

Historical Method in Canadian Literary Studies: Some Recent Examples

Renée Hulan

Volume 34, numéro 2, spring 2005

URI : https://id.erudit.org/iderudit/acad34_2re01

[Aller au sommaire du numéro](#)

Éditeur(s)

The Department of History at the University of New Brunswick

ISSN

0044-5851 (imprimé)

1712-7432 (numérique)

[Découvrir la revue](#)

Citer ce document

Hulan, R. (2005). Historical Method in Canadian Literary Studies:: Some Recent Examples. *Acadiensis*, 34(2), 130–145.

REVIEW ESSAYS/NOTES CRITIQUE

Historical Method in Canadian Literary Studies: Some Recent Examples

IN A RECENT ARTICLE ENTITLED "Literary History as Microhistory" Heather Murray observes: "Literary work for English Canada is, by now, and by and large, historical in its orientation: in a wider time frame, and increasingly contextual. But the development has not been accompanied by a parallel dialogue on historical method".¹ With this, she seeks to initiate a discussion examining the potential of microhistory for literary historiography, identifying method as the sticking point in debates between history and literary studies. Like Murray, I come to these debates as someone with an education in literary history and criticism and an intellectual interest in interdisciplinary research that continues to help me rethink the disciplines in which we work. Several recent literary works underscore this potential: E. D. Blodgett, *Five Part Invention: A History of Literary History in Canada* (Toronto, 2003); George Elliott Clarke, *Odysseys Home: Mapping African-Canadian Literature* (Toronto, 2002); Colin Coates and Cecilia Morgan, *Heroines and History: Representations of Madeleine de Verchères and Laura Secord* (Toronto, 2002); David Creelman, *Setting in the East: Maritime Realist Fiction* (Montreal and Kingston, 2003); Clarence Karr, *Authors and Audiences: Popular Canadian Fiction in the Early Twentieth Century* (Montreal and Kingston, 2000); Heather Murray, *"Come, bright Improvement!": The Literary Societies of Nineteenth-Century Ontario* (Toronto, 2002); Glenn Willmott, *Unreal Country: Modernity in the Canadian Novel in English* (Montreal and Kingston, 2002) and Herb Wyile, *Speculative Fictions: Contemporary Canadian Novelists and the Writing of History* (Montreal and Kingston, 2002). My reading of these recent works, including these examples, has led me to share Murray's belief that careful attention to interdisciplinary method will fulfill the potential of history and literary studies as mutually enriching fields of knowledge.

Beginning within the "linguistic turn", theory has been the subject of interdisciplinary debates in literary and historical studies with postmodern theory gradually becoming a central focus. The resulting comparison of fiction and history as forms of writing opened historiography to literary criticism, downplaying the fundamental methodological differences between literary and historical inquiry. As a result, literary critics often "read" history without much attention to the things that historians consider important.² In fact, the historian's concern for documentary evidence is often interpreted as naively empiricist by the theory-struck literary

1 Heather Murray, "Literary History as Microhistory", in Cynthia Sugars, ed., *Home-Work: Postcolonialism, Pedagogy and Canadian Literature*, (Ottawa, 2004), p. 405.

2 For a critical discussion of the claim that literary theory is the answer to the problem of history see Tani E. Barlow's response to Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak's *A Critique of Postcolonial Reason: Toward a History of the Vanishing Present* (Cambridge, 1999) in "Degree Zero of History", *Comparative Literature*, 53, 4 (2001), pp. 404-25.

scholar. While historical method remains a common ground on which historians might stand, it does little to fend off the postmodernist attack that historians invent rather than discover the past. Ironically, this truism of postmodern critique denies the complexity of the impact postmodern and poststructuralist theories have had on contemporary literary and historical theory. To see this, one need only look to the lasting influence of Michel Foucault on historiography. Historians including Peter Tosh and Kevin Passmore credit the study of discourse as the primary sphere of power relations with new directions in historiography and note the debt of feminist, postcolonial and multicultural histories to the work of Foucault as well as the cultural history of Edward Said.³ While it may appear that the impact of such work has been felt most in social history and not the essentialist historical narratives of “great men and events” which still exist, one could argue that the influence of postmodernism informs not only the content of contemporary historiography but the form as well. Today, it is hard to imagine an historical account that does not accept the function of language in its own construction, and studies dedicated to understanding the discourses of particular historical periods abound. The present “revival of narrative” in historiography has been accompanied by the self-conscious narrative presence of the historian in the account, explicit acknowledgement of the selection and interpretation of evidence, and more provisional or speculative conclusions than literary scholars often admit. The resounding voice of authority associated with realist techniques in 19th-century historiography has been replaced by more tentative and sceptical voices.⁴

However, history and literary studies continue to clash over how far the implications of postmodernism can go.⁵ The characteristically postmodern view of history – that it is another, perhaps specially privileged, form of narrative – raises questions that intersect with current debates concerning historical epistemology, such as discussions of the differences between history and fiction and the appropriateness of using fictional techniques to write history. Literary critics offer historical fiction as a viable alternative to the grand or master narratives that leave marginalized people(s) out, yet it is only by ignoring or discounting current historiography that such a dichotomy can be generalized to all historical practice. Indeed, contemporary social history and historical fiction share an interest in the forgotten or silenced voices and stories of people(s) who have been marginalized and under- or unrepresented in history. When literary critics speak of history – or as postmodernists prefer, History – as an internally coherent discourse operating as the exclusive domain of the powerful,

3 For a brief survey of what poststructuralists have contributed to historical practice, see Kevin Passmore, “Poststructuralism and History”, in Stefan Berger, Heiko Feldner and Kevin Passmore, eds., *Writing History: Theory and Practice*, (London, 2003), pp. 118-40 and Peter Tosh, *The Pursuit of History*, 3rd ed. (Harlow, 1999), pp. 122-9.

4 As Peter Tosh maintains, “historians now tend to be more sensitive to the countercurrents of meaning in their sources, pushing Marc Bloch’s well-known aphorism about ‘witnesses in spite of themselves’ in a new and rewarding direction”. See Tosh, *The Pursuit of History*, p. 128.

