“We’d Lose Our Shirt!”: How Canada’s Cultural Policy Has Shaped the Canadian Literary Canon

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Abstract

Most scholars consider the 1951 issue of a report by the Royal Commission on National Development in the Arts, Letters and Sciences to be a pivotal moment in the development of Canadian literature. Later known as the Massey Report, the commission’s document outlined a number of policy recommendations and advocated for a federally supported system of arts patronage. Today, literature is one of Canada’s most mature and respected cultural industries. Writing and publishing this body of literature has also translated into profits and employment for many Canadians. According to Statistics Canada, written media contributes nearly half of the percentage share of the nation’s
GDP generated from the cultural sector. As a result, the federal government has a vested interest in supporting the writing and publishing industry; the business of books not only generates wealth, but also contributes to the construction of a strong sense of national identity.

This paper explores the relationship between the Canadian literary canon and the country's cultural policy framework. How has this framework, bolstered by the Massey Report, contributed to the development of literature as a cultural industry? Does cultural policy impact the types of books that are published in Canada? While it is neither appropriate nor possible within the scope of this paper to explore the history of Canada's national literature in depth, it includes a brief examination of the emergence of CanLit during the 1950s, as well as review the introduction of cultural policy. A critical discussion about the impact of this relationship follows. The paper concludes with a critical review of current funding for the publishing industry.

Introduction

Anne of Green Gables. The English Patient. Life of Pi. Literature is one of the most mature and respected cultural industries in Canada (CONNECTUS Consulting Inc., 2004) Writing and publishing this body of literature has also translated into profits and employment for many Canadians. According to Statistics Canada (2004), written media contribute nearly half of the percentage share of Canada's GDP generated from the cultural sector. As a result, the federal government has a vested interest in supporting the writing and publishing industry; the business of book publishing not only generates wealth, but also contributes to the construction of a strong sense of national identity. Therefore, a cultural policy framework has been established to support the industry.

This paper will explore the relationship between Canadian literary canon and the country's cultural policy framework. While it is neither appropriate nor possible within the scope of this paper to explore the history of Canada's national literature in depth, it will be pertinent to briefly examine the emergence of CanLit during the 1950s, as well as review the introduction of cultural policy, beginning
with the 1951 Massey Report. A critical discussion about the impact of this relationship will follow. It should be noted that the focus of this paper will be limited to English literature, as the tradition of Québécois literature has developed under different circumstances than that of English-Canadian literature.

The Massey Report and Canada’s New Cultural Policy

Most scholars consider the 1951 issue of a report by the Royal Commission on National Development in the Arts, Letters and Sciences to be a pivotal moment in the development of Canadian literature (Kallmann, n.d.). Later known as the Massey Report (in reference to Vincent Massey, the eighteenth Governor General of Canada and the appointed chair of the Royal Commission), the commission’s document outlined a number of policy recommendations and advocated for a federally supported system of arts patronage. The commission also encouraged the creation of an arm’s length funding body to administer these funds. The impact of the report on Canadian culture should not be understated. At the time of its publication, the notion of patronage for arts and scholarship had fallen out of favour in post-war North America, as many equated government support with state control. Moreover, there existed a growing sentiment that any endeavor that was not self-sustaining should be abandoned in favour of a more profitable enterprise.

Nevertheless, the federal government adopted nearly all of the recommendations put forward by the commission. As Litt (1991) explains, the success of the Massey Report can be attributed to two profoundly affecting cultural predicaments. First, Canada was experiencing a great sense of pride based on its wartime achievements, but was still a relatively young nation. The federal government hoped to seize this opportunity to forge a national identity separate and distinct from Britain. Second, although European influences quickly waned, the government feared the encroachment of rapidly expanding channels of American mass media. There was considerable worry that ‘Americanism’ would irreparably harm Canadian culture in a number of sectors, including broadcasting, film, libraries, archives and literature. At the same time, the commission was concerned that Canada
was too weak to stand on its own. Quoting McCourt, the commission reported, “The unpalatable truth is...that today in Canada there exists no body of creative writing which reflects adequately, or with more than limited insight, the nature of the Canadian people and the historic forces which have made them what they are” (Report Royal Commission on National Development in the Arts, Letters and Sciences, 1949-1951, 1951). The Massey Report offered a prescription to protect the fledgling Canadian national identity against the more mature and robust American nationalism.

One of the protectionist instruments suggested by the commission was the establishment of a new Ministry of Fine Arts and Cultural Affairs (Litt, 1991, p. 371). In addition, the report recommended that a Council for the Arts, Letters, Humanities and Social Sciences be set up to offer the same level of administrative support as the National Research Council (NRC) provided for the sciences and technical crafts. Similar to the Arts Council of Great Britain, the Canada Council would be:

A semi-independent body... provided with modest funds to stimulate, comfort and support any societies or bodies brought together on private or local initiative which are striving with serious purpose and a reasonable prospect of success to present for public enjoyment the arts of drama, music and painting (Litt, 1991, p. 374).

