

The Beginnings and Background of ACQL/ALCQ

Sandra Dajwa

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The Beginnings and Background of ACQL/ALCQ

SANDRA DJWA

THE ASSOCIATION OF CANADIAN AND Quebec Literatures/L'Association des littératures canadiennes et québécoise (ACQL/ALCQ) was a product of the nationalist 1970s and the desire to affirm the existence of an English-Canadian and Québécois literature. The Writers' Union of Canada (1973) and *Studies in Canadian Literature* (1976) were motivated by a similar impulse. The 1970s financial crisis at McClelland and Stewart, then the major publisher of Canadian writing, threatened writers and readers alike and galvanized writers into forming a professional organization.¹ As I recall, Desmond Pacey of the University of New Brunswick, a scholar, writer, and the established critic of *Creative Writing in Canada: A Short History of English-Canadian Literature* (1952), was one of the founding members of the Writers' Union and, in the early 1970s, VP Academic at the university. He asked me to contribute to the proposed journal, *Studies in Canadian Literature*, and I wrote "*The Canadian Forum: Literary Catalyst*," which became the opening essay in the inaugural issue.

In addition to this larger cultural concern, ACQL/ALCQ was also a political response to specific problems experienced by faculty teaching English-Canadian and Québécois literatures at universities in Canada. These problems ranged from the dismissal of Canadian Literature as a discipline to the scarcity of research funding. The underlying issue was the more pragmatic question of what should constitute literary value in Canada. Unfortunately, research in Canadian literature was not always considered seriously for tenure and promotion, although writers such as E.J. Pratt, Earle Birney, Ethel Wilson, and Hugh MacLennan were well established as poets and novelists by the 1960s. Specialists in English-Canadian literature competed with the traditional English and American heavyweights like Shakespeare and Whitman when applying to give papers on Canadian topics at the annual meetings of what was then known as the Association of Canadian University Teachers of English (ACUTE). Finally, there were few venues for publishing

articles on Canadian topics. Those were primarily general journals like the *Canadian Forum* or the *Dalhousie Review*. There was one specialist journal, *Canadian Literature*, founded in 1958 when a committee, led by poet and professor Roy Daniells at the University of British Columbia, raised the funds to hire an editor to run the magazine. George Woodcock, a literary journalist and a biographer, was invited to take on the task of editor when Reginald Watters, a UBC faculty member and a member of the original committee, was unavailable to serve.²

Research support for Canadianists was unpredictable because applications for research support in English-Canadian literature fell under the category of "ENGLISH" at primary funding bodies, first at the Canada Council and then at the Social Sciences and Humanities Research Council. Specialists in English or American literature, unfamiliar with Canadian topics, regularly assessed such applications. Up to this time many, if not most, Canadian academics undertook post-graduate studies in the United Kingdom or the United States where the established Canadian writers mentioned above, and rising stars such as Margaret Laurence, Mordecai Richler, Alice Munro, Leonard Cohen, and Margaret Atwood, were rarely known. To complicate matters this was the period of rapid university expansion from the late sixties to the eighties, and Canada had a very small pool of applicants with doctorates. Consequently, a large number of newly hired university faculty were newcomers from Great Britain and the United States who did not know Canadian literature. In contrast, most Canadianists had a prior grounding in English and American literatures because these subjects were part of the Canadian university curriculum in English.

Issues related to the existence (or non-existence) of a Canadian literature could be a matter of academic survival for young scholars in English Departments, especially in new universities like Simon Fraser and York, where non-Canadian faculty tended to predominate in English departments. But similar problems of recognition also existed in more established universities. My memory is that Dalhousie, McGill, and the University of British Columbia had begun to give separate courses in Canadian literature by the late sixties, but at the University of Toronto throughout the sixties, Canadian writing was part of a six-week appendage at the end of the Honours English program. The *University of Toronto Quarterly* provided an annual review of publications in the field, but this journal had an unwritten law that it did not publish indi-

vidual articles on Canadian writing because it was a quarterly and much of one of the four issues was already taken up by "Letters in Canada." This policy changed under the editorship of W.J. Keith in the 1980s when he published a *McGill Fortnightly* memoir by Leon Edel, the distinguished Henry James biographer and a graduate of McGill.

