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Canadian Poetry: From CanLit to Where?

WHEN THE AMERICAN POET Marnie Pomeroy and I founded the Ladysmith Press in Quebec in 1968, typesetting our first volumes by hand and printing them on a massive platen press which threatened to go through the floor if its motor ran too fast, we were not bothered by the nationality of the poets we published. But when we went on a bookselling tour across Canada in 1970 we were met with: 'Oh, you're the people who publish Americans!' Actually by then we had published two Americans, three Canadians, and one Brit (me). Already various presses, small and large, were churning out volumes of Canadian poetry, subsidised by the Canada Council (we did not apply for grants), so that by 1972 another bookseller was able to remark, with a sweep of the hand to a wall of bright slim volumes: 'I can't sell that stuff, so why should I sell yours?' Doug (now George) Fetherling, a Canadian poet of American origin, quipped at the time: 'The government is paying Prairie farmers not to grow wheat. Maybe they should pay Canadian publishers not to publish poetry.' Fetherling eventually became domesticated and wrote a biography of George Woodcock who was born in Canada but lived many years in England, an anarchist and friend of George Orwell, then returned to the University of British Columbia and founded the review *Canadian Literature*—otherwise known as 'CanLit'.

The Vancouver writer Douglas Coupland has remarked, 'CanLit is when the Canadian government pays you money to write about life in small towns and/or the immigration experience.' But it had an ugly companion in the fanatical raging against 'US Cultural Imperialism' of the academic Robin Matthews who clamoured for a purge of Americans (and by extension Brits) from Canadian universities. This included me, as I was teaching part-time English 101—which I justified to myself because it did not include poetry—at the same university as Matthews, Carleton in Ottawa.

I was a founding member of the Independent Publishers' Association (IPA), in Toronto in 1971. At its inaugural meeting I suggested tax breaks for writers, as in Ireland, and was called undemocratic. The name of the game was grants. Later that year we met in Ottawa around a table and were addressed by the Minister of State, Trudeau's smooth side-kick Gerard Pelletier, then by Naim Kattan from the Canada Council. He announced a huge amount of money for publishing—$9 million, I think. A bankrupt publisher from Toronto stood up and thumped the

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table shouting 'It's not enough, Naim! It's not enough!' Books were obviously different from wheat. Inevitably, some grants later, the IPA was renamed the Association of Canadian Publishers.

The academic critic Stephen Henighan wrote the obituary of Canlit in a controversial book of essays *When Words Deny the World* published in 2002. (As a boy he had been caught in the crossfire of Canadian nationalism versus 'foreign' academics, since his American father and English stepfather both taught at Carleton.) In 'Canadian Cultural Cringe' he writes, 'Canada remains a colonial society; here friends must think alike [...] In Canadian literary circles, the opinions you express continue to be a function of who you know rather than what you think.'

Canlit's norm was a modernism which aimed to cut Canadian writers loose from colonial attachments. All those thousands of small press books were in free verse in its degenerate form of chopped prose. It was hard not to be infected. Robert Graves had written warmly about the 'glow' of my first book of poems, but about my second he wrote, 'they have much to describe and discuss.' In other words, 'Watch it, Seán, your poems are turning into prose.' I had actually been eliminating the rhymes that came naturally to me. Eventually I decided to let the poems rip and be themselves, but it was a dispiriting experience in 1985 to read Dennis Lee's definitive *The New Canadian Poets* in which chopped prose ruled from cover to cover, and to feel like the last man standing who wrote in rhyme.

I returned to England in 1994, so I am not quite sure how soon, before Henighan pronounced its obsequies in 2002, Canlit died. And if CanLit is dead, long live what? While cheerfully burying the CanLit culture of uniformity, Henighan has a new foreboding, based on the invasion by American cable television under free trade and the centring of publishing in Toronto—in the de-Canadianised international best-sellers of what he calls 'Torlit'. Henighan is against nationalism but (like the Irish essayist Hubert Butler who explored this distinction) he is for localism. And 'it may prove to be one of the ironies of Canadian cultural development that we lost our idiom at the moment when we were finally ready to begin creating a distinctive literary voice.'

