

WANTED: RECIPROCITY IN CANADIAN LITERATURE

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IT is taken for granted almost universally to-day that Canada is a nation of two distinctive cultures, as well as two languages. In the now hackneyed phrase, English and French cultures are like two rivers that flow for a long distance side by side but whose waters never mingle. Nowhere is this cultural differentiation more strongly marked than in the field of literature. Canada to-day has two literatures—one English, and one French, and each with its own atmosphere and outlook trends. In modern works dealing with the Canadian scene the two literatures are usually treated in two compartments and little attempt is ever made to work out any similarities or affinities between them. Reading some of the studies of the literary history of Canada by French Canadian writers, one would be completely unaware that English speaking Canada had ever produced any literature of importance or significance; and the English Canadian writers are equally neglectful of French Canadian literary production when they discuss the literary evolution of their country. This is to some degree natural, since French Canadian literature in the past has been an offshoot of the parent literature of France, while English Canadian writers have looked towards London and New York for their models. Yet the fact that English and French Canadian literatures are separate and are probably fated to remain separate in the foreseeable future, does not mean that English and French Canadians should not have some mutual understanding and appreciation of each other's contributions and achievements in this most important realm of national culture.

Yet the ignorance on both sides is really extraordinary—a situation perhaps unparalleled in any other country in the modern world. During recent years, in both English and French Canada, some new figures of impressive originality and power have appeared on the literary horizon. One has only to mention such authors as Hugh MacLennan, Gwethlyn Graham and E. J. Pratt on the English side, and the novelists Roger Lemelin, Gabrielle Roy, and Robert Charbonneau, the historian Guy Fregault, and the chroniclers of Quebec rural life—Claude Henri Grigon and Germaine Gueuremont—on the French side. Yet aside from the first two French names mentioned, English Canadians with literary interests are completely unfamiliar

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with the names or works of any French Canadian writers. *Le Bonheur d'Occasion*, of Gabrielle Roy, and *Au Pied de la Pente Douce*, of Roger Lemelin, have gained their authors a certain amount of esteem in English Canada because these works have been translated into English under the titles of *The Tin Flute* and *The Town Below* and have had a considerable sale in English Canada and in the United States. But the translations were made and put on the market by American publishers in New York, and their renown in English Canada is largely a reflux of the appreciation won in literary circles in the United States. If the average English Canadian gives any thought to French Canadian literature at all, he thinks of it solely in terms of one work—*Marie Chapdelaine*—which was written almost forty years ago, not by a native Quebecer but by a Frenchman who received all his literary training in France. This work, although a masterpiece, is in many ways completely outdated as a realistic picture of life in the Province of Quebec to-day. Quebec has undergone a whole industrial revolution since the days when Louis Hemon set down in immortal prose his impressions of the primitive and hard daily life of the people of Peribonka. English Canadians are completely unaware of the impressive achievements of French Canada in the literary field during the past two decades. They do not know that Quebec literary production is, on the whole, superior to that of English Canada in colour, vitality, and originality of treatment and outlook. The same is true of English Canadian book publishers. Their lists are almost completely bare of translations into English of recent outstanding Quebec novels, or short stories, poetry, and historical works. Even the older nineteenth century Quebec literary figures such as Nelligan, Frechette, Cremazie and Garneau are unknown names in English Canada.

There is a similar lack of knowledge among residents of French Canada regarding contemporary English Canadian literary trends. Here the situation in the City of Montreal—a meeting place of English and French cultures—is interesting indeed. *The Two Solitudes*, of Hugh MacLennan, has been widely praised as one of the most objective and understanding studies yet produced in English of the problem of English-French relationships in Canada. It has been acclaimed from this standpoint, as well as on its purely literary merits, in the United States and England. Yet this important work, which is a landmark, in some respects, in the development of Cana-

dian literature, is virtually unknown in French Canada even among people who are well up on current literary trends in England and the United States. Although French-language book publishing in the City of Montreal is flourishing, no Montreal publisher has yet made a move towards having *The Two Solitudes* translated into French. The same is true of another important work of fiction produced recently by an English Canadian authoress resident in Montreal. Although her *Earth and High Heaven* deals with a subject that deeply concerns all residents of the Province of Quebec, English and French alike—anti-Jewish prejudice—this fine work is almost completely unknown in French Canada. On the other hand, it must be said that cultivated French Canadians have a far wider and more intimate acquaintance with current literature published in England and the United States than the corresponding class of English Canadians have with contemporary literature of France. One often sees a considerable number of books in English in a better class French Canadian home, whereas a book in French is an extreme rarity in a similar English Canadian home. This is probably due to the fact that many French Canadians of the educated class have a fluent reading knowledge of English, while the number of English Canadians who have even a nodding acquaintance with the French printed page and word is small indeed. The same situation is noticeable with regard to the circulation of daily newspapers in the city of Montreal. Many of the French speaking residents of the city read regularly the English daily prints—the *Gazette*, the *Star*, and the *Herald*; but an English speaking person reading *La Presse* or *Le Canada*, or *Le Devoir*, on a street car or in a restaurant is a sight so very unusual as to invite comment.

There is thus abundant evidence that the cultural gulf between English and French Canada is much wider and deeper in the field of literature than in those of the plastic arts and music. In the realms of painting and music there is considerable knowledge and appreciation on both sides. French Canadian newspapers and "revues" often devote space to the discussion of new works by English Canadian painters and sculptors, and certain French Canadian musicians are becoming well known in English Canada. There is at least one Canadian art journal published in Ottawa that gives almost equal space to the discussion of the work of English and French Canadian artists.

It is a pity that this understanding cannot be extended to the field of literature. It is through studying modern French Canadian novels, short stories, poetry and historical works that an outsider can get the best comprehension of the Quebec outlook and of French Canadian ways of life. A thorough reading of *Les Plouffe*—Roger Lemelin's new and masterly study of working class life and manners in the Lower Town of Quebec City—gives the English Canadian a far better insight into modern Quebec than struggling through volumes of statistics and official reports. Certainly, knowledge of this type would contribute far more to mutual understanding on both sides than the all too frequent speeches of politicians—English and French alike—on the pressing need for national unity.

It is difficult to suggest just what can be done about this situation, which is most unsatisfactory from every angle. But English Canadian colleges and universities could devote more space and time in their French courses to the study of French Canadian literature, both past and present—both for its own sake and as reflecting the general life of French Canada. Take, for example, the current catalogue of McGill University in Montreal. Although it offers many courses to its pass and honour students on the development of literature in France, there is not a single course devoted solely to French Canadian literary production, and not a single French Canadian work is mentioned among its prescribed texts. It should not be left to New York publishers and literary critics to acquaint English Canadians with works written in their own country with a completely Canadian viewpoint and background. Here is one field where closer cultural relations could be of inestimable value both to Canadian literature and to the wider cause of Canadian national unity.