

"MAKING LITERATURE HUM":  
CANADIAN LITERARY JOURNALISM  
IN THE TWENTIES

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Many people who are otherwise very knowledgeable about our national history may not be aware that the Canadian Authors Association is sixty years old in 1981. The occasion arrives amid a spate of celebrations in the life of Canadian cultural organizations and publications. These anniversaries of the early 1980s remind us that journals such as the *Dalhousie Review*, *Canadian Historical Review* and the *Canadian Forum* all appeared within the decade after the First World War. A remarkable time: and it is to be hoped that the present ferment of cultural review may yet generate a range of responses every bit as astonishing, and that the Applebaum-Hébert committee's report will honestly reflect the inevitable diversity of analyses and solutions that will come forward in answer to the call for cultural strategies. For it must be apparent to anyone looking over the list of the Twenties' progeny, that their separate incorporations reflect the real disagreements between them in policy, if not in the spirit of idealism. They may all have felt the urgency of certain needs in Canadian cultural life, but there was certainly no consensus about possible strategies.

The first issue of the *Canadian Bookman*, for instance, the journal established in 1919 whose short life yielded to the regrouping of its staff in the form of the Canadian Authors Association, contained, among other ideas, proposals for both a bibliographical bulletin of Canadian publications and a review of historical publications. However, the impracticability of a single agency attempting to undertake any number of such substantial projects quickly became apparent, and there followed a necessary divergence of strategies.

The *Bookman*, in particular, addressed itself to the premise that books in Canada were too frequently treated as "narcotics" in a busy world, and also, that what was needed was an awareness of books attractive to the Canadian reader. The *Bookman's* opening editorial stated:

It is too early yet to forecast the character of this new era with any precision. But it does not seem too early to be confident that it will be in one respect an era of ideas, an era of profound and general thought, not about the purely material problems which preoccupied us until four years ago . . .

And if this era is to be an era of ideas, it follows that it is to be also an era of books, since books are the one great medium through which ideas of [sic] communicated and perpetuated . . . Not, certainly, the merely sentimental, narcotic, idea-less books, miscalled books of the imagination, which have formed the literary food of too many of us who did not wish to be bothered with ideas . . . It was this conviction, of the coming of an era of ideas and of books, which was strong in the minds of the founders of the new *Canadian Bookman* and which led them to select the present as an appropriate time even though when they selected it it seemed unlikely to be a time of peace, for the establishment of a purely Canadian periodical which should deal with them not as masses of paper and binding, nor as so many square inches of type, nor as speculative adventures in search for "best-sellers", but as the vessels for the containing and the imparting of ideas — and of ideas suited to the uses of Canadian readers. In this sense, the appearance of the *Canadian Bookman* at the very dawn of this new era is not a mere coincidence. The *Canadian Bookman* is itself one of the phenomena of the new era.<sup>1</sup>

The hopes expressed here are typical of other eras besides the Twenties and certainly of many Canadian periodicals before and since. The argument invoked, however, depended upon the assumptions that the work of all Canadian authors was inherently congenial to thoughtful readers and also that Canadian authors could successfully compete in the commercial market. The *Bookman* staff, in fact, hoped to open up a new readership market to compete against narcotically commercial books, and to accomplish this specifically with books of Canadian authorship.

Their second editorial, "Bookishness in Canada," focused on the Book, not as opposed to the material objects of daily Canadian life, but as it might be cultivated among them. And more than the rivalry between practical and recreational pursuits, this article singled out the competition offered by recent cultural developments, the invention of recorded music and pictures, while "the taste for books is left, like the wild mustard seed, to propagate itself as and

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<sup>1</sup>*Canadian Bookman* 1 (Jan 1919).

where it will."<sup>2</sup> Therefore, the *Bookman* declared, the publisher, author and bookseller must pool their resources to advance the claim of books upon the Canadian consumer's attention.

Within the world of books, the interests of all these differing classes are diverse and, in some respects, conflicting. When it is a question of defending the Book itself against its rivals, of advancing it in the affection and esteem of the public, their interests are indistinguishably one.<sup>3</sup>

"By maintaining a forum for the discussion of all bookish matters, by bringing the producers and consumers of the Book into a more sympathetic and understanding relation," the *Bookman* itself hoped to contribute to this effort.