One of the baneful requirements of CanLit was not only 'modern' free verse but (as in Canadian TV stations) 'Canadian content.' In this Canlit had an indirect ally in Northrop Frye ('that dreary Norrie Frye' as Graves referred to him, perhaps in pique that his protégée Jay MacPherson—see later in this essay—had fallen under Frye's influence). An example of CanLit's unwillingness to lie down and die is the annual Frye literary festival founded by Anglophone academics in Moncton, New Brunswick—a town which is mainly Francophone. Frye spent his later childhood there, loathed the place, and left as soon as he could. His literary exegeses concentrated on Themes, and themes such as 'survival' and 'wilderness' were duly taken up by Canadian writers. George Woodcock in his introduction

to *The New Canadian Anthology: Poetry and Short Fiction in English* (1988), after a prissy reference to 'echoes of foreign influences' on Canadian poetry quoted a poem by W.W.E. Ross (1894–1966) that 'in its modesty, directness, and clarity of diction, and yet in its contained simplicity […] epitomises so much that is characteristic of the best in recent Canadian poetry.' Here is an excerpt:

> Black and white
> The loon glides at approach of night
> On the lake …

As a reviewer of Starnino's *The New Canon*, Bill Coyle, has ironically put it, 'loons crying out on a misty lake are authentic because they are indigenous.' The Canadian dollar coin introduced in 1987 is known as a 'loonie' because it has a loon on it. But as a test image this comes a cropper: the loon could be on a lake in Alaska, Michigan or Minnesota—where it is the State bird.

What is the point of a national anthology anyway? Even defining 'Canadian' is difficult. English Canadians share a country with French speakers who often refuse to define themselves as Canadian (preferring 'Québecois' or 'Acadien'); most of them live within 100 miles of a 3,000 mile border with the US; most have travelled and many have studied in the US or Europe, and Nova Scotia is less flying time from Europe than it is from British Columbia. Yet their language policies are civilised (more so than in, say, Belgium): immigrants quickly identify themselves as Canadians, and perhaps what can best hold Canada together is fellow feeling. They occupy the same, though incredibly varied and huge, space, and surely any anthology labelled Canadian must reflect this variety and hugeness. Few have done this, though of 20th century anthologies Margaret Atwood's *Oxford Book of Canadian Verse* (1984) came closest. It was succeeded by the narrowness of Dennis Lee's *The New Canadian Poets* in 1985; incredibly, there was a 20 year gap until Carmine Starnino's *The New Canon* (2005).

This review is of two anthologies because although *The New Canon* is now five years old, it is not possible to review the recent Carcanet *Modern Canadian Poets* without reference to it. And they only overlap slightly, like two intersecting circles in Venn diagrams.

Starnino has been called the 'enfant terrible' of Canadian poetry. He prepared the ground for *The New Canon* with a book of critical essays, *A Lover's Quarrel* (2004), which had a similar impact to the essays of that other *enfant terrible* Stephen Henighan. One of Starnino's terribilist acts was to take a 14 line poem ('not a sonnet') by E. D. Blodgett, a winner of the Governor General's award (the Holy Grail of CanLit) and reprint it backwards, sentence by sentence. It made equal non-sense either way. This can be christened 'the Blodgett test'.

A 'canon' means any set of works established according to judgment. James Reeves and Martin Seymour-Smith edited *A New Canon of English Poetry* in 1967, intending a collection of poems in English (not 'English poems': they included several Americans) which would not replace the canonical Palgrave's *Golden Treasury* or the Oxford Book(s) of English verse, but proposed a new essential canon where, for example, there were many poems from Elizabethan songbooks, many by Fulke Greville, none by Wordsworth, and many by Trumbull Stickney. The book sank without trace—which may be a risk of new canons, since the inertia of accepted anthologies is strong.

The New Canon similarly does not offer to replace the existing canon but gives an alternative: poems in chronological order by 51 Canadians born between 1955 and 1975. Starnino proposes that the CanLit voice in poetry has been succeeded by two voices: a new formalism, and a new experimentalism. *The New Canon* 'picks up where Dennis Lee's 1985 anthology leaves off.' Starnino remarks that 'the sixties and seventies witnessed the rise of poets who at no time in their careers laboured with prosody' and formal poetry 'went underground'. And 'If the free-verse account of Canadian poetry feels doctrinal, it's because such lyrics were once seen as breaking free from 'foreign' forms, thus permitting free-verse to be neatly folded into our catechism on nationalism.' Starnino rejects 'the ruling aesthetic since the 1970s—the plain, the soft-spoken, the flatly prosy, the paraphrasingly simple, the accessibly Canadian—in its last throes.' Instead, 'a freer formal energy is entering our poetry', and the Canon poets 'see themselves less as 'Canadian' than as part of a total English-language culture.'

The first poet in the book is Mark Abley (born in Warwickshire, 1955, but came to Canada as a child, then was a Rhodes scholar at Oxford) who is the vigorous author of books on dying languages (*Spoken Here*) and the future of English (*The Prodigal Tongue*). Abley is often cerebral but touched by feeling:

> These are the trees chopped down, chopped by the hour.
> Tomorrow they'll emerge as plywood, pulp or fire.
> A lifetime ago last week they sheltered rainbows in a canopy
> or tangled against snow, subarctic bonsai:
> willow, larch, arbutus, the chainsawed fruits of desire.
> These are the trees chopped down, chopped by the hour.