In 1957, the Canada Council for the Arts Act created such an agency (Canada Council for the Arts Act R.S., 1985, c. C-2).

The Emergence of CanLit

The observations of the Massey Commission resonated with literary critics and scholars around the nation, having a great mobilizing effect. Northrop Frye, for example, began writing a series of essays aimed at generating support and awareness for what he considered to be a “national spirit” (O’Grady and Staines, 2003, p. 3). The most aggressive response, however, came from Malcolm Ross, then head of the Department of English at Queen’s University Chittick, 1984. Frustrated by the lack of Canadian literature in the curriculum, Ross approached John Gray, publisher of McMillan of Canada, with a proposal that he produce a paperback series highlighting the works of Canadian authors.¹ Ross insisted that a paperback

¹ Because Anglophone Canada had developed under the tutelage of the British Commonwealth,
series would promote a body of national literature by making it more accessible for students and every day readers. Gray immediately rejected the idea, stating, “We’d lose our shirt!” A chance encounter with Jack McClelland, of McClelland & Stewart, prompted Ross to try his luck again (Chittick, 1984). This time, Ross managed to convince McClelland that the publishing house could create a market for Canadian titles where one did not currently exist, as long as they were promoted in schools and universities. The result was the New Canadian Library, which Lecker (1995) has described as an ideal vehicle for the development of a Canadian literary canon (p. 151).

The importance of a literary canon has been explored in depth by Corse (1997). As she explains, “national literatures are the cornerstones of national cultures…. [they] have traditionally been understood as reflections of the unique character and experiences of the nation” (Corse, p. 1). The canon establishes and reinforces cultural mythology and captures common narratives, which in turn foster a better understanding of the past, present and future. Not surprising, the canonization of Canadian literature occurred at a time when the country was particularly interested in nation-building activities. According to Corse, preparation and anticipation for the upcoming 1967 centennial celebrations of Canadian Confederation began as early as the mid-1950s. The founding of Canadian Studies as an academic discipline and the launch of the journal *Canadian Literature* also occurred during this period. Corse (1997) cautions, however, that:

"National literatures are not passive reflections of naturally occurring phenomena, but integral components of the process of national development, consciously constructed pieces of the national culture, and creators of the world in which we live. The canon is chosen, not created (p. 9)."

Canada’s literary canon, often referred to as CanLit, therefore comprises a
number of works selected to represent the shared experiences of Canadian citizens.

An obvious question, then, is who chooses the works that become part of the canon? Also, how is the canon shaped and what impact does this have on national identity?

Ultimately, Ross and McClelland are responsible for selecting the works that were published in the New Canadian Library, at least in the early years. The series began by reprinting older, out-of-print novels by Morley Callaghan, Sinclair Ross, and Stephen Leacock, and grew to include a bevy of works by numerous others. Promoted to newly established Canadian Studies programs, these authors became synonymous with CanLit. But why choose these authors over others? Why select Callaghan and not, as Gerson (1991) has noted, one of the many female writers of equal notoriety? In a 1984 interview, Ross admitted that the selections were “rather haphazard,” based on personal tastes, and that profits were also a primary consideration—books by Leacock sold well, so they were published to offset the costs of producing less popular titles (Chittick, 1984). When CanLit grew as a genre, several other publishers began producing canonical works and these houses were likely faced with similar considerations while making business decisions.

Gerson, however, is not convinced that publishing decisions were quite as “arbitrary and malleable” (p. 47) as Ross would have us believe. In her survey of post-Victorian era Canadian literature (1918 to the 1940s), she found that novels frequently described a hero struggling to make a new life for himself in the vast rural wilderness. Natural landscape plays a key role in these early narratives, with the hero searching for identity in a world not unlike a Group of Seven painting. Isolation, poverty and conquering the rugged terrain are all common themes. Ross, who was well versed in literature from this period, may have perceived these narratives as shared experiences, representative of all Canadians. This could also explain why Susanna Moodie’s cathartic memoir *Roughing it in the Bush*, outlining her bleak experiences emigrating to Canada from England, was one of the first female-authored titles published in the New Canadian Library series. Thematically, Moodie’s manuscript stands apart from the coterie of writing authored by her female contemporaries, and it complements the rest of the works chosen by Ross and, later, editor David Staide.
Yet, Gerson’s suggestion that publishers serve as gatekeepers of the canon is not a revelation. Moreover, while placing control of CanLit into the hands of an elite few publishers across the country is problematic for a number of obvious reasons, it is not the only factor influencing the construction of the Canadian canon. According to Lecker (1999), there is another major influence that informs the types of literature that are published and how these works are canonized: federal arts patronage.

