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Under Scrutiny, Under Siege: The Nation in Contemporary Canadian Literary Criticism

Unreal Country: Modernity in the Canadian Novel in English. By Glenn Willmott. Montreal and Kingston: McGill-Queen's UP, 2002. 248 pages. \$65.00.

Setting in the East: Maritime Realist Fiction. By David Creelman. Montreal and Kingston: McGill-Queen's UP, 2003. 247 pages. \$75.00.

Speculative Fictions: Contemporary Canadian Novelists and the Writing of History. By Herb Wyile. Montreal and Kingston: McGill-Queen's UP, 2002. 316 pages. \$75.00.

Five-Part Invention: A History of Literary History in Canada. By E.D. Blodgett. Toronto: U of Toronto P, 2003. 371 pages. \$65.00.

Imagined Nations: Reflections on Media in Canadian Fiction. By David Williams. Montreal and Kingston: McGill-Queen's UP, 2003. 278 pages. \$70.00.

If Canada has always been an imagined community, it has never been one with a communal imagination. The nation was and remains profoundly unsettled, its debts undying, its accounts unclosed.

—Glenn Willmott, *Unreal Country*

MANY OF THE BOOKS REVIEWED here start by evoking Benedict Anderson's familiar argument about the nation as an imagined community, but the trenchant, speculative nature of Glenn Willmott's introduction to the paradox of Canada's "long history of ...

postnationalism” distinguishes his opening gambit and typifies his entire project (3). The goal of Willmott’s *Unreal Country: Modernity in the Canadian Novel in English* is to establish a coherent frame of reference for modern Canadian fiction in English. His argument hinges on the early twentieth-century prevalence of the Canadian *Bildungsroman* and its capacity to reveal the structures and idiosyncracies of Canadian modernity. Drawing on a familiar postcolonial argument about the suitability of the *Bildungsroman* as site for the exploration—via allegory—of a nation’s coming of age, Willmott argues that “the nation as youth metaphor pervades the popular culture of Canada, which everywhere prophesies the need for, and looks for signs of the maturity of, a ‘national consciousness’” (19). He then goes on to demonstrate that the distinctiveness of the modern Canadian *Bildungsroman* has to do with its setting, suggesting that, while modernity in Canada was a period marked by unprecedented urban and industrial growth, the favoured setting of these texts is not the city, but the small town.

Through a number of very rigorous and enthusiastic close readings of a wide range of canonical and non-canonical novels, Willmott argues for a regional modernity that is simultaneously metropolitan and regional, cosmopolitan and colonial. For example, he suggests that Sara Jeannette Duncan’s novel *The Imperialist* “lures the unsuspecting reader into the cliché community of the place, only in order, ironically, to deconstruct our sense of its unity at every turn” (54). In *The Imperialist*, as in so many of the novels he studies, Willmott articulates a tension between a realist plot and perspective used to develop a sense of regional identity, and a modernist distortion of that plot and perspective in the “abstraction of regional into larger spaces with fluid and unpredictable proportions” (60). In chapter 1 he adapts an argument of Mark Taylor’s and calls the aesthetic tension between realism and abstraction “disfigurement” (60). In chapter 2 Willmott develops his argument about the aesthetics and the implications of disfiguring through readings of Bertram Brooker’s *Think of the Earth* and Sinclair Ross’s *As For Me and My House*. Chapters 3 and 4 consider how gender and region are encoded in a variety of modern Canadian novels. By way of example, Willmott’s tremendously subtle and complex reading of Thomas Raddall’s *The Nymph and the Lamp* links the novel’s very ambivalent feminism to a particularly Canadian expression of antimodernism that is inflected by the ideology of im-

perialism: while scrupulously attending to the many contradictions that characterize Raddall's protagonist, Isabel Jardine, Willmott demonstrates how "imperialism posits an antimodernist frontier which frees the individual from the determining form and power of his or her modern society, not as the freedom of a manly individualism, but as the freedom of a restored paternalism in individual experience" (181).

Glenn Willmott is a versatile scholar who ranges widely between and within the disciplines of postcolonial theory, geography, history, communications, and art history. As a result, he demands rather a lot of his reader. That said, one of the book's many strengths is its spare, elegant prose, and its scrupulously clear presentation of difficult theoretical material. But, what really makes *Unreal Country* shine is the originality and the conviction of its close readings. Because some of the books that Willmott takes on have received little scholarly or popular attention—I'm thinking, for example, of Duncan's *A Daughter of Today* or Brooker's *Think of the Earth*—and because Willmott's close readings invariably produce such strong material, my only complaint is that he might have devoted more space to them.

