**Anglo-Modernism in Canada**

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Among the movements originating in Western Europe that instigated the modernist turn in anglophone Canadian literature, the most prominent were symbolism, impressionism, aestheticism, and decadence, which saw significant uptake by writers of Canada’s fin-de-siècle generation, particularly among those who moved to New York and Boston in the 1890s. Of these Canadian expatriates, Arthur Stringer, who was best known at the time for his crime fiction, later penned Canadian modernism’s first manifesto for free verse in the foreword to his poetry collection *Open Water* (1914) and produced its earliest stream-of-consciousness prose in his prairie trilogy (*The Prairie Wife* [1915], *The Prairie Mother* [1920], and *The Prairie Child* [1922]). Bliss Carman, who was known as “The American High Priest of Symbolism,” and his cousin Charles G.D. Roberts, embraced a cosmopolitan vogue at the time for “everything that’s ‘New’” (Carman 14)—namely the latest trends out of Europe. Although Carman’s repute as a leading poet was all but demolished by later generations, his early recognition by Ezra Pound has sustained critical interest, principally for his publication of *Sappho: One Hundred Lyrics* in 1903—a work of “imaginative and … interpretive” (Roberts xi) free-verse reconstructions that served as an immediate predecessor to the early imagism of the Anglo-American modernists and their celebrated lyric imitations of Sapphic fragments.

A later generation crossed the Atlantic to Paris, where Canadian authors lived on the fringes of the Lost Generation of the 1920s. Recorded in memoirs of the period, Morley Callaghan’s *That Summer in Paris* (1963) and John Glassco’s *Memoirs of Montparnasse* (1970), Canada’s expatriates joined a transnational literary culture that converged in Paris, one that continued through mid-century to attract Canadian authors such as Brion Gysin, Mavis Gallant, Mordecai Richler, and Sheila Watson. Often compared to Ernest Hemingway, Callaghan launched his career in the late 1920s and into 1930s with a string of urban novels and short story collections mainly set in Toronto, a city that serves as a symbolic North American metropolis for his hard-boiled depictions of urban modernity. Although he never travelled Paris, Ontario-born poet, short-story writer, and novelist Raymond Knister was appointed the Canadian correspondent for one of the Lost Generation’s literary magazines, *This Quarter*.

A new wave headed to Europe during the Great Depression, writers mostly sympathetic to the Republican, anti-fascist side of the Spanish Civil War. Ted Allan, who covered the Spanish Civil War as a correspondent for the International Brigades, returned with Canada’s first novel of the war, *This Time a Better Earth* (1939). Years later Hugh Garner reprised his experiences as a soldier in the MacKenzie-Papineau Battalion for his novel *Cabbagetown*, which was published first in an abridged mass-market version in 1950 and later revised and expanded in 1968. Charles Yale Harrison, best known for his 1930 antiwar novel *Generals Die in Bed*, was American-born but moved to Montreal and fought for the Canadian military in the First World War, also produced an avant-garde satire and Spanish Civil War novel titled *Meet Me on the Barricades* (1938).

By far the most celebrated of Canada’s expatriate modernists is Elizabeth Smart, who published her first novel, *By Grand Central Station I Sat Down and Wept* (1945), not long after her departure for England in 1942. Although reissued in a paperback edition in 1966, it was not until the publication of Rosemary Sullivan’s 1991 biography that Smart’s ground-breaking novel attracted and sustained the kind of critical acclaim that it now enjoys, especially for its feminist aesthetics, allusive density, and open eroticism.

