

# Canadianization, Colonialism, and Decolonization: Investigating the Legacy of “Seventies Nationalism” in the Robin Mathews Fonds

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THE 40<sup>TH</sup> ANNIVERSARY ISSUE OF *SCL* offers an opportunity to revisit the founding narrative of the disciplinary study of Canadian literature in Canadian universities, and to posit the way that narrative might unfold in the coming years. Despite the strong feeling of mission among Canadianists over the past forty years, Canadian courses still make up only about 10% of English department course offerings in universities across the country, a percentage that has not changed in the last twenty years, and typically these courses contain fewer and fewer texts published before 1980. The drive to “Canadianize” English departments envisioned in the 1970s failed, as Paul Martin’s excellent 2013 study, *Sanctioned Ignorance*, points out: most English departments only require that students dabble their toes in the literature of Canada before graduation, and literature degrees in Canada, to the extent that they share anything, are still decidedly degrees in English literature, rather than literature in English.

The opening of the Robin Mathews Fonds at Library and Archives Canada in the Spring of 2014 provides access to a wealth of materials that throw light on the failure of the Canadianization movement, and on the current debate about the nation as a category in literary studies. Robin Mathews was an activist throughout the 70s and 80s for the teaching of Canadian literature in Canadian universities, arguing not just for more books, teachers, and scholarship, but also that these goals could not be met without confronting the overwhelming dominance of foreign-born and foreign-trained scholars in Canadian universities. Mathews’s papers, consisting of manuscripts, voluminous correspondence, and documents related to the founding of the Great Canadian Theatre Company (GCTC), the Association for Canadian and Québec Literatures (ACQL), and Steel Rail Publishing, were sealed for twenty-

five years when they were donated to Library and Archives Canada in 1989, and rightly so; he was famous for conducting highly personalized arguments with fellow scholars, writers, and activists, many of them friends and former friends, and the letters contain accusations of betrayal and evidence of personal pettiness as well as heroic energy, strength, and intellectual struggle.<sup>1</sup> This is one reason they are a highly ambivalent site of investigation and one that calls upon both historical and affective knowledges for their interpretation.

But reading Mathews's papers reminds us that many of the nationalists of the seventies saw the nation, and a national literature, as important discursive tools in the struggle against multi-national capitalism: a way to unite the opposition to globalization, and to argue for the rights of wage workers and women. In this they had much more in common with anti-colonial and anti-capitalist movements of the present day than is usually realized. Placing Mathews at the centre of the narrative of Canadian literary studies as a discipline, I argue, changes what is at stake in that story; it shifts focus from the discipline's current project of unsettling the dominance of settler nationalism in Canadian literature, to seeing a particular form of that nationalism as a historical precursor to the larger de-colonization struggle in which we are now engaged. This struggle was at least in part an institutional one, focused on the politics of English departments and on university governance; it was also partly a political one, allied with forces outside the academy working to oppose the hegemony of international capital in Canada. Mathews's career provides a model (perhaps a cautionary tale) for the contemporary political activist within the university, whose successes are often dismissed as part of the ordinary, or even inevitable, evolution of the discipline, and whose failures are often misinterpreted by subsequent generations.

The narrative of that "evolution" is familiar: Canadian literature as a separate field was born of a particular cultural moment, consisting of the intersection of government funding, political engagement, and reader excitement about Canadian literature in the mid-1970s. The beginnings of this era of what academics often refer to as "70s nationalism" was partly the result of worldwide anti-colonial activism of the nineteen-sixties, coinciding with the wave of (government-sponsored) national celebration that took place in the Canadian Centennial year. These provided the climate that resulted in the instant popularity of

Margaret Atwood's study of Canadian writing, *Survival* (1972), a book that introduced Canadian works that had been forgotten or gone out of print to a new audience, and in a politicized context; it also initiated a nation-wide debate about how we define Canadian writing and what might be unique about it.

One aspect of this debate was elegantly articulated by Dennis Lee in his famous 1974 essay, "Cadence, Country, Silence": the recognition that Canada, far from having emerged from a colonial past to become an independent nation, was complicit in a global system of exploitation of which Canadians seemed hardly aware. Lee focused on his awakening from a kind of colonial mentality, his recognition that "the prime fact about my country as a public space is that in the past 25 years it has become an American colony" (155) and that further, "the sphere of imperial influence . . . included my head" (158). Indeed, Lee's account of his "awakening" from his "spineless existence in colonial space" (158) remains one of the most visceral and passionate accounts of the roots of critical nationalism in a revulsion against the way that even white, Anglo, Canadians had come to see themselves as second-class citizens in their own country. Lee reports that for him (as for Tom Wayman, on the other side of the nation<sup>2</sup>) the "cool kids" lived in New York and California, and even within Canada, the space of dissent and critical activism was dominated by US émigrés (like the character "David" in Atwood's novel *Surfacing*). The directness of Lee's language and his self-condemnation as an agent of his own colonization exemplify the passion and engagement that motivated advocates of Canadian culture, and his essay has remained a classic account of this period. Yet, popular and journalistic accounts of the growth of Canadian literature often omit any reference to the political and ideological commitment that provided the grounds for the post-1970s growth and popularity of Canadian writing. Instead, "Canadian literature" is presented as no more than a publisher's market category, a field of employment, a university specialty, or a CBC interview topic: so much of a "given" in popular literary discourse that it can safely be declared dead.

