

coincidental with the appearance of this study, *El general en su laberinto* (*The General in His Labyrinth*) is only mentioned briefly.

This erudite study contains a valuable select bibliography, and under the heading of "General Works" contains 128 items the author describes as sources that in some way went into his general thinking of this book, whether or not the works were cited in the text or in the notes. The present reviewer found the work to be accurate and complete, even with the correct year of the birth of García Márquez (1927). Of special value is the fact that this study relates the Colombian writer to contemporary global literature and political currents. It is a critical text for the general reader as well as for the literary scholar. It reads well and demonstrates the polish and élan of its author.

Carole Gerson

*A PURER TASTE: THE READING AND WRITING OF FICTION IN ENGLISH IN NINETEENTH-CENTURY CANADA*

Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1989. Pp. 210

Reviewed by Alex Knoenagel

For critics who consider a work's context an essential tool in determining the text's meaning and value, there always exists the problem of properly establishing the relevant context. People who study nineteenth-century Canadian fiction from a contextual point of view will find a valuable aid in Carole Gerson's book. Only a few texts published in the first decades after Confederation have been canonized, and very few of these are novels. Gerson's examination of the conditions—social as well as aesthetic—under which novelists such as Sara Jeanette Duncan (1861-1922), John Richardson (1796-1852), and Rosanna Leprohon (1829-1879), to list just the more familiar authors, wrote their novels and under which their books were received shows convincingly the reasons for the weak position nineteenth-century fiction had, and continues to have, in the Canadian literary canon.

Canadians attempting to publish fiction in their own country in the nineteenth century were, as Gerson aptly shows, faced with an array of problems: "Throughout the nineteenth century the reception of literature in Canada was steered by nationalists who . . . advanced the familiar notion that 'A national literature is an essential element in the formation of national character'" (8-9). However, the social, cultural, and economic conditions of life in Canada were not at all conducive to the aesthetic demands with which authors were faced. As Gerson shows, Canadian novels were measured by the degree to which they emulated the standard set by Walter Scott's novels. Quite understandably, this standard was practically impossible to reach, since from the predominant English-Canadian point of view Canada was a country without a usable mythology. Consequently, Canadians determined to write about their own country "were confronted with the problem of creating the highly refined, lengthy Victorian prose narrative, whether realistic novel or imaginative romance, out

of unpromising local raw materials" (37). This problem, paired with the feeling of cultural inferiority common to colonial societies, led Canadians (well into this century, as we know) to regard their own literature not as works of art, but as second-rate means of entertainment or instruction.

Gerson traces very well the attempts by Canadians to establish a Canadian literary identity in the shadow of the omnipresent Walter Scott and guided by Goldwyn Smith's (in)famous essay, "The Lamps of Fiction." For example, Gerson demonstrates with the example of John Richardson that "in 1832 even a native-born Canadian found it impossible to divorce the romantic novel from its connection with Sir Walter Scott" (86). In addition, Gerson shows the attempts of little-known authors who were "resolved to create a national literature [and therefore] tailored Canadian material to the pattern of historical romance. Canadian content, not Canadian form, was their object" (101). Her examples of the attempts to find a usable past for Canadian fiction range from Kirby's *The Golden Dog* to a novel basically unknown today, *An Algonquin Maiden* (1887) by Graeme Mercer Adam and Ethelwyn Wetherald.

Of course, nineteenth-century Canadian fiction did not consist entirely of historical romance. Authors such as Sara Jeanette Duncan attempted to incorporate into the body of Canadian fiction the aesthetics of bourgeois realism developed by William Dean Howells and other contemporaries. Gerson's examination of Canadian realist fiction focuses on the reasons—primarily moralistic—why realist fiction had almost no chances for popular and critical success in Canada and did not, in fact, make any major inroads in Canadian letters until the 1920s.

Gerson's book does not cover any new territory, but it fulfills very well its intention of "illuminating Canadian literary history by presenting it on its own terms" (xiii). *A Purer Taste* is very well researched, well written, and amazingly well documented—154 pages of text are supplemented by 616 notes, normally references to the nineteenth-century periodicals which formed an even more significant element of the literary expression of that conservative culture whose novelistic production was intended as a means of creating a cultural identity and self-confidence rather than as works of literary art. Sometimes the text abounds with the dropping of unfamiliar names (especially chapter 1) and the organization of the book is sometimes a bit startling (shouldn't the chapter on Sara Jeanette Duncan come after that on Walter Scott?), but overall *A Purer Taste* is certainly a book nobody who is interested in the climate of Canada's literary culture in the last century should miss.