

Up the Hill

SCL/ÉLC Then and Now

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Up the Hill: *SCL/ÉLC* Then and Now

JOHN CLEMENT BALL

SINCE I FIRST DISCOVERED IT as a graduate student, *Studies in Canadian Literature* has always struck me as the CanLit journal that could. In its modest way (a Maritime thing or a Canadian thing?), it has quietly and with minimal fanfare helped disseminate and shape the discourse of Canadian literature criticism for four decades — though perhaps at times overshadowed by the confident elder statesjournal *Canadian Literature* (1959-) and the hipper-seeming *Essays on Canadian Writing* (1974-2009), both founded at bigger (and big-city) universities.

SCL/ÉLC began in 1975 at the University of New Brunswick in Fredericton, in a department that had been dominated by Desmond Pacey for three decades until his death that same year. Thanks in no small part to Pacey's pioneering work and that of many others within and outside UNB, these were heady days for Canadian literature: post-centennial cultural nationalism had been surging for nearly a decade; new writers and literary presses were popping up all over the country; thematic criticism ruled (but not for much longer); and our nation's fiction, poetry, and drama was beginning to become a respectable subject of secondary and postsecondary study. Indeed, my southern Ontario high school had what I believe was its first Canadian literature segment of an English course in my Grade 11 year (1975-76); I remember reading *Fifth Business*, *The Stone Angel*, and *The Watch That Ends the Night* and doing a presentation on Gwendolyn MacEwen, whose poetry I considered (in the go-to word of my teenage years) "bizarre." At my wife's Halifax high school, though, a full-year CanLit course was introduced only to be threatened with cancellation part way through by provincial officials nervous that the content might not be worthy of Grade 12 English credit. The solution? Add *King Lear* to the curriculum and carry on. There were still some hills to climb.

Like UNB's Faculty of Arts (home also to *The Fiddlehead* and the Atlantic history journal *Acadiensis*) and its Department of English (which had courses in Canadian and Commonwealth/postcolonial lit-

erature in the 1960s), *SCL/ÉLC* has, to be less modest, always punched above its weight and been unafraid to frame the debate. Roger Ploude, who co-founded the journal, recently recalled its humble but ambitious beginnings:

The idea for the magazine occurred to Barrie Davies and me after a few drinks at a splendid old pub along the St. John River called The Riverview Arms, long since demolished and replaced by a row of spiffy homes. Barrie and I felt that the country, and especially the East Coast, needed another critical journal to celebrate our literature and to rival *Canadian Literature* on the West Coast. We also felt that the magazine should distinguish itself by being a bilingual journal, especially as we could not find one in the country at that time. Mike Taylor joined us a week or two later, and Barrie and I always intended that Mike be recognized as one of the founders.

Barrie and I received a small sum from the university to travel to Ottawa to seek funding from the Canada Council, armed with a preliminary budget which Barrie had scratched on the back of a cigarette package and which I had to recopy in the hotel room. We were successful in securing funding for a launch (subject to renewal should the journal “prove itself,” as we were told). I clearly remember celebrating with Barrie that evening in the hotel bar and scribbling together a silly poem, a copy of which I believe I still have — somewhere!¹

In all honesty, the initial issues were a struggle. Solid articles were hard to find, and we spent weeks trying to persuade contributors, largely relying on Barrie’s contacts in CanLit. We did contact George Woodcock at UBC, who was editing *Canadian Literature* at the time. He responded with a full and highly supportive letter. Barrie, Mike, and I were all on full teaching schedules and had to squeeze time from other commitments to launch the journal, without any release time or secretarial help. In short, we did it all for the first year or so — marketing, editing, correspondence, keeping budgets, renewing applications, etc. etc. The rest is history, and I am very proud of *SCL* — not for helping to found it, but for the solid, carefully edited, and highly regarded journal it has become, thanks largely to the editors who followed us.

