

The Beginnings of ALCQ/ACQL: A Reminiscence

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The Beginnings of ALCQ/ACQL: A Reminiscence

KATHY MEZEI

THE INAUGURAL MEETING OF ALCQ/ACQL was taking place at the University of Toronto's Victoria College on 29 and 30 May 1974, as part of the Learned Societies' annual gathering; as a fledgling organization it was being organized jointly with more established associations: the Association of Canadian University Teachers of English, the Canadian Comparative Literature Association, and the Association of Canadian University Teachers of French. At that time I was an ABD doctoral student living in Vancouver, working on my dissertation on comparative English-Canadian and Québécois poets at Queen's, and teaching Canadian Literature at UBC under a six-month contract, thanks to W.H. New's kind support.

Off I went to Toronto to give my first academic paper, "Dream Landscapes in Archibald Lampman and Emile Nelligan" (Figure 1). Since there were only a few Canadianists working in comparative Canadian literature, focusing on English-Canadian and Quebec literatures, it was a significant occasion. Only the Comparative Canadian Literature programme at the University of Sherbrooke, created by D.G. Jones and Ronald Sutherland, was then addressing this new field. Two brilliant scholars, Pierre Nepveu and the late Barbara Godard, were in my session, and this is how we became lifelong colleagues and friends. As Sandra Djwa explains here in her history of ALCQ/ACQL, Barbara was instrumental in organizing the Quebec participants. Barbara remained an active participant in and supporter of the Association throughout her life; she also kept urging us to deposit its papers and records in the National Archives of Canada. Pierre's paper, comparing Leonard Cohen and Gaston Miron, portended his award-winning monumental 2012 biography, *Gaston Miron: la vie d'un homme*.

For many years I have kept a journal, and glancing back through my account of that foundational meeting, I see that (among others) D.G. Jones, Sheila Fischman (Jones's wife at the time and just beginning her stellar career as a translator), Sandra Djwa, Robin Mathews, Marya

CANADIAN COMPARATIVE LITERATURE ASSOCIATION
ASSOCIATION CANADIENNE DE LITTÉRATURE COMPARÉE

Sixth Annual Meeting
May 30 - June 2, 1974
Toronto, Ontario

Sixième congrès annuel
30 mai - 2 juin 1974
Toronto, Ontario

UNIVERSITY OF TORONTO

All meetings will take place in Victoria College, with the exception of the joint session on Literatures in Canada which will take place in St. Michael's College.

Toutes les séances auront lieu dans le collège Victoria à l'exception de la réunion conjointe Littératures au Canada, qui aura lieu dans le collège St. Michael's.

Thursday, May 30

Jedi le 30 mai

9:15 A.M. to 9:30 A.M.

St. Michael's College
University of Toronto

Carr Auditorium

Welcome on behalf of the University of Toronto
Accueil de la part de l'Université de Toronto

C. Hamlin (Toronto)

Session I / 1ère séance

Literatures in Canada
joint session of

Littératures au Canada
réunion conjointes des

Canadian Comparative Literature
Association

Association Canadienne de Littérature
comparée

Association of Canadian University
Teachers of French
(afternoon meeting)

Association des Professeurs de
Français des Universités
canadiennes
(réunion de l'après-midi)

Society for Canadian and Quebec
Literatures

Société pour les littératures
canadienne et québécoise

9:30 A.M. to 11:00 A.M.

St. Michael's College
University of Toronto

Carr Auditorium

Chairman/président

Jack Warwick (York)

Gilbert Drolet (CMR, Saint-Jean)
Kathy Mezei (UBC)

Canadian War Fiction (20 mins.)
Dream landscapes in the poetry of
Nelligan and Lampman (20 mins.)
Poèmes d'amour de Leonard Cohen et
de Gaston Miron (20 mins.)

Pierre Nepveu (Sherbrooke)

pause-café

Figure 1: First page of the 1974 CCLA programme showing the joint session with ACQL/ALCQ. Property of Kathy Mezei.

Fiamengo, Paul Wyczynski (an expert on Nelligan and later his first biographer), were all present at our session. Over the following days, there were a number of very lively panels (one of which I apparently sat on, although I have no idea now of the topic nor who the other panelists were). Inevitably there were planning meetings, along with a lunch to celebrate Carl Klinck's retirement at Western, and a "good sensible" talk

by Northrop Frye. I recall a spirited debate about the most fitting name until it was finally settled as the “Association of Canadian and Quebec Literatures/Association des littératures canadiennes et québécoise” with an insistence upon the “s.”

An air of excitement prevailed as we sensed new possibilities and connections; it was truly gratifying to have English-Canadian and Québécois scholars in conversation with each other. Those were heady, stirring, and creative times for Quebec and its scholars and writers, and relations with English Canada had often been touchy and conflicted. Feelings were still heightened after the 1970 October Crisis, with Quebec’s quest for independence much in the air. Since the two literatures and scholarships, alas, dwelled in markedly separate worlds, the creation of ALCQ/ACQL opened an opportune space for the two cultures to begin to interact.

I am afraid, however, that my journal recounts more vividly and in greater detail the pub-crawls, discos, and outings with friends and colleagues than the discourse and debates around the sessions. I had also recorded a moment that will resonate with many of you when I recalled my nervousness and the pep talk to myself as I started my presentation (“Kathy, why are you nervous; you have been lecturing to students for a whole year now. . .”). Those meetings were memorable for me for another reason; en route to give my paper, I met my future husband, who was hopping around on crutches (Whistler ski accident) and searching for the room where he was shortly to present a paper.

After this initial foray in 1974, I continued my involvement with ALCQ/ACQL, even serving as president from 1986 to 1988. Through these past forty years, I have watched, with interest and curiosity, the evolution of the Association, its changing thematics and preoccupations, and the generations of participating scholars from here and abroad. I do wonder how these origins will look to readers forty years from now.

Kathy Mezei
Simon Fraser University
15 July 2016