The Canada Council and its Publishing Support Program

First, an overview of the Canada Council and its Publishing Support Program is necessary. Following the recommendations set out in the Massey Report and dictated by the Canada Council for the Arts Act, the mandate of the Canada Council is “to foster and promote the study and enjoyment of, and the production of works, in the arts” (Lorimer and Frith, 1999, p. 1). This is expressed through a series of grants for artists, artist collectives and cultural institutions, divided into seven main categories: dance, inter-arts, media arts, music, theatre, visual arts, and writing and publishing. As outlined on the Council’s website, there are more than two dozen funding programs available for writers and publishers; two of these programs, introduced in 1972, are known as the Emerging Publisher Grants and Block Grants. Both are intended to provide “financial assistance to Canadian publishers to offset the costs of publishing Canadian trade books that make a significant contribution to the development of Canadian literature” (Canada Council for the Arts, 2004). In other words, the block grants support publishers who contribute to the body of national literature who would otherwise operate in a deficit.

In 1995, the Council reaffirmed its three basic operating principles: 1) its arm’s length relationship with government, which allows the Council to make artistic decisions free from external pressures; 2) peer assessment as the basis for its grant decisions; and 3) comparative artistic merit as the most important criterion in its funding programs. (Canada Council for the Arts, 2004).

Applicant publishers must therefore meet eligibility criteria set out in the Council’s policies, gain approval from a jury of seven peers, and produce meaning-
ful works with Canadian content before a grant can be secured. Emerging Publisher Grants are renewable annually and Block Grants may be renewed biannually.

Although Lecker (1999) acknowledges the benefits of the block grant system insofar as it bolsters the publishing industry, he also recognizes that arts patronage is never “value-free” (p. 439). Calling the Massey Report “a product of the federalist and culturally elitist ideology,” Lecker (p. 439-40) carefully examines the tenuous relationship between publishing houses, both small and large, and the Canada Council. He also pays particular attention to how these relationships are expressed in the titles that are eventually published. In order to secure grant monies, publishers must produce at least four books each year that meet the Council’s eligibility requirements. These requirements, however, are based on ever-changing notions of what actually constitutes a work of significant value. Initially, both non-fiction and fiction were funded, but as time progressed, the Council placed more restrictions on the categories of eligible non-fiction; the underlying assumption for this decision being that significant academic scholarship should already be funded by other federal agencies, such as the Social Sciences and Humanities Research Council and the Natural Sciences and Engineering Research Council. Additionally, mass-market titles, e.g. celebrity biographies and travel guides, are ineligible, presumably to avoid criticism that the Council funds titles that should be profitable without government support. Only “culturally relevant” titles are supported and only if they are not “too commercial” (Lecker, p. 444). Lecker believes that this final condition reflects a systemic bias against American-style popular culture that was first articulated in the Massey Report and has trickled down into the Council’s mandate.

Perhaps more unsettling is Lecker’s review of the many additional restrictions to eligibility. For example, manuscripts must be written in an accessible language, making more academic works ineligible. Art books are allowed only if they “contribute to [the] public understanding” of art (Lecker, 1999, p. 453). As a result, applicant publishers are forced to negotiate ambiguous language. Also, because the grants are designed to offset costs related to the publication of significant works, the Council has determined a deficit value for each genre. In 1996, the Council rated one novel as having a deficit value of $8,000;
books of poetry were valued at $5,500 each and children’s books were worth $3,000 each in debt (Lecker, p. 455). As a result, any publisher who produces novels would be eligible for higher levels of funding than a publisher who deals exclusively in children’s books. Lecker observes that, “to obtain funding, publishers had to adapt their programs to the Council’s criteria or risk losing their place within the block grant program” (p. 443). It is no coincidence that the majority of the Can-Lit oeuvre is trade (as opposed to mass market) paperback fiction. Where do authors whose works do not fit the eligibility criteria get published?

Lecker is not alone in his criticisms of the Canada Council. Wright (2001) is also keenly aware that funding agencies have had a profound impact on the types of materials that are produced in Canada. The boom in children’s publishing that occurred in the 1980s, for example, can be traced back to a decision made in 1975 to allow children’s books to be eligible titles for the block grants. According to Wright (2001), Canada is now well known for its rich and diverse children’s publishing, a cultural product that would not exist without support from the Council.