The journal’s first special issue, “Minus Canadian” (2.2), published in 1977, helped galvanize the move away from thematics, and the most recent issue (this one) asks both how far we have climbed over the past forty years and where we hope to journey over the years to come. In

between, *SCL/ÉLC* has published special issues, or sections, on drama, poetry, poetics, and historical fiction; on Aboriginal, Atlantic-Canadian, and South Asian Canadian literatures; on space and place, publishing, “women in motion,” indigeneity, adolescence, and ecology. “Canadian Poetry: Traditions/Counter-Traditions” (30.1), our thirtieth anniversary issue (which I co-edited with Jennifer Andrews, Ross Leckie, and Marie Carrière), was our biggest ever with seventeen articles plus an interview. It ran to 344 pages; perhaps we should have made it a double! “Writing Canadian Space” (23.1), my first special issue (co-edited with Linda Warley and Robert Viau), had the largest number of submissions for any special issue or section, with some fifty articles mailed in, from which we chose fifteen; many fine pieces by good scholars didn’t make the cut, and the weighty responsibility of the editor’s job hit home then. Some special issues we published later were pitched to us by outside scholars, and some, like “Space,” were dreamed up in-house. They all involved guest co-editors, whose contributions to their success were immeasurable and remain deeply appreciated; and they all had introductions that took the current temperature of critical discourse on the genre/topic/subfield in question and framed the articles that followed. *SCL/ÉLC* was also among the first Canadian journals to go electronic; with the help of a SSHRC Strategic Initiatives grant, UNB’s Electronic Text Centre, and many graduate assistants, we digitized our first twenty volumes and posted them online through the ETC website in 2000, moving onto the Open Journal System a few years later. It was thrilling to be at the vanguard of a new era, and we now publish parallel print and electronic editions of each new issue (available to subscribers), with back issues freely available online after two years.

My first general issue as editor of *SCL/ÉLC* was 21.1, published twenty years and half of the journal’s lifetime ago; my final issue (by then as co-editor) was 38.1. I’m not sure that, at the beginning, I really had any business editing this fine journal. I was a new hire in the department in 1995, with a freshly minted PhD in postcolonial literatures from the University of Toronto. I had been a minor deckhand on the CanLit ship for a while: among other things, working for the Literary Press Group and the Association of Canadian Publishers, where my various duties to promote Canadian-owned presses included hosting a radio book show on which I interviewed, between 1986 and 1990, such delightful writers as bpNichol, Graeme Gibson, Roch Carrier,

Hugh Hood, Janice Kulyk Keefer, Nino Ricci, Linda Spalding, and David Adams Richards (with whom I embarrassingly mispronounced Miramichi during our interview, as I discovered years later on moving to New Brunswick). But as for editing a scholarly journal, an honour typically reserved for senior researchers in the field — well, I was neither senior nor exactly in the field. Postcolonialism was emerging as a dominant lens for interpreting Canadian writing, with the publication of articles and special issues on the topic in the mid-90s, so I suppose there was that. But I hadn't been hired as a Canadianist and didn't know until three months after I arrived at UNB that I would be taking the reins of *SCL/ÉLC*.

There was a precedent, however: the existing but exiting editor, Kathleen Scherf, had begun editing the journal shortly after her own arrival as a tenure-track hire in 1989. Now that she had become an associate dean, she wanted to move on. As I've written in these pages before, she declared me "fresh meat," expressed her full confidence in my abilities, and handed me the journal to edit before the end of my first year. This did not seem to be negotiable, and in any event, I was eager to please; challenged as I already was by my new job, new city, new courses, new graduate students, a new baby at home, and even by recklessly agreeing to teach drama production and direct student plays (which also hadn't been in the job description but which Kathleen also urged me to do), I stepped up to the editorship full of youthful confidence, enthusiasm, and a little apprehension. With the guidance of Kathleen, Roger, other colleagues, the superb advisory and editorial boards I inherited and continued building, and especially the journal's long-serving managing editor, Sabine Campbell, I muddled through and soon began to settle in and enjoy it. Only with such tremendous support could Kathleen's "I think you can" have become my own "I thought I could."