Here is the beginning of 'White on White':

> *Energy is Eternal Delight*, said Mr Blake
>
> now I face a February morning by the lake
> below a gull at work in the delighted air

as the wet snow settles, flake by flake,
onto melting ridges that sketch a line of jagged
puddles in the churning, half-solid water

soon, I think, the weather will have to break
but soon means nothing to this granite wind
or the dour, unbroken mass of clouds transforming
the far shore to a moist abstraction …

At the end of the poem 'the ghost of Mr Blake cries satisfaction'. 'Mr Blake' may seem mannered, but Blake's wife Catherine called him Mr Blake. This is a highly literate poem, but again a feeling one, and the CanLit theme of the inevitable snow is not artificial: it is the context in which this Canadian poet sees Blake.

There is an elegant series of seven sonnets on paintings by Breughel by Anne Simpson (b.1956), which again sounds like an artificial project, but she has vision:

A man makes notes in sand. The wind goes free.
One gust: his words are ghosts. The dust, absolved,
has vanished too. First kiss, last glance. Tick. Tock.
All goes to ground. We kneel down and dissolve.
Turn in. Turn out of time. Where nothing's clocked.
A touch: so light. Love's breath. Things we can't hold:
these watches. Ticking. Still. Each hour is cold.

And here is the opening of 'Light Falls Through You':

After many years avoiding the place, I lift the latch
(which disappears as it is touched) and find

you are young as always, while I have closed thousands
of little doors in my skin …

George Elliott Clarke (b.1960), one of the best known poets in this anthology, describes his heritage as Afro-Nova Scotian and Mi'qmac (Amerindian) and proclaims himself an 'Africadian', i.e. a mix of the black slaves who escaped America in the War of 1812 and 'Acadian' French settlers who were in fact expelled from Nova Scotia 57 years before the Afro-Nova Scotians arrived. Clarke has admitted in an interview that 'Africadia is a mythical notion, an intellectual construct', which makes him a nation of one. (I am supported in this conclusion by my wife who is an Acadian-cum-probable-Mi'qmac). Clarke has written of 'disguising

the truth in fiction'. Most of his poems are about imaginary people and places, and are very long—part of epic sequences, including one on Pierre Trudeau. But Clarke writes in a poem in *The New Canon*: 'Love poems wither in our bleak, stony, / frigid, hostile, brutal Canuck anthologies'. His love poems are lively:

> I cry, in the vernacular, this plain manifesto,
> No matter how many fishermen offer you their laps,
> Or how contrary you are in the morning,
> Or how your hair gleams like dark lightning,
> Or how many lies the encyclopedia preserves,
> Because, Selah, I won't play them parlour-seducer games—
> Card tricks of chat, sleight-of-hand caresses—
> Or stick my head in books. I love your raspy,
> Backwoods accent, your laughter like ice breaking up!
> I'd burn dictionaries to love you even once!

Canadian love poetry, insofar as it exists, is usually more buttoned up and tight-lipped than this. Even the vocative is unusual. When I brought out my first book of poems in 1968, my literal-minded students at Carleton had two main comments: 'Why all these references to nakedness?' And 'Who is this 'you' in the poems?' But their idea of love poetry was Leonard Cohen's 'Suzanne' where the lady is safely distanced as 'she' and where seaweed grows in a river—an inconsistency they brushed aside. 'Suzanne' is a safe blur in the mind (although admittedly not so safe as the loon on the lake). Since Clarke is in the Carcanet anthology too, I'll come back to him later.

Tim Bowling (b.1964) writes with intensity:

> Whale jaw, jack spring spine, rock cod gill,
> scallop under the skin of my hand; these
> are the bones I'm burying now. Tomcat skull,
> sparrow wing, spaniel paw, full moon behind
> my bluest gaze; I'm planting them all.
> No animal returns to gnaw its gnawed limb
> left in a trap; I've thirty years to dig
> the deep six for, and hard shoulderblades
> to gunnysack. Darling, carry the spade
> for me, chant my years without you down ...

Another poet capable of intensity in a received form (sonnets) is Barbara Nickel (b.1966). 'Busking' ends:

Mozart, the people shout. I laugh as doors
open, wind snatching notes and rumpling clothes.
Our cases on the wet and sticky floor,
the clinking coins on velvet, crumpled bills.
Beside my violin, a tiny boy
is moving to the shadow of my joy.

