

“ex-centric” in relation to any notions of centrality (xv). Although Lal’s conclusions are valid, I feel that her theorizing just does not succeed in knitting the three apparently distinct and conflictual critical discourses into a unified, cogent paradigm for interpreting female experience.

It would be fair to accept Lal’s admission in her concluding paragraph that “perhaps inclusiveness rather than integration is the merit of this anthology” (xxi). That does not prevent *Feminist Spaces: Cultural Readings From India and Canada* from being a highly relevant and valuable resource for teachers, students, and researchers in Canadian Studies programmes in India and abroad.

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Frank Birbalsingh. *Novels and the Nation. Essays in Canadian Literature*. Toronto: TSAR, 1995. Pp. xvi, 183. \$19.95.

Frank Birbalsingh gives us the results of more than 20 years of interest in Canadian and postcolonial literature, particularly Caribbean and African. Such a broad outlook enables him to create distance in space as well as in time. The early essays are influenced by Northrop Frye’s myth criticism and makes consistent use of Margaret Atwood’s survival and victimization paradigms. But they also bring fresh insights to a number of the writers under full consideration—about half of the 60 listed in the index.

The 18 essays progressively move from authors such as Stephen Leacock who denied their Canadianness while in fact establishing its roots, to the self-conscious and highly sophisticated sense of nationhood in Neil Bissoondath and Michael Ondaatje. The grouping of essays has some advantages as well as drawbacks. They are self-sufficient and sharply-etched, but some silences remain and repetitions occur. As the title of the collection suggests—“Novels” rather than “the Canadian Novel”—the view is panoramic but does not aim at comprehensiveness: Hugh MacLennan and Margaret Atwood are not given the full-scope examination one could have expected, and a number of important novelists, such as Timothy Findley, Jack Hodgins, Robert Kroetsch, Carol Shields, are left out altogether. Conversely, the essay on E. J. Pratt’s poetry remains alien in a study of the novel. Finally, it might have been advantageous to fuse chapter 16, “South Asian Canadian Novels in English—the 1970s,” and chapter 17, “South Asian Canadian Writers from Africa and the Carribean.” Avoiding repetition concerning Harold Sonny Ladoo or Reshard Gool would have given more room for the particularly illuminating consideration of those writers and possibly others. What I am really saying is that I hope this collection will have an enlarged second edition; the omissions are minor restrictions in a study in which the central concern with na-

tional and personal identity is carefully maintained and the mainly thematic approach is both consistent and necessary.

The first chapter, "Novels and the Nation," traces the development of a Canadian identity as early as John Richardson's *The Canadian Brothers* (1836), Thomas Chandler Haliburton's *Clockmaker* (1836), and Sara Jeannette Duncan's *The Imperialist* (1904), under the double shadow of England and the US. The vision of Canada changes from that of a colonial outpost, then a colonial nation, to MacLennan's and mid-century Canadians' idealistic hopes for the birth of a new nation. Surprisingly, MacLennan's *Two Solitudes* is not discussed although it is germane to the theme. The next two chapters, "Aboriginals in Canadian Literature" and "France in the Canadian Novel," are general in scope, as are chapters 16 and 17. All the other chapters focus on individual authors.

Birbalsingh concludes his study of George Ryga's play *The Ecstasy of Rita Joe* (1970) and Rudy Wiebe's novel *The Temptations of Big Bear* (1973) somewhat optimistically: "Canadian writers contribute more and more to our understanding of the historic role played by indigenous people in the establishment of a Canadian nation" (14). The detailed study of "the writing of aboriginals, from Pauline Johnson to Tomson Highway" (13), suggested in the essay, would be a useful addition to the sympathetically close but still external views of the white writers. Similarly, "France in the Canadian Novel," is restricted to Ringuet's *Trente Arpents*, Gabrielle Roy's *Bonheur d'occasion*, and Roger Lemelin's *Les Plouffe*: the selection aims at depicting the evolution of the "francophone Canadian" sense of being a victim and its connection with nationhood from the early decades of this century to World War II. An additional study of the more militant Québécois writers might have helped to diversify the picture. The outlook is essentially federalist but the study rightly concludes that "French Canadians possess a culture which is not exactly synonymous with the culture of France" (24).

The consideration of individual writers from the consistent standpoint of their share in the development of a Canadian identity often leads to new insights. In "Sara Jeannette Duncan's Indian fiction," Canadian identity unexpectedly emerges as a new form of imperialism. Chapter 5 underlines the paradox of Stephen Leacock's role in the development of a Canadian sensibility, which derives from an environment which is hard to define because of "the ambivalence of its historical and cultural traditions" (44). Chapter 6, "Robertson Davies and Provincialism," places him in a long tradition of Canadian writing. It focuses on his three novels set in the Ontario town of Salterton (based on Kingston), *Tempest Tost* (1951), *Leaven of Malice* (1954) and *A Mixture of Fraillies* (1958). In his examination of "Grove and Existentialism," the author underlines the theme of free will and the capacity

of his characters for "a show of fierce resistance, even when they realize that resistance is futile" (66). It confirms my opinion that voluntarism might well be one of the distinctive features of Canadian writing.

One of the merits of this study is constantly to evaluate Canadian fiction in a worldwide context. Grove's stance is viewed in the larger perspective of Europeans such as Sartre, Camus, Kierkegaard, Nietzsche, Ibsen, Strindberg, and Dostoevsky. Morley Callaghan is paralleled with Frank Sargeson from New Zealand; the Thomist influence of the French philosopher Jacques Maritain on Callaghan is stressed: "his chief protagonists . . . reach deadlock because the idealistic ethics of their beliefs are confronted with human (individual and social) behaviour representing inconsistent, inadequate or reversed ethics" (80).

A number of felicitous comments sum up and sometimes alter significantly the received appraisals of some leading novelists. "Ethel Wilson: Innocent Traveller" (chapter 10) stresses "her subtle blend of actual and fantastic elements" (91). "Richler's early fiction" deals with "the large national problem of assimilating a Canadian identity out of disparate racial and cultural elements" (100). In chapter 12, the African works of Margaret Laurence are reevaluated convincingly: "it is not entirely correct to suppose that these books, or her African experience as a whole, have influenced Laurence's thinking significantly: this early work contributes mainly to her technical development" (108) and the permanent Calvinist foundation of her work is emphasized: "Laurence regards colonialism, physical deformity, and old age as consequences of an imperfect world order—that is to say, of cosmic disorder" (114). Alice Munro's *Lives of Girls and Women* (chapter 13) is viewed sympathetically as a plea for women's liberation and self-respect in a life threatened by contingency. Marian Engel's *Bear* (Chapter 14) "indicts all systems of morality which separate body from mind, flesh from soul, and people from an organic relationship to the physical universe" (138). The next three chapters dealing with Austin Clarke and South Asian writers contain some of the best criticism in this collection of essays. The final chapter, devoted to Michael Ondaatje's prize-winning *English Patient*, offers stimulating insights into the complexities of its symbolic pattern involving its characters in the postcolonial "shared sense of homelessness and placelessness" (171).

On the whole, *Novels and the Nation* offers a balanced, finely perceptive appraisal integrating myth criticism and the more recent insights of postmodernism and postcolonial criticism. It certainly is a significant contribution to the definition of the Canadian novel.

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