## Landscape and Authenticity: The Development of National Literatures in Canada and Australia

When Margaret Atwood visited Australia in 1978, she received an enthusiastic welcome. Her book, Survival: A Thematic Guide to Canadian Literature, sparked a shock of recognition: Australians felt she was talking about them! And indeed the two countries have much in common. They share similar colonial histories. In Atwood's words, they both "have had a physical environment which has been out of synch, with their cultural environment, because their cultural environment has come from elsewhere." The problem each country's literature faces, then, is similar: how to find an indigenous voice when the language and literary forms one has inherited have developed elsewhere in reponse to another environment. The cultural heritage too is similar: it comes from Britain, Neither the English language nor English mythology is indigenous to Canada or Australia. Only the local landscapes in the two countries are different - in some ways, almost diametrically opposed. Thus the problems they faced were similar although different in kind because the Australian landscape posed greater difficulties for adjustment. It was easier to pretend one was in England here than there.

Australia has always been the antipodes for the northern hemisphere. As the Great South Land, it has its opposite in Canada, the Great North Land. Why compare the two? In many ways the two countries seem to be mirror images of one another, superficially similar because they share a common British ancestry and each has inherited a colonial economy based on resource extraction, but fundamentally unalike to anyone who looks more deeply. Like Alice in Through the Looking Glass, we may learn from penetrating beyond the familiar reflections of our world into a world which is at once very like our own yet unfamiliar. The familiar in unfamiliar surroundings may assume new dimensions and take on new life as shades of difference become apparent, as familiar words take on different connotations.

For example, simple words like snow and sun may arouse different responses in the two countries. They denote the same things, but their connotations are different. Advertising lures Canadians to "escape to the sun", while anyone in a tropical country most often desires escape from the sun. For this reason, the Guvanese writer Wilson Harris believes that idealization of the sun is an "American attitude", a result of American idealism; in the West Indian world, in contrast, the sun becomes a terrible adversary.<sup>2</sup> Similarly, the Australian poet Ives Murray has spoken of the difficulty of writing in an English manner when "the sun gets in the way"3, and the Australian novelist Martin Boyd contrasts England, "the land where it was always afternoon", and where the indoor and outdoor worlds harmonized perfectly, with the sunlit land of Australia, where it seemed to be eternally morning and to "go out of doors was like entering a vast scorching oven." In Canada too indoors has so often represented a refuge from outdoors that Northrop Frye has coined a term for it: the garrison mentality.5 At first especially, Canadians and Australians tried to make their homes into little Englands, shutting out the alien landscape around them. Yet at the same time they were proud of having survived in such a threatening environment. There is always a tendency to make a patriotic identification with the harshest elements of the climate, so that Canadians sing, "Mon pays, c'est l'hiver", while Australians recite: "I love a sunburnt country." The few books I have found in which Australians write about Canada, or Canadians about Australia, also employ these stereotypes. Australians love to dream of the ideal purity of snow, but when confronted with its actuality they long for the sun of their native land. The many Canadian poems and stories about snow - like the Inuit repertory of words for this element - reveal its centrality to our imagination.

Within both Canada and Australia there is a disparity between outside and inside, between British values and perceptions and an alien landscape. But Canadians tend to develop a love/hate relationship with snow and often long for its opposite, the sunshine, while Australians tend to develop a love/hate relationship with the sun, and often long for its opposite, the snow.

The role of these stereotypes in developing a national culture and a local sense of language can be difficult to trace. Cultural history is a complex study; even its groundrules have not yet been clearly established. Scholes and Kellogg provide some guidance in *The Nature of Narrative* when they point out that "in practice all aesthetic choices are conditioned by cultural factors which vary from one time and place to another... the artist... can only choose from what is available to him, and this is a matter partly of literary tradition and partly of moment

and milieu." But how do these choices actually work? How much depends on time, how much on place, and how much on what earlier writers have decided? Perhaps a look at some of the choices made by writers in Canada and Australia as they sought to articulate their experience in an appropriate language may provide some answers.