David Creelman's *Setting in the East: Maritime Realist Fiction* is also valuable for its attention to non-canonical novels. Creelman examines English-language Maritime fiction published between 1920 and 2000, tracing some of the many ways in which the region's fiction has been shaped by its history and culture. Chapters 1 through 4 explore both the role of nostalgia and the tension between the traditions of realism and romance in works by Frank Parker Day, Hugh MacLennan, Thomas Raddall, Charles Bruce, and Ernest Buckler. Chapters 5 through 8 consider works written since the 1960s, and include writers as diverse as Alden Nowlan, Budge Wilson, and Leo McKay. Throughout, Creelman draws heavily on Ian McKay's argument that the disruption and loss born of endemic economic deprivation in the Maritimes has been thoroughly reworked by a tourist industry keen to market the Maritimes as an innocent, antimodern idyll. In contrast with those critics who "reproduce positivist definitions" of regional identity (6), Creelman sets out to demonstrate that whatever common ethos exists in the Maritimes resides not in a "sense of shared community" but in the reconstructed memory of an idyllic lost continuity (Kulyk Keefer quoted in Creelman 6). For the most part he is successful. How-

ever, the first four chapters are stronger than the last four, where Creelman's treatment of his texts tends to be cursory and consists largely of plot summaries. Interestingly, he chooses to devote a single chapter to the seven women writers whose work he discusses, despite his concern that doing so "runs the risk of ghettoizing" them (200). Although he conjectures that this risk is "worth taking if it demonstrates the powerful and productive relationship that has developed in the Maritimes between realism and feminism" (200), one wonders why he couldn't have pursued that relationship while devoting more attention to these texts and allowing for the differences among them. For instance, Ann-Marie MacDonald is easily one of the most commercially and critically successful of the writers studied by Creelman, but he devotes less than five pages to her epic novel *Fall On Your Knees*. Similarly, he would have done better to explore the debt that Lynne Coady's bleak stories about dysfunctional families owes to David Adams Richards's unremittingly grim Miramichi trilogy, rather than reading Coady alongside Donna Smyth's *Quilt*, a much more optimistic novel that affirms the redemptive possibilities of a female-centred community.

Herb Wyile's *Speculative Fictions: Contemporary Canadian Novels and the Writing of History* also provides a comparative analysis of a large number of very diverse texts. This book extends and co-ordinates contemporary scholarship on the role of history in late twentieth-century Canadian fiction by considering how contemporary writers like Guy Vanderhaeghe, Jane Urquhart, and Thomas Wharton have sustained the historiographical projects initiated in the 1970s by novelists like Timothy Findley and Rudy Wiebe. Although Wyile concludes that recent historical novels tend to be less experimental and less innovative than their predecessors, his close readings of these novels render very strong material. For example, although Wyile argues that Vanderhaeghe's *The Englishman's Boy* lacks the self-conscious polyphony of Wiebe's *The Temptations of Big Bear*, his highly original and very confident reading of *Boy*'s "contrapuntal structure" is one the highlights of *Speculative Fictions*.

A subsequent attempt to pair Michael Ondaatje's *In the Skin of a Lion* with Thomas Wharton's *Icelfields* is less satisfying. Given Wharton's obvious stylistic debt to Ondaatje, Wyile's decision to extend a familiar argument about the extent to which the lush aestheticism of Ondaatje's novel compromises its political energies

to *Icefields* makes good sense. But Wylie's argument that both books "inscrib(e) an uncertainty and skepticism about historiographical practice and commodity culture" while also "'investing' in history as the raw material for the production of marketable fiction" lacks rigour (215): he does a good job of outlining and applying Fredric Jameson's argument that the culture of consumerism functions by effacing the politics and dynamics of production and by reifying the product, but his argument that Wharton "exploits" the past "as material in the creation of a product" is undercut (217), somewhat ironically, by his own very thorough and convincing close reading of *Icefields*' indictment of consumerism. Though Wylie's conclusion that "many contemporary historical novels are at least openly trying to address [their] complicity" in consumer capitalism "through their representations of an erstwhile past" is somewhat unsatisfying (237), his close, careful engagement with *Icefields*, *The Englishman's Boy*, and a number of other recent Canadian novels that have not yet received much scholarly attention is enough to strongly recommend his book.

Wylie's book ends where E.D. Blodgett's *Five Part Invention: A History of Literary History in Canada* begins, with a consideration of the viability of national frameworks as paradigms for literary criticism. Both men are concerned to ward off what they understand to be a waning interest in "the specific modalities of historical and cultural experience in Canada" (Wylie 258). But whereas Wylie's interest has to do with the increasing globalization of literary studies, Blodgett's concern lies less with the question of where Canadian literature is going and more with the question of where it has been.