And here is Adam Sol (b.1969):

Sarah, whichever of my foolish words
still churns inside you,
that is the one I treasure. Even now,
despite the lobby's clank and drone,
when you remove your overcoat,
home wafts from your sweater,
the smell of burning charcoal. I must tell you
that all my hopes from those days
are bees battering windows.
I want to wish you better.

But *The New Canon* also contains much prosaic Canlit. Here is Iain Higgins:

67/68

You could see the prison farm from across Deer Lake, wondering why
that was punishment.
Bugs, a can of water, & some drano.
There you were then, half nonsense, half flesh, holding your own
amongst gods & cold warriors.
He hung a peace sign in his window, hoping the hippies would notice
as they drove past the house towards SFU …

(SFU, for those in the know, is Simon Fraser University, in Vancouver, but who cares?).

There is also the stylish, the pseudo-smart, as in Laura Lush:

My father at 61
clings to this farm
like blood to an accident …

And there is description, description, description. Here is Susan Gillis:

> The path is a transverse angle that crosses so.
> As I move downward the hill to the left rises.
> To the right rooftops and windows fall away glittering.
> Through them far below the silver river.
> When the air reaches a certain temperature.

And Jeffery Donaldson:

> Casual snow shortages at first,
> cutbacks and inconspicuous
> diminishments, the field stretching
> to make ends meet: uncoverings.
> Then, nothing left but a matted
> quilt of old grass, re-stitched in parts
> with needlings of a thready brook ...

There is prescription too. Bruce Taylor:

> 'This is your history,' said the teacher of it.
> And it was. So, now, is she,
> passing around her portrait of a Cree
> Indian in a top hat. Any child could see
> how meticulously bad that drawing was ...

The German poet Wilhelm Lehmann made much of 'Genauigkeit'—exactness. But he saw poems as 'originating' ('entstehend') in observation of nature—which moves the poet. His seemingly descriptive poems are the inscription of observation on a feeling mind. Sorley MacLean in an essay on 'Realism in Gaelic Poetry', as distinct from the stupidities of 'the Celtic Twilight', proclaimed that realism resulted in intense emotion. Prose description (or a prosaic pseudo-poem) tends to reiterate established ways of seeing. It lacks vision as well as what MacLean, following Croce, described as 'the lyric cry'.

The New Canon cannot quite live up to Starnino's hopes for it. The lyric cry as I hear it is present in Abley, Simpson, Bowling, Nickel, and Sol—and in the unfortunately often specious Clarke. But there cannot be 51 poets (though there are perhaps half a dozen) up to his own standards as evident in his own poems. He is decent enough not to put himself in his anthology. (Atwood did not hesitate to put herself in hers). Starnino's language, whether in essays or poems, is exuberant, and as Blake said 'exuberance is beauty.' 'Santa Maria del Popolo', from a

recent collection *This Way Out*, ends after several short stanzas about the sound of bells in which all the lines rhyme:

> ...we lower our voices, ears to the air, the erupting ave
>
> bone-heard. High-strung, touch-sensitive, suddenly supernumerary, fey,
> racing past each other in surging deceleration, runaway
>
> and woken through, four clappers knocked into flower, into epic play,
>
> until our heartbeats slow, mid-swing, stalling to a sway;
> slack, slaked, huge and half elsewhere, the heaven-taken grey
> hanging in belfry darkness, sacks to dry till Sunday.

Carcanet's *Modern Canadian Poets* is not the new canon, but very much the old one. 'We drew a line at the birth year 1962', Jones and Swift announce. So there is not a poet in it younger than 48! But the excuse for omitting these is that 'readers need first to visit the grounds out of which the best new work springs: the tradition of Canadian modernism.' The blurb proclaims that 'modern Canadian poetry' is 'Cosmopolitan, hybrid, and eloquent [...] multilingual, culturally pluralist [...] unmistakably Canadian and international.' And so Henighan's TorLit squares CanLit. There are 35 poets (at least 20 of whom, from the brief bios before their sections, were or are full time university professors). And 'Among them are French Canadian poets in translations by Anglophone writers [one: Anne Hébert], poets from the First Nations [one], Caribbean-Canadian [one] and Africadian communities [the community of one, George Elliott Clarke]'.

Anne Hébert (1916–2000) is represented by feeble translations, e.g. in her poem 'Neige' / 'Snow', of which I quote the last two stanzas:

> The snow sets us in magic, slack tide of white, swollen
> feathers where pierces the red eye of this one bird
>
> My heart; stroke of fire under frost palms marvelling
> blood races on its way

The original (not given) is:

> La neige nous met en magie, blancheur étale, plumes gonflées
> où perce l'œil rouge de cet oiseau

> Mon cœur; trait de feu sous des palmes de gel file le sang qui
> s'émerveille.