The physical environment and the cultural environment were out of synch. How did writers try to bring them together? How did they take what Jack Hodgins has called "borrowed words" and make them their own? At first, many writers didn't try. They wrote out of their acute sense of exile of their distaste for the new land and their longing for home.

To the first settlers in Canada and Australia, the wilderness seemed less real than the European civilization they had left behind, yet carried with them in their language and in their assumptions which their language reflected, and which determined what they saw and heard in what they called "the new land". Again language is a good indicator of biassed perspective. Whereas the native inhabitants thought of the land as mother earth, the new settlers saw it as virgin territory. Because their ears were not attuned to new sounds, they called the unfamiliar birds, "songless"; because their eyes were not attuned to new sights, they called the landscape dreary; because their educations had not prepared them to understand different cultures, they called the aboriginal inhabitants they encountered "savages".

The Australian poet Adam Lindsay Gordon begins his "Dedication" to a collection of his verse entitled *Bush Ballads and Galloping Rhymes*, by apologizing:

They are rhymes rudely strung with intent less of sound than of words In lands where bright blossoms are scentless, And songless bright birds.8

About the same time in Canada, Alexander McLachlan described a similar reaction in his long poem "The Emigrant":

Lovely birds of gorgeous dye Flitted 'mong the branches high, Coloured like the setting sun, But were songless every one.9

Nature is perceived as inarticulate, because no human voice, at least in English, has yet attempted to interpret her, to translate her non-human existence into human terms.

The first efforts at translation were stumbling at best. Poets like Robert Service, William Henry Drummond, and Pauline Johnson in Canada were popular because they dealt in national stereotypes, mythologizing the frozen North Land, the quaint habitant and the romantic Indian for a European audience that wanted to see Canada as an exotic land of adventure and for a local audience desperate for any reflection of itself, however distorted. The content of their poetry was self-consciously Canadian. But there was also some attempt at creating a Canadian voice, at least in Drummond and Johnson. (Service is really just a Canadian Kipling.) Drummond introduced the halting English of the French Canadian peasant in poems which celebrated a simple life in harmony with the rhythms of the seasons and the cycles of farming the land:

But I tole you - dat's true - I don't go on de city
If you geev de fine house an' beaucoup d'argent —
I rader be stay me, an' spen' de las' day me
On farm by de rapide dat's call Cheval Blanc. 10

Pauline Johnson's "The Song My Paddle Sings" tries to create a distinctively Canadian rhythm through its imitation of the paddle's dip and lift:

The river rolls in its rocky bed; My paddle is plying its way ahead; Dip, dip, While the waters flip In foam as over their breast we slip.<sup>11</sup>

Their work contributed to the belief that the distinctively Canadian was to be found in the natural world rather than in the city.

In Australia a similar belief emerged from the debate between Henry Lawson and Banjo Paterson about the relative merits of Sydney or the bush. Gordon's "galloping rhymes" were the Australian equivalent of Johnson's dipping rhythms. His poem, "From the Wreck", borrows its theme - a race to bring news - and its galloping rhythm from the English poet Browning's "How We Brought the Good News From Ghent to Aix". Only the setting is Australian, although the identification with the horse soon became so:

There was bridling with hurry, and saddling with haste,
Confusion and cursing for lack of a moon.

"Be quick with these buckles, we've not time to waste."

"Mind the mare, she can use her hindlegs to some tune."

"Make sure of the crossing-place; strike the old track,
They've fenced off the new one; look out for the holes
On the wombat hills." "Down with the slip rails; stand back."

"And ride, boys the pair of you, ride for your souls." 12

This kind of poetry led the Canadian anthologist Lighthall to conclude that "Australian rhyme is a poetry of the horse; Canadian, of the

canoe."13 Unfortunately, the influence of geography on poetry isn't quite so simple. We reject this kind of criticism today, just as we reject poetry of the "maple leaf" school in Canada and of the "gum tree and wattle" school in Australia. Canadian content alone doesn't make a Canadian poem. Culture would be much easier to understand if it were simply geographically determined.