As much as Canada’s modernists circulated beyond the nation’s borders, immigrant authors provided an international influx of aesthetic innovation. Born in Germany under the name Felix Paul Greve (before faking his own death to escape his creditors) and briefly married to the Dadaist poet and artist Baroness Elsa von Freytag-Loringhoven, Frederick Philip Grove apprenticed in the decadent aesthetics of fin-de-siècle Europe and later gravitated toward naturalism and realism in his early Canadian fiction, but his experimentation with temporal and spatial distortions in his late novels and radical reinventions of the self in his fictionalized autobiographies exhibit signature modernist techniques. Typically identified with Grove among Canada’s early to mid-century “prairie realists,” Martha Ostenso (born in Norway) and her literary collaborator Douglas Durkin not only chronicled diasporic experiences in their novels about North American immigrant farm life but also, most notably in Durkin’s *The Magpie* (1923) and their co-authored *Wild Geese* (1925), captured the stylistic influence of cinematic montage. From the prairies to central Canada, the city provided a locus for the fiction of Canada’s modernist immigrants, especially in the self-described “disjointed, disconnected” (36) fiction of Jessie Georgina Sime, who emigrated in 1907 from Scotland to Montreal, where she lived for a half-century and wrote her socialist-feminist short-story cycle *Sister Woman* (1919) and novel *Our Little Life* (1921).

The Second World War brought another surge of immigrant modernists into Canada—Malcolm Lowry to Vancouver, Wyndham Lewis to Toronto, Henry Kreisel to Edmonton, and Patrick Anderson to Montreal. This wartime period saw Lowry rewrite and complete his late-modernist masterpiece *Under the Volcano* (1947), Lewis gather material for his devastating portrait of cultural provincialism in his autobiographical novel *Self-Condemned* (1954), and Kreisel prepare the ground for his 1948 novel *The Rich Man* in which he juxtaposes the grotesque and distorted aesthetics of visual abstraction against the horrors of anti-semitism and the rise of Nazism in his native Austria.

By the time Anderson arrived in Canada, the Montreal modernists of the 1920s—A.J.M. Smith, F.R. Scott, John Glassco, Leo Kennedy, A.M. Klein, Leon Edel, often collectively identified as the McGill Movement—had parted ways and a second generation arrived. The 1940s generation of Anglo-Montreal modernists included figures from the 1920s, principally Scott and Klein, who were joined by newcomers Anderson and P.K. Page, among others—all of whom were affiliated with *Preview*,a mimeographed magazine that ran from 1942 to 1945. Although he published several collections of surrealist- and automatiste-influenced poetry and is increasingly recognized as a trailblazing queer poet, Anderson is frequently remembered for his literary quarrels with John Sutherland, editor of another Montreal magazine, *First Statement* (1942–45). Alongside his Montreal-based co-editors Irving Layton and Louis Dudek and with contributions from Miriam Waddington in Toronto, Sutherland sparred with his cross-town adversaries in a series of editorials, articles, and reviews that has been mythologized as the native-cosmopolitan debate—with the *Preview* group as the cosmopolites and the *First Statement* group as the nativists. While the debate heated up in the 1940s, it started with Montreal’s emergent modernists of the 1920s—namely A.J.M. Smith, whose 1943 anthology, *The Book of Canadian Poetry*, framed the contest as one between traditions of native-nationalist poets who “attempt to describe and interpret whatever is essentially Canadian” and cosmopolitan-internationalist poets who aspire “to transcend colonialism by entering into the universal, civilizing culture of ideas” (5). While this narrativization of early to mid-century modernist poetry has proven durable, there is little doubt that the major poets who published in the Montreal magazines—Anderson, Dudek, Klein, Layton, Page, Scott, Smith, and Waddington—managed to transcend the debate itself.