Furthermore, because Canadian literature had not yet gained the status of a discipline in a number of Canadian universities, this strongly impacted the hiring and promotion of professors in this area. The late Barbara Godard, a fine scholar, was kept as a junior professor for a long period at York University, and my own applications for promotion at Simon Fraser were rejected on two occasions because, although external referees were favourable, senior members of the departmental tenure committee were not familiar with Canadian scholarship or with E.J. Pratt, then (in the late sixties and early seventies) probably Canada's best-known poet. Many of the same problems applied in Quebec but, by and large, the province's universities were supportive of Québécois writing.

The immediate impulse for ACQL/ALCQ was a remark made by the poet Dorothy Livesay, speaking at ACUTE at the Learned Societies in June 1972 in Kingston. She proposed that Canadianists should form their own association as distinct from ACUTE. Robin Mathews of Carleton University, who was then waging a campaign to hire Canadians in Canadian universities, put forward a resolution that the Canadianists attending the lecture meet as a group. I seconded the motion. We met the next day, on 1 June. Mathews, Joanne Harris-Burgess (then a PhD candidate at the University of Toronto), and I led a discussion from the podium to consider organization. Approximately forty people attended. After an hour of discussion, we agreed that we wished to pursue the matter further and appointed an organizing committee from Montreal and Toronto. The following year, in late May 1973, again at the Learned Societies, we held a second meeting and approximately 100 people attended. I proposed "The Association for Canadian Literature" as the name for our society and the motion passed. However, the October Crisis of 1970 still loomed large and Québécois professors wanted to assert their literary independence. We promptly changed our name to be more inclusive. Our new Learned Society became The Association of Canadian and Quebec Literatures/L'Association des littératures canadiennes et québécoise, and our focus became the encour-

aging of Canadian and Quebec studies in a bilingual context. For ease of communication, we set up an organizational structure in which the President and Vice President would come from the triangle of Ottawa, Toronto, and Montreal, but the members of the advisory and planning boards would be national in scope. The executive and regional committee on the English side consisted of Joanne Harris-Burgess, John Moss, Desmond Pacey, David Pitt, Robin Mathews, Laurence Ricou, and me.

As Program Director and Western Regional Representative for the newly founded association, I planned the first meeting that was held at the University of Toronto during the end of May 1974. Arrangements began in September of 1973 in Toronto when the schedule of meetings for the Learned's was organized. ACQL/ALCQ shared one session with ACUTE on the 29th and one session each with the Canadian Comparative Literature Association and one with the Association of Canadian University Teachers of French on the 30th. As we wanted to make the association better known to Canadianists who might attend the first meeting in May, I wrote to George Woodcock, editor of *Canadian Literature*, asking if he would put a sentence or two in one of his editorials regarding our first meeting. He refused, saying he was "regretfully un-co-operative regarding the proposed Association for Canadian/Quebec Literatures." In his letter of reply he maintained that *Canadian Literature* was "a critical magazine and not involved in the academic superstructure, except as we survive in one of its unconsidered burrows" (Woodcock, Letter). This was quite a blow because *Canadian Literature* was a university-supported journal and the primary outlet for our discipline. We then decided to make direct contact with possible members and, fortunately, help came from Simon Fraser University, where the English Chair's secretary typed my letters to potential speakers and attendees and xeroxed related correspondence. W.A.S. Smith, then Dean of Arts, supplied the postage for over 200 letters of invitation.

This inaugural meeting was held at the University of Toronto on 29 and 30 May and brought together more than 250 people (Figure 1). There were writers, critics, academics, translators, and members of the Canada Council, including Hubert Aquin, Paul Audley, Gérard Bessette, Frank Davey, Jean-Charles Falardeau, Robert Fink, Sheila Fischman, David Hayne, and Desmond Pacey. Barbara Godard, fluently bilingual, moderated the first morning session, and she had been

ASSOCIATION
FOR CANADIAN
AND
QUEBEC
LITERATURES

ASSOCIATION
DES ETUDES
LITTERAIRES
CANADIENNES
ET QUEBECOISES

MAY 29 - 30, 1974
LE 29 - 30 MAI, 1974

VICTORIA COLLEGE
UNIVERSITY OF TORONTO

Hubert Aquin

Paul Audley

G rard Bessette

Alan Brown

Gilbert Drolet

Louis Dudek

Jean-Charles Falardeau

Sheila Fischman

Barbara Godard

David Hayne

Kathy Mezei

Pierre Nepveu

Desmond Pacey

Membership and Registration

English

Dr. David Pitt

DEPARTMENT OF ENGLISH

MEMORIAL UNIVERSITY

ST. JOHN'S, NEWFOUNDLAND

Frais d'adh sion et d'inscription

Fran ais

Dr. G. Drolet

D PARTEMENT D'ANGLAIS

COLLEGE MILITAIRE ROYAL

ST. JEAN, QUEBEC JOJ 1R0

Figure 1: 29-30 May 1974 ACQL/ALCQ programme. Property of Kathy Mezei.