The Canadian critic Milton Wilson has labelled Lighthall's approach the "geographical fallacy": that tendency to measure Canadianism by the image, "tamaracks and totem-poles instead of dryads and nightingales". It would be more profitable, he suggests, to concentrate attention on how images are transformed and transplanted. <sup>14</sup> The image itself is less important than its function. Canoes and horses are less important than the ways they are used to show human beings working in harmony with their new landscapes and forging a new sense of national identity.

The receptions accorded these efforts differed in the two countries. In the 1890s Australians built up their famous Legend of mateship and men battling the bush, while Canadians' sense of their collective identity remained nebulous. The "galloping rhymes" contributed to a sense of "aggressive Australianism" while the paddle's song was drowned out, in Canada, by the more acomplished but predominatly nostalgic poetry of the Confederation group: Roberts, Carman, Lampman and Scott. Instead of depicting man within the landscape, these writers tended to stand back from a scene and describe it as if it were a still life painting. As Lampman put it, they were "content to watch and dream." 16

Painting in the two countries also reflected the different ways of seeing and responding to the landscape which were developing as settlement proceeded. Like the writers, early painters saw with English eyes. Homer Watson produced Canadian landscapes which were acclaimed because of their resemblances to Constable's English landscapes. Louis Buvelot, the "Father of Landscape Painting in Australia", "enjoyed the eucalypt", but couldn't help seeing it "against a background of European recollections." The two large trees in his Waterpool at Coleraine, for example, "give the distinct impression of being a kind of cross between eucalypt and oak." Nonetheless, the effort he made in this painting to capture the atmospheric colour of Australian scenery, though only partially successful, did inspire the writer Marcus Clarke to consider the problem more thoroughly in what has become a famous piece of Australian prose. 19

Clarke views the natural world as a text to be interpreted by the colonial artist. In this he differs from North American writers in both the United States and Canada who see themselves as new Adams in a

"world yet scarcely uttered". For them, an object doesn't really exist until it has been named; they are creators; they breathe significance into hitherto lifeless matter. For Clarke, the writer is less a creator than an interpreter; instead of imposing his own name on an object, he should try to learn the name it gives itself. This is quite close to contemporary Canadian thinking, at least as expressed by Margaret Atwood in her *Journals of Susanna Moodie*, where her protagonist comes to believe that she needs "wolf's eyes to see the truth".<sup>20</sup> The Adam metaphor is now being rejected. But Clarke published his piece in 1876. It's well worth quoting at some length. He argues that

there is a poem in every form of tree or flower, but the poetry which lives in the trees or flowers of Australia differs from those of other countries.... In Australia alone is to be found the Grotesque, the Wierd, the strange scribblings of nature learning how to write. Some see no beauty in our trees without shade, our flowers without perfume, our birds who cannot fly, and our beasts who have not yet learned to walk on all fours. But the dweller in the wilderness acknowledges the subtle charm of this fantastic land of monstrosities. He becomes familiar with the beauty of loneliness. Whispered to by the myriad tongues of the wilderness, he learns the language of the barren and uncouth, and can read the hieroglyphs of haggard gum-trees.... The phantasmagoria of that wild dream-land termed the Bush interprets itself, and the Poet of our desolation begins to comprehend why free Esau loved his heritage of desert sand better than all the bountiful riches of Egypt.<sup>21</sup>

The issue of perspective is central here. To the outsider there is no beauty in the Australian landscape, but to "the dweller in the wilderness", the insider, there is beauty if the other language can be learned. In Atwood's words, "Whether the wilderness is real or not depends on who lives there." But not just who lives there. Position in the landscape is also important. You will see one thing from the top of a hill and another from the valley below. As Frye says, the question is not "Who am I?" but "Where is here?" An obsession with the self must yield to a curiosity about the selfhood of the place one finds oneself in. Receptivity must replace aggression.