5 This is not to say, as illustrated by one recent exchange, that historians are of one mind concerning postmodernism. See Perez Zagorin “History, the Referent, and Narrative: Reflection on Postmodernism Now”, *History and Theory*, 38, (1999) pp.1-24 followed by Zagorin, “Rejoinder to a Postmodernist”, *History and Theory*, 39, (2000) pp. 201-209 as well as Keith Jenkins, “A Postmodern Reply to Perez Zagorin”, *History and Theory*, 39 (2000), pp. 181-200.

we overlook contesting views and debates within the field. Literary scholars who tend to make postmodern arguments against “History” stress theory over practice and rarely consider what historians actually do. These arguments represent historiography in its 19th-century narrative form, thus insisting on disciplinary differences that establish the contemporary literary scholar’s epistemic authority over the historical text and effectively positioning History as Other to literary interpretation.

This “Othering” of History in literary studies is exemplified by references to Hayden White as the representative – often the only representative – of historical practice. Despite the distance travelled since the linguistic turn, “Hayden White” still functions as a synecdoche in many literary studies – authorizing particular interpretations of historical texts as well as claims about “History”. In place of reference to current work in historiography, such criticism returns to the linguistic turn while overlooking the response by historians to the crisis in representation it initiated. In the 1960s and 1970s, White’s critique of historiography, along with the work of Roland Barthes, inaugurated an interrogation of representation that would develop into forms such as the “new ethnography” and the “new history” and to, perhaps paradoxically, the “revival of narrative”.⁶ As writers drawing on literary theory exposed the rhetorical strategies they and their colleagues used to persuade, others responded that history was defined by its method, not its style.⁷ Early critiques emphasized rules of evidence as a distinguishing feature of history, especially when compared to fiction. Further investigations into historical narrative scrutinizing the concept of objectivity and questioning the referentiality of history, like other debates in postmodernism, went back and forth across disciplinary lines. Following on these discussions the study of narrative moved beyond its somewhat flattened definition as any written account that orders events as historians, such as Peter Burke, and philosophers of history, such as David Carr, explored “narrativity” as an element of human experience.⁸ Prominent historians, including Natalie Zemon Davis, joined this discussion rejecting the universalizing tendency of the structuralist approaches underlying the critique. In *Fiction in the Archives*, Davis stated that she too could “agree” that the past does not present itself as a narrative and that the writer shapes it as one in order to “present an account that seems to both writer and reader true, real,

6 White was at the forefront of this movement, with such influential essays as “The Burden of History”, *History and Theory*, 5, 2 (1966), pp. 109-34 and “The Structure of Historical Narrative”, *Clio: An Interdisciplinary Journal of Literature, History and the Philosophy of History*, 1, 3 (1972) pp. 5-20. Later, in *Tropics of Discourse: Essays in Cultural Criticism* (Baltimore, 1978), White reiterates his basic argument: “The historian *shapes* his materials, if not in accordance with what Popper calls (and criticizes as) a ‘framework of preconceived ideas,’ then in response to the imperatives of narrative discourse in general. These imperatives are *rhetorical* in nature” (p. 102).

7 See F. R. Ankersmit, “Historiography and Postmodernism”, *History and Theory*, 28 (1989), pp. 137-53.

8 According to Carr, there may be agreement that “the narrative, as a literary artifact produced by historians, reads into the reality of the past a narrative structure that the past does not ‘really’ have”, but this does not support the presumption that such structures exist apart from “everyday life”. Indeed, Carr sets out to demonstrate a continuity between narrative elements of experience and written narratives, showing that narrative “arises out of life”. See Carr, *Time, Narrative, and History* (Bloomington, 1986), pp. 13-17. I am grateful to Peter Brown for recommending this useful book.

meaningful, and/or explanatory”.⁹ But she also stated that it is the particular in experience, in this case 16th-century experience, that concerns the historian, not universal archetypes or myths. As these examples show, responses to White helped historiography move beyond the linguistic turn after absorbing its useful insights.

Another reason for the continued appeal of Hayden White’s work for literary critics lies, I believe, in his appropriation of concepts derived from literary theory, especially in *Metahistory* where he instrumentalizes Northrop Frye’s *Anatomy of Criticism*.¹⁰ Not only did White’s theory place literary matters at the centre of analysis, giving pivotal importance to literature and literary criticism, but the argument that narrative gives the historian moral authority would later serve to represent “History” as aspiring master narratives available to postmodern scrutiny and the postmodern literary critic as an ideal reader. White incorporated the work of two prominent structuralists, Frye and Claude Levi-Strauss, while paying little attention to the structuralist approach in history typified by the *Annales* school.¹¹ He also dispensed with materialist analysis, so that the text and not documents or other *things* constituted evidence. This could only be achieved by ignoring the distinction between “context” as other texts and “context” as, in Peter Tosh’s words, “conventions created by real culture and real social relations”. Tosh’s distinction is particularly valuable in understanding the difference between literary evidence and “extraliterary” elements such as “the identity and background of the author, the conditions of production of the texts, the intended readership, the cultural attitudes of the time, and the social relations that enveloped the writer and readers”.¹² Documents provide the evidence needed to trace these relations, but their use relies on the belief that historical subjects exist in a material world where these relations are not merely the creation of a literary imagination. In contrast, White’s emphasis on the literary imagination’s creative role in historical interpretation suggested that the historical narrative provides all the evidence required for exegesis. This belief aligned his theory with literary Formalism, the methodological bedrock of literary studies. Most literary criticism still relies on Formalist method, to an extent, by performing close reading, usually as the point of departure for analysis. But, as the destination of inquiry, close reading is haunted by the cowed scribes and cassocked exegetes of literary scholarship’s past. In this theory, the critic interprets the text’s meaning, just as White interprets the meaning of history through literary modes.

In Canada, literary critics saw an articulation of White’s critique of History in

9 Natalie Zemon Davis, *Fiction in the Archives: Pardon Tales and Their Tellers in Sixteenth-Century France*, (Stanford, 1987), p. 3.