Hébert is precise, the translation not. What is this 'slack tide'? And note that the characteristic French use of active verbs is enfeebled. An accurate though not 'poetic' translation, keeping Hébert's punctuation would be:

> Snow puts us in magic, white spreads, swollen plumes
> where pierces the red eye of this bird
>
> My heart; stretch of fire under palms of frost flows the blood that
> wonders at itself.

The blurb to this anthology states its aim to explore a lineage of 'culturally pluralist writers who have engaged with other English- and French-speaking traditions in new ways'. But Hébert spent more than half of her life in France and most French Canadian poets prefer to call themselves Québecois. And although Acadians will often cheerfully admit to being French Canadian many of their intellectuals have been educated in France. The most popular French Canadian poets, such as Gilles Vigneault (not in this anthology) are 'chansonniers' along the lines of George Brassens who have no English-speaking equivalent (and no, Bob Dylan is not up to their standard). English and French Canadian poets pay almost no attention to each other, and it is useless to pretend they do. A peculiar error in the introduction is that four French Canadian poets are announced with a flourish about 'the great poets of Quebec'—Nelligan, Saint-Denys Garneau, Melançon, and Hébert—but only Hébert appears. Some loose translations by John Glassco of Garneau appear in the Glassco selection. But there is no Nelligan or Melançon.

Otherwise the introduction is forthright. Jones and Swift attack a 'dominant poetry establishment that has congratulated itself on shutting in on itself' and state that 'Canadian nationalism has resulted in Canadian culture becoming isolated from the rest of the world.' They remark that Atwood 'overemphasised thematic importance in her selection, revealing the more prosaic elements of Canadian poetry—a flat tone of statement.' (They astutely keep Atwood herself out of their anthology on the grounds that she is a prose writer). They take a swipe at 'the loud-mouthed, formless Everyman whose verse dominates many Canadian anthologies.'

Unfortunately this Everyman, though mealy-mouthed rather than loud, turns up frequently in their anthology. Here is Don Coles (b.1927):

Here is a family so little famous their names
are not recorded. They stand, indistinct
as though they know it's right, in this slum
courtyard in weak sunlight. The darksuited
father's hand rests on his small son's shoulder,
mother and daughter are on either side of
the open door …

And here is Irving Layton (1912–2006) in Everyman mode:

In the empty market
    coolness spills out
from vineyards
    gathered in boxes of grapes;
the rumour of orchards,
and pears full of an indisputable dignity
that lie like jaundiced dowagers …

Layton became a poetic windbag in later life but this anthology includes an early poem 'Berry Picking' which alerts us to why he attracted a following earlier. It begins:

Slenderly my wife walks on the still wet furze
Now darkgreen the leaves are full of metaphors
Now lit up is each tiny lamp of blueberry.
The white nails have dropped and the sun is free.

And whether she bends or straightens to each bush
To find the children's laughter among the leaves
Her quiet hands seem to make the quiet summer hush—
Berries or children, patient she is with these …

Overstated, but next time you see a blueberry check for the 'tiny lamp'.

There is no space here for a systematic consideration of all the big names of mid-20th century Canadian poetry. A. M. Klein, John Glassco, Anne Wilkinson, George Johnston, Douglas LePan, Margaret Avison, Susan Musgrove, and Daryl Hine have never interested me but might interest others. They are represented.

P. K. Page (born in Dorset, 1916–2010) is always interesting. The editors describe her as 'the grande dame of Canadian poetry' and a surprisingly tacky collage by her adorns the cover of this anthology. My wife and I had drinks with

her and her husband the former diplomat Arthur Irwin in Victoria, BC, in about 1993. Arthur, who was then aged 95, threw a huge log onto the fire with such vigour that he almost followed it. We started to our feet. P. K. (Kathleen) remained immobile. She knew her man, I suppose. But her poise was both a virtue and a fault. She risks being the Edith Sitwell of Canadian poetry:

> The snails have made a garden of green lace:
> broderie anglaise from the cabbages,
> Chantilly from the choux-fleurs, tiny veils—
> I see already that I lift the blind
> upon a woman's wardrobe of the mind.
>
> Such female whimsy floats about me like
> A kind of tulle, a flimsy mesh,
> While feet in gumboots pace the rectangles—...

To me this seems mannered, but I am impressed by her recognition of her own preciousness. And here is a stanza from her long poem 'Cry Ararat':

> So flies and blows the dream
> embracing like a sea
> all that in it swims
> when dreaming, you desire
> and ask for nothing more
> than stillness to receive
> the I-am animal,
> the We-are leaf and flower,
> the distant mountain near.

PKP is mystical, but she grows on one.