When I look back beyond the memory-blur of SSHRC applications, marked-up proofs, and correspondence with authors and advisors, I realize that those seventeen and a half years and thirty-five issues — first as sole editor, from 2003 as co-editor with Jennifer Andrews, and in my final year as co-editor with Herb Wyle — included some important changes in the journal and its operations. In 1998, coinciding with the "Space" issue, we undertook a redesign, inside and out, and the result was, and still is, I think, an elegant and attractive package. For

the cover, we decided to keep the black, red, and white Kathleen had introduced in her 1990 redesign — red and black are UNB's colours, and red and white are Canada's — but we wanted something visually compelling, something more than a staid type treatment. We hired a graphic designer and brainstormed with him a bit, during the course of which I happened to mention a little-known fact (or urban myth?) that if you do a perceptual flip with the maple leaf on the Canadian flag, switching foreground and background, you can see two people — two not-so-solitary solitudes? — talking to each other in profile, their pointy noses nearly meeting in the middle. Someone had showed me this once, and I had no idea if it was a legitimate or intended way of seeing the flag, but I kind of liked it. The designer ran with this image and brought us a stylized half-leaf single face with his or her pointy nose stuck in a book that formed the other half of the leaf (because a page is a leaf too, right?). His finishing touch of an eye (which in retrospect looks more like an upside-down Nike slash than it might), and an oversized watermark-like shadow image of the face-book-leaf combination in grey, completed the playful and stylish look. It made us smile and we readily adopted it as the new face of the journal.

Editorially, we shifted from paper submissions and snail-mail correspondence with authors and peer-reviewers to email communication; as I write, the journal is moving toward an Open Journal Systems-based editorial interface that we've contemplated for years but until now balked at in favour of more personal (but more time-consuming for staff) interactions. We also moved away from doing all of our post-acceptance editing in coloured pen on paper page proofs; back then, corrections were entered and the article published with no involvement or approval by the author at any point. Surprisingly, I recall no complaints about unwanted edits during those early years; perhaps I've simply blocked them from memory, but with house style at the time still a work in progress (and a bit of a moveable feast), we were quite light and non-intrusive in our changes. As I learned more about editing, and especially after my own very satisfying experience of being copyedited by *ECW* with Track Changes and getting to approve those changes *and* the later page proofs, we decided to adopt a similar system for *SCL/ÉLC* in the interest of cleaner, more transparent, and more professional copyediting, not to mention better training for our graduate students. Lisa Alward and Réjean Ouellette took on that copyediting for many

years; Rob Ross, a previous graduate-student proofreader, signed on later, and, more recently still, Dallas Harrison, the freelancer whose work for *ECW* had impressed me so much, and Michel Pharand have become our main copyeditors in English. These editorial changes, as much as the aforementioned electronic archive, redesign, SSHRC funding successes, and a growing number of submissions all marked a kind of maturing, a coming of age for the journal through its twenties and thirties.

Editors of journals have a bird's-eye view of disciplinary trends and changes. In my early years, it seemed every other submission was on Ondaatje, Atwood, or King; Hearne, Duncan, Munro, Kroetsch, and Marlatt were steady presences in the submission pile, and later there was a Brand phase. It did seem to me that we got a preponderance of submissions on fiction, and most of those on contemporary novels. Drama was virtually AWOL and poetry surprisingly sparse — or at least this was my impression. And despite an inviting space at the end of each issue for an author interview, we sometimes had trouble filling it, as submissions were few. Nonetheless, we published thirty interviews over those thirty-five issues, including fascinating conversations with Jeannette Armstrong, Tim Lilburn, M.G. Vassanji, George Elliott Clarke, Daphne Marlatt, Thomas Wharton, Thomas King, Gail Scott, Dennis Lee, Lawrence Hill, Raymond Souster, Guy Vanderhaeghe, and Raymond Guy LeBlanc, among others. When I look beyond the impressionistic and do a rudimentary statistical analysis of the thirty-five issues and 345 articles *SCL* published while I was editor or co-editor, I see that 293 were in English and fifty-two in French, a split of 85% to 15%. Fiction did indeed dominate, but not as much as I had thought: 178 of the articles in English focused on fiction, though interestingly seven of those were on French-language authors (e.g., Gabrielle Roy, Michel Tremblay); thirty-three of the articles in French were on fiction, with three of those being on English-language authors (e.g., Ondaatje, Munro). Spanning the two languages, articles primarily on fiction thus accounted for over 61% of what we published during that period, with studies of poetry comprising just under 21%, of drama less than 2%, of travel or life writing over 3%, and of criticism, pedagogy, multiple genres, or *sui generis* works making up the remaining 13%. In terms of authors, the one with the most articles solely or substantially on his or her work between 21.1 and 38.1 was indeed Ondaatje (at thirteen), followed by Munro (ten)