Stephen Marche, the contrarian culture commentator for the *National Post* and CBC's cultural magazine show, *q*, stated in an April 2015 article for *Partisan* that Alice Munro's Nobel prize and Margaret Atwood's seventy-fifth birthday occurring in the same year (2014) provided "a sense of an ending" for Canadian literature. Marche carefully

distinguishes Canadian writing (which “meanwhile continued its blessed existence”) from Canadian literature, which he defines as “the sense of writing as a national project”: “The question of ‘national identity’ is an antique one; literary nationalism is something your grandparents did, like macramé. . . . Canadian literature, in the sense of a literature shaped by the Canadian nation and shaping the nation, is over.” For Marche, Canadian literature was a discourse engaged in by writers, one that saw writers self-consciously defining the nation through their writing, addressing a specific readership made up of people who, perversely, seemed to enjoy that sort of thing. Charles Foran constructs the project of Canadian literature differently when he declares in *The Walrus* that the announcement that Douglas and McIntyre Publishers had sought bankruptcy protection in 2013 indicated the end of the project of Canadian literature. For Foran, Canadian literature began with the Massey Report and the Kingston conference,<sup>3</sup> and involved an alliance of “[a]uthors, publishers, sellers, and academics . . . agitating door to door to get local books produced, funded, promoted, and protected.” For both of these writers, Canadian literature was primarily a project that began outside the academy, and ended there too; whether because, as Marche suggests, it “matured” past the necessity for special pleading, or as Foran argues, the combined effects of electronic publishing and the diversity of reader tastes made a specifically Canadian publishing industry an anachronism.

But putting Robin Mathews at the centre of the narrative of Canadian literature significantly changes what is at stake, because it re-introduces an engagement with anti-imperialist politics, and defines Canadian literature not just as an activity engaged in by writers, readers and publishers, but as a field of study and research in English departments. For Mathews was a central (and highly controversial) figure in the struggle to have Canadian literature taken seriously as a field of study: to offer courses, create programs, fund research, publish articles, and secure textbooks.<sup>4</sup> Putting Mathews at the centre also significantly changes the narrative of Canadian literary studies from one that is essentially complicit with the hegemony of cultural elites and the forces of market capitalism (as Marche’s and Foran’s analyses would suggest) to one that (however ineffectually) opposed them, from one that takes place in the field of discourse to one that plays out materially in the form of jobs, incomes, and economic power. As Mathews wrote in a

letter to Brian Fawcett in 1976, “My work was to give Canadians their rights to jobs (as Germans, Russians, Hungarians, English etc. have those rights). That is not cultural nationalism. My work was to permit young Canadians to learn seriously about their own history, culture and political-economic-social milieu. That is not cultural nationalism. My work was to resist imperialism” (Letter, 15 April 1976, 2). Putting Mathews at the centre of a re-evaluation of the place of Canadian literary nationalism in the narrative of Canadian literary studies attempts to recover a point of view that would define the study of Canadian literature as anti-imperialist in itself, rather than an extension of the hegemony it opposed.

Activists like Mathews pooh-poohed Dennis Lee because his account of his political commitment focused on internal, psychological anti-colonialism at the expense of political action. Atwood’s *Surfacing* (1972) took the same approach as Lee’s, seeing the heroine’s individual psychological growth as a necessary step toward social change, in the famous phrase, “This above all: to refuse to be a victim” (*Surfacing* 191). For Mathews and his allies, this was hogwash: as self-identified Marxists they were looking for material change, not inner growth, and jobs and incomes for Canadian writers and scholars. For them, the colonized mind derived from a colonized economy: the base determined the superstructure, in the most simplistic of Marxist analyses. As long as Canada continued to sell its major industries, whether resource, manufacturing, or culture, to US-based multi-nationals (and in those days, they were mostly US-based), there could be no intellectual or personal freedom. “There is no doubt capitalism as we know it must also be destroyed in Canada” (“Beginning Again” 12), declared Mathews, because freedom could only arise in a country where Canadians were free to make economic policy in their own interests.

This account of Mathews’ s thinking has not aged well; it sounds ridiculous, in fact, with its simplistic Marxist analysis, its references to the bourgeoisie, and its rejection of the two authors, Dennis Lee and Margaret Atwood, who are now widely held to be the spokespeople, even the radical left, of seventies literary nationalism.<sup>5</sup> But Mathews’ critical perspective on liberalism in Canada is easily recognizable as an early manifestation of resistance to the “rescaling” of political discourse under neo-liberalism described by Jeff Derksen in his book of essays, *Annihilated Time* (2009). Derksen observes that under neo-liberalism

political discourse has elided the nation and left only two registers in which political action can take place: the personal and the international. Mathews resisted the view that the freedom of the individual from all forms of social restraint was a progressive social goal, because it undermined the possibility of collective social action in the short term. For Mathews, the goal was not liberation of the self but collective action, unified by a nationalist pedagogy that would offer alternative and material histories of the nation to rally a grass roots opposition to both old-style Conservative politics and neo-liberalism. Thus in the seventies the nation became a focus for opposition to neo-liberalism for Mathews's allies in such movements as the "Waffle" wing of the NDP,<sup>6</sup> the Committee for an Independent Canada (precursor of the Council of Canadians), and labour struggles against "international" takeovers of Canadian unions in the mining and auto sectors.