Other Canadian mystical poets tend to fall under the influence of 'that dreary Norrie Frye'. When Graves revived the Seizin Press to publish Jay MacPherson (b.1931, in London) with such poems as 'Eurynome'—not included in this anthology—he could not have foreseen what seems her work's decline while she taught under Frye at Victoria College, a United Church of Canada college of the University of Toronto, into biblical esoterica and eventually silence. Here is the omitted 'Eurynome', followed by the beginning of 'Job's Daughters' which is included in this anthology:

> Come all old maids that are squeamish
> And afraid to make mistakes,

Don't clutter your lives up with boyfriends:
The nicest girls marry snakes.

If you don't mind slime on your pillow
And caresses as gliding as ice
Cold skin, warm heart, remember,
And besides, they keep down the mice—

If you're really serious-minded,
It's the best advice you can take:
No rumpling, no sweating, no nonsense,
Oh who would not sleep with a snake?

Then

The old, the mad, the blind have fairest daughters.
Take Job: the beasts the accuser sends at evening
Shoulder his house and shake it; he's not there,
Attained in age to inwardness of daughters,
In all the land no women found so fair …

I know which I like better.

Another poet much influenced by Frye was Richard Outram (1930–2005), who also studied at Victoria College. He too wrote 'Blakeian' poems stuffed with biblical allusions. But more robust than the academics (he earned his bread as a sound engineer in radio), and married to an artist with whom he produced engraved volumes of his poems (a sort of joint Blakeian enterprise) he put his money where his mouth was, unifying his poetry with a poetic life. A year or so after his beloved wife died he killed himself, at age 75, in time-honoured Northern fashion (like the Swedish poet Karin Boye who walked into the snowy woods) by sitting out on his porch in Ontario on a January night. This anthology includes 'Barbed Wire', too long to give entire, but here are the beginning and end:

Consists of two tight-twisted, separate strands
Conjoined as one: and not unlike, in fact,
Our own familiar silver wedding bands,
Though these are loosely woven, inexact

With wide interstices, so that each makes
A circle of ellipses. Tightly caught
At random intervals, two little snakes
Of wire and crimped into a snaggled knot,

That four short ends, sharp bevel-cut, present
Unsheathed ingenious fangs …

[…]

… A detail left the trench
At night, to get the dead back from the wire,

And no one volunteered. They stood, to view
Our brief exchange of rings and vows, for both
Our fathers had survived the war: and knew
Of death, and bright entanglement, and troth.

Outram needs picking through and the Blakeian poems put to one side, but is one of the 20th century's real poets.

There is very little passion in this anthology—even the modest passion of exact observation (Lehmann's 'Genauigkeit'). Moving to the second half of the 20th century, modernism encourages the oblique, as in Eric Ormsby's Wallace Stevens-like

My quarrel with your quorum, Monsignor
Flamingo, is that you scant the rubicund
In favour of a fatal petal
Tint. I would rather bask
In riots of the roseate
Than measure your footfalls'
Holy protocols beside the head-
Board of a drowsy demiurge …

One impressive poet here whom I had not known of is Robyn Sarah (b.1949). There are several poems of this calibre included:

He had already turned to walk away
When she looked back. And he did not look back.
The train began to inch along the track,
Then picked up speed, then left the station bay.
She stowed her knapsack on the luggage rack.
Through banks of cloud, one broad bedazzling ray
Of setting sun shone red on bales of hay
In autumn fields. She watched the land go black.

She thought she understood him: why prolong
A valediction in the afternoon—
A visit preordained to end too soon?
(She'd made the reservation to be strong.)
Why should he pause to wave? Proper goodbyes
Are crisp. Besides, the sun was in his eyes.

This is a perfect sonnet (a form that refuses to die) and it would be absurd even to think of applying the Blodgett test to it: it tells a story.

Anne Carson has gained a reputation in the UK (promoted by Andrew Motion), perhaps because, being a Professor of Classics, she satisfies academic snob requirements. The editors' statement that 'her writings [...] at their best conflate prose and poetry' is all too true: she is a favourite of those who don't care about the difference. Here is the start of 'Essay on What I Think About Most', as pretentious as a lecture in Classics 101:

Error.
And its emotions.
On the brink of error is a condition of fear.
In the midst of error is a state of folly and defeat.
Realising you've made an error brings shame and remorse.
Or does it?

Let's look into this.
Lots of people including Aristotle think error
an interesting and valuable mental event.
In his discussion of metaphor in the Rhetoric
Aristotle says there are 3 kinds of words.
Strange, ordinary and metaphorical.

By comparison, George Elliott Clarke's short poem 'Ecclesiastes' is an explosion of lyricism:

I am tired of gold sunflowers with jade leaves.
The Sixhiboux River, almost fainting,
Weeps through the dull, deaf hills. Behind all words
Burns a desert of loneliness. Sunlight
Dulls to vulgar gold. Once I had believed
Selah's passion would seed sunflowers and yield
Skull honey—ineluctable bees' dreams.