10 Hayden White, *Metahistory: The Historical Imagination in Nineteenth-century Europe* (Baltimore, 1973); Northrop Frye, *Anatomy of Criticism: Four Essays* (Princeton, 1957).

11 Typically, White focusses on the historians of the 18th and 19th century such as von Ranke, Gibbon and others in the Romantic tradition who, like the anthropologists of the late-19th century, sought to formalize and professionalize their discipline by insisting that historians follow realist conventions. He only addresses the attack on historical narrative led by Febvre and Braudel in the early-20th century in later work, possibly because their work was not available in English translation when he was writing the *Metahistory*. In *Temps et récit* (Paris, 1983), Paul Riceour argues that narrative structure is even present in the work of the *Annalistes* (Paris, 1983). See also Michel de Certeau, *Writing History*, trans. Tom Conley (New York, 1988).

12 Tosh, *The Pursuit of History*, p. 130.

postmodern historical fiction and began to situate their close readings of literary texts within the context of his analysis. Linda Hutcheon's influential study of what she termed "historiographic metafiction", *The Canadian Postmodern*, closely followed Hayden White's ideas in literary studies.¹³ Further studies of historical fiction written since Hutcheon's work, including Martin Kuester's *Framing Truths* and a number of articles, have explored historical fiction, reading for forms of parody and dialogue.¹⁴ In the 1990s, the appearance of historical fiction by prominent Canadian writers including Michael Ondaatje, Margaret Atwood, Alice Munro, Douglas Glover, Wayne Johnston, Jane Urquhart and Audrey Thomas, among others, initiated new discussions of historical representation in Canadian literary criticism. Herb Wyile's *Speculative Fictions: Contemporary Canadian Novelists and the Writing of History* belongs within the body of work extending Hutcheon's analysis by emphasizing the imaginative, literary revision of history and the cultural work of recent literary texts. As the title indicates, Wyile stresses the resemblance between historical fiction and the writing of history as well as the shared interest of social historians and creative writers in attending to the historically dispossessed. Wyile's method is synthetic, drawing together supportive theoretical and critical arguments around close readings of individual novels and outlining the concerns common to both contemporary social history and contemporary historical fiction that reconstruct lives considered on the margins of history, such as Jane Urquhart's *Away* and Margaret Atwood's *Alias Grace*, or that undermine the history of great men by parodic means, including Heather Robertson's William Lyon MacKenzie King years trilogy, John Steffler's *The Afterlife of George Cartwright*, Rudy Wiebe's *A Discovery of Strangers* and Wayne Johnston's *Colony of Unrequited Dreams*.¹⁵ Maintaining that "historical evidence is already textualized, shaped by the signifying systems of its time, and already framed as evidence, as 'historical' or 'significant', through the interpretive systems of historians", Wyile seeks to retain the sense that "historical and representational discourse assumes, constantly gestures to, a phenomenal world".¹⁶

The impact of postmodern readings is also apparent in E.D. Blodgett's metacritical study of Canadian literary histories entitled *Five Part Invention*, which applies the method of reading suggested in *Metahistory*.¹⁷ As the first extended study of literary histories concerning Canada and Quebec, *Five Part Invention* succeeds in covering a

13 Linda Hutcheon, "Historiographic Metafiction", in Hutcheon, *The Canadian Postmodern: A Study of Contemporary English-Canadian Fiction* (Toronto, 1988), pp. 61-77. See also Dennis Duffy, *Sounding the Iceberg: An Essay on Canadian Historical Fiction* (Montreal, 1986).

14 Martin Kuester, *Framing Truths: Parodic Structures in Contemporary English-Canadian Historical Novels* (Buffalo, 1992).

15 Margaret Atwood, *Alias Grace* (Toronto, 1996); Wayne Johnston, *The Colony of Unrequited Dreams* (Toronto, 1998); Heather Robertson, *The King Years Trilogy* (Toronto, 1983-86); John Steffler, *The Afterlife of George Cartwright* (1992; Toronto, 1999); Jane Urquhart, *Away* (Toronto, 1993); Rudy Wiebe, *A Discovery of Strangers* (Toronto, 1994).

16 Wyile, *Speculative Fictions*, pp. 25, 32.

17 *Metahistory* is the only text by White cited, but its influence is acknowledged: "The reading that is made is never simply an archival gesture; rather, as I argue, it is a discursive ordering of the data (literary texts and their contexts) that follows, consciously or not, certain rhetorical structures. In this, I consider Hayden White's study of nineteenth-century historiographical practice especially useful in which the modes of Metonymy, Synecdoche, Metaphor, and Irony may be shown to be dominant in various historical styles". See Blodgett, *Five Part Invention*, p. 6.

broad, neglected terrain, providing a comparative framework and sharing the results of extensive research. Through comparative close reading of individual histories, Blodgett arranges texts separated by differences of language and time period into a Canadian literary history of five parts. There is much to debate in Blodgett's interpretation, especially regarding Quebec; however, for the purposes of this article, a few examples will illustrate some of the limitations of the rhetorical analysis. Like an historian, Blodgett reads each literary history as an argument concerning the past, revealing the values to which it speaks and examining the difference between past and present in the theoretical and ideological shape each one takes. Attention is given to tantalizing historical details – such as J.D. Logan's machinations delaying the publication of Archibald MacMechan's *Headwaters of Canadian Literature* so that Logan's book could appear first – but documentary evidence serves primarily to deconstruct the text and, rather than demonstrating connections between details, ideas are often left in the air.¹⁸ Similarly, the comparison of literary histories is not accompanied by a detailed discussion of the field, how the works were received, what influence they had or what has been written since. In the section devoted to Penny Petrone's *Native Literature in Canada: From the Oral Tradition to the Present* and Robin McGrath's *Canadian Inuit Literature: The Development of a Tradition*, the absence of this discussion is a missed opportunity to explore the subsequent flourishing of criticism by Aboriginal scholars.¹⁹ Blodgett justifies this absence by stating that Aboriginal scholars have not written literary histories, but he does not explain why the reception of Petrone and McGrath's work is left unexplored. Indeed, his argument that Petrone's "history" is structured so as to imply that Native societies have no history of their own, and his astute analysis of the cultural trauma imposed by colonization, would find much support in the work of Aboriginal scholars.