One of Robin Mathews's most important roles in the struggle for the acceptance of Canadian literary studies as an academic field was as a founder of the Association for Canadian and Québec Literatures, and he preserved minutes of meetings, posters, and letters that tell that story. At the ACUTE<sup>7</sup> meeting in 1972 at McGill, he gave a paper entitled "Canadian Literature: Problems of Research, Curriculum, Scholarship and Endowment" that called for Canadian literature to be considered academically as "a tradition in its own right."<sup>8</sup> The paper, and the following question session, galvanized a large audience who felt that scholarship on Canadian literature was not welcome at ACUTE.<sup>9</sup> An ad hoc session was organized for the next morning, where the "Provisional Committee on Canadian Literature" was created to investigate the possibility of forming a scholarly association to address a number of needs that the approximately sixty attendees thought were not being met: "communication among those interested in Canadian literature, the need for pressure upon departments to undertake the study seriously (the call for a 'model' to use for that purpose was raised), and the need for a full consciousness of French-Canadian and English Canadian literature" (Djwa 1). Dorothy Livesay made the motion, Robin Mathews chaired the meeting, and Sandra Djwa took minutes. A number of committee members were proposed, but, in this era before the Internet and Skype, the cost of travel had to be factored in, and several attendees pointed out that despite the need for input from French-Canadian scholars, there were none in attendance (it was, after all, an ACUTE meeting).

Four people became members of the “Provisional Committee”: Joanne Burgess, then at McGill; Alec Lucas, also at McGill; Judie Livingston, at Marianopolis College; and Robin Mathews from Carleton. The group was charged with recruiting Quebecois membership, researching the number and content of CanLit courses offered across the country, and developing a mailing list of individuals who might want to join a new association.

This was, eventually, ACQL. It elected its first executive at a meeting held at the Learned Societies conference in 1973, with Joanne Burgess as President and John Moss as Secretary; by the time it held its first annual conference in May of 1974 (program organized by Sandra Djwa: speakers included Hubert Aquin, Gérard Bessette, Louis Dudek, Sheila Fischman, Barbara Godard, Kathy Mezei, and Desmond Pacey: Frank Davey’s historic paper, “Surviving the Paraphrase,” was presented),<sup>10</sup> it had both French and English membership officers, Gilbert Drolet at Collège militaire royal de Saint-Jean and David Pitt at Memorial. The meeting received funding from the Secretary of State for simultaneous translation and from the Canada Council for conference travel, and the new constitution<sup>11</sup> mandated both regional and francophone representation. Robin Mathews was on the executive from its inception, as chair of the meeting that resulted in the “Provisional Committee” and as member-at-large from 1973 to 1978; along with Donald Smith of the French Department at Carleton, he planned the program for the 1976 meeting at Laval. When Joanne Burgess retired as President at the 1976 conference and passed her position to René Dionne at the University of Ottawa, she wrote to Mathews: “when I look at the spin-off of your work over 8 years it seems incredible one man’s drive and vision could accomplish as much. . . . ACQL is your brainchild. . . . Another 8 years that cover as much ground, and we should arrive at the New Jerusalem.”

In the 1972 paper that spurred the creation of ACQL, Mathews advocated a fresh look at Canada’s cultural history, a Foucauldian look at the archive, to see if it were in fact true, as Northrop Frye so famously put it, that an evaluative reading of literary writing before 1960 would leave Canadian Literature “a poor naked *alouette* plucked of every feather of decency and dignity” (Frye 213). As Mathews argued in a letter to Brian Fawcett in 1976, people who identified themselves as Canadians had been writing about Canada since the time of Champlain: in the ensuing three hundred years, “they had to write well *sometimes*”

(30 July 1976, 4). Beginning from this premise, he argued, we should re-evaluate “the tradition” and see what’s there. “What you have to do — it is the great incarceration and the great liberation that we all face — is to *know* your past (which doesn’t mean falsely celebrate it or be chauvinistic about it or anything like that) and see the ways to grow from it, to be other than it” (30 July 1976, 3), he told Fawcett. So one of the first priorities of the new scholarship in the field of Canadian literature, as articulated in Mathews’s 1972 paper, was bibliographies of Canadian writing, in both English and French, and proper scholarly editions of nineteenth- and early twentieth-century texts to replace the reprint editions and mangled versions published by the nascent New Canadian Library (NCL). Only when specialist scholars had such editions would the work of critical interpretation begin.