But, all is gilt sorrow and gleaming pain:
The heavy sunflowers droop, brightness brushes
The earth; wisdom is late and death is soon.

This has feeling. But look at all the buzz words—'fainting', 'weeps', 'burns', 'loneliness', 'passion', 'dreams', 'sorrow', 'pain', 'brightness'—in such a short space. In a poem not in these anthologies Clarke writes: 'My college speech ripens before you / Becomes Negro-natural.' But is this diction natural? And disguising truth as fiction makes it a lie—the glamour of 'Whylah Falls' instead of Windsor, and the 'Sixhiboux' river instead of the St Croix. 'Ecclesiastes' (pretentious title) even fails the Blodgett test:

The heavy sunflowers droop, brightness brushes
The earth; wisdom is late and death is soon.
But all is gilt sorrow and gleaming pain:
Once I had believed Selah's passion would seed
Sunflowers and yield skull honey—ineluctable bee's dreams.
Sunlight dulls to vulgar gold. Behind all words
Burns a desert of loneliness.
The Sixhibou River, almost fainting,
Weeps through the dull, deaf hills.
I am tired of gold sunflowers with jade leaves.

Nothing happens in this poem. The emotion is steady-state. Clarke is as disappointing here as his hero Trudeau: promise followed by grandiosity. But he is probably capable of surprises.

Starnino's *The New Canon* given its narrow focus cannot be criticised for omissions, but *Modern Canadian Poets* can. One is the Nova Scotian Charles Bruce (1906–1971) a plain but powerful poet of the sea about whom Starnino has written a revival essay. Another is Kenneth Leslie (1892–1974)—although his near contemporary W. W .E. Ross (1894–1966), whose loon poem was so admired by Woodcock, is generously represented. We published Leslie's *Collected Poems* at Ladysmith in 1971. We then fell out with him because we omitted a poem which began, I recall, 'Remember Lumumba, the drums of the Congo'. He was a red hot socialist from a Gaelic speaking community in Nova Scotia—a sort of Canadian Sorley MacLean—and although he wrote in English he once had a radio show in New York where he and his daughters sang Gaelic songs. He was a friend of Robert Frost. He won the Governor General's award. He married four times. When I first met him he was earning his living, at age 80, driving a taxi in Halifax. Atwood included this corker of a sonnet in her 1984 anthology:

The silver herring throbbed thick in my seine,
silver of life, life's silver sheen of glory;
my hands, cut with the cold, hurt with the pain
of hauling the net, pulled the heavy dory,
heavy with life, low in the water, deep
plunged to the gunwale's lips in the stress of rowing,
the pulse of rowing that puts the world to sleep,
world within world endlessly ebbing, flowing.
At length you stood on the landing and you cried,
with quick low cries you timed me stroke on stroke
as I steadily won my way with the fulling tide
and crossed the threshold where the last wave broke
and coasted over the step of the water and threw
straight through the air my mooring line to you.

Another Ladysmith poet worth inclusion would be Philip Roberts, but there is the excuse that he fell off Canadian radar when he went to teach in Australia for twenty years or so. He did however return and is mayor of Annapolis, Nova Scotia. A town mayor a poet?

More astonishing omissions are of Frank Prewett, Robert Ford, and Bertram Warr. Prewett (1893–1962) fought in a Canadian regiment in the Great War then went to Oxford and became an agricultural scientist. He was taken up, under the nickname of 'Toronto' by Lady Ottoline Morrell's Garsington set and was friends with Sassoon and Graves—the three of them suffering from degrees of 'shell-shock'. He returned to Toronto (then known as 'Toronto the Good' for its puritanism) but as he put it, 'Man does not live by bread alone, and Canada offers only the bread'. He returned to England to farm in the Cotswolds. His early 'Georgian' poems, greatly admired even by Hardy, dropped out of fashion. Soon after his death Graves sponsored the publication of a *Collected Poems* (1964) which made little impact. In 1987 the Canadian writer Barry Callaghan sponsored a new *Collected Poems* which includes a gut-wrenching war poem, 'Card Game', left out by Graves. Even his so-called Georgian poems have what he called a 'hard but true music' and although my mind is not usually retentive of poems, fragments of them have stuck for decades, such as 'Do not go away so often or so high / Into the cold spaces where you are alone', and 'Invade me love, longer besieged / I am irresolute, I fear.'

