively pronounced. However, neither do their anthologies display a fear of mediocrity and of the verses of their friends. The latter would be impossible, given the connections referred to above; the former provokes questions about the nature and purpose of anthologies, especially with respect to historical and formal representativeness, as well as with respect to the standards by which (and whether) mediocrity is to be measured.

Canada's first anthologist, Edward Hartley Dewart, whose *Selections from Canadian Poets* (1864) appeared before the nation formally existed, contended that "The Literature of the world is the footprints of human progress" (ix). Leaving aside for the moment the evaluative implications which Dewart probably attached to the world "progress," his statement otherwise suggests what his anthology almost provides: a historical record of the formal, stylistic, and thematic footprints of Colonial Canadian verse. I say "almost provides" because the demotic verse which can be found in Colonial newspapers and journals (mostly political and social satire and diatribe) is largely missing from Dewart's collection. Dewart's is, consequently, not an aesthetically neutral document. It neither could nor should be, nor can or should any anthology be. Any act of selection, as we have lately come to acknowledge, is implicitly political and, of verse, inevitably an act of aesthetic judgement. By the same token, anthologists are inevitably literary historians. The supposed separation of literary history from literary criticism (aesthetics) so wrongfully perpetrated by the wilfully myopic New Critics can no longer be convincingly pretended. That being so, the question naturally arises as to the nature of the literary history to which an anthology should contribute. Should it seek to be, as many of the anthologies of the last half century have sought to be in various ways, canonical? This is the kind of

anthology that at its "purest" represents English Romantic verse by selections from the five "greats": Wordsworth, Coleridge, Byron, Shelley and Keats; that at its less pure would include Burns, Southey, Scott, Campbell, Moore, and some others; but that would almost never include such as the Dibdin brothers, James Montgomery, or Felicia Hemans, versifiers whose contemporary popularity rivalled and surpassed that of most other poets of the period. To ignore such as these completely is to misrepresent both the period's writing and its reading. But how much representation should they be given? Perhaps that depends upon the aims of the anthologist. Certainly no anthologist claiming historical representativeness of the period can exclude them. Those with canonical ambitions will of course not be able to do otherwise, given their commitment to the virtues of evaluation (and intimations of the "great tradition") and their adherence to the myth of universality. All of which too has its place in literary history.

The anthological models to which I refer are the opposing poles between which, though heavily weighted toward the canonical end, most anthologies fall. I would not advocate an even balance across the entire range of the spectrum, either within individual anthologies or collectively. I do think that more frequent reminders of the entire poetic experience of a period would be helpful and healthy. And I think as well that anthologies of the most popular works and poets of an age would be similarly healthy and helpful. Perhaps these will come when the interest in reader response expands from its present theoretical and new critical foundations into the province of literary history. It will always be appropriate that the reader's greatest (not exclusive) attention be given to the poetry which utilizes most effectively the combined physical, affective, and intellectual properties of language. Sometimes anthologies contain such work. It is presumably, what they intend when they announce, as does Dennis Lee (among so many others), that they "have taken quality as the criterion throughout" (xl ix). Like Lee, they accord "quality" the characteristics of universality and objectivity. George Woodcock attempts to capture something of this cachet of objective certitude for David and Lecker's *Canadian*

Poetry when he talks repeatedly of “anthologizable poems” and when he makes the following distinction between “selective” and “representative” approaches to anthologizing:

The editors of *Canadian Poetry* are not saying explicitly, “These are the *best* Canadian poets,” but they *are* saying, at least implicitly, “these are, for one reason or another, the most significant poets.” And to this extent *Canadian Poetry*, as all anthologies do, steps beyond the rules laid down by many current academic schools of criticism, for selection is inevitably an act of evaluation, and by picking out the forty-six poets whose work appears in the following pages they are marking them with their special approval. These, they are saying, are the poets who are both interesting and valuable in their own terms and who will also tell you, if you read them well, what poetry has meant and now means in Canada. (17)

Margaret Atwood too threatens to subscribe to the apparently endemic hierarchicalism of anthologizers when she employs the banal Romantic metaphor of literature as vegetation and makes distinctions between flowers and weeds, between blossoms and roots. Though she does suggest that geological and archeological motifs might be more appropriate than the biological for English-Canadian poetry. She goes on in a more democratic and more modern vein to suggest that “Canada should abandon the term ‘anthology’ altogether and adopt another, signifying ‘a collection of rocks, roots, pottery shards and skull fragments’” (xxx).