For premature critical interpretation was bound to fail: certainly Atwood’s *Survival*, despite its ground-breaking popularity and its general nationalist approach, was a failure, in Mathews’s view. A responsible critic could never have read Susanna Moodie as afraid of the wilderness, Mathews argued, if she had consulted a *complete* version of the book, rather than the mangled NCL edition, and placed Moodie in a fully conceived historical context. Roberts’s animal victims, rather than dominating the critical landscape as they do in *Survival*, would take their proper place in a *collected* Roberts beside his neo-Romantic landscape poetry and his *New York Nocturnes*. In a polemical and, frankly, badly written review, published in *This*,<sup>12</sup> Mathews slammed *Survival* for its selectivity in addition to its argument that Canadians were victims, a position diametrically opposed to his own: that Canadians should have confidence in themselves and their own history, enough confidence to hold their “economic masters” to account.

Mathews was not alone in his call for basic scholarship: as the record shows, this was a major priority in the early days of Canadian literary studies, and remains a priority of scholars in the field. The 1976 ACQL executive struck two committees (the English-language one chaired by feminist Canadian literature champion Lorraine McMullen) to gather information on current projects, and to discuss the work that needed to be done. In 1974 an application for federal funding for a critical history of Canadian poetry by a group headed by Sandra Djwa was not funded, while John Matthews’s proposal for editing the letters of former British Prime Minister and novelist Benjamin Disraeli got half a million dol-



lars.<sup>13</sup> ACQL executive members swung into action, writing letters and meeting with officials, trying to figure out whether it were true, as they suspected, that the magic recipe for a successful grant application was simply that it not be focused on Canadian materials. A report commissioned by ACQL noted that one of the problems was that there were few specialists qualified to assess applications who were not also applicants for money.<sup>14</sup> Eventually, projects like Djwa's on Pratt, Zailig Pollock's on A.M. Klein, and the Centre for Editing Early Canadian Texts were successful. But in Mathews's papers there is a report from the Canada Council giving the results of the 1974 competition for grant funding: in four closely printed pages listing names and projects funded, only three are on Canadian materials.

This emphasis on editorial issues and the bibliographical recovery of early works in the study of Canadian literature recalls the central division between *belles lettres* and philology that was played out in many English departments at the mid-twentieth century.<sup>15</sup> The former saw the study of literature as a means for developing aesthetic taste, moral discrimination, and citizenship; as Margery Fee points out (21), this approach was dominant among Canadian English professors, who associated it with the role of culture in creating civil order articulated by Matthew Arnold in *Culture and Anarchy*. Arnoldianism, Fee argues, led to Canadian university English departments that focused on English literature rather than Canadian, with the goal of consolidating the power of economic elites by reinforcing the idea that class divisions were merely an effect of the hierarchy of culture. Fee's argument is supported by Daniel Coleman's analysis of the way that Canadian class and racial hierarchies have been maintained through the idea that English culture was "farther ahead on the single timeline of civilization" (11) than Canadian,<sup>16</sup> and therefore that familiarity with English literature, rather than Canadian, was a mark of civilization. Within such departments, the teaching of Canadian literature had a defined role, however marginal, as the content of courses for non-majors, and as the hobby and pursuit of professors whose working days were spent teaching Shakespeare and the Victorians, Fee recounts. The approach of philologists, whose methods were developed for the study of historic texts with the goal of recovering the histories of European languages, was associated in Canadian universities with the United States and with the soulless scientific method of structuralism. But its emphasis on historical accuracy

and its assumption that the texts under study were worth investigation simply because they formed the basis of historic discursive communities created a rationale for Canadianists, and this rationale formed the basis for early scholarly endeavours like the *Literary History of Canada* edited by Carl F. Klinck in 1965. Ironically, the model of philology rejected by many Canadian English departments provided the basis for a new and oppositional legitimacy for Canadian literary studies, for in arguing for the necessity of basic editorial and historical scholarship on early Canadian texts, Mathews and ACQL could undercut the hegemony of Arnoldian humanism and the social structure it implicitly supported.

Despite ACQL's, and Mathews's, emphasis on basic scholarship, Mathews was not himself opposed to what we would now call thematic criticism, and in a series of articles published between 1972 and 1976 (and collected in 1978 in a book titled *Canadian Literature: Surrender or Revolution*) Mathews made his own argument about the prevailing themes of Canadian writing. In his view, Canadian fiction was structured by the opposition between community solidarity and individual freedom, a dialectic initially articulated in John Richardson's *Wacousta* in the paired opposing characters of Wacousta himself and his enemy, Colonel de Haldimar, both of whom pursue "private feelings . . . at the expense of the public good" (522). Mathews identifies "The Wacousta Figure" as a defining archetype of Canadian literature (just as Atwood uses her "victim positions"), and argued that his defeat in Canadian novels signals the triumph of the community good over the self-serving individualist. In subsequent chapters Mathews attempted to identify an alternative, collectivist intellectual tradition that might/could/should form the basis for a collectivist, socialist politics in Parliament. This counter-narrative, to both *Survival* and to the dominant liberal paradigm of progressively increasing personal freedom definitely owes more than a little to Georg Lukács<sup>17</sup> and has strong roots in the Marxist tradition of the early twentieth century that favoured reading realist fiction as national allegory. It also emerged in dialogue with Livesay's famous definition of the documentary poem (Livesay, "Documentary") and with the works of Canadian authors who were either committed to leftist socialist action or who represented an old-style unionist working-class, such as Livesay herself, poets F.R. Scott, Milton Acorn, Al Purdy, and Earle Birney, and novelist Irene Baird, all of whose works Mathews championed as central to the Canadian tradition.