Another consequence of focussing on rhetoric at the expense of context is the over-interpretation of authors' meanings or intentions. For example, Blodgett criticizes Elizabeth Waterston's choice of 1763 as a heading for one of the chapters in *Survey: A Short History of Canadian Literature* because it "tactfully avoids the highly changed [*sic*] year of 1760" and locates the origin of British North America

18 Archibald MacMechan, *Headwaters of Canadian Literature* (1924; Toronto, 1974). For example, in his discussion of William Douw Lighthall's *Songs of the Great Dominion* (Toronto, 1889; London, 1893), Blodgett states that the emphasis on national character is "evocative of Cardinal Newman's argument that 'literature is both the agent and the expression of the organic unity of a national culture, the synthetic power of culture in action'" (p. 38); the quotation, however, is not "Cardinal Newman's argument": it is a characterization taken from Bill Readings' *The University in Ruins* as the footnote acknowledges. What connection Lighthall may have had to Cardinal Newman, what influence his thought may have had on the anthologist or how his writing may have resembled that of the Victorian didact is not established.

19 Penny Petrone, *Native Literature in Canada: From the Oral Tradition to the Present* (Toronto, 1990) and Robin McGrath, *Canadian Inuit Literature: The Development of a Tradition* (Ottawa, 1984). See the En'owkin Centre's *Gatherings* series as well as several edited collections such as Jeannette Armstrong, ed., *Looking at the Words of Our People: First Nations Analysis of Literature* (Penticton, 1993); Armand Garnet Ruffo, ed., *(Ad)dressing Our Words: Aboriginal Perspectives on Aboriginal Literatures* (Penticton, 2001) and Renate Eigenbrod and Jo-Ann Episkaneew, eds., *Creating Community: A Roundtable on Canadian Aboriginal Literatures* (Penticton, 2002).

“elsewhere”.²⁰ But one might choose to see this alternative date as a rejection of English triumphalism, as an attempt to revise national history along different criteria or as an attempt to address the colonial context, a context in which decisions bearing on the history of what would become Canada were *in fact* made “elsewhere”. In any case, the dates chosen in relation to literary texts and events – 1764, the year the first English language press was founded in Quebec, and 1769, the year *The History of Emily Montague* was published – figure more prominently in the chapter than its heading. In its day, Waterston’s *Survey* offered a new research tool to students and teachers, including pertinent suggestions for further reading. Since Blodgett does not consider historical difference, only form, and the form Waterston embraces is chronological, *Survey* receives rather harsher criticism than it deserves. Moreover, these issues are symptomatic of the methodological limitations of the linguistic approach to historical and literary subjects. The postmodern view implies that no written account of the past can ever attain the perfect self-consciousness expected here. Indeed, if *all* representations are interested – in the poststructuralist view that there is nothing “outside” or prior to language – then literary critics cannot treat their own readings, or revisionist literature for that matter, as if somehow closer to a real truth than the narrative history they judge self-interested. It is the radical relativism implied by this reading that invites scepticism, especially when the writer argues that there can be no privileged position outside representation only to occupy that position when reading another’s work.

The texts reviewed below avoid these pitfalls by moving beyond the postmodern insight. Like the historians discussed earlier, these authors have incorporated insights from the linguistic turn without rejecting historical interpretation. David Creelman’s *Setting in the East* (2003) sets out to unveil the ideology, whether silent or spoken, that animates each literary text using close reading, yet prefaces the discussion with a brief overview of Maritime history. As the first book-length study of Maritime literature in some time, it will become required reading for students of the subject. The singular nature of its achievement should be credited for tackling the realist tradition, once described by Michael Ondaatje despairingly as a tradition that continues “without wit”. As Creelman notes in his conclusion, Maritime writers have not enjoyed the attentions of critics whose interests lie in postmodern literature, and their writing has received less scrutiny as a result. If this were not challenge enough, he is also confronted with the problem of historical context, which he identifies as a characteristic feature of realist fiction in a literary culture that seems to prefer myth to history.

Setting in the East begins with a survey of Maritime history that emphasizes the impact of economic change: the shift from a subsistence economy to an industrialized one, the modernization of resource industries, the demise of manufacturing and primary industries, the rise of the service industry, and the steady migration of Maritimers out of the region.²¹ From this interpretation of past causes and present conditions, Creelman develops his thesis that Maritime culture waivers between “nostalgia and hesitation”. These impulses, emerging from the social, political and

20 See Blodgett, *Five Part Invention*, pp. 153-5; Elizabeth Waterston, *Survey: A Short History of Canadian Literature* (Toronto, 1973).

21 David Creelman, *Setting in the East*, pp. 6-14.

cultural contexts surrounding them, shape the literary text, even if literature does not actually mirror reality. Thus, writing by Maritime women is presented as riding the second wave of feminism out of obscurity. In a chapter devoted to women's writing, Creelman looks beyond the eye-catching new writers, exemplified by Anne-Marie MacDonald, to the writers who went before, exemplified by Donna Smyth. While the success of these women is hailed as progress, it is given relatively little space; seven women writers serve as the subject for one chapter while Charles Bruce, Ernest Buckler and David Adams Richards rate chapters of their own. This presentation of women's writing as a supplement further naturalizes the historical argument that women writers simply came into their own when the time was right. The reasons for their exclusion and marginality are never confronted as the canonical writers are never taken to task for writing fiction that upholds patriarchal values. For example, Creelman admits that Alistair MacLeod's stories depict "a social structure that is anchored firmly by patriarchal traditions and assumptions", yet he attempts to justify this representation by referring to female characters who seem to pursue individual goals: the "willing" death of the grandmother in "The Road to Rankin's Point" and the mythic function of the dead wife in "The Tuning of Perfection" serve to show that MacLeod emphasizes individual identity over gender identity. Donna Palmateer Pennee's persuasive argument that modernist literature establishes itself through the symbolic sacrifice of woman – that woman is the "dead referent" of modernist literature²² – might help at this point, yet though Creelman acknowledges that "some feminists" have critiqued the patriarchal structure of realism, his analysis does not incorporate their insights nor does it delve deeply into the gendered discourse of modernism in Canada. As if to literally illustrate this point, the dead referent is graphically, if unwittingly, suggested by the painting chosen for the cover of *Setting in the East*. David MacKay's "The Offering" is a darkly foreboding image featuring a woman, her face turned away from the viewer, her nude body lying prone on an inhospitable shore.

