

BIBLIOGRAFIA

a. RECENSIONES Y RESEÑAS

CANADIAN POETRY IN SPAIN

Statistics regarding the number of translations published in different countries always reveal Spain to be very near the top of the list. Spanish readers consequently have ample opportunities of quick access to foreign writing, particularly to recent works. Nevertheless, there are large areas of the English speaking world, beyond Britain and the United States, which remain practically unknown. Writers from the so-called Commonwealth countries get scarce attention unless they happen to have attracted the attention of some literary agent by winning a prestigious prize, as has been the case with Patrick White, V.S. Naipaul and Salman Rushdie. There is a considerable body of interesting writing in Africa, Australia, the Caribbean and other areas still awaiting the translator, not to mention Canada, a country that has a fair share of good poets, novelists and dramatists who are ignored because they have not "hit the jackpot" of International Awards. What Canadian writers could one expect Spanish readers to know? Literary academics might, presumably, be familiar with the work of Northrop Frye. Those old enough to look back to the sixties and interested in the social phenomena of the media may recall the *Gutenberg Galaxy*, the Global Village and what George Woodcock described as "general McLuhanacy". Others of the same age will probably respond to the name of Leonard Cohen, while readers of popular fiction may remember the Spanish versions of Mazo de la Roche's *Jalna* series. For the rest, even well-read Spaniards would be pushed to think of many names. This ignorance is not merely a Spanish phenomenon; owing to a poor distribution of Canadian books, few of their writers are known even in Britain except possibly those who made it into Penguin editions, like Robertson Davies, Mordecai Richler or Alice Munroe.

In view of all that we must particularly applaud the initiative of Dr. Bernd Dietz, who has turned his attention to the Canadian poets producing an excellent bi-lingual anthology¹ in which we can discover 94 poems by 26 XXth. century poets. As one of our most distinguished young Spanish *anglistas*, Bernd Dietz is ideally suited to the task, having a first hand knowledge of Canada, a good command of both English and Spanish and the sensibility of a poet. His translations are, moreover, accompanied by a useful introduction which offers much basic information for readers unfamiliar with this world.

Canada, like Australia—the country it can best be compared with from the point of view of cultural development—has had to pass through a series of phases in an unnaturally short space of time. First there was the cutting of the strong umbilical cord attached to the English Motherland; then the tentative search for a personality of its own; then a timid voice stammering in an unencouraging, Phillistine environment; then the questions: What am I? Is there such a thing as a Canadian? Is there such a thing as Canadian Literature? Can this Canlit (unfortunate abbreviation!) be a suitable subject for university study? Of course the Americans went through all the same growing pains but owing to their rapid demographic and economic

expansion, they came much more quickly to that all too vigorous consciousness of being American. Even Australia, the newest land from the point of view of European settlement, overcame its "Cultural Cringe" with relative ease in the 50s. But for Canada it has been difficult, for a number of reasons. First of all there is a matter of geography: with an immense frozen wall to the north and, on the other hand, an immense open frontier to the south, facing the world's most dominant "culture", it is not surprising that a tiny population in the world's second largest land area should have difficulty in finding its national identity in relatively few years. As Henry James said: "it takes a great deal of history to produce a little literature."

In his introduction, Bernd Dietz suggests that Canada's most influential literary academic Northrop Frye and his disciples have been responsible for fostering a certain sense of inferiority or lack of confidence in Canadian poetry. It was certainly Frye who put out the notion of a huge, wild, hostile Canada where "to feel Canadian was to feel part of a no-man's-land with huge rivers, lakes and islands that very few Canadians have ever seen... one wonders if any other national consciousness has had so large an amount of the unknown, the unrealized, the humanly undigested to built into it." It was Frye also who spread the idea of Canadian poetry conveying "a tone of deep terror in regard to nature", "a terror of the soul" which in its turn produced a "garrison society" huddling together in provincial cosiness for mutual protection. These ideas led to the sort of criticism summed up in the title word of Margaret Atwood's widely read critical work *Survival*. Bernd Dietz rightly points out that this is not the whole story and that Canadian poetry is a lot healthier than some critics would have us believe. In these cases it is often the outsider, the reader or critic from another country, who can give a boost to nations with cultural inferiority complexes. The interest and admiration of foreign readers certainly gave encouragement to Australian writers, why not Canadians too?

Although Canada has literary roots going far back into the XIXth. century and, as Dietz suggests, there is much worth revising in this earlier work, there is no doubt that the great flowering, what Frye called "a colossal verbal explosion", took place after the Second World War, as indeed it did in all the Commonwealth countries. We have only to read George Woodcock's account of the literary panorama he found on his return to his country in 1949 to appreciate how great that explosion was. Looking back on the subsequent decades after 18 years of editing *Canadian Literature*, Woodcock remembered how in 1949 there were only three poetry magazines in the whole country and the outlook for budding writers was bleak. Viewed from 1974, the outlook was infinitely brighter. "I believe", wrote Woodcock, "we owe the active artistic life that goes on now in so many Canadian centres to the kind of mutation in cultural consciousness that occurs in every nation when by obscure movements of the collective scenes it realizes its own maturity."