This reading of the Canadian literary tradition had its roots not in the current conservative (and Conservative) adulation of Canada and things Canadian for their own sake, but in the desire, articulated across many disciplines and fields of endeavour, to challenge dominant narratives of class, power, and nationality in Canada by examining how they were built, what was left out, and in whose interests. Mathews argued that intellectual colonialism in the post-war period of the '50s and early '60s had allowed the national narrative to be defined in the interests of the powerful:

In order to secure their position in the empire, the bourgeoisie have had to convince the population that economic development would only be attained by an imperial attachment — nationalism within imperialism. Through the bourgeoisie's control of the major institutions in society they have succeeded in convincing Canadians of the necessity of this position by stressing our historical, cultural and geographical links with the empire, first the British and now the American. These links have been reinforced by predictions of economic chaos for any program that encourages political and economic independence. ("Colonialism and the University" 6)

Elsewhere he argued that

We have been told . . . that we are a country that should not expect to initiate ideas, to invent, to revolutionize thought or social structures. We are conditioned to be the great social gannets, picking up the scraps of social change that fall from the tables of "mature" countries. Such preaching — whatever its intentions — has served to keep our population unsure, insecure, fearful of dynamism within itself and stupidly adulatory towards the energy of other countries. We were invited to see ourselves as perpetually immature, forever needing a parent figure. . . . ("Beginning Again" 6-7)

One of the great achievements of the critical nationalist movement in Canada was the creation of a counter-narrative that suggested that Canadian elites had collaborated in (and profited from) the foreign ownership of resource, manufacturing, and cultural industries: we had sold our inheritance for a mess of pottage — and our so-called traditions of politeness and reticence and peace-keeping had just made it easier for others to screw us.

Like all thematic criticism of this period, Mathews's organizing paradigm was prescriptive in its definition of what belongs to "the tradition," an approach that made him a figure of ridicule in some circles. Mathews tried to account for the exceptions to his thematic model with turgid arguments designed to prove that writers like Atwood, Mordecai Richler, and George Bowering were not Canadian, because, in his view, they were too strongly influenced by individualism. But in both Atwood's *Survival* and Mathews's *Canadian Literature*, the methodology (and its inherent flaws) was essentially the same, as it was in other thematically organized works such as Jones's highly influential *Butterfly on Rock* and Gaile McGregor's *The Wacousta Syndrome*, a comprehensive tome published in 1985 that expanded Mathews's argument without giving him much credit for originating it.

Mathews's paper at ACUTE in 1972 had other goals than spurring a re-interpretation of Canadian writing. He also argued that not enough college and university courses were being offered in Canadian literature: at many institutions where eight or ten courses in American literature were a regular part of the curriculum, he argued, only one survey course in Canadian appeared, usually taught by a sessional or a graduate student. He advocated hiring specialist faculty and suggested that putting specialist courses on the curriculum would inspire publishing and editing. He pointed out that much of the scholarly work being done was not sophisticated enough to win grant money, and did not take French-Canadian writers into account. He proposed as a degree requirement for a PhD in Canadian Literature that scholars have a real knowledge of French, and the ability to do research in both French and English literatures (a suggestion taken up later by both Université de Sherbrooke and Carleton University in their comparative English-French Canadian literature PhD programs, but, as Paul Martin has demonstrated, that was ultimately defeated as a model for the discipline<sup>18</sup>). The association was to be not just a hub of information for members who taught Canadian literature, and a venue for scholarly research, but a political pressure group to lobby university English departments and granting agencies to ensure courses were taught, specialists hired, and research funded.

Mathews's work in founding ACQL brings into focus an aspect of Canadian literary studies that is often overlooked in contemporary narratives of the rise of CanLit: there was substantial opposition to the Canadianization of the curriculum. According to Steele and Mathews

(2006), some stemmed directly from foreign and foreign-trained faculty, and “Some of it stemmed from obsequiousness on the part of Canadian academics and administrators with respect to foreign colleagues and their particular modes of thought” (502). Canadian universities had expanded hugely in the late 1960s to accommodate the influx of baby boom students; newly founded or expanded universities were scrambling for faculty. The federal government tried to attract foreign faculty by giving them an income tax holiday; recent PhDs from British and US universities were lured to the new institutions with the promise that they wouldn’t have to do research, but only teach — as much and as fast as they could. Newly hired faculty members phoned home to offer their friends and classmates jobs: many positions were filled without being advertised, and many more were hired at the MLA conference, without consideration of Canadian applications. The percentage of faculty members who had taken undergraduate degrees in Canada fell from about 80% to less than 50% in a matter of a few years, according to a study published by Mathews and his Carleton colleague James Steele in 1968. Departments were crowded with assistant professors who had never heard of Canada before they got the call, and heartily hoped that after a few years in the boonies of Ottawa or Victoria, they would be able to return home. It was not at all surprising that English departments offered few courses in Canadian literature, given that the vast majority of faculty, whose own training had not included any literature in English outside of the US or Britain (or indeed any demotic or colonial literatures), were not interested in offering any; when the subject came up, department members simply voted against adding Canadian literature courses and programs. As Steele and Mathews wrote in 2006, “What remained an outstanding practical question in the seventies was whether or not a Canadianization of the curriculum would or could ever occur in the presence of the many recently appointed scholars from abroad” (492-93).