Clarke is consciously mythologizing here, taking what are assumed to be faults and reclaiming them as virtues. In the absence of human history, he stresses the ancientness of the land itself, and argues that the authentically Australian expresses its identity through the natural world rather than through the social institutions which have been transplanted from abroad. Much the same arguments were put forward in nineteenth century Canada. There too writers alternated between seeing Canada as "the land that God gave Cain" and as a "new Eden", "fairer far/than Eden's self". Each country was seen as simultaneously prison-house and new Britannia. There was hope for

the future but there was also an exile's longing for what had been left behind. An ancient geological past was substituted for a human past. English visitors to Canada, like William Francis Butler, tended to see an "utter negation of life" and a "complete absence of history"26 where native-born writers, like Charles Sangster, saw a mystery which might prove forever inaccessible to them, because of who they were and how they came. Sangster mourns: "We cannot lift the mantle of the past:/ We seem to wander over hallowed ground:/ We scan the trail of Thought, but all is overcast."27 Colonial melancholy gave way to a new optimism toward the turn of the century with Confederation in Canada and Federation in Austalia. A national, plein-air school of painting came to prominence in each country: the Heidelberg School in late nineteenth century Australia, and the Group of Seven in early twentieth century Canada. The most frequent observation made of the difference between the two groups, and between Australian and Canadian painting in general, is an important one. The best known Canadian paintings seem to be landscapes without people, whereas the best known Australian paintings are peopled landscapes and even portraits.

Although "sun-drenched optimism and gaiety of spirit"28 characterized much of the work of the Heidelberg School, the strain of colonial melancholy was not completely abandoned. Frederick McCubbin's The Lost Child (1886) and Tom Roberts' The Breakaway (1891) are well-known examples of these contrary impulses toward melancholy on the one hand and toward high spirits on the other. Most significantly, both are a new kind of history painting, recording common incidents of Australian life instead of the traditional subjects from ancient, European history. The lost child, a common motif in literature of the period in both countries, deals with the fear of being swallowed up by the bush, taken over by the natural world and even by the primitive urges within ourselves, all of which seemed an immediate threat in a pioneering community. The Australian children's movie Manganinnie provides a modern, romanticized version of this common colonial occurence. The Breakaway, in contrast, celebrates man's ability to cope with these forces and to domesticate nature. But both tell stories; they share an interest in narrative.

The Canadian landscape, as you know, has inspired a very different kind of painting. Arthur Lismer has called Tom Thomson's *The West Wind* "the spirit of Canada made manifest in a picture."<sup>29</sup> Russell Dryesdale's paintings, particularly *The Drover's Wife*, occupy a somewhat similar position in the Australian consciousness.<sup>30</sup> What can these two paintings tell us about the national spirit of the two countries?

The West Wind celebrates the harsh beauty of the land independent of people. It is self-sustaining and independant. To put people in this environment would be to expose their irrelevance and their puniness. But their absence tells us a great deal about their self-image, about the value they place on themselves and about how they perceive the relations between man and nature in this country. A. J. M. Smith's poem, "The Lonely Land", is the literary equivalent of this painting. It begins:

Cedar and jagged fir uplift sharp barbs against the gray and cloud-piled sky; and in the bay blown spume and windrift and thin, bitter spray snap at the whirling ski; and the pine trees lean one way.

## And ends:

This is the beauty of strength broken by strength and still strong.<sup>31</sup>

The image of the wind-swept tree dominates the poem as it does the painting. There is no story here; only a lyric moment celebrating, not the strength of the human, but the strength of the non-human, some would say the sub-human.