How did that maturity come about? Undoubtedly the Second World War was the greatest factor, loosening the links with Britain, bringing in so many immigrants from non-English speaking countries who had no attachments to that old British Home. They, the first generation immigrants, have not personally had much time yet to contribute to the literary scene —among Dietz's poets there are two or three young ones born outside Canada— but perhaps they helped to build up the climate in which second, third or fourth generation Canadians might flourish poetically.

Looking at that vast, varied, multinational country one cannot be surprised that there are problems in discovering the Canadian identity. The nordic barrens of Newfoundland, the old-fashioned calm of the Maritimes, the glass and concrete towers of Montreal or Toronto,

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rural verdor of Ontario, vast Prairies, Rockies and rain-forest Pacific coast; and then the epeople —the two solitudes of Montreal which are really three, according to Irving Layton: French, English and Jewish, with the latter contrasting with the WASH –White, Anglo-Saxon, Hebrew— of Toronto. The Scottish Presbyterean severity of Ontario, Mennonite sobriety, not to mention all those other elements Chinese, Japanese, Ukranian, etc. that have not yet quite “melted” in the way they have into the Coca-Cola Culture of their Southern neighbours. What poet could manage all that? Unless it be Al Purdy who, as George Woodcock nicely wrote: “fits Canada like a glove, you can feel the fingers of the land working through his poems.”

What sort of themes do we expect then from our Canadian poets? First we think of the land itself, with its long, harsh winters, its short, hot, fly-plagued summers and its characteristic animals. Then its connection with its European past or perhaps a more remote past of its own aboriginal peoples. Problems of diverse ethnic groups? Or perhaps a looking beyond its frontiers to more universal themes? All these are to be found in Canadian poetry and, admirably, even in his necessarily small selection, Dietz has contrived to reflect all these moods in his short, selected poems.

For James Reaney, the well-known Ontario-born dramatist, the river Avon, flowing above the town of Stratford, Ont. does not flow “With English accents”.

And you do not sound
Like Avon
Or swans & bards
But rather like the sad wild fowl
In prints drawn
By Audubon
And like dear bad poets
Who wrote
Early in Canada
And were never of note.

Margaret Atwood finds that the animals in Europe are not like those of Canada:

In that country the animals
have the faces of people...

In this country the animals
Have the faces of
animals.

Both these poets we note, have been pupils of Northrop Frye.

But the animals with faces of animals are disappearing even from the wild Canadian scene with the incursions of motorways and other man-made devices. The omnipresent beaver is unknown to town-dwellers.

The Italians have never seen one; the Poles call them squirrels

·writes David Donnell; and there is a profound tragic splendour in Alden Nowlan’s old Bull

Moose, coming down through the spruce and cedar to be stopped by a pole-fenced pasture:

Too tired to turn or, perhaps, aware
there was no place left to go, he stood with the cattle.

The Canadians themselves are now, in a sense, confined within their own nationhood, according to Al Purdy:

but French no longer
nor are we any longer English...
only this handful of earth
for a time at least
I have no other place to go.

Canada may still have vague formal links with the British Crown but this can mean little to the young, native born, as is humorously reflected in Reaney's *The Royal Visit*:

When the King and the Queen came to Stratford
Everyone felt at once
How heavy the Crown must be.
The Mayor shook hands with their Majesties
And everyone presentable was presented
And those who weren't have resented
It, and will
To their dying day.

Many of the poets are university people, academics, but there are some who have come up the hard way and learned the true nature of much of Canada still, as is the case of Patrick Lane who writes of:

Men on the pond
push logs through constant ice...

Everything is hard. The sky
scrapes the earth at thirty below
and living things pull into pain
like grotesque children
thrown in the wrong season.

Perhaps it takes time to grow into love with such a harsh country. The poets took longer to sing the beauty of the Prairies than the novelists did but in this volume we can find John Newlove (apt name) born in Regina in 1938 capturing some of its frightening beauty.

What's lovely
is whatever makes the adrenalin run;
therefore I count terror and fear among
the greatest beauty...

Beauty's what makes
the adrenalin run. Fear at night

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on the level plains, with no horizon
and the level stars too bright, wind bitter
even in June...

I

remember plains and mountains, places
I come from, places I adhere and live in.

Canadian poets are often great travellers, Newlove himself typifying the restless roaming within Canada itself:

never

to be at ease but always migrating
from city to city
seeking some almost seen.
god or food or earth or word.