Still, *The New Oxford Book of Canadian Verse in English* does not represent its 121 poets equally. Atwood’s introduction acknowledges that her collection is “not fully representative formally,” that sound, performance, and concrete poetry are omitted, and that the long poem is present only in fragments and in Birney’s “David” and Newlove’s “The Pride.” She declares that her selection process made no concessions to the pressures of regionalism or sex, but she does hint at personal preferences. She admits a preference for D. C. Scott among the Confederation Poets, speaks laudatorily of E. J. Pratt as a “craggy original,” “a narrative poet *par excellence* as well as . . . a poet who is both completely unique and ferociously representative, not so much of other poets as of the country he was writing about and within” (xxxiv), and proclaims Al Purdy as the “giant figure” of Cana-

dian poetry in the 1960s. And, in terms of a combination of poems chosen and space accorded, these three are among the poets most favoured by Atwood's editorship. For within her attempt to provide historical representativeness, an attempt which is sufficiently latitudinarian to include popular poets such as W. H. Drummond, Pauline Johnson, and Marjorie Pickthall, and which is, as usual, vastly overbalanced in its representation of contemporary verse, a hierarchy of poets can be discerned. It will indubitably surprise some to discover Irving Layton at the very peak of the pyramid, or to find Jay Macpherson, P. K. Page, and George Bowering among the most highly placed, rivalling more conventionally acknowledged primary figures such as Earle Birney, Margaret Atwood (chosen by William Toye), Purdy, Margaret Avison, Pratt, D. C. Scott, and Archibald Lampman.

A similar hierarchy, based on the same combination of number of poems chosen and space accorded, is evident in David and Lecker's *Canadian Poetry*, though with fewer poets (23 per volume) the discriminations are less dramatic than in the Atwood's *New Oxford*. There are fewer surprises here: a listing that gives precedence to Purdy, Pratt, Klein, Atwood, Lampman, Birney, Layton, Livesay, and C. G. D. Roberts is unexceptional, especially when the criterion for placement is, as Woodcock declared above, significance (though the definition of significance is rather vague). Whatever the precise understanding of significance, whether aesthetic or historical, or some combination of both, the presence of John Newlove in the foregoing panoply will startle some. So will the realization that this hierarchy values Milton Acorn or bill bissett above A. J. M. Smith, F. R. Scott, Avison, Page, Alden Nowlan, and Phyllis Webb. These distinctions, I suppose, are some of the "signs of more sharply defined choices than in earlier anthologies, of a surer sense of the direction Canadian poetry has taken in the century and a quarter since Charles Sangster," of which Woodcock boasts. Or perhaps they are intended to depict some of "the collective trends through which tradition is modified by innovation to create works that speak for a new culture, for a realization of a national life view developing out of a growing understanding of our geography and our history, our place and time."

One might question the understanding of history demonstrated by an anthology which begins its transcription of "significant" Canadian poetry with a solitary, and very late, figure from the century and more of Canadian Colonial verse. Surely this presents a truncated tradition at best. Of course, Woodcock doesn't believe that the voices of the past have much relevance to the contemporary poet. The latter, he contends, have emerged "only through . . . realizing that they could be fully themselves only by living within their place and time," and by relegating the "endemic," "vague cultural nationalism" to a position of secondary, less conscious motivation.

Dennis Lee, whose anthology undertakes to present a picture of recent Canadian poetry by concentrating exclusively on those poets who have published volumes only since 1970, also speaks of the rejection of tradition, but rightly contextualizes it as a literary fashion determined by the times. Lee's portrait consists of selections from 45 poets whom the editor has divided into two groups: a group of twenty given 10-15 pages each, and a group of twenty-five given 3-5 pages each. The discrimination is presumably a purely aesthetic one since, while Lee identifies his editorial policy as eclectic and surveys his choices from the categorical perspectives of content (prairie documentary, feminism, immigration, work), voice (vernacular), image and phenomenological stance, he insists that he has "attempted to represent conflicting schools and tendencies by their best work (including cases where they are schools of one), rather than screening out groupings *a priori*." Since his procedure is frankly evaluative, it will not be surprising to find intimations of hierarchical preference in his arrangements. He provides greatest space in his first group to Robert Kroetsch and Christopher Dewdney, and the formula applied above to the other two anthologies places Dewdney, Don McKay and Pier Giorgio di Cicco at the peak of this first-group pyramid with Marilyn Bowering and Brian Fawcett at its base. The second group's representations are more uniform, though David Solway is given more space than the others. Since Lee has made the contemporary his province, any challenge to his schema can only come from conviction. His groupings do invite revision by their very existence. My own inclination would be to demote di