Wright, however, is suspicious about the long-term viability of CanLit in the wake of rapidly changing attitudes to popular culture and a resistance among youth to identify with the model of Canadian nationalism envisioned by the Massey Report and subsequent cultural policy. Responding to the development of new media and the trend toward the commercialization of culture that occurred throughout the 1990s, Wright believes that youth are disinterested in CanLit because it neither reflects the plurality of contemporary Canada nor their experiences living in it. Themes of isolation and wilderness are anachronistic in today’s fast-paced, highly urbanized terrain. Yet, the Canada Council has not responded quickly or appropriately to such a profound change in the cultural landscape of young Canadians. Instead, the agency continues to fund publishers whose titles are print fiction and overwhelmingly entrenched in man vs. nature ideology. Wright calls on the federal government to acknowledge its high culture bias and open up new avenues for arts funding that can support independent micropublishers, internet-based publishers, and new media projects.
The Current Climate

Interestingly, critics of the Canada Council’s block grants have remained relatively silent since the publication of Lecker’s muckraking 1999 article and Wright’s 2001 book. Although it could be argued that this silence suggests relative complacency with the current funding system, several events have occurred that suggest otherwise. First, large corporations improved media convergence as an economic strategy during the 1990s, which had a profound impact on retailing. In an effort to fill their massive stores with products, chains such as Chapters Inc., began ordering unprecedented numbers of books from Canadian publishers (Nicholson, n.d.). Initially a boon to the industry, publishers quickly found themselves facing bankruptcy when the store began to return their unsold product for a full refund. Not only did this situation leave publishers without income, but in many cases, they had also incurred debt due to high print runs. The problem was exacerbated by the fact that a decade of concentrated media convergence had left publishers with few retail options; after subsuming several small retail chains, Chapters’ success had forced the closure of dozens of small independent bookstores (Nicholson, n.d.). The hostile takeover of Chapters by Indigo Books & Music, Inc. during the autumn of 2000, meant that even fewer avenues were available to struggling publishers, and many turned to the Canada Council for a financial bailout (O’Hare, 2000).

Second, the collapse of Stoddart’s General Distribution Services (GDS) was devastating for small Canadian publishers. The company, which served as the distribution hub for dozens of small publishing houses, had taken the brunt of financial losses during the Chapters-Indigo merger (CBC News, 2002). When the company declared bankruptcy on 1 May 2002, publishers were left without a distribution infrastructure and few were paid for sales of their books. Creditors claimed losses of $45.7 million in total (CBC News, 2002). A funding package of $2.2 million was offered to client publishers of GDS through the Department of Canadian Heritage Book Publishing Industry Development Program (BPIDP) (Department of Canadian Heritage, 2004) and more than sixty publishers took advantage of this package. Is it possible that publishers have become hesitant to criticize a funding framework that consistently
stands between subsistence and bankruptcy?

There is, however, another factor that may help explain the dearth of reflexive scholarship from within the Canadian publishing community about arts patronage. CanLit has become such an entrenched element of the Canadian cultural landscape that it is now a focal point of Canadian Studies programs around the globe. As Richler (2006) points out, Canada’s most recognizable exports are its cultural products; from L. M. Montgomery’s Anne of Green Gables to Douglas Coupland’s Gen-X slackers, characters from Canadian literature promote the country and its national character to an international audience. This situation has ramifications for Canada’s economic livelihood as well. As Holden (2004) explains, since the 1980s, culture has increasingly become “the handmaiden of the economy,” and artists are now obliged to produce cultural products that can be valued, rather than creative works. In turn, even arm’s length funding bodies have adopted measurement systems based on the instrumental value of the arts to justify their funding decisions. Canadian publishers must therefore negotiate a balance between producing books that are “culturally significant” and “culturally valuable,” the definitions of which are constantly changing. This leaves little time for deeper consideration of the ideological underpinnings of CanLit.

There is a wealth of critical analysis bubbling up through the numerous literary subcultures that have emerged since the collapse of GDS. New media and improvements in digital printing technology have resulted in a resurgence of micropublishers and self-publishing opportunities—distribution and printing are now more affordable and accessible to independent producers. In addition, independent cultural critics, such as Hal Niedzviecki (See http://www.smellit.ca/) and Lindsay Gibb (See http://www.brokenpencil.com/), have discovered new channels to produce and critique literature that does not conform to the familiar body of CanLit. These channels include wikis, blogs, and other Web 2.0 technologies. Interestingly, micropublishers, self-publishers, and independent writers are seldom eligible for any publisher block grants administered through the Canada Council for the Arts, but do take advantage of the Council’s grants for writers. In fact, many alternative producers of written media by-pass traditional small and large
publishing houses altogether. Of course, these grants also maintain a set of criteria for the types or writing and authors that are funded.

**Conclusion**

The fact that Statistics Canada has consistently reported a rise in average annual GDP directly related to the cultural sector would suggest a continued justification for Canada Council funding (Statistics Canada, 2004). Yet, the more Canada comes to rely on the economic contributions of culture and the more CanLit becomes a tool of the globalization of Canadian culture, the more likely it seems that the literary canon will continue to be shaped by the same federalist ideology that fueled the Massey Report. How micro-publishers, self-publishers, and a growing influx of urban-centered, young, immigrant voices will affect this canon is yet to be seen.
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