**Knister, (John) Raymond (1899-1932)**

Raymond Knister (the K is pronounced, the i is long) was one of Canada’s first modernist writers. Although Knister is best known as an Imagist poet, he wrote and published work in a wide range of genres: 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 his fellow Canadian poet, Dorothy Livesay (xii). Knister’s writing career, which began in the 1920s, coincided with an age of Canadian nationalism. Despite the fact that Knister found it easier to publish in the U.S. than in Canada, he was a great supporter of the 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 tragically 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 tenur 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 writer exemplifies his position in relation to the current of Canadian literary nationalism at 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 next 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 the 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.

**List of Works**

Much of Knister’s work was published after his death. In the first decade of the twenty-first century, Knister’s daughter, Imogen Givens, worked to publish a handful of her father’s previously unpublished manuscripts, some of which had gone unread in seventy years.

Knister, R. (1929) *White Narcissus*, Toronto: Macmillan. (Knister’s most-widely read novel, *White Narcissus* is an example of the mix of romance and realism in the Canadian modernist novel.)

Knister, R. (1934) *My Star Predominant*, Toronto: Ryerson. (This is Knister’s literary biography of John Keats for which he won a prize from Graphic Press in 1931.)

Knister, R. (1949) *Collected Poems of Raymond Knister*, Dorothy Livesay (ed.), Toronto: Ryerson. (This collection was the first published collection of Knister’s poetry. As well as a good number of Knister’s poems, it includes the foreword he wrote to accompany ‘Windfalls for Cider,’ Livesay’s memoir, and a bibliography by Margaret Ray.)

Knister, R. (1972) *Selected Stories of Raymond Knister*, Michael Gnarowski (ed.), Ottawa: University of Ottawa Press. (This is a fairly short collection of stories Knister published between 1922 and 1925.)

Knister, R. (1975) *Poems, Stories and Essays*, David Arnason *et al.* (eds.), Montreal: Mellrock Press. (This is a collection of poems, stories, and essays. In particular, it offers a good collection of the wide range of themes Knister took up in his criticism, including his comments on the short story genre and Canadian literature. This collection also includes a preface by David Arnason, a biographical note by Marcus Waddington, and a thorough chronology of Knister’s creative work.)

Knister, R. (1976) *The First Day of Spring: Stories and Other Prose*, Peter Stevens (ed.), Toronto: University of Toronto Press. (This collection is broken into three sections: stories, sketches, and criticism. It also includes a critical introduction by Peter Stevens.)

Knister, R. (1983) *Windfalls for Cider: The Poems of Raymond Knister*, Joy Kuropatwa (ed.), Windsor: Black Moss Press. (This volume is primarily two collections of poems that Knister had intended to publish: ‘Windfalls for Cider’ and ‘Grass Plaitings.’ This volume also includes Knister’s foreward to ‘Windfalls for Cider,’ a preface by James Reaney, an introduction by Joy Kuropatwa, and an afterward by Imogen Givens.)

Knister, R. (2003) *After Exile*, Gregory Betts (ed.), Toronto: Exile Editions. (This volume, which Betts calls a Raymond Knister ‘Reader,’ includes poems and stories from Knister’s published and unpublished works, letters to and from Knister, reviews of his work, transcribed newspaper clippings from after his death, photographs, and sketches by Knister’s wife, Myrtle Grace.)

Knister, R. (2006) *There Was a Mr. Cristi*, Windsor, Black Moss Press. (This novella was published for the first time in 2006. The story – of a group of people living in a Toronto rooming house in the 1920s – was inspired by Knister’s sister-in-law’s experiences. The character Miss Campbell in the novella is based on Knister’s sister-in-law, Minnie Gamble. Knister and his wife make an appearance as Mr. and Mrs. Max Helyar.)

Knister, R. (2007) *Taxi Driver*, Windsor: Black Moss Press. (This volume includes two of Knister’s novellas based on his experiences as a taxi driver in Chicago during the summer and fall of 1924: ‘Taxi Driver’ (previously unpublished) and ‘Hackman’s Night’ (first published in *The First Day of Spring: Stories and Other Prose* [1976].)

**References and Further Reading**

Maylor, M. (2007) *Full Depth: The Raymond Knister Poems*, Hamilton: Wolsak and Wynn. (This volume is a collection of Maylor’s original poems that take up Knister’s sudden death and his literary reputation as their topic.)

**Memoirs and Biographies**

Givens, I. (1979-80) ‘Raymond Knister – Man or Myth?’ *Essays on Canadian Writing*

16: 5-19. (In this memoir, which uses information from her mother’s diary, Knister’s daughter defends her father against those who assume he committed suicide.)

Livesay, D. ‘Raymond Knister: A Memoir,’ *Collected Poems of Raymond Knister*, Dorothy Livesay (ed.), Toronto: Ryerson: xi-xli. (Livesays’s memoir, which hints that she believes Knister committed suicide, is more of a personal remembrance of the poet than a critical commentary on his work. Livesay does, however, comment on nationalism in Canada in the 1920s and relates Knister to the German poet, Rainer Maria Rilke.)

Waddington, M. (1975) ‘Raymond Knister: A Biographical Note,’ *Poems, Stories and Essays*, by Raymond Knister, David Arnason *et al*. (eds.), Montreal: Mellrock Press: 175-92. (Waddington’s is a short but comprehensive biography of Knister and his development as a writer. It also includes a chronology of Knister’s work.)

**Criticism on Knister**

The best critical resources on Knister are the introductions to his posthumously collected works.

Arnason, D. (1975) ‘Preface,’ *Poems, Stories and Essays*, by Raymond Knister, David Arnason *et al*. (eds.), Montreal: Mellrock Press: 7-10. (Arnason gives a short introduction to notable formal characteristics of Knister’s writing and some information about the social context of Knister’s development as a writer.)

Betts, G. (2003) ‘Introduction,’ *After Exile*, by Raymond Knister, Gregory Betts (ed.), Toronto: Exile Editions: xiii-xxviii. (Betts’s introduction is a good starting point for someone interested in Knister. It consolidates information from most of the other critical introductions and contextualizes the culture in which Knister wrote in the 1920s.)

Gnarowski, M. (1972) ‘Introduction,’ *Selected Stories of Raymond Knister*, Michael Gnarowski (ed.), Ottawa: University of Ottawa Press: 11-16. (Gnarowski offers some good introductory and critical remarks on Knister’s stories. He argues that the stories fit into two groups: ‘farm stories’ and ‘psychological’ stories [13].)

Stevens, P. (1965) ‘The Old Futility of Art: Knister’s Poetry,’ *Canadian Literature* 23: 45-52. (In this short article, Stevens discusses Knister’s move from poetry to prose.)

Stevens, P. (1976) *The First Day of Spring: Stories and Other Prose*, by Raymond Knister, Peter Stevens (ed.), Toronto: University of Toronto Press: xi-xxvi. (Along with biographical information, Stevens’s introduction offers some good critical commentary on the themes of Knister’s stories. Stevens places them, for example, in groups of innocence and initiation.)

Trehearne, B. (1989) ‘Impressionism and Modernism in Ross and Knister,’ *Aestheticism and the Canadian Modernists: Aspects of a Poetic Influence*, Montreal: McGill-Queen’s University Press: 22-70. (Trehearne describes Knister’s affiliation with the Imagist movement and questions the accuracy of Knister’s reputation as an Imagist poet. Trehearne argues that Knister’s poetic influences can be found in Imagism, but also in Aestheticism and literary Impressionism. Trehearne’s chapter is one of the best resources on Knister, but does require some previous understanding of the poetic movements discussed.)