Many of the contributors to the *Bookman's* first number were distinguished members of academic or theological institutions. Far from any rampant hucksterism, it gave off the air of a Victorian schoolmasters' conference. The commercial note was sounded only obliquely, in Stephen Leacock's satirical article "The Book Agent or Why Do People Buy Books?" (17-19). The sheer bulk of articles, along with the number of authorities canvassed, made it an ambitiously comprehensive first issue for a new magazine. Moreover, every issue from October 1919 to July 1920 published a list of the last quarter's publications in Canada, with books by Canadian authors starred. There was an impressive range of both short notices and serious articles on international authors and historical topics.

Then in June 1921 the *Bookman* became the official organ of the Canadian Authors Association, the editorial committee having organized the first Association convention. For they had turned their attention to the need for the expression of Canadian authors' comments on the copyright legislation then before Parliament. Their collation of names and supporters soon led to the formal establishment of the Association, which then turned its attention to the practical problems of the continued existence of Canadian authors, most prominent among them, the lack of a Canadian readership. The Canadian Authors Association came up with a characteristically practical approach: a week devoted to draw attention to Canadian authors — Canadian Authors' Week, later

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<sup>2</sup>*Canadian Bookman* 1 (Jan 1919), [2] — [3].

<sup>3</sup>*Canadian Bookman* 1 (Jan 1919), 3.

Canadian Book Week. Branch groups of the Association across the country managed to make it a national event, by their efforts among local booksellers and publishers. Nonetheless, in the announcement of the first Book Week in December 1921, it was thought necessary to qualify their enthusiasm and to discount suggestions of "boosterism":

The fact has never been lost sight of that this is not a trade "stunt" for "boosting" the product of a particular author or even of a particular publisher. It is not a call to the Canadian people to abnegate their own judgment and buy something because a shout has been raised about it from the housetops . . . Canadian literature needs financial support, it is true, but much more than that it needs the intelligent attention and criticism of the Canadian people. Nobody else can make a Canadian literature. The Canadian authors cannot do it alone, nor with the help of no criticism and no judgment save that of Englishmen or Americans. Canadian literature is made when a Canadian with two dollars goes into a bookstore and buys a book of poems or a novel or a biography or an essay collection because it gives the picture or the attitude or the view which he as a Canadian thinks needs to be given. Without that act by the Canadian reader, Canadian literature will never be made at all.<sup>4</sup>

In the definition of Canadian literature here, it is no longer a matter of agonizing over uncertain abstractions, for the task has been greatly simplified by use of the vocabulary of materialism: Canadian literature is a product much like any other which competes for the time and dollars of the modern consumer.

To the subsequent charge of sordid commercialism, the January 1922 issue of the *Bookman*, with slightly paradoxical reasoning, answered that their critics (the *Canadian Forum*) had

failed to perceive that the sale of a book may be something more than a mere economic transaction, may in fact be followed by spiritual consequences quite different from those which follow the sale of a loaf of bread, and may therefore be desirable for these consequences even if not for itself.<sup>5</sup>

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<sup>4</sup>*Canadian Bookman* 4 (Dec 1921), 5-6.

<sup>5</sup>*Canadian Bookman* 4 (Jan 1922), 38.

In its title's emphasis upon the adjective *Canadian* and the focus upon the book as a literary product, the *Bookman* claimed to advertise, not so much a narrowness of outlook, as a singleness of purpose. From the perspective of this purpose, any attempt at a comprehensive treatment of international literature became irrelevant.

With the change to a monthly format in December 1921 the magazine became smaller in bulk. The inclusion of Association news broke up the pages with a number of shorter items. Then, with the February 1922 issue, it was announced that the magazine headquarters had moved to Toronto and the magazine, under a new publisher, had merged with the *Canadian Book Trade Journal*. As well as the addition of a trade section the new format included full page publishers' advertisements among the articles. There had always been pictures of authors; new photographs of successful book displays were also included.