This debate over the citizenship of professors was not a new feature of Canadian public life; Margery Fee, in her article “Canadian Literature and English Studies in the Canadian University,” recounts that similar controversies occurred over hirings at the University of Toronto as long ago as the turn of the last century. However, Fee’s evidence suggests that the goal of those advocating for Canadian hiring before World War One was the maintenance of the Arnoldian hegemony

which had been set up in opposition to the supposedly philological and scientific methods associated with US training. In contrast, the goals of Mathews and his allies were to directly challenge that hegemony by recovering and teaching a tradition which they pre-supposed to be collectivist, with roots in old-left unionist and new-left anti-colonial activism. The work of new scholars would be to use the methodologies of editorial history to reveal just how that tradition was “lost” and in the process create a vanguard of student activists whose restored awareness of a collectivist past would motivate social change.

Mathews spent the late 60s and early 70s talking about Canadianization of the universities, giving speeches at his own expense as often as every second weekend during the school year at “Teach-ins” and other events across the country, often sponsored by student societies critical of the education they were receiving (see Cormier 19-55). He advocated that universities adopt policies to ensure that Canadian citizens remain, or become, a two-thirds majority of the faculty in Canadian universities. The methodology that he and James Steele had used to determine citizenship was attacked, and he was called a racist, but his witty and charismatic speaking style also gained him huge support. He made things personal: he challenged the appointment of Bruce Partridge as president at the University of Victoria,<sup>19</sup> he criticized the influence of Warren Tallman at UBC (and made life-long enemies of several members of the TISH group),<sup>20</sup> and attacked foreign-born scholars like W.J. Keith, whose early work on Charles G.D. Roberts, Mathews claimed, dismissed him as little more than an imitator of British models.<sup>21</sup> He also co-authored a report that alleged racism against Canadians at Waterloo.<sup>22</sup> A supporter would call him a gadfly, but his detractors said things that were much worse, both behind his back and to his face.

The most persistent criticism of Mathews and his allies was that they were racist. During the early part of the Canadianization campaign this accusation was most often leveled not by individuals who were members of visible minorities but by those whose privilege was most obvious: white, male US citizens who were employed as professors at Canadian universities.<sup>23</sup> Cormier reports accusations of “racism and ethnocentrism” as well as “Nazi tactics” (128) leveled against professors who supported Mathews’s Canadianization campaign; Mathews and Steele recount similar charges in their collection of documents related to the campaign, *The Struggle for Canadian Universities* (1969). These

complaints today would most likely be dismissed as examples of “white fragility,”<sup>24</sup> but other accusations were more salient: that nationalist attempts to define a monolithic, collectivist, literary tradition (however inclusive of French-Canadians) not only gave short shrift to aesthetics but excluded minority groups, and so were by definition racist. The generation of scholars who followed Mathews (identified by Frank Davey as “postcolonialists”) directed their analysis of neo-colonialism in Canada toward the colonial oppression of Indigenous and racially marginalized groups, and while many of these scholars would link their work to its roots in the nationalism of the seventies, many also “portrayed Canada as a fortuitously ‘unravelling’ nation-state” (Davey 31) whose eventual dissolution would be part of a global liberalizing movement toward racial equality. This set them in opposition to those scholars Davey calls “cultural studies” Canadianists, who “aimed to alter society by increasing the social awareness of how meanings are constructed, how popular culture is increasingly shaped or created by the privileged and powerful, how social customs can help maintain injustice, and how the formation of new institutions, and the waning of older ones, can shape literary and other judgements” and who continued to believe in the legitimacy of the nation as a tool of analysis and a platform for political action (30-31).

Mathews’s own publications in his later career (such as *Canadian Identity: Major Forces Shaping the Life of a People* in 1988) stubbornly held to the mission of defining a single central intellectual tradition, usually dominated by white men, arguing that since the dominance of English and US literature in Canadian universities meant that there had never been a Canadian canon, efforts to dismantle it could only further the interests of colonialism. In this Mathews anticipates the analysis of critics such as Jeff Derksen, who point out that progressive theories of globalization “shared an unintended yet unfortunate vocabulary with neoliberalism” (23). If the goal of an engaged Canadian literary criticism is to expose the oppressive authority of nationalism and to undermine it by teaching texts by marginalized authors, then Canadian literary scholars have performed a reversal of their foundational terms, for as Paul Martin’s research shows, the literary authors identified as canonical, like Susanna Moodie, Sara Jeannette Duncan, Hugh MacLennan, Frederick Philip Grove, Stephen Leacock, and Charles G.D. Roberts, now appear only rarely in course reading lists, and so are in practice marginal to the field, while authors identified as socially marginalized by gender or

racialization, like Thomas King, Margaret Atwood, Michael Ondaatje, and Eden Robinson, are among the only ones that Canadianists agree are central to the discipline. To the extent that students read any Canadian literature at all at university, they read texts whose goal is to subvert something of which they are only vaguely aware.