R. A. D. Ford (1915–1998) is the kind of poet, and literary presence, whom any country would be glad to have among its writers, but he is not in *Modern Canadian Poets*. He was Canadian Ambassador to Moscow from 1964–1980, a friend and translator of Akhmadulina and Voznesensky (as well as other poets in Serbian and Portuguese—his wife was Brazilian), a supporter of Russian dis-

sidents, and the author of *A Moscow Memoir* as well as several books of poems (one of which won the Governor General's award) and a *Selected Poems 1940–89*. I can only attribute his dropping out of the Canadian literary view to the hostility of Canlit to anything that might seem 'foreign-influenced'. Ford, whose Canadianness is unquestionable as he represented Canada all his life, is open to poetry in many languages (his poems are often prefaced by one line quotes from Rilke, or Goethe, or Dante—the kiss of death in Canlit terms). His poems can be gloomy—he suffered from a rare muscle-wasting condition involving periods of intense pain—as well as happy in love. He often uses the vocative. Here is the early 'A Delusion of Reference':

> The arms of the sea are extended,
> The hills, which are not really mountains,
> Extinguished, and a delusion
> Of reference sets in when you spread
> Your hair to the light. It is a contagion
> Like any other, and in all the cantons
> Of the East there is no cure. Things
> Unconnected seem in harmony, blazon
> Before me, the shotgun becomes a decoration
> On the wall, and pheasants' wings
> Furnish the meadow. Until you turn away
> Again negligently, and the reason
> Of nature disappears while the universe
> Settles into its usual disarray.

In real poetry thought and feeling are one, and perhaps Ford is difficult because his thinking is as deep as his feeling. Here is a very late poem, 'Getting the Message Straight':

> I am searching for the right verb
> To tell you that I am coming after all
>
> But I do not want an impious word
> Or a message distorted
>
> It is almost as important
> As the coming itself to put it right
>
> It is not logical but still
> When I arrive and you have heard

And you have read the signal
You must know that love

Has justified the journey

At his best Ford's poetry is as good as it gets.

Bertram Warr (1917–1943) was a Torontonian of high social and pacifist ideals who stowed away on a ship to England in 1938 and worked in London as a dishwasher and clerk, enrolled part-time in Birkbeck College and worked as an air-raid warden, then was called up in 1941 and became a member of an RAF bomber crew. Here is 'The Heart to Carry On':

Every morning from this home
I go to the aerodrome.
And at evening I return
Save when work is to be done.
Then we share the separate night
Half a continent apart.

Many endure worse than we:
Division means by years and seas.
Home and lover are contained,
Even cursed within their breast.

Leaving you now, with this kiss
May your sleep tonight be blest,
Shielded from the heart's alarms
Until morning I return.
Pray tomorrow I may be
Close, my love, within these arms,
And not lie dead in Germany.

His bomber was shot down. How can a poem like this be left out of a definitive anthology? Because it is not 'Canadian'? Not academic enough? Surely any young person—say, at a Canadian High School—would be touched by this poem. It is simple, direct, and heart-breaking—especially given Warr's death in spite of his final prayer. And although Warr's poems are very patchy, given his young age, they contain brilliant lines and phrases. 'Tenderness only confuses / The children who wait in the dusk.' And in 'Death of an Elephant': 'Sunset, when the eyes suddenly closed, / And the huge flesh moved on the hooks of instinct...' And 'Now we will sit a while amid the peaceful morning green …' And 'Only I like to

think there was a time before cinemas, / Before the bound-up longing of things for one another.'

At least Atwood (1984) included a few poems by Ford and a longish one by Warr. Jones and Swift cannot claim ignorance of these poets—or of Bruce or Leslie or Prewett. Their omissions are incomprehensible. But the dead hand of Canlit is only just letting go of its grip. 'Canlit is dead! Long live Canlit!' is the dangerous prospect as the academic and culture bureaucrats, in spite of funding cuts, somehow endure. Even the maverick Starnino spent six months in Rome on a government grant (but a local one, from Quebec, not Canada). Some of the outlaws, the true poets, find their way into the Carcanet anthology, but as many have not. It should be called *Modern**ist** Canadian Poets*. It offers a backward look although published five years later than Starnino's *The New Canon* which looks hopefully forward. I got more enjoyment from *The New Canon* precisely because most of it was new to me—and I recommend it to new readers of Canadian poetry. I am too angry with *Modern Canadian Poets* for its crazy omissions and its sloppy mix-up over French Canadian poetry to recommend it as other than a curiosity. Atwood's much longer 1984 anthology remains, amazingly, the most reliable reference book. It would be useful to have a new anthology, say of *Twentieth Century Canadian Poetry in English*. At least Starnino, Jones and Swift are all aware that Canadian poetry is not necessarily in English and that, when it is, it is part of the international English-speaking world.