Such ambivalence was, in fact, reflective of a divisiveness editorially as well and in November 1922 B.K. Sandwell left the magazine, and its connection with the Association ended. In January 1923 the CAA put out the first issue of its *Bulletin*, devoted exclusively to the organization's own news. There were neither lavish literary studies nor advertisements on pages half the size of the *Bookman's* generous quarto. Some Association news continued to appear in the *Bookman*, but the period of thoughtful reflection on aims and models appeared to be gone. The Canadian authors had indeed taken over, and Sandwell's new magazine was fully devoted to their activities and problems. In the pages of the *Bulletin*, at least, the Association had reverted to the role favoured for it by the *Canadian Forum*: that of an authors' union. For the attempt to combine "bookish" criticism and Association news in the *Bookman* had inevitably meant that neither party would be satisfied. A literary magazine singlemindedly devoted to Canadian books could not be taken seriously by literary critics; while a Canadian authors' magazine which discussed international literature was less practically useful and more pretentious than it need be.

Perhaps the problem derived simply from having a board, rather than one individual, responsible for editorial direction. However, even after the parting of Sandwell and the *Bookman*, such conflict continued to haunt the Canadian Authors Association. For however narrowly professional the *Bulletin's* items may have

appeared to the general reader, the Association was committed to the platform of popularizing "bookishness," particularly in insisting upon its membership policy of allowing non-writers to become Associate members.

The contradictions in such an effort were as readily apparent then as now. It is perhaps only that post-Massey competition for government money as well as commercial success has now smudged the battlelines. During the early Twenties these battlelines were perhaps most starkly represented by the conflict between the Canadian Authors Association and the *Canadian Forum*. With the Book Week venture into commercialism and what is traditionally the publishers' territory of book-as-product, the Association found itself divided from its fellow workers in the Canadian cultural soil. (As was to be realized much later when Canada Council funding was brought in to revive the lapsed Book Week, the spirit of nationalism is somehow more palpable when money is available to go with it.) There were individuals such as Watson Kirkconnell, Pelham Edgar, and E.K. Broadus, who could work enthusiastically for both the Association and a journal such as the *University of Toronto Quarterly* (established a decade later). They were tireless both as scholar-critics in many literatures and as promoters of Canadian literature. They were also the colleagues of those who wrote for the *Canadian Forum*. Barker Fairley, editor of the *Canadian Forum*, contributed several articles on major contemporary English novelists to the *Bookman* from January 1920 to September 1921, and was listed as a member of the Association in the September 1921 issue.

Still, it was the *Canadian Forum* which became the most formidable critic of the Canadian Authors Association. The *Forum's* first notice of the Association came in November and December 1921, regarding the first Book Week. Its opening observations were favourable, noting with approval that the Association had already done valuable work as a union to strengthen the copyright position of authors. But the Association's subsequent efforts on behalf of Canadian authors — namely, Book Week itself — were seen as inappropriate and confused:

We all recognise the several rights of publisher, author, and critic, but we are apprehensive when we see them indiscriminately mingled, as they appear to be in the Authors Association. Criticism under the wing of the publisher never reads the same as criticism that is morally independent. Methods of publicity which by the general standards of our age are acceptable in the publisher come with an ill grace from the author.<sup>6</sup>

This argument was answered by B.K. Sandwell in the same issue, responding to the *Forum's* remarks in November:

enlightened interest must be preceded by attention, and we are very strongly of the opinion that the Canadian author does not receive from the Canadian public the attention which, in proportion to his merits, he deserves . . . But we begin by trying to arrest its attention. With the help of a vigorous literary criticism (in which the CANADIAN FORUM will bear a hand), the rest will follow.<sup>7</sup>

Perhaps such differences in outlook lay, too, in the fact the *Canadian Forum* was fundamentally pessimistic about the value of Canadian writing after Carman and Lampman. Canadian painters, by contrast, seemed to the *Forum* to be passing through a period which gave cause for more genuine optimism:

Canadian literature has been a series of disappointments after a fair promise; Canadian painting has shown a steady growth . . . One could wish no fairer fate to any nation than the power to recognise its natural direction of growth and to foster that growth healthily.<sup>8</sup>

The *Forum* insisted upon the necessity for informed criticism, not merely a plethora of information about publishers' lists. By contrast, the *Bookman* cited the state of Canadian painting to show the need for generous allowance to be made in critical judgements about Canadian culture:

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<sup>6</sup>*Canadian Forum* 2 (Dec 1921). 453.