This reversal provided the context for an illustrative encounter between Mathews and novelist and academic Thomas King, at a joint session of ACQL and CACLALS (the Canadian Association for Commonwealth Language and Literature Studies) in Victoria in 1990. Mathews rose from the floor to attack King by suggesting that the gentle and ironic satire in *Medicine River* and its rejection of the politics of protest would do little to improve the lot of most Indigenous peoples in Canada. In a heated reply, King accused Mathews of relying on racist stereotypes for his knowledge of Indigenous peoples, and the chair of the session, Diana Brydon, failed to recognize Mathews as a founder of the Association and ruled the ensuing discussion out of order. While this exchange is preserved in two versions (one is from Thomas King himself, in an interview with Hartmut Lutz published in 1991, and the second is from Davidson, Walton, and Andrews in their book *Border Crossings: Thomas King's Cultural Inversions*), in both versions Mathews's "vulgar Marxist" suggestion that class and privilege continue to operate in the work of authors like King — indeed, that King himself now represents the privileged mainstream of Canadian literature — is suppressed in favour of King's accusations of racism. (King later retaliated by satirizing Mathews as the character Red in his short story "A Seat in the Garden," the second fictional representation of Mathews I have discovered).

This episode was perhaps the opening skirmish in what Frank Davey has called "a visible struggle among cultural studies Canadianists and postcolonial Canadianists for control of the terms through which Canadian writing is read and discussed" (30). For some critics, the nation has become simply and only a repressive and homogenizing cultural hegemony mobilized by the right in order to enforce cultural conformity; Gary Boire suggests that critics who dissent from this position risk characterization as "fossilized academic detritus" (232). The other, smaller group of scholars suggests that the "enobling rhetoric of postcolonialism has been co-opted" (Sugars 22) by neo-liberalism, and that the study of the nation itself and national literatures remains neces-



sary in order to “bring to light the colonial histories attendant upon the establishment of the nation” (Cho 528). Mathews was unable, or unwilling, to think through those colonial histories in terms of race; in his view, power operated through class oppression, and, as for Livesay and many other activists of the old left, racial difference was merely a tool used by capital to divide the working class. His inability to grow beyond this view, and to accept the nation’s role in the extinguishing of Indigenous sovereignties and peoples, make his academic writing seem sadly dated, and of little use to those who continue to see the nation as a valid category for analysis and pedagogy.

If, as Davey suggests, the body of Canadian literature scholars squabble among themselves about whether the cultural nationalist or globalization streams of criticism are most likely to bring about social change, the colonialist administration of literature degrees critiqued by Mathews in the seventies in Canadian universities continues apace. Canadian degrees in literary studies are still decidedly degrees in English literature, with minimal exposure both to Canadian literature and to other literatures in English. Most of our colleagues would bridle at the suggestion that the reason for this emphasis is colonialism, but the course offerings attest to the way that Canadians continue to see Britain, and the historical achievements of English literature, as the standard, and any other literature as an add-on to the program. Fee argues that “Just as foreign literatures (Latin and Greek) served to distinguish the British cultural elite, so a foreign literature (British) serves to distinguish the postcolonial cultural elite. . . . The discourse of English studies in Canada may have been deployed nationalistically to resist foreign domination, but it was also used within the country as a vehicle of social control” (32-33). Mathews invited us to decolonize our curricula, and move away from the centrality of English and US literatures and critical approaches; the few small changes that were made did little to oppose the growth of neo-liberalism or the yearning identification of our students with US popular culture.

The Canadianization struggle provides a salutary lesson for those of us who are thinking about a sincere and comprehensive response to the Truth and Reconciliation Commission Report “Calls to Action,” for the failure of Canadianization foretells the failure of decolonization. Can English departments de-colonize our curricula and our pedagogy in order to feature Indigenous pedagogies and values, as we must and

should, without questioning why we subscribe to the current disciplinary focus on English literature, and more importantly, to whose benefit? If, as Fee suggests, “Canadian literature is unlikely ever to be ‘quite good enough’ to dominate the curriculum” (32), then Indigenous literatures are likely to remain marginal as well, an add-on to a degree that will continue to be defined, as Mathews suggested in the seventies, in the interests of cultural elites. And if Canadianists continue to take the lead in university responses to the TRC, then we may also risk the erasure of Canadian literature as a discipline in itself, because in the absence of substantial new hiring of Indigenous faculty members, many of us are being called upon to shift to teaching courses in Indigenous studies and Indigenous literatures. The loss of the few Canadian literature courses that persist within the curricula means we also lose the specific histories of colonization that the TRC is attempting to highlight, those that can only be examined in what Stephen Slemon has designated the Second World, where the colonized and the colonizers confront each other in the intimacy of a shared home. A true decolonizing of the curriculum must involve re-thinking all our disciplinary assumptions, including the marginalization of Canadian writing within our departments. In order to accomplish this task, we will need to re-situate ourselves as colonials as well as colonizers, and take a hard look at how we got here.