The critical consecration of Montreal as the prime mover of modernism in Canada obscured the contributions of Toronto’s modernists. At the hub of modernist Toronto in the 1920s were the Arts and Letters Club, the Hart House Theatre, and the Theosophical Society, which brought together visual artists, playwrights, and poets—among them playwrights Roy Mitchell and Herman Voaden, painters Arthur Lismer and Lawren Harris, author and artist Bertram Brooker, and poet W.W.E. Ross—in a brotherhood that celebrated the artistic, theatrical, and literary avant garde, occultism, and mysticism. Rather than their spiritualist contemporaries, Toronto poets E.J. Pratt, Dorothy Livesay, Raymond Knister, Raymond Souster, and Ross (in his non-mystical mode) have been more readily recalled as the early to mid-century practitioners of imagist poetry in Canada. By the 1940s and 1950s, Toronto witnessed the what Northrop Frye calls the arrival of a “great mythopoeic age” (viii), one that consisted of late-modernist poets— including Margaret Atwood, Margaret Avison, Douglas Le Pan, Daryl Hine, Jay Macpherson, Gwendolyn MacEwen, Eli Mandel, James Reaney, Anne Wilkinson, and Wilfrid Watson—whose mythic propensities corresponded with his concurrent development of myth criticism.

Depression-era Toronto saw the creation of a leftist cultural community that made a lasting impression in Canada’s literary and theatre histories. Most prominent among the leftist poets was Livesay, who returned after a year abroad at the Sorbonne in 1931 to repudiate her early imagist poetry of the 1920s and commit herself to writing agit-prop poetry and mass chants, which she produced as a member of the communist-affiliated Progressive Arts Clubs and as a regular contributor to its magazine *Masses* (1932-34); she later aligned herself with the socially progressive modernism of the Auden generation and the antifascist politics of the Popular Front, which she promoted in the magazine *New Frontier* (1936-37). The Progressive Arts Club of Toronto that coached Livesay in her leftist transformation made its most memorable statement with its production of the agitprop play *Eight Men Speak* (1934). Based on the 1931 arrest and imprisonment of eight members of the Communist Party of Canada and the attempted assassination of its leader Tim Buck, the play was suppressed by the Toronto police after only one performance. Co-written by Oscar Ryan, Frank Love, Mildred Goldberg, and Ed Cecil-Smith,the play is an exemplar of 1930s agitprop theatre that adapted techniques from the avant-garde leftist theatre of the Russian constructivists and German expressionists.

Urban narratives of modernism have served to marginalize its emergence on Canada’s coasts and prairies. Generalizations about the geographic determinism of Canada’s coastal and prairie literatures typically exclude them from the formation of urban modernisms. On the contrary, as Glenn Willmott claims, if the most common setting of the modern Canadian novel “is not the city” but rather “an archetypal space of transition between country and city, the traditional and the modern, the past and the future” situated “in regions on the colonized peripheries of the world’s empire-driven modernity” (61, 51), it follows that Canada’s prairies and coasts provided prime locations for the emergence of literary cultures that negotiated these transitions. Atlantic Canadian authors such as Newfoundland’s Margaret Duley, Annapolis Valley’s Ernest Buckler, and Cape Breton’s Hugh MacLennan each translated international modernisms to local contexts—Duley through the anti-realist fantasies of her 1936 novel *The Eyes of the Gull*, Buckler through his self-reflexive and ironized künstlerroman *The Mountain and the Valley* (1952), and MacLennan through two early novels (*So All Their Praises* [1933] and *A Man Should Rejoice* [1937]) in which he enlists a self-described “kaleidoscopic” technique that places fragmented voices of historical and anonymous figures in dialogue. Like MacLennan, who is far better known for his later realism, Sinclair Ross is most frequently heralded as Canada’s pre-eminent prairie realist for his 1941 novel *As For Me and My House* and Depression-era short stories—though the case has be made for his modernist portraiture of post-impressionist aesthetics, psychological alienation, and symbolic waste lands. Further west, the emergence of modernist fiction developed alongside British Columbia’s resource-based economy, with early twentieth-century labour novels by M. Allerdale Grainger, Hubert Evans, and Bertrand Sinclair, and A.M. Stephen, which reached their peak in Irene Baird’s 1939 novel *Waste Heritage*, which not only fictionalizes the 1938 sit-down strike at the Vancouver post office and trek of the unemployed to Victoria but also provides ironized metafictional commentaries on its own modernist-leftist genre of documentary reportage.