In contrast, Glenn Willmott's *Unreal Country: Modernity in the Canadian Novel in English*, demonstrates how the outlines of modernist literature are given shape by gender. Willmott builds his argument carefully, beginning with an examination of the *Bildungsroman* as the dominant genre of Canadian modernism. The *Bildungsroman* recounts the development of an individual, usually a young, inexperienced or naive person, whose idealism is pitted against actual social and cultural conditions. Although associated with stories of female liberation and independence in the contemporary period, the modernist novels such as *Think of the Earth* and *As For Me and My House* feature a male protagonist alienated by modernity "while the woman is a figure of the more powerfully enabling and limiting, and more abstract and unknowable, transformative historical world"²³ As characters in these novels, women are agents of history who enable the development of the male protagonist; on a

22 Donna Palmateer Pennee, "Canadian Letters, Dead Referents: Reconsidering the Critical Construction of *The Double Hook*", *Essays on Canadian Writing*, 51, 2 (1993-94), pp. 233-57.

23 Willmott, *Unreal Country*, pp. 107-8. See also Bertram Booker, *Think of the Earth* (Toronto, 1936) and Sinclair Ross, *As For Me and My House* (1941; Toronto, 1957) as well as Sara Jeannette Duncan, *A Daughter of To-Day* (London, 1895).

symbolic level, they signify History itself. What happens in these novels signals the wider cultural process of feminization as “[c]anonical modernism” becomes aligned “with the alienation of a critical art culture from a commodifying popular culture”.²⁴ In his reading of Sara Jeannette Duncan’s *A Daughter of To-Day*, Willmott nicely illustrates the association of mass culture and popular literature with the feminine, allowing the avant-garde and modernist to occupy elite, masculine, public space.²⁵ While it is not possible to do justice to Willmott’s nuanced arguments in a few lines, it is sufficient to say that this critique of a commodifying, feminizing modernist culture informs the reading of genre and individual works throughout. Thus, the genres associated with high and low as well as realism and romance are not contrasted as they usually are; rather, realism in the modernist period is seen to absorb romance “where realism must always register an incomplete reality, and romance an historicized wish, and therefore to mark the production of a new formal practice”.²⁶

Unreal Country was the English language winner of the 2002 Gabrielle Roy Prize for best book on Canadian or Quebec literature.²⁷ In both its argument and method, it works towards what Willmott calls “historicized criticism”: instead of letting historical “context” stand outside the interpretation of the literary text either in an authenticating or explanatory position, this method integrates historical knowledge and critical interpretation. Answering calls for closer attention to the particular histories of literary texts and their authors as well as their production and consumption, Willmott argues that “criticism typically restricts its domain of authority to individual authors and works, and allows only supplementary attention to cultural discourses and histories that might relate them together and to the collective dimensions of their own, present worlds. This practice is laudable in preserving the specificity, and so the adequacy, of our constructions of individual and local cultural contexts for literary expression”.²⁸ A critical work infused with the consciousness of historical difference, *Unreal Country* is the kind of work that William Thornton refers to when he calls for a “newer historicism” “forging a contextual bond between historical and literary theory, thus clearing a path for a new literary historiography”.²⁹

If one of the aims of this “new literary historiography” is to attend to historical difference by reconstructing the production and reception of literary texts, then studies by historians such as Clarence Karr’s *Authors and Audiences: Popular Canadian Fiction in the Early Twentieth Century* also serve to define the field. Karr studies Ralph Connor, Robert Stead, Lucy Maud Montgomery, Nellie McClung and Arthur Stringer, five contemporaries who “both shared and helped to create the liberal, progressive consciousness of the Anglo-Canadian, white, urban middle class”.³⁰ By showing that the audience for these popular writers was not limited to Canada but

24 Willmott, *Unreal Country*, p. 7.

25 Willmott, *Unreal Country*, pp. 8-12.

26 Willmott, *Unreal Country*, p. 22-3.

27 George Elliott Clarke’s *Odysseys Home* and Heather Murray’s *Come bright Improvement!*, also reviewed in this essay, were the two other books short-listed for the prize in 2002.

28 Willmott, *Unreal Country*, p. 38.

29 William H. Thornton, “Cultural Alterity and ‘Plain Description’ in Literary Historiography”, *Language and Literature*, 19 (1994), p. 20.

30 Clarence Karr, *Authors and Audiences*, p. 25.

international in scope, Karr offers an important historical analysis. Basing his conclusions on sales records as well as on reviews, Karr concludes that they were “part of the first generation of Canadian writers who became internationally recognized creators of best-selling fiction”.³¹ Documents are often cited to establish the validity of claims made; for instance, the Uxbridge Hypatia Club’s motto, a club in which Lucy Maud Montgomery participated, is cited to underline the description of her viewpoint while a letter from Wilfred Campbell published in the Toronto *Globe* in 1893 offers an example of resistance to the commercialization of literature at the time. Karr is not content to suppose that ideas “in the air” influence writers or to link them without showing the connection; instead, he examines a wide range of evidence, reading reviews to try to understand the audience’s attitudes and using fan mail as a primary source of readers’ experiences.³²

