



Milton Israel. *In the Further Soil: a Social History of Indo-Canadians in Ontario*. Toronto: Toronto Organization for the Promotion of Indian Culture, 1994. Pp. 165. \$24.95.

In a poem that captures with admirable subtlety the predicament of being an exile in England, Zulfikar Ghose ends with the lines "To this country I have come. / Stranger or an inhabitant, this is my home" ("This Landscape, These People"). In relation to the finality and inevitability of "I have come," the last line remains deliberately open-ended, stressing the paradox of claiming, in unequivocal terms, a home, while accepting the reality of living on the margins.

Milton Israel's *In the Further Soil* is about this ambivalence, about living on the cusp in a country that is both a haven and a reminder of otherness. Its specific focus is the history of Indo-Canadians in Ontario, a large, heterogenous group of people who immigrated to Canada either directly from India or arrived from a range of countries, such as Trinidad, Guyana, Fiji, Sri Lanka, and Uganda, but all of whom share a common Indian ancestry and are collectively known as South Asians. Given the multiplicity of India and the cultural transformation caused by exposure to other cultures in countries where Indians lived for a period of time, this collective label is nothing more than an intellectual construct. And the author is always aware, even as he establishes categories and offers generalizations about the entire group, that definitive statements about the lives of these people must be carefully qualified to reflect their diversity.

The book is not an attempt to theorize about the experience of living on the margins, although it is clear, from occasional comments, that the author is aware of the various positions espoused by theorists and the controversies that have caused so much debate in recent times. Israel's objectives are clear from the beginning: "This book seeks to tell the story of the founding of Indian community life in Ontario. It concerns individual and collective experience of acculturation and adaptation as well as the commitment to cultural defence and resistance to change. It deals with the effort to recreate in an alien land, family life, familiar cultural institutions and the feeling of being at home" (Preface). And this is precisely what is achieved as the author gives both a chronological and synchronic account of Indo-Canadians, tracing their economic, religious, social, and cultural lives. Each part is dealt with in meticulous detail, and the author's expertise in the field of South Asian studies is evident in the ease and fluency with which he handles his material. His strategy of juxtaposing individual episodes with more general accounts humanizes the narrative and gives to it a fullness and authenticity. Every episode, however digressive on first reading, is linked to the more overarching argument that Indo-Canadians have struggled against heavy odds to create for them-

selves a world in which they can live as both Indians and Canadians. As the author points out, "old images and stereotypes of 'benighted India' are being successfully confronted by individual Indians facing the demands of an alien society and making themselves at home" (Introduction xxviii). The book, then, is about the South Asian experience in Ontario, told with objectivity, balance, and honesty.

Arguably, the book is important for the amount of information it offers about Indians. The author has gathered data with painstaking care and thoroughness, making this work valuable as resource material for anyone interested in South Asian studies. The inclusion of oral history—mainly in the form of information gathered through interviews—tells the reader how this history needs to be narrated. Almost sixty years ago, the Indian author Raja Rao wrote in the preface to his novel *Kanthapura* that "the telling has not been easy." That is equally true of this book that seeks to tell the story of a community whose experience in Canada has not found adequate expression. Whether it is the description of how a community organization functions or how a temple service captivates an assembly of worshippers, the author shows a remarkable combination of sensitivity and objectivity in his discussion. For instance, having described a Murugan festival at the Ganesh Temple in Richmond Hill, the author concludes: "Whatever was going on in the distance on Bayview Avenue and beyond, on that day and in that building, these worshippers were carried back to Tiruputi or Jaffna, to the ambience of ancestral home" (56). Time and again the account comes across as being much more than a narrative of events and a compilation of data, although the author's analysis is always scholarly and rigorous.

Of particular significance is chapter 4, devoted to a critical survey and analysis of the literature of the Indo-Ontarian diaspora. By moving from the factual to the imaginative, the author creates an appropriate context for exploring the multiple perspectives offered by contemporary writers. As he points out, "with poetic imagery, symbol, metaphor, dream narrative and irony, Indo-Canadian writers have sought to represent the complexity and tension of immigrant diaspora life" (85). Having referred briefly to writing in Punjabi and Gujarati, he moves to literature in English, about which he is well-informed and very competent. He is aware of the various positions held by both authors and critics and rather than pursue the merits and weaknesses of the various positions, he provides a close textual study of several works, thereby revealing the inherent difficulties of dealing with issues such as centre and margin, mainstream and ethnic. He focuses on such writers as Uma Parameswaran, Moyez Vassanji, Rohinton Mistry, Arnold Itwaru, and Himani Bannerji, drawing attention to their thematic preoccupations and to the various social and psychological stresses they depict in their work.

The book deliberately avoids an in-depth discussion of the psychological stresses faced by the community, both in its interaction with

the non-Indian community and in its attempt to reshape inherited practices to make them regulate and define roles in the nuclear and extended family. Significant as it is, to draw attention to emotional adjustment and trauma in any detail is to shift the focus and write a very different kind of book. The “public” sphere is his concern, and in dealing with it so competently, the author has created a vantage point from which other writers can look at the different facets that make up the South Asian experience. *In the Further Soil* is a notable work, insightful and illuminating, and it is clearly essential reading for anyone interested in the field.

CHELVA KANAGANAYAKAM



Merton M. Sealts, Jr., *Beyond the Classroom: Essays on American Authors*. Columbia: U of Missouri P, 1996. Pp. xvi, 267. \$58.50.

As reviewer-in-waiting, I found I had much in common with the author of *Beyond the Classroom*. I am also of the postwar generation of students and teachers, many of whom shifted from “British literature, which had been the staple of my formal study” (190) to what might be called post-Matthiessen American literature and to the New Critical “value of close reading, the significance of metaphor and symbol, the importance of structure and tone” (190). Like Sealts, I later saw “New Criticism replaced by New Historicism, close reading transformed into deconstruction, and aesthetic considerations giving way—for some at least—to various cultural, ideological, and even overtly political goals” but “still hold firmly to a more open and liberal conception” (190) of literary study. I share his interest in major authors of the American Renaissance. Like him I have tried to combine “experience in the classroom and the scholarship that good teaching must depend on—meaning both original research and assimilation and application of the ongoing work of others” (xii). And I even share his interest in railroads, to the extent of “an O-gauge operation in my own basement” (xiii).

Yet as reviewer I must ask: what kind of book is *Beyond the Classroom*, and what is it good for? It is not a unified critical study like, say, Sealts’s *Emerson on the Scholar*. Nor is it a systematic survey of significant information like his *Melville’s Reading*. Nor is it a teaching or reading edition like Sealts and Ferguson’s *Emerson’s Nature—Origins, Growth, Meaning*. Nor a scholarly edition like Hayford and Sealts’s genetic *Billy Budd, Sailor*. But it does bear traces of all of these.

Beyond the Classroom is chronological in several ways. It is a sequel to Sealts’s *Pursuing Melville, 1940-1980*. In itself it is a sequence of essays, several on Melville’s reading and shorter fiction as we might expect, ordered in three parts. Its checklists, again chronological, of books, of articles, and of reviews, chronicle the complete doings of what Wayne