At the same time as the second-generation Montrealers, the west coast’s formation of a mid-century modernist poetry culture in Vancouver and Victoria arrived with the appearance of a mimeographed magazine, *Contemporary Verse* (1941-52). Edited by Alan Crawley, a former lawyer from Winnipeg who lost his eyesight as a young man—who was assisted by his wife Jean and worked with a publication committee consisting of Dorothy Livesay in Vancouver and Floris McLaren, Doris Ferne, and Anne Marriott in Victoria—the magazine provided an vital venue for the majority of Canada’s mid-century modernist poets. Earle Birney’s two-year stint as editor of *Canadian Poetry Magazine* coincided with his move in 1946 to Vancouver, where he worked prolifically, producing poetry collections and novels and writing radio plays throughout the 1940s and 1950s. Of Vancouver’s mid-century fiction writers, the most remarkable is Ethel Wilson, whose novellas, novels, and short fiction represent a body of work that manages to be simultaneously Victorian and modernist with its conjunction of intrusive narrators, stream-of-consciousness technique, and staccato montage effects.

Perhaps Western Canada’s most original and troubling contribution to literary modernism is its appropriations from First Nations cultural heritage and practice of primitivist aesthetics. Among Canada’s early modernists, Constance Lindsay Skinner attracted international recognition with a sequence of imagist poems—not ‘translations nor adaptations of Indian poems,’ but a ‘succession of lyrics [that] presents, in primitive symbolism, the characters of an imaginary community’ (Skinner vii, ix)—first published in the 1910s and later collected under the title *Songs of the Coast Dwellers* (1930). Contemporaneous with Skinner, Stō:ló Chief William K’HHarlserten Sepass approached Eloise Street and her mother Sophia White Street in 1911 to record and translate his song-cycle in English—which was eventually collected and published under the title *Songs of the Y-Ail-Mihth* (1955) and reissued in revised editions. Despite avowals of their ethnographic authenticity, the version of the Sepass cycle preserved by the Streets is typical of modernist, free verse interpretations of aboriginal songs such as those collected by George W. Cronyn in his anthology *The Path on the Rainbow* (1918). Explicitly based on his field work as an ethnographer, Marius Barbeau’s 1928 novel *The Downfall of Temlaham* deploys an anti-chronological narrative structure based on at once on imperial history of colonial conquest and traditional Gitk’san stories that bears the hallmarks of modernist experiments with temporality; its accompaniment by colour reproductions of works by some of Canada’s most celebrated modernist artists, including Emily Carr and A.Y. Jackson, reinforces its affiliation with the period’s primitivist aesthetics. A work of metafiction that unsettles imperialist histories, Howard O’Hagan’s 1939 novel *Tay John* tells the story of métissage—that of “Tête Jaune” who cannot settle among the Shuswap who regard him as their blonde messiah nor among the settler society that views him as a noble savage. Probably the most critically acclaimed modernist novel in Canada is one that evolved from Sheila Watson’s experiences among the Shuswap as a schoolteacher in the 1930s—a book preceded by two short stories (“Rough Answer” and “And the Four Animals”) and one novel (*Deep Hollow Creek*) written at that time—and that eventually led to the publication of her 1959 novel *The Double Hook*. Its fragmented, elliptical narrative unfolds “under Coyote’s eye” (13), the gaze of the aboriginal trickster figure whose presence haunts this story of a fragmented community that Watson says is “about how people are driven, how if they have no art, how if they have no tradition, how if they have no ritual, they are driven in one of two ways, either towards violence or towards insensibility—if they have no mediating rituals which manifest themselves in what I suppose we call art forms” (“What” 183). Precisely because of its late appearance and its subsequent canonization as the epitome of high modernism’s “mythical method” in the Canadian novel, *The Double Hook* is symptomatic of the ways in which modernism in English Canada has been too often misremembered as a belated literary culture, one that trailed behind its Anglo-American and European counterparts.

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