Beginning with the notion that the generic function of a national literary history is to construct the nation, Blodgett uses literary histories published between 1864 and 1999 to examine the unique and complementary narratives with which various national groups—English-Canadians, French-Canadians, First Nations, Inuit, and ethnic minority Canadians—have demonstrated their different responses to the notion of nationhood. For example, he convincingly argues that historians of Quebec literature have tended to monumentalize the past, while English-Canadian literary historians have tended to construct the nation as a spatial artefact, and have, for the most part, failed to address questions of time and history. He then argues—though with regrettable brevity—that Canadian

histories of First Nations, Inuit, and ethnic minority literature are frequently organized around the idea of rupture, if not catastrophe, and that they tend to assume that “‘Canada’ has no ontological function” (210). Whether or not one accepts Blodgett’s claim that the brevity of this section of the book depends on a dearth of relevant material, there are some surprising omissions here. For example, George Elliott Clarke’s *Odysseys Home: Mapping African-Canadian Literature* (2002) may have been published too late for inclusion in *Five Part Invention*, but the many earlier essays in which Clarke “maps” the history African-Canadian literature deserve attention. It’s also likely that James Doyle’s *Progressive Heritage: The Evolution of a Politically Radical Literary Tradition in Canada* (2002) is too recent for *Five Part Invention*, but its absence, like that of Larry McDonald’s “Socialism and the English Canadian Literary Tradition,” is a reminder of Blodgett’s failure to address the history and historicization of working-class Canadian writing.

As a rejoinder to the current fashion for scholarly work that assumes “the immanence of the cultural ideas of instability” and that understands “difference as the only catalyst of change” (288–89), Blodgett works hard to articulate the structure and form of the various theoretical and ideological positions inhabiting his source texts, and to thus shore up the idea of the nation against the “challenge of multiple contexts” (289). At a time when the vogue for certain kinds of poststructural and postnational theories has encouraged a sometimes uncritical celebration of hybridity, alterity, and all that is inchoate, this strikes me as laudable. And, as the first extensive study of Canadian literary histories, Blodgett’s book is a significant contribution to Canadian literary studies. But it’s hard going. Given that he begins the book by acknowledging that literary history is a moribund genre, a body of work that is often consulted but rarely read, it is perhaps uncharitable to lament that the book is not more lively, but such is my feeling.

Blodgett begins chapter 1 by lamenting that early literary histories of Canada are too often read from a vantage point that makes them appear “substantively outdated, offering little more than ancillary assistance in the critical study of literature” (23). But, his argument—however true—that a systematic study of these texts stands to reveal interesting things about the criteria of canon formation and about ideas of nation, does not make the ensuing lists

of books that have been included or excluded by these compendiums any more compelling. And, given Blodgett's acknowledgment that "early literary histories of Canada would appear to be of interest primarily to scholars" (23), I was surprised and frustrated that he felt the need to—frequently—remind his readers that literary histories are "not a random series of events" (212), but "a discursive ordering of the data" that "carry the mark of their period of gestation with them" (6, 181).

David Williams cannot be accused of patronizing his readers. *Imagined Nations: Reflections on Media in Canadian Fiction* is a dense and difficult book. But his use of contemporary Canadian novels to demonstrate how our notions of time, space, and personal and national identity are shaped by various modes of communication is also very provocative. Chapters 4 through 9 are organized around close readings of novels by writers as diverse as Alistair MacLeod, Hubert Aquin, and Michael Ondaatje, but all are oriented around the premise that the idea of the nation has, in each novel, come under question because of some fundamental change in the mode of communication. For example, in one of two chapters on the *English Patient*, he uses Harold Innis's argument that Hitler's rise to power was facilitated by his use of the radio to produce a very compelling reading of the way that Ondaatje's character Kirpal Singh responds to the news that the Allied forces have bombed Hiroshima. Like a number of scholars who have written about this passage of *The English Patient*, I have contended that Singh's indictment of the radio, printing press, and novel rings false. But Williams's careful use of Innis and his very subtle close reading convinced me that "it is the voice of Allied radio that explodes [Singh's] faith in the values of Western civilization" and that his response is entirely in keeping with his author's interest in the ways that books have been used to incite nationalism and extend the boundaries of empire (229).

All six of the chapters that use contemporary Canadian novels to explore how particular media predispose us to imagine certain forms of political community are strong, and they work very well together. The problem is that they are preceded by three long introductory chapters surveying the social and political effects of various kinds of media over two millennia. "I wish to know," Williams writes, "why, for example the Romans would, for 500 years, prefer the papyrus roll to parchment in imagining their em-

pire" (xiii). And, "did the parchment codex favour dualist thinking in Augustine's *City of God*?" (xiii). As the book's title suggests, Williams is very much influenced by Benedict Anderson's notion that nations are imagined communities, and these introductory chapters—grouped under the heading "The Nation in Theory"—are designed to extend Anderson's argument about "language's power to mediate the nation" (xii), while also pointing out the limitations of his contention that "no media before print anticipated such forms of community" (xii). This is certainly a worthwhile project, and Williams's range of reference is impressive, but in its present form, this material doesn't belong here. The point about Anderson might have been made much more economically, thus allowing the book to cohere better; and the attempt to survey and historicize the variable relations of media ranging from Egyptian papyri to the "World Wide Web" should be its own project. But for all its structural oddities, Williams' *Imagined Nations* is one of the most incisive and original books of Canadian literary criticism that I have read in a long while. It is also a hopeful book: even as it explores the unease that so many contemporary Canadian novels express regarding the viability of the nation as a continuing entity, it reminds us that our variously "imagined nation" is as resilient as it is incomplete.