<sup>7</sup>*Canadian Forum* 2 (Dec 1921). 459-60.

<sup>8</sup>*Canadian Forum* 2 (Dec 1921). 462.

We do not in the present state of the population, wealth and intellectual development of this country, expect to find men with the literary skill and practical craftsmanship of those writers, engaged in the production of Canadian literature any more than we expect to find artists like Brangwyn, Zorni Zuloaga, Orpen or John contributing to Canadian portraiture or landscape. Even if we had such amongst us — and the law of mathematical chance is against it, to say nothing of the more important laws of environment and economic inducement — they would not be able to carry a purely Canadian art as far as Galsworthy or Orpen can carry their respective British arts, because they would have to pick it up at a much more primitive stage of development.<sup>9</sup>

Yet it was characteristic of the *Bookman's* stance in general, that along with such critical temporizing went an attention to the practical problems which seem to be with Canadian artists always. In the same issue in which the above appeared, there was also a symposium on the lack of protection for Canadian periodicals from the American flood of ephemera.

Curiously, in its argument against indiscriminate publicity, the *Forum* echoed the *Bookman's* analysis of modern reading habits. The Canadian reader's appetite

allies itself to a desire for reading matter at any cost, cheap novels rather than no novels, anything to kill time in a street-car. This is the most ineradicable narcotic of our modern life. Canada shares it with the rest of the western world. It has more of a physiological than a mental relation to good writing, but it uses the same outward medium and the two are continually getting confused. The narcotic of cheap writing is a marketable ware and hence there is a potential market for the best writing too.<sup>10</sup>

Again the *Forum*, like the *Bookman*, concluded that there were two problems facing Canadian literature: the need to search out works of merit, and the need to produce a literature recognizably expressive of the Canadian character. The *Forum* solution in both instances was a morally high-toned one, maintaining insistence upon comment which would be commercially impartial:

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<sup>9</sup>*Canadian Bookman* 1 (April 1919), 7-8.

<sup>10</sup>*Canadian Forum* 2 (Dec 1921), 460.

Instead of helping our infant literature to grow from small to larger on a severe diet, which being a healthy infant it is strong enough to stand, it [the CAA] nurses the baby continually, passing it from hand to hand with no thought of letting it crawl and ultimately walk.<sup>11</sup>

In the following month, the *Forum* printed a letter from Basil King, which continued and extended this metaphor of Canadian national life and literature in its infancy, but argued for the leniency and protectiveness which normally surrounds childhood. King was a founding member of the Association, though he lived in Massachusetts.

In response to King's letter, February and March brought correspondence refuting this image of the Canadian literary infant. It was pointed out that Canadian writers had access to all that has been written in their languages previously, and that, in fact, a significant number of her national leaders and artists came to this country in their own days of maturity:

there are in Canada hundreds and hundreds of people to whom the best traditions of English literature and English culture have been handed down intact. There are on the other hand hundreds of people in England itself to whom these same traditions have been handed down very imperfectly . . .<sup>12</sup>

Moreover, the letter continued,

the heaviest handicap to clear thinking about human life and art at the present time is the Darwinian evolutionary hypothesis, not as it is understood and qualified by science, but as it has been hastily misapplied in fields of human activity . . .<sup>13</sup>

The examples of Green and Renaissance drama and of nineteenth-century American literature were cited, showing that an art form may come from promise to fulfilment within a very short number of years. The novel appeared exhausted as an art form in the Twenties, and it seemed unlikely that such should be the format in which contemporary Canadian culture would find its voice; the writer guessed that poetry might prove more congenial.

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<sup>11</sup>*Canadian Forum* 2 (Dec 1921), 462.