But with the new assimilation of Canada itself in its vastness it is interesting to see the reaction of a younger Canadian in Europe. The historic Greece, for David Solway, b.1941, produces an almost claustrophobic feeling:

There is no distance in this land,
background is foreground; perspective
utterly impossible.
One lives in the infinitive...

The man in the next valley coughs
in your ear, and the cataract
you hear is someone's kitchen tap.

Once the umbilical cord with Europe is cut, some may turn back to study the ancient and neglected forefathers in their own new country: the Indian or Inuit aboriginals. In fiction this development can well be seen in the novels of Rudy Wiebe who, after brilliant writing about his own Mennonite forbears, has turned to reconstruct Canada's Indian past. This aspect is touched on in at least one poem in this anthology: Al Purdy's reflections on observing the gigantic six-foot-three skeleton of a Beothuck Indian in the museum of St. John's, Newfoundland. With characteristic humour he compares it to the tourists examining it:

I gawk at the gawking tourists
over this last symbol
of his extinct nation...

I ought to feel sadness here
but can't
only a slight amazement
at the gawking tourists
that these specimens survived
and the man in the glass case didn't it.

With these lines one remembers Purdy's other fine *Lament for the Dorsets*— an eskimo tribe extinct in the XIVth. century, or Robert Kroetsch's beautiful *Stone Hammer Poem*, both too long, no doubt, to have been included in this volume.

But while some poets may be looking back into the remote past of their country, others will be concerned with current world affairs. Earle Birney, an inveterate traveller over five continents, reflects his journeyings in his poems, and Irving Layton a passionate need to be involved in mankind:

When reading me I want you to feel
as if I had ripped your skin off...
For I do not write to improve your soul
or to make you feel better, or more humane...
I write for the young man, demented,
who dropped the bomb on Hiroshima;
I write for Nasser and Ben Gurion;
for the Defence Secretary
voted forty-six billions for the extirpation
of humans everywhere.

Phyllips Webb, writing about Jacobo Timerman, eyeing his jailer through the steel door of a prison in Argentina, also reflects this mood of concern. In an interview with *Books in Canada* last year, Irving Layton complained about what he felt to be a lack of sensibility among the younger Canadian poets about such matters —killed off, he thought, by the critics and a technical civilization unkind to the imagination. There is "little or no social awareness. As far as Canadian poets are concerned Gulag never happened; there were no holocausts." Involvement, while still keeping the poetic imagination alive, is not an easy task. As David Satherley, a younger poet born in 1949, writes:

How to feel anger enough to survive
And yet not spoil one's ability to love.

There is a danger, of course, in becoming hopelessly egocentric, turned entirely into the personal and immediate triviality as when Newlove writes:

How are you? And whose
here do you want me
to be? My tooth hurts
and it is raining, there is
no oil for the stove.

Meanwhile the poet-housewife struggles along with the daily round. In *Maintenance*, Robin Sarah writes dejectedly:

Sometimes the best I can do
is homemade soup, or a patch on the knees
of the baby's overalls.
Things you couldn't call poems...
... the eaten

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replaced by the soon-to-be eaten, the raw
by the cooked, the spilled-on
by the washed and dried, the ripped
by the mended; empty cartons
heaved down the cellar stairs, the
cans stacked on the ledge, debris
sealed up in the monstrous snot-green bags
for the garbage man.

And I'll tell you what
they don't usually tell you: there's no
poetry in it.

Is that all life is then? Toothaches and snot-green garbage bags? The modern consumer, super-tech, society does sometimes make it seem so, but there still remains the vast, splendid and fearful universe for those with courage to face it. And there is the Grand Old Man of Canadian poetry still going strong at 81 to remind us of it.

We are a spark beleaguered
by darkness; this twinkle we make in a corner of emptiness,
how shall we utter our fear that the black Experimentress
will never in the range of her microscope find it?...

Yet we must speak, we the unique glowworms.
Out of the waters and rocks of our little world...

Somos una chispa asediada
por la oscuridad; este centelleo que hacemos en una esquina de vacío...

Yes, it rings true in English and in Spanish.

Ahora al cabo de los años irreflexivos hemos llegado al tiempo
en que mirar esta colcha de luces es un deleite turbador.

Birney's beautiful poem has been beautifully rendered and we must be grateful to Bernd Dietz for this excellent volume. He has had a hard task to select from so many fine poems of Canada. Inevitably one will regret some of the absences but, at least, he has managed to give us a fair representation of regions, of moods, of poetic techniques and has translated them with rigorous accuracy and simple elegance into a Spanish that is a pleasure to read. Let us hope he may continue to labour in this field.

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1. *Antología de la poesía anglocanadiense contemporánea*. Selección, traducción e introducción de Bernd Dietz. El Bardo. Libros de la Frontera. Barcelona, 1985. 365 pp.