As a historian commenting on literary criticism, Karr performs the same function that literary critics sometimes perform for historiography by commenting on the discipline from the outsider’s position. Karr is particularly attentive to both the historical differences literary criticism can sometimes downplay as well as to presentist arguments. Considering the lack of criticism on writers who chose to publish in magazines, he writes: “Perhaps for critics, the real issue surrounding magazine publishing is not the question of quality but the context of commercialization and the mass readership”.³³ As Willmott argues, the strict division of popular and high art had not been fixed at this time, and the commercialization of their work has little to do with our current ideas about commercialization. Clarence Karr highlights this significant historical difference by demonstrating how a hierarchy of high and low culture is embedded in notions of literary value: “Unfortunately, with the ever-increasing gulf between high and popular culture, these best-selling authors, in their encounters with modernity, lost the respect and support of the Canadian literary elite”.³⁴ While this statement may not hold true for Montgomery in the contemporary period, it did earlier in the 20th century. By explaining the decline in their popularity in terms of academic standards of literary value, Karr is able to make often trenchant comments on critical conventions. Quoting literary critic Jane Tompkins, he agrees that such assumptions emerge from attitudes in 20th-century criticism and teaching. Just as contemporary “literary” novels are now often assumed to be progressive, even subversive, so too are these popular novels assumed to “provide entertainment and escape, and conform to the standard conservative tastes and values of society”.³⁵ The writers included in his study are clearly conservative, no question, but, as Karr shows, their conservatism is quite different from our present understanding of the term, a point Willmott also emphasizes.

As clear-eyed as Karr is about the practice of criticism, however, it is disappointing that he does not tackle the uglier elements of the social class the selected authors

31 Karr, *Authors and Audiences*, p. 204. Early on, Karr establishes that the five “knew each other, frequently attended the same meetings, and even shared the same platforms” (p. xii). See also p. 167.

32 Karr, *Authors and Audiences*, p. 154.

33 Karr, *Authors and Audiences*, p. 60.

34 Karr, *Authors and Audiences*, p. 204.

35 Karr, *Authors and Audiences*, p. ix.

belonged to and how they often remained silent on the exploitation and dispossession that sustained their privileged world. Each reference to signs of these issues, from “black servants” in Stringer’s case to Stead’s employment at the Department of Immigration and Colonization, is a missed opportunity not redeemed by Karr’s general statement that the five authors’ attitudes toward race “reflected attitudes typical of a Western society which expected assimilation to the standards of the majority”.³⁶

Heroines and History: Representations of Madeleine de Verchères and Laura Secord by Colin M. Coates and Cecilia Morgan demonstrates the mutually enriching methods of literary criticism and historical research without shying away from the difficult subjects of racial and gender politics. Studying the stories of these two heroines, they carefully locate the various competing versions but also “the varied and multiple uses to which the same historical narrative may be put, as it shifts locations and contexts”.³⁷ When considering the various stories of Madeleine Verchères, Coates uses literary analysis to identify important themes and aspects of narrative style in the two letters that give the earliest accounts of her actions, subsequent narrative accounts by other authors and the court cases in which Verchères was involved as an adult. Each text is treated by Coates as evidence that can be “read in a number of different ways”.³⁸ Similarly, Morgan, in her section of the book on Laura Secord, distinguishes between the different types of narrative and analyses each in literary terms.

In a fascinating analysis, the authors illustrate the stories’ competing representations of Native people: as fearsome enemies laying siege to the Verchères fort; as loyal servants awaiting Secord’s message while also a threatening, unseen presence in the woods she walks through; as heroic warriors of the Battle of 1812 but also enemy attackers of the colonists. While some authors gesture towards a day when Aboriginal authors will take up a particular genre or topic, a gesture which places the Aboriginal author on a developmental timeline moving towards a future stage that others have already attained, both Coates and Morgan present evidence that Native culture has been stereotyped as the “antithesis of modernity” and trace the stereotype of Native people as “a vanished race relegated to anachronistic time” that Morgan shows still remains in the post-war period.³⁹ In “Epilogue: The Iroquois Presence”, the authors place the Native characters in the stories at the centre of the analysis, attempting both to understand how the Iroquois were exploited in such narratives and to reconstruct an Iroquois history of the same events.

In preliminary research, Morgan found concerns about the depiction of the Iroquois expressed by a Mohawk teacher who challenged the Ontario school system in the 1930s and 1940s and by a ministry official who did so in the 1950s. While she notes that more research is necessary, Morgan follows this pattern into the 1960s and 1970s arguing that “far from being the concern of an elite group of academics, politicians, and writers, the writing and teaching of Canadian history (as well as other subjects) was . . . a real concern for ‘ordinary’ members of the public. What that history should be – whether it would reflect the dynamics of power relations and struggles in the past,

36 Karr, *Authors and Audiences*, p. 207.

37 Colin M. Coates and Cecilia Morgan, *Heroines and History*, p. 232.

38 Coates and Morgan, *Heroines and History*, p. 36.

39 Coates and Morgan, *Heroines and History*, p. 190.

whether it was simply a liberal inclusiveness of various groups' contributions and their recognition – is a question that textbooks alone cannot answer, given the dynamics of classroom practice and students' own interpretations". Thus, when it comes to the contemporary concern about a crisis in historical education, Morgan concludes "the rhetorical devices often used to frame these arguments are no stranger to any student of commemoration and memory: most common is the tragic narrative of a Golden Age, a period when all Canadian schoolchildren 'knew their history' (one might hope that Laura Secord's walk formed part of this sacred corpus of knowledge!) and thus assured the security of Canadian national identity".⁴⁰

Heroines and History is valuable for demonstrating historical difference between current and earlier attitudes towards history and historiography, thus providing an important counter-argument to the postmodern representation of History. In 19th-century Upper Canada, those interested in commemorating historical events could be highly creative in their representations of events as they were untroubled by the emerging professional concern with "objectivity". These individuals seem to have regarded the past both as what happened and as stories that could be told with creative panache. Coates and Morgan show that these individuals and groups were concerned with shaping Canadian society by remembering certain stories and by telling them in certain ways. That they considered themselves historians Coates and Morgan do not dispute: "While it is possible to debate their claim in today's terms, it seems more useful to try to determine just what it meant in the context of the late nineteenth century, for these individuals found no contradiction in the wish to create both history and memory through their work".⁴¹ In this passage, we see the tentative and provisional nature of the claims Coates and Morgan wish to make: "it *seems* more useful to *try* to determine". The historian asks questions and suggests interpretations; these authors recognize that "specificity and contingency" shape their historical investigation as much as it did the work of the 19th-century commemorators.⁴² Although often written in a narrative style, *Heroines and History* offers an argument for, and not a representation of, how the past was. Indeed, it is this type of writing that the postmodernist critique tends to leave out in its representation of historiography.