very helpful in the process of suggesting prominent Québécois writers and professors. The first session included a review of the decade in English-Canadian literature by Desmond Pacey and in Francophone Literature by David Hayne: both had suggestions for future studies. The second session was devoted to criticism in Canada. We had hoped for a lively exchange of brief position statements followed by a fifteen-to-twenty-minute elaboration. The first paper was given by Frank Davey on Margaret Atwood's *Survival*, noting the prevalence of thematic criticism in Canada. A second paper was given by novelist and professor Gérard Bessette on psychological criticism in Quebec writing. We also held a special lunch at the Park Plaza honouring Carl F. Klinck for his pioneering work in initiating and developing the *Literary History of Canada*. The strength of this program helped establish ACQL/ALCQ as a viable professional association.

At our next meeting, in May 1975 at the University of Alberta, we invited poet, critic and professor A.J.M. Smith, then a faculty member at the University of Michigan, to give the primary address in English. Smith was then one of the doyens of English-Canadian criticism and his talk appealed to both Anglophone and Francophone members. At one point he read from his poem "Brigadier," a translation of a Québécois folk song, which provoked a ripple of laughter:

One Sunday morning soft and fine
 Two old campaigners let their nags meander;
 One was a Sergeant of the Line,
 The other a Brigade Commander.
 The General spoke with martial roar,
 "Nice weather for this time of year!"
And "Right you are," replied Pandore,
"Right you are, my Brigadier."

"A Guardsman's is a thankless calling,
 Protecting private property,
 In summer or when snows are falling,
 From malice, rape, or robbery:
 While the wife whom I adore,
 Sleeps alone and knows no cheer."
And "Right you are," replied Pandore,
"Right you are, my Brigadier." (49)

I wrote to Smith thanking him for speaking at the ACQL/ALCQ: "The few minutes of shared warmth and appreciation after you read 'Brigadier' were the only such at the Learned Societies this year. Everyone felt as well as heard your words. I noticed a varied audience came out to hear you speak, including all of the English-speaking members of ACQL/ALCQ and most of ACUTE" (Djwa, Letter to A.J.M. Smith).

Professor Carl Klinck was an unfailing supporter of the new association. He joined the ACQL/ALCQ Advisory Board and attended the working sessions of the regional committees and the executive. After general discussion about the importance of determining where we should be focusing our attention, he and I were asked to develop a questionnaire, which we sent to scholars working in the field of English-Canadian literature. The idea of a questionnaire had originated at the executive meeting of the association in October 1977. I wrote to him shortly after the meeting saying, "I have reviewed my notes of our ACQL committee meeting and agreeing to our joint responsibilities" (Djwa, Letter to Carl Klinck). My task was secretarial: to survey research projects now under way in Canadian literary history and criticism, to check the list of ACQL/ALCQ members against the ACUTE list for members who state they are interested in Canadian literature, to look around in Canadian literary journals for additional names of active scholars, to advertise in *Canadian Notes and Queries*, to compile a joint list from the above sources, and to send letters to individuals requesting information on their research. Professor Klinck was asked to draw upon his extensive knowledge of the field; this allowed him to compile a list of the projects required if the discipline were to develop. He then annotated his list. We also compared research in Canadian literary topics then under way in theses and articles with the projected list of works still needed. Finally, we suggested priorities for future research: these included a history of criticism and a history of drama; a third possibility mentioned was a history of Canadian expatriates like John Glassco. This questionnaire, compiled at SFU with the help of a graduate bibliographer, Marilyn Flitton, went by the prescriptive title of *Survey of Research in Canadian Literature: Now Underway and To Be Undertaken*. It was a mini book filling 200 odd pages, and was distributed at the 1978 ACQL/ALCQ meeting. This document was updated the following year and copies were again distributed to members. This listing became

a blueprint for studies in Canadian literature, especially thesis topics, for the next decade. Granting bodies also drew upon it when recommending topics for financial support.