<sup>12</sup>*Canadian Forum* 2 (Feb 1922), 525.

<sup>13</sup>*Canadian Forum* 2 (Feb 1922), 525.

The controversy continued in the *Forum's* correspondence columns for another two months until May, when the editor finally put a stop to it; although in June, there was a letter *cum* article on the state of the Canadian novel. With this, the topic disappeared from the pages of the *Forum*. It would appear that the *Forum* insisted upon its international outlook, while not ceasing also to maintain a hopeful attitude towards the possibilities of Canada's literature. The magazine was not so enamoured with the more successful developments in Canadian art that a book of verses recently published by Lawren Harris was exempted from criticism in the January 1923 issue. With such a stance the *Forum* remained necessarily at odds with the efforts of the Association, excepting its work on copyright legislation.

Perhaps the *Forum* article which was to prove most offensive to the Association was Douglas Bush's "Making Literature Hum," in December 1926. Noting the end of another Book Week, Bush remarked:

Inflated rhetoric used to be left to the politicians, its rightful exponents, for use on the first of July; during the last few years it has become the language of literature, and one learns on all sides that Canada is taking its permanent seat in the literary league of nations.

And so we have bulky histories of Canadian literature appraising the product of every citizen who ever held a pen; bulky anthologies preserving almost everything metrical that has sprung from a Canadian brain; little books celebrating the genius of people who in another country would not get beyond the poetry corner of the local newspaper; reprints of Canadian 'classics' which not even antiquity can render tolerable; respectful consideration of inferior Zane Greys as literature — in short, an earnest and sincere desire to establish a completely parochial scale of values.<sup>14</sup>

To this, Watson Kirkconnell replied, defending the Association; he noted that it had been established with the practical aim of improving copyright provisions for the Canadian author — a fact omitted by Bush — and that

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<sup>14</sup>Canadian Forum 8 (Dec 1926), 72-73.

It was assumed also that such a nation-wide organization might achieve subsidiary ends (a) by annual educational campaigns, seeking to give the Canadian public a nodding acquaintance with the literature that we already possess and so build up a sympathetic audience for the writers of the present and the future, (b) by fostering mutual acquaintance and encouragement, and (c) by a joint study of literature and the problems of authorship.<sup>15</sup>

Kirkconnell admitted that in these activities the Association had found itself involved with dilettantes and marketeers: "I can assure Mr. Bush, however, that most of the leaders of the C.A.A. have been men with as few illusions as himself regarding the shortcomings of Canadian literature."

If, with dissociation from the *Bookman*, the Association had become freed of the necessity to authorship on an intellectual plane, it nonetheless continued to lumber itself with the attempt to make Canadian authorship popular. Ultimately, in response to the contradictions and compromises inherent in the effort at education/persuasion, the result was a move among modern authors back towards a union and a withdrawal of academic literary criticism into its specialized concerns — and consequently, the Canadian Authors Association has found itself disenfranchised. The middle ground has become a no-man's land, given over to the awkward grazing of that centaur-like figure, the amateur writer. The attempt of the Twenties to find for Canadian writers a ground somewhere between narcotic and arcane literature failed. In the 1980s the writer, if not also an academic or journalist, is faced with the need to choose between Arthur-Haileyism or arts council-ese — both spawners of formulaic fiction and both likely to become even more calcified in the future.

Thus, the *Canadian Bookman* and the Canadian Authors Association, representing Canadian authors at the beginning of the modern era, failed to effect the looked-for revolution in Canadian literature; and Canadian authors, now at the end of modernism, seem likely once again to fossilize the achievements of the past quarter century in the mire of self-congratulation. The Canadian reading public is left to be mystified by the spectacle. There is perhaps cause left for optimism in the very fact of national cultural

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<sup>15</sup>*Canadian Forum* 8 (Jan 1927), 110.

review, as yet again a forum is created for the meeting of authors, publishers and critics. This time, too, the narcotic Media have been summoned to the reckoning of Canadian culture. But it is not so certain that this is to be an era of ideas; and if it were, it is even less likely that they would be ones suited to Canadians.

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