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| Knister, (John) Raymond (1899-1932) |
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| Raymond Knister was one of Canada’s earliest modernist writers. Although Knister is best known as an imagist poet, he wrote and published work in a wide range of genres, including poetry, novels, short stories, book reviews, literary criticism, and one play. Born and raised in the farmlands of southern Ontario, Knister was called the ‘farmer who was poet too’ by fellow Canadian poet Dorothy Livesay. Knister’s writing career, which began in the 1920s, coincided with an age of Canadian nationalism, and despite the fact that Knister found it easier to publish in the U.S. than in Canada, he was a great supporter of developing Canadian literature. Like other writers of this time, such as Morley Callaghan and A.J.M. Smith, Knister insisted upon the development of a unique national literature that would remain connected with international literary movements, like modernism, but would be neither an imitation of other literatures or produced for the ephemeral tastes of the market. Knister’s writing career was cut short when he drowned on August 29, 1932, while on holiday with his wife at Lake St. Clair in Ontario. |
| Raymond Knister was one of Canada’s earliest modernist writers. Although Knister is best known as an imagist poet, he wrote and published work in a wide range of genres, including poetry, novels, short stories, book reviews, literary criticism, and one play. Born and raised in the farmlands of southern Ontario, Knister was called the ‘farmer who was poet too’ by fellow Canadian poet Dorothy Livesay. Knister’s writing career, which began in the 1920s, coincided with an age of Canadian nationalism, and despite the fact that Knister found it easier to publish in the U.S. than in Canada, he was a great supporter of developing Canadian literature. Like other writers of this time, such as Morley Callaghan and A.J.M. Smith, Knister insisted upon the development of a unique national literature that would remain connected with international literary movements, like modernism, but would be neither an imitation of other literatures or produced for the ephemeral tastes of the market. Knister’s writing career was cut short when he drowned on August 29, 1932, while on holiday with his wife at Lake St. Clair in Ontario.  Born into a hard-working farming family, Knister was mostly self-educated. He enrolled at the University of Toronto, but was forced to withdraw when he became sick during the influenza pandemic of 1918-20 (Stevens xi). He then moved back to his family’s farm for a brief period. He was a voracious reader during his youth and turned to his own writing in the early 1920s (Stevens xii). In the winter of 1922-23, Knister was offered a position of associate editor at *The Midland*, an avant-garde literary magazine, in Iowa City, which he took up when he moved there in October 1923. During his tenure at *The Midland*, Knister had time to work on his poetry and attend creative writing classes at Iowa State University. At the end of Knister’s term at *The Midland* in the summer of 1924, the job market for poets and editors in Canada was bleak, and so Knister moved to Chicago, where he wrote reviews for *The Chicago Evening Post* and *Poetry*, while working as a taxi driver at night. Knister’s posthumously published novellas, ‘Hackman’s Night’ and ‘Taxi Driver,’ were inspired by his experiences as a taxi driver during this period. As urban stories, these novellas (along with *There Was a Mr. Cristi*) contradict Knister’s reputation as a rural writer.  Knister returned to Canada in October of 1924 and continued to write short stories and poetry. In 1925, he began work on his best-known novella, *White Narcissus*. During this time, he also sent a manuscript of poems, *Windfalls for Cider*, to Lorne Pierce, the editor of Ryerson Press. With his manuscript, he sent Pierce a ‘salient statement of the problems facing the Canadian artist’ (Waddington 182). Knister’s statement ends with a compelling assessment of the state of Canadian writing: ‘But it is not likely that we will reach indigenous Canadian forms at the first try, so that experiment has always seemed perilous. It will perhaps need many generations of farm boys who find a soul in the pigs they are feeding and romance in their furrows, before we produce the perfect singing voice of a Shropshire lad […] Many Chattertons may come before a Burns. Burnses do not spring from the void; but undoubtedly this country will yet produce a great poet from its soil’ (qtd. Waddington 183). With this statement, Knister addresses the belief, popular among many Canadians at the time, that Canada could not produce a literary talent to rival those giants of the English canon. Furthermore, this statement reflects Knister’s optimism that there would one day be a Canadian Burns and his insistence that Canadians should not settle for the lesser poets who would inevitably outnumber the great poets. Knister’s optimism about the future of Canadian writers exemplifies his position in relation to the current of Canadian literary nationalism of the time. Opposed to the imitative and purely commercial trends in Canadian writing in the 1920s, Knister was nonetheless a great supporter of the developing Canadian literary scene. As such, he edited the first anthology of Canadian short stories, *Canadian Short Stories*, which he began in 1927 and saw published the following year.  Knister has long held a reputation as an Imagist poet. Brian Trehearne, however, places Knister’s poetry between imagism and literary impressionism (23). Furthermore, despite his reputation as a poet, Knister had all but abandoned poetry by the time he was twenty-seven (Trehearne 22). In the later 1920s, Knister’s creative attention was focused on prose. Knister’s prose, like that of his contemporaries, uses techniques of psychological realism (Arnason 8). During the late 1920s, Knister wrote his novella, *White Narcissus*, which was published in 1929 and is now part of McClelland and Stewart’s New Canadian Library series. The novella is remarkable for its conjunction of realist and romantic conventions. It is also an example of the Southern Ontario Gothic, a sub-genre of the Canadian novel.  Knister’s second published novel, *My Star Predominant* (1934), is a ‘great and sprawling work about the life of John Keats’ (Arnason 9). Frederick Philip Grove, one of Knister’s contemporary Canadian novelists, encouraged Knister to cut his ‘sprawling’ Keats manuscript down and to enter it in a contest with Graphic Press. In 1931, the novel won the $2500 prize from Graphic Press, but Knister’s celebration was short-lived. Soon after Knister won the prize, Graphic Press went bankrupt and was unable to publish *My Star Predominant*. Moreover, Knister entered into a legal battle with the bankrupt press for his prize money. In the end, he only received about half of the amount he was promised and did not see his novel published during his life. Ryerson Press published *My Star Predominant* in 1934, two years after Knister’s death.  1932 was a year of promise for Knister. After a winter in Montreal – where he became friends with notable Montreal poets, A.J.M. Smith, F.R. Scott, and Leo Kennedy – Knister accepted a job at Ryerson Press on August 10, 1932. Unfortunately, on August 29, before he was able to assume his position, he drowned while on holiday at Lake St. Clair with his wife. The sudden death of a writer of great talent and potential caused some people to assume that Knister had committed suicide. Most notably, Dorothy Livesay hints at her belief that Knister’s death was a suicide throughout her memoir of him. Using her mother’s diary from the time of her father’s death, Knister’s daughter, Imogen Givens, has convincingly argued against the possibility of Knister’s suicide. Selected Works *White Narcissus* (1929)  *My Star Predominant* (1934)  *Collected Poems of Raymond Knister* (1945)  *Selected Stories of Raymond Knister* (1972)  *Poems, Stories and Essays* (1975)  *The First Day of Spring: Stories and Other Prose* (1976)  *Windfalls for Cider: The Poems of Raymond Knister* (1983)  *After Exile* (2003)  *There Was a Mr. Cristi* (2006)  *Taxi Driver* (2007) |
| Further reading:  (Arnason)  (Betts)  (Givens)  (Gnarowski)  (Livesay)  (Maylor)  (Stevens, Introduction)  (Stevens, The Old Futility of Art: Knister's Poetry)  (Trehearne)  (Waddington) |