It is also apparent that ACQL/ALCQ received support from the Canada Council at an early stage as well as later when the humanities were split off into the Social Sciences and Humanities Research Council of Canada, or SSHRC. In 1979 Fred Cogswell (poet, professor, and editor of the poetry magazine *Fiddlehead*) and I were deputized to contact the Head of the new funding organization, André Fortier, President of SSHRC. We went to lobby for the Anglophone and Francophone research committees of ACQL/ALCQ for special funding for our annual meetings (quite expensive because they included simultaneous translation) and also for funding targeted towards Canadian and Québécois cultural projects alone. Our survey had demonstrated that a great deal of foundational work in both languages needed to be done. I reported to Professors Gordon Moyles and Richard Harrison of the University of Alberta in 1977:

Fred and I went to see André Fortier[,] Head of the SSHRC, in early May and twice again at the Learned's. He was encouraging. We asked for \$4,000 for working expenses for each of the French and English research sub-committees and received assurance of this continued support, at least for another year. We also said that a request as large as \$7000 would be forthcoming. (Djwa, Letter to Gordon Moyles)

At a formal meeting in the Ottawa office of the SSHRC, Cogswell and I explained to President Fortier at some length how difficult it was to get a project in Canadian writing off the ground — in both languages — because of a lack of financial support. We also stressed the need for the basic foundational research suggested in Desmond Pacey's talk at the inaugural meeting: bibliographies, indices, and biographies.

In March of 1983 we learned that a very large pool of money had been assigned to studies in Canadian topics by the SSHRC. Most importantly, there was now to be a new category for applications dedicated to funding Canadian/Québécois studies. I wrote to Cogswell, sending along a copy of this announcement and saying:

Isn't it amusing to think that we have had a hand in diverting all that SSHRC money into Canadian Studies? There was a big fuss

about this at the meeting of the Federation of the Humanities in Ottawa last fall. The 'Toronto Caucus,' as they call themselves (and the letter was signed by Northrop Frye among others) complained bitterly about this diversion of funds. I spoke up to the effect that the attitude expressed to Canadian Literature was not only insulting but also unprofessional. . . . However, much of the academic community is not pleased. (Djwa, Letter to Fred Cogswell)

I might have added that although he did not approve of this particular action, Professor Frye was often of great help to ACQL/ALCQ and, despite the pressure of his own research, allowed his name stand for the advisory board for the E.J. Pratt editorial project.

Professor Cogswell and I went away from our first meeting with André Fortier feeling that he understood the problems that we were experiencing. However, confirmation of our role in relation to this funding did not come until February 1983 when I received a letter from Fortier:

I have a vivid recollection of our first meeting when, accompanied by Professor Cogswell, you impressed upon me the position of underdevelopment of research in Canadian literature. I was convinced then that something had to be done. It took a long time afterwards, but the final success has been most rewarding for us all. It is therefore for me to thank you and Professor Cogswell for your initial role in convincing the Council about that specific need. (Fortier, Letter)

All the money for foundational research, SSHRC grants for Canadianists, and especially for major projects, flowed from this source. For over twenty years we had our own special pot of money in SSHRC grant categories that made it possible to lay the groundwork for the disciplines of Canadian and Québécois literatures.

From the perspective of forty years later it is amazing to see how writing in Canada has blossomed. We could not have imagined in 1973 that Alice Munro would be awarded the Nobel Prize for Literature in 2013. Yet I wonder if we have seen the zenith of support for creative writing in Canada in the old sense. We seem to lack the collective will — so evident in the 1970s — to maintain a national literary culture. And multi-national presses, often the offshoot of media conglomerates, will publish on uniquely Canadian topics only when the books can be marketed to an international English-speaking audience. Finally, under

present copyright laws it is difficult for Canadian writers to receive financial credit when their work is copied — even some of our major institutions no longer pay Access Copyright for reproduction for university teaching. Counterbalancing these issues is the fact that many new writers are promoting their own work and undertaking independent publication. In retrospect, looking back to the heady days of the 1970s when we proposed the founding of ACQL/ALCQ, I am both delighted and astonished.

Sandra Djwa
West Vancouver
9 August 2016

NOTES

¹ The publishing house of McClelland and Stewart, the major publisher of English-Canadian writing, could not meet the press's substantial debts in 1971, and it appeared likely that the press would collapse. It managed to stay in business when the Ontario Development Corporation provided a loan of \$961,645. See Spadoni and Donnelly 41-42.

² See Woodcock, "Tentative Confessions." In this article Woodcock explains how *Canadian Literature* had just come into being as the result of a University of British Columbia committee.

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