Cicco, Donnell, Van Toorn, Wallace, and Zieroth while promoting Solway, Pittman, Sarah, and possibly Fitzgerald. I would strike completely Couzyn, Dutton, Filip, Furberg, Kleinzahler, Lillard, Moritz, and Thompson, and I would insist that Claire Harris should certainly be represented in such an anthology as this. My own criteria for such revisions are my estimation of the richness and effectiveness with which the properties of language referred to earlier are utilized, and my sense of the respective contributions made to the developing traditions of Canadian and world literature.

Lee presents the kind of anthology approved by Jerome Rothenberg. He does not "perpetuate the orders of a limited past and by so doing hold back the real work of the present," but offers something consistent with Rothenberg's ideal of "the kind of anthology that presents a new move in poetry, like a well-conceived magazine or like a group show in the visual arts." Woodcock too admonishes about anthologies which "are mandarin products that help to freeze taste over a considerable period of time, so that later attempts to revise them for modern times . . . remain in the shadows of their predecessors, as works upholding establishment taste and merely sanctifying the modifications time has made necessary." But Ralph Gustafson counters cogently with the reminder that "there is no such animal as an old poem," and opines

The real job, it seems to me is a thorough job — of delicate balances and counterweighting and fairness to poet, historical continuity with a good perspective on the how of the development of a nation's poetry. (letter 37)

Lee, whose anthology fulfils its purpose of providing an introduction to contemporary Canadian poetry, was certainly concerned with representing his first group with some thoroughness and fairness, and also acknowledged, as I suggested above, the pressures of history and development. Woodcock relegates these latter to secondary positions, but David and Lecker clearly were concerned with the ideals of thoroughness and fairness in the representation of individual poets in structuring their two volumes. David and Lecker were compiling a teaching text for classes dominated by the New Critical ideology that informs

most university literature classes at the present time; hence their disregard for the early stages of Canada's poetic development. Their anthology might be useful for classes concerned with tracing the outlines of modernism in Canadian poetry. Atwood is concerned with representing the entire historical sweep of Canadian poetry to the uninitiated at home and abroad. Consequently, her concern with thoroughness and fairness has to be focused more on the collective than on the individual level. Her selection of poets is judicious, though her comparative weighting as I have already mentioned, is occasionally questionable: for instance, Jay Macpherson and Phyllis Gotlieb are overrepresented while Daphne Marlatt is underrepresented.

Atwood and Lee are responsible and attentive editors. The reader can trust the integrity of their texts. Both readily acknowledge the help of others, but *The New Oxford Book of Canadian Verse in English* and *The New Canadian Poets* are finally one-person projects. *Canadian Poetry*, however, illustrates the adage that "too many cooks spoil the broth." David and Lecker assigned editorial duties for each poet to individual scholars (34 scholars for the 46 poets—Robert Billings manages 5, Ken Norris 3, while Leonard Early, Peter Stevens, Don Conway, Terry Whalen, Zailig Pollock, and Douglas Barbour handle two apiece). This editorial heterogeneity has resulted in grievous textual errors (intermixed and incomplete poems, mistitling, verbal omissions, garbled stanza-breaks, misspellings, and typographical errors). Since many of these have been detailed already in W. J. Keith's review in *Canadian Poetry* (No. 12, Spring/Summer 1983) I shall not repeat the exercise here. I shall merely conclude with the reflection that, since this scholarly carelessness is the product of a selection of Canadian literature's newest generation of "scholars" (George Woodcock is the only representative of the old generation here), we have occasion to regret the practical and fundamental consequences of the New Criticism's long-standing depreciation of scholarship.

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We are deeply saddened by the death in July of Charles R. Steele, an active member of our editorial board and a valued teacher, scholar, and colleague.