Another successful meeting of literary and historical interpretation is Heather Murray's "*Come bright Improvement!*": *The Literary Societies of Nineteenth-Century Ontario*. It provides an example of the microhistorical approach to the literary history she advocates in "Literary History as Microhistory", one situated at "the intersections of the academy and the public sphere and in the interests of that public".⁴³ In both scope and method – the two characteristics explored in her essay – the book seems modelled on microhistory. In the preface, Murray notes that before she embarked on her research, she "had heard of only a handful" of literary societies, but she consulted "hundreds of correspondents" and benefited from "the deep local knowledge" of the many individuals she acknowledges. The scrupulousness with which Murray

40 Coates and Morgan, *Heroines and History*, p. 193-4.

41 Coates and Morgan, *Heroines and History*, p. 6.

42 Coates and Morgan, *Heroines and History*, p. 14.

43 Heather Murray, *Come bright Improvement!*, p.168.

acknowledges colleagues and correspondents as well as her meticulous use of sources and compilation of the preliminary resource guide and appendices of primary documents distinguishes the book as an outstanding work of scholarship. The microhistorical approach allows Murray to examine a specific context for each representative society. From this examination, she is able to conclude, for example, that societies in Ontario were modelled mostly on the Mechanics Institutes rather than the 18th-century literary, philosophical or antiquarian societies common elsewhere. Without making extravagant claims about national character, she shows how literary societies in Ontario differed from their counterparts in Boston, London and in Quebec, where such groups served “men of letters” almost exclusively. Indeed, Murray describes her project modestly as an “attempt to make sense” of the 19th-century practices of reading, and she concludes that the book contributes to literary history in three ways: by bringing to light new documents by little or unknown authors, by unsettling the assumption that 19th-century readers and writers were isolated in rural areas devoid of cultural activity, and by the highlighting the public function of literary study.⁴⁴

Come bright Improvement! is also remarkable for the careful attention to historical difference displayed in this definition: “A literary society, then, had at its core a variety of ‘literary’ activities according to the nineteenth-century sense of that term. In other words, it dealt with the rhetorical arts in and of themselves and in relationship to a variety of other cultural or civic pursuits, which could cause a ‘literary’ society to engage in activities that seem to our eyes only tenuously connected”.⁴⁵ Literary societies, with their overlapping of public and private relationships, offer an opportunity to investigate wider social and cultural issues, such as women’s struggle for equality and cultural values in the colonial period. One Shakespeare Day program for the Pleasant Hour Circle in Brantford, for example, featured a “Julius Caesar” evening during which, according to the program, participants were invited to discuss these pertinent questions: “(a) What is the leading thought of the play? (b) Is Brutus a true patriot? (c) What noble characteristics in his wife Portia?”.⁴⁶ The membership of individual societies also tell much about social life in 19th-century Ontario. Some were organized by and for women; others were organized by the community of former slaves who had come to Upper Canada as fugitives. In piecing together their stories, Murray is attentive to change over time and to the development of societies from loosely organized activities such as “clubbing” together to obtain and exchange books to the creation of formalized societies with programmed activities such as lecture series and performances.

All this is indispensable to the student or teacher of 19th-century history, but while readers will learn a great deal by reading the book, perhaps its form will prove to make an even greater contribution. By studying readers engaged in the social and intellectual enjoyment of reading, discussing or studying books together, Murray presents reading as a public activity with social functions, shifting the methodological emphasis of literary analysis from the close reading of individual, privileged readers.

44 Murray, *Come bright Improvement!*, pp. 159-60.

45 Murray, *Come bright Improvement!*, p. 15.

46 Murray, *Come bright Improvement!*, p. 91.

Exploring microhistory as a theoretical model for literary history, Murray moves beyond the “oddly optimistic faith in the evidentiary nature of texts” that both characterizes Formalist approaches and rejects the text’s representative status: “The subject of microhistorical examination, whether an individual, a cultural formation, or a community, is not placed in a synecdochic or ‘standing for’ relationship, but rather in a network of material and ideational conditions”.⁴⁷

Odysseys Home: Mapping African-Canadian Literature by George Elliott Clarke also beautifully illustrates the possibilities of the contextual approach to literary historiography by presenting a literary history that emphasizes historical difference. Over the years, Canadian literary scholars have learned a great deal from Clarke’s work, but to read his essays reprinted together is to understand the full force of his scholarly contribution. With each essay, Clarke is shaping literary history and uniting what he calls the “archipelago of blackness” in the white sea of Canadian national mythologizing. In his opening section, “Embarkation”, he offers this explanation: “I feel a responsibility, too, to contest the erasure and silencing of black culture and history in Canada. I am weary of black people always being a subject only for sociologists, criminologists, and morticians, their scalpel eyes slicing into us, their shrapnel voices exploding our dreams, their heavy metal hands ripping into us with a crabby penmanship that dates back to the Dark Ages. In their minds, we are supposedly too poor to even have history”.⁴⁸

With the supple vocabulary and rhythmic voice of the talented poet he is, Clarke writes with urgency and power in a variety of literary genres, including bibliographic, critical and review essays that alternate between critical, creative, personal and polemical registers. Clarke does not reject empiricism nor hold it too close, calling on students of African-Canadian literature to “counter amnesia, for those who do not research history are condemned to falsify it” and, later, in one of his characteristic echoing phrases, warning that “those who do not interrogate history are fated to imbibe half-truths”.⁴⁹ His historical approach queries archival sources and constructs history along lines of difference. In his “Acknowledgements”, he describes being “haunted” by a comment Desmond Morton made to him while he was working on *Odysseys Home*: “People in the past are different from us. They think differently”.⁵⁰ It is the attempt to articulate that difference that avoids the presentist pitfalls of Formalism and makes the work historical in focus.