### AUTHOR’S NOTE

This paper is dedicated to Herb Wylie, without whose knowledge and editorial guidance it would have been much worse.

### NOTES

<sup>1</sup> For an account of some of these disputes, see Dart. Bryan Palmer recounts how Mathews alienated potential allies in the New Left in *Canada’s 1960s* (292-93).

<sup>2</sup> See “Laramie or Squamish,” in Wayman, *A Country not Considered*.

<sup>3</sup> The Kingston Conference was a major gathering of Canadian poets to discuss the state of writing and publishing in Canada that took place at Queen’s University in 1955. The results were published in Whalley, *Writing in Canada*. The Massey Report, also known as the Royal Commission on National Development in the Arts, Letters and Sciences, appeared in 1951; it proposed many of the cultural institutions that shaped Canadian literature in the latter half of the twentieth century. These two events are often cited as laying the foundations for the post-1970 explosion of Canadian writing.

<sup>4</sup> Margery Fee, in her article “Canadian Literature and English Studies in the Canadian University,” provides a useful account of the history of university courses on Canadian literature, the first of which was taught in 1907. According to Fee, however, such courses were usually marginalized as options for non-majors and taught by part-time faculty or graduate students.

<sup>5</sup> Literary satires of Canadian nationalists include “Sparrow,” the self-appointed protector of Evangeline in George Bowering’s *A Short Sad Book*, and the impractical and dangerous anti-American bomber Arthur and his friends in Atwood’s *Lady Oracle*.

<sup>6</sup> See Azzi for an account of the Waffle and its role in Canadian nationalist politics in the 1970s.

<sup>7</sup> At the time, the Association of Canadian College and University Teachers of English (ACCUTE) was known as the Association of Canadian University Teachers of English (ACUTE).

<sup>8</sup> This paper was later published in two different forms, in *English Quarterly* 5.3 (1972): 39-46, and as a chapter in *Canadian Literature: Surrender or Revolution*.

<sup>9</sup> The then president of ACUTE, Clara Thomas, a groundbreaking Canadian literature scholar, righteous feminist, and Mathews ally, had no control over the conference program.

<sup>10</sup> A poster with the program for this meeting is in Mathews’s papers: Robin Mathews Fonds LAC MG 31 D 190 box 37 file 9.

<sup>11</sup> A constitution dated May 31 1974 is in Mathews’s papers: LAC Robin Mathews Fonds, MG 31 D190 Box 37 file 9.

<sup>12</sup> This review is reprinted, with some revisions, in *Canadian Literature: Surrender or Revolution*. Atwood replied in “Surviving the Critics.”

<sup>13</sup> “At the annual meeting of the Association of Canadian and Québec Literatures held at Laval University in May 1976, members expressed concern at the large Canada Council Grants made to major research projects in other areas of literary study and the dearth of Canada-Council supported major research projects in Canadian literature. As a result, the ACQL executive at its June 1976 meetings decided to appoint two committees, one on English Canadian Literature and one on Quebecois Literature, to study and make recommendations on major research projects in Canadian and Quebecois literature.” “Report — committee on Major Research Projects in English-Canadian Literature” Association for Canadian and Québec Literatures, May 1977 (written for the Association by McMullen and Ricou). LAC Robin Mathews Fonds MG 31 D190 box 38 file 6.

<sup>14</sup> “Report — Committee on Major Research Projects in English-Canadian Literature” by the Association for Canadian and Québec Literatures, May 1977 (written by McMullen and Ricou). LAC Robin Mathews Fonds MG 31 D190 box 38 file 6.

<sup>15</sup> See Fee.

<sup>16</sup> See the introduction to Daniel Coleman, *White Civility*, especially pages 14-17, which describe the way that Canada is constructed as behind England on the timeline.

<sup>17</sup> I’m thinking of Lukács’s *The Historical Novel*, which describes an oppositional discourse of communitarian heroics in social realist fiction.

<sup>18</sup> See Martin (xvii-xix).

<sup>19</sup> See Steele and Mathews (502-03) for an account of this controversy.

<sup>20</sup> At the “Future Indicative” conference at the University of Ottawa in 1986, George Bowering made a number of disparaging remarks about Mathews during the opening panel. He then looked up at the audience and said, “I hope he isn’t here. . . .” It was a historic moment in the development of Canadian literature. However, this hostility was not universal: TISH member Robert Hogg was a colleague of Mathews at Carleton University for many years and they had a cordial relationship, and Frank Davey later dedicated his book *Post-National Arguments* to Mathews.

- <sup>21</sup> See “Charles G.D. Roberts: Father of Canadian Poetry” in *Canadian Literature: Surrender or Revolution* (45-62).
- <sup>22</sup> See *The Waterloo Report*.
- <sup>23</sup> Azzi repeats the claim that nationalists exhibited “visceral anti-Americanism” (213).
- <sup>24</sup> See DiAngelo, “White Fragility.”

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