Compare this to The Drover's Wife, itself inspired by a Henry Lawson short story and the source of inspiration for other stories since. The title alone directs attention to the human figure in its outback setting. Both paintings confront the loneliness and harshness of an inhospitable landscape, but in The West Wind humanity seems irrelevant, whereas in The Drover's Wife it demands recognition. The West Wind simply is, demanding and giving nothing; The Drover's Wife invites speculation. Who is she? Why is she there? What is she doing? Murray Bail, a contemporary Australian writer, addresses these questions in a short story of the same title. The narrator of the story recognizes "the drover's wife" as his own, runaway wife and tries to piece together her story from the evidence in the painting: "The picture gives little away though. It is the outback - but where exactly? South Australia? It could easily be Queensland, West Australia, the Northern Territory. We don't know. You could never find that spot."32 The typicality of the outback landscape defeats his effort to individualize it, but he succeeds in giving the woman a name - "Hazel" - and a history.

Why should the Australian imagination favour narrative, while the Canadian imagination leans to the lyric? It does seem to be true that Australia's strength lies in her novels, while Canada's is in her poetry. No Canadian novelist can rival Patrick White or Christina Stead; few Australian poets can rival the host of excellent Canadian poets writing today. It is one of the choices that has determined the different directions taken by Australian and Canadian literatures after their common beginnings. Much more work must be done in comparative cultural history before any conclusions can be reached about why these choices were made instead of others. Landscape and climate were equally forbidding. Population was equally sparse. The people in the two countries, however, were already beginning to see themselves in different ways.

In 1954 Hugh Kenner commented on the Canadian tendency to identify with an unpeopled landscape in an article entitled "The Case of the Missing Face". He wrote:

The surest way to the hearts of a Canadian audience is to inform them that their souls are to be identified with rocks, rapids, wilderness, and virgin (but exploitable) forest. This pathological craving for identification with the subhuman may be illustrated in every department of Canadian culture... The primary critical question in Canada today is whether it is yet safe to cut the umbilical cord to the wilderness: whether it is time to conduct a new raid on the inarticulate.<sup>33</sup>

Australians have their own "umbilical cord to the wilderness", their myths of the outback and the bush, but they lack our "craving for identification with the subhuman". In recent years the problem in Australia has been the opposite of ours. While Canadians wondered if they had a national identity, Australians felt inhibited and confined by the limitations of theirs. As a result, a continual atmosphere of questioning pervades writing in both countries.

Two images which continue to draw on the metaphorical possibilities of this umbilical cord to the wilderness may help us to understand some of the differences between the two countries' literatures. These images are the drowned poet in Canada and the doomed explorer in Australia. Although the drowned poet recurs with great frequency in Canadian writing, the supreme treatment of the theme appears in A. M. Klein's "Portrait of the Poet as Landscape". This poem brings the two arts of landscape painting and portraiture together in a manner which confirms Kenner's concern with "the missing face". The poet becomes the landscape, the body of the world, bringing both himself and the world into being through his "seeding of illusions".

Nothing exists until it has been named; the poet is the 'nth Adam taking a green inventory/in world but scarcely uttered". He "makes of his status as zero a rich garland,/a halo of his anonymity,/and lives alone, and in his secret shines/like phosphorus. At the bottom of the sea."<sup>34</sup> Out of the colonial silence comes a new flowering of achievement, just as Marcus Clarke had predicted, but it is a flowering that comes at the expense of individuality. Even our portraits depict man as landscape.

A. D. Hope's poem "Australia" may be seen as the Australian equivalent of "Portrait of the Poet as Landscape". Deliberately echoing Clarke's imagery and mood, Hope writes of Australia as a "drab" and "desolate" land, "Where second-hand Europeans pullulate/ Timidly on the edge of alien shores." "Yet", he concludes

Yet there are some like me turn gladly home From the lush jungle of modern thought, to find The Arabian desert of the human mind. Hoping, if still from the deserts the prophets come,

Such savage and scarlet as no green hills dare Springs in that waste, some spirit which escapes The learned doubt, the chatter of cultured apes Which is called civilization over there.<sup>35</sup>

The supposed cultural desert may yield a spiritual insight and an unfolding of beauty impossible elsewhere. The same hope is expressed in each poem, but each uses metaphors which grow from its own national experience. And in the Canadian poem, the poet is immersed in the landscape, whereas in the Australian poem he rises from it.