One of Clarke’s concerns in these essays is what he calls African Canadian’s “ambivalent relationship to African-American culture”.⁵¹ In “Contesting a Model Blackness: A Meditation on African-Canadian African Americanism, or the Structures of African-Canadianité”, he traces the image of Canada as the Promised Land through Martin Luther King and Malcolm X, exposing the “psychological evisceration” of those who crossed over. In a country that denies its slave history, Black identity becomes invisible or a “lighter shade” of American blackness, its

47 Murray, “Literary History as Microhistory”, pp. 408, 418.

48 George Elliott Clarke, “Embarkation”, in *Odysseys Home*, p. 6.

49 Clarke, “Embarkation”, p. 7 and “Treason of the Black Intellectuals?”, p. 198, both in *Odysseys Home*.

50 Clarke, “Acknowledgements”, in *Odysseys Home*, p. vii.

51 Clarke, “Contesting a Model Blackness: a Meditation on African-Canadian African Americanism, or the Structures of African-Canadianité”, in *Odysseys Home*, p. 27.

literature “caught between two national(ist) pincer movements of exclusion”.⁵² What Clarke aims to do is to clarify the specific characteristics of African-Canadian culture, including those that import, imitate and derive. In the African-Canadian appropriation of African-American culture, he finds both resistance and repetition, just as he sees these twin impulses at work in the response to culture generally. Repetition, a key concept in his writing, constitutes originality; it is “not elementary iteration, but calculated repetition insisting upon a *signifying* difference”.⁵³

Clarke brings a sceptical eye to everything he reads, not just those texts that fashion or critical orthodoxy single out, and he queries the tenet of postmodernism that theoretical and political work are seamlessly integrated. In “Harris, Philip, Brand: Three Authors in Search of Literate Culture”, he takes a critical look at the pretense to political action that critics often use to comfort themselves: “Indeed, one of the awful intoxications of literary theory is that one dreams that one can do socio-political good, dispelling illiberal forces of malice and ignorance, delivering into the illumination of academic discourse entire canons – or communities – which have been consigned to the limbo of marginality. The belief is praiseworthy, and doubly so when it catalyzes joyful political action”.⁵⁴

In essays like “Must We Burn Haliburton?” and “White Niggers, Black Slaves: Slavery, Race and Class in T. C. Haliburton’s *The Clockmaker*”, which are not included in this collection, Clarke joyfully deconstructs the representation of Black characters and Blackness in canonical works.⁵⁵ In *Odysseys Home*, essays such as “Syl Cheney-Coker’s Nova Scotia, or the Limits of Pan-Africanism”, make literary history by reclaiming a little-known work: Cheney-Coker’s representation of Nova Scotia. This means narrating the history of the 1,200 Black Loyalists who left Nova Scotia between 1783 and 1815 to found Sierra Leone, reminding or informing readers that “Two ‘nations,’ not one, emerged from the Black Loyalist exile of 1783: the black minority enclave of Africadia and the black majority, Creole- and Temne-dominated state of Sierra Leone”.⁵⁶ To tell this story, Clarke looks to the work of historians Pearleen Oliver, Robin Winks and James Walker among others, to writers Marlene Nourbese Philip and Charles Saunders, and to the memoirs of Boston King and John Marrant for an understanding of the critical insights he brings to the analysis of Cheney-Coker’s poetry and prose.

Like his mapping of the shared and divergent history of Nova Scotia and Sierra Leone, Clarke’s analysis places works of literature in national and international context. At times, this method stresses matters of literary influence, politics and style as in the case of his demonstration of the affinities between the poetry of Marlene

52 Clarke, “Contesting a Model Blackness”, in *Odysseys Home*, p. 36.

53 Clarke, “Contesting a Model Blackness”, in *Odysseys Home*, p. 62.

54 Clarke, “Harris, Philip, Brand: Three Authors in Search of Literate Culture”, in *Odysseys Home*, p. 253.

55 George Elliott Clarke, “Must We Burn Haliburton?”, in Richard A. Davies, ed., *The Haliburton Bicentenary Chaplet: Papers Presented at the 1996 Thomas Raddall Symposium* (Wolfville, 1997), pp. 1-40 and George Elliott Clarke, “White Niggers, Black Slaves: Slavery, Race and Class in T. C. Haliburton’s *The Clockmaker*”, *Nova Scotia Historical Review*, 14, 1 (1994), pp. 13-40.

56 Clarke, “Syl Cheney-Coker’s Nova Scotia, or the Limits of Pan-Africanism”, in *Odysseys Home*, p. 140.

Norbes Philip and the political thought of George Grant. Pointing out the affinities between black and white intellectuals is another way of laying claim to a history that is not bounded by the categorizations of racist representations. In “Treason of the Black Intellectuals?” Clarke calls on black intellectuals to submit African-Canadian culture to serious critique. Clarke offers “enlightened, X-ray-exact, critical self-scrutiny” in answer to David Sealy’s rejection of historical reconstruction and Rinaldo Walcott’s “shouting down of history”.⁵⁷ By challenging students and scholars in this way, *Odysseys Home* not only maps the field as his title promises but charts a way forward for literary historiography.

As the scope of this essay has been defined by questions of method and theory, an exhaustive review of each book’s merits has been beyond it. Yet, I hope to have shown the extent to which each book indicates, to varying degrees and in different ways, how historical method has begun to inform theory and to transform practice. In so doing, literary critics and historians are working towards an historicized criticism that pays careful attention to the content of the form yet broadens the scope of literary evidence. Though a theory of such a criticism has yet to be fully realized, as Heather Murray points out in “Literary History as Microhistory”, scholars are finding new directions for advancing historical analysis. Taken collectively, the books reviewed here demonstrate this historicizing impulse in both historical and literary studies and illustrate their potential to further enrich this field of interdisciplinary study.

RENÉE HULAN

57 Clarke, “Treason of the Black Intellectuals?”, *Odysseys Home*, p. 202.