The Australian Nobel prize winning novelist, Patrick White, writes of his return to Australia after many years overseas in an essay which could be seen as a prose equivalent of Hope's poem "Australia". Like Clarke, White understands "the beauty of loneliness". He suggests that

Possibly all art flowers more readily in silence.... Writing, which had meant the practice of an art by a polished mind in civilized surroundings, became a struggle to create completely fresh forms out of the rocks and sticks of words. I began to see things for the first time.<sup>36</sup>

"To see things for the first time", to rid themselves of the useless cultural baggage brought from Europe so that they can see the land with its own eyes and write of it in its own voice, creating "completely fresh forms out of the rocks and sticks of words" - this has been the challenge for artists in Canada and Australia. When Atwood's Moodie persona recognized that as an Englishwoman in Canada she was "a word/in a foreign language"<sup>37</sup>, she realized too that she would need "wolf's eyes to see/the truth".

Both White and Atwood have written parables about this process in their novels Voss and Surfacing. These novels narrate spiritual quests which involve actual journeys to the heart of the land (the centre in Australia, up north and under water in Canada), and which involve also emotional participation on the part of the imaginative woman in the quest of the scientific male. In each case, the explorations are both inner and outer, searching for self-knowledge and a sense of belonging in the new land. Each implies that the rational, masculine and European intelligence must die before an indigenous imagination may take shape. The central characters shed layer after layer of civilized excrescences until in nakedness and silence a new consciousness is born. Both novels explore the paradoxes involved in Atwood's knowledge that home ground is also foreign territory38 through what White's heroine Laura calls "death by torture in the country of the mind". 39 And in each novel, language and the nature of the narrative itself are called into question as the text attempts to reinvent its world.

After the original obsession with naming, which often assigned familiar European names to new and quite different species, artists in both countries came to realize, like Atwoods' protagonist in Surfacing, that they must learn a new language if they were to find a new way of perceiving their own reality. This is what is happening right now in both countries. In Margaret Laurence's The Diviners, her artist-protagonist Morag Gunn, ends her marriage to the English expatriate Brooke Skilton, significantly her English teacher, with the realization that she does not know the sound of her own voice. 40 Canadian and Australian writers are still learning the sound of their own voices. And their readers are learning that nationality has less to do with sun or snow, gum trees or maple trees, than it does with our attitudes toward them, and toward ourselves.

The Australian identification with Atwood's Survival confirms objections that Atwood was erroneously claiming a universal theme to be uniquely Canadian. We can only learn to recognize what is distinctively Canadian by studying what is not. Even if one accepts Atwood's initial proposition that each country possesses a central image which defines its identity, "survival" is clearly of a different order from the "island" she proposes for Britain or the "frontier" she suggests for the United States. Survival, unlike these other two, is a state of being, not a geographical position. More suitable would be the historian Creighton's partially discredited "Great River" theory, which works well enough for Eastern Canada but not for the West, or Desmond Morton's concept of the North for Canada, and the Island Continent with its dead heart of desert for Australia. Atwood herself recognized the centrality of these images when she told Jim Davidson, the editor of

the Australian journal Meanjin, that "the North is to Canada as the Outback is to Australia ... and as Africa is, shall we say, to The Heart of Darkness. It's the place where you go to find something out. It's the place of the unconscious. It's the place of the journey or the quest."41 Within Canada and Australia, the North and the Outback fulfill similar functions, often as civilization's shadow, its suppressed self, and therefore to come to terms with the North or with the Outback is to come to terms with oneself and with one's life in that country. Thus geography provides us with our characteristic metaphors, but seems to have little impact on how we employ them. Our histories have been determined by our struggles to synchronize our physical environments and our cultural environments. The Outback, with its doomed explorers and emergent prophets, has been a prominent image in Australia, while the North and the image of the drowned poet were prominent in Canada. A common problem has prompted different solutions. By studying these differences, we may learn more about ourselves.

## NOTES

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