and Atwood (eight). Of the 329 articles that focus on a literary text or texts from a particular period (with those spanning two periods assigned half to each), over 71% come from the second half of the twentieth century, with just under 10% each from the twenty-first century, the first half of the twentieth, and the seventeenth to nineteenth combined.

Those proportions did not come about by design, and while we might have liked more articles on non-contemporary work, or on poetry (UNB is the home of Poets' Corner, after all²), submissions to *SCL/ÉLC* were probably a pretty accurate sampling of the field — of what most engaged CanLit researchers across the country and abroad, and of the sheer volume of literature worthy of study. Moreover, while editors can make overtures to scholars whose work they admire or who have just given an excellent conference paper, for the most part you get what you get, over the transom, and hope a sufficient number will be good enough or promising enough to develop for publication and keep on schedule. Editing a journal is partly proactive — recruiting people and papers; inviting, assigning, and arm-twisting peer reviewers; brainstorming special issue topics; promoting the journal to scholars and funding agencies — and we did all that. But largely, day to day, editing is about reacting and responding. Submissions arrive, are assigned for peer review, the reviews read and responded to (often more than once), edits proposed and negotiated, proofs checked, and volumes received, with relief and a bit of a glow, from the printer.

All of this is an immensely collaborative activity, and I was extremely fortunate, after my initial solo years, to partner with Jennifer and Herb; I couldn't have asked for more insightful, industrious co-editors. And while our journal may be unusual in having two editors rather than a single one at the top of the masthead, it is hardly unusual in relying, as I wrote in my farewell editorial in 38.1, on a village-sized community of advisory board members, associate editors, staff, and editorial assistants to get the job done. *SCL/ÉLC* is unusual, from my experience on other advisory boards, in leaning quite so heavily as it does on its brilliant and hard-working advisors to do the majority of its peer review. As always when I wax grateful in these pages, I must tip my hat to all of them, past and present, who have done so much, necessarily anonymously, to gatekeep and, most importantly, to advise us and prospective authors on how submissions can be improved. The most satisfying aspect of editing a journal, to my mind, and the one that kept me doing it year after year,

is the pedagogical function that brings about those improvements — the part that's about process rather than product (since the latter, quite honestly, seems to float out into a void where editors hope and assume it meets appreciative readers but rarely receive confirming feedback that it actually has). In an era in which the pressures of professionalization and the job market meant that the majority of those submitting to us were junior faculty members and graduate students, working carefully and sensitively with vetting reports and one's own responses to guide those scholars toward the best possible version of their articles offered some of the same satisfactions as supervising a good graduate thesis. (Indeed, I recall one recent PhD graduate at another university telling me that *SCL/ÉLC* had given him more and better feedback than his graduate committee had.) I'm proud of and grateful for what the journal's whole village of small huts did to foster excellence in these important, if unheralded, ways.

That work has continued under the editorship of Jennifer's and my successors, Cynthia Sugars and Herb Wylie, who stepped up imaginatively and industriously to their roles over their tenure together at the helm — a tenure that was sadly foreshortened by Herb's untimely death in the final stages of editing this issue, which left us at the journal — and a whole community of Canadian literature scholars — mourning the loss of this remarkable researcher, sensitive editor, and generous, supportive colleague. One of Herb's final academic tasks, less than two weeks before he died, was discussing with me a draft of this memoir, the last paragraph of which I have since, with a heavy heart, had to revise. The devastating turn in Herb's health, which happened very rapidly, leaves us feeling like we've lost a limb; but otherwise, as Cynthia graciously steps up to cover his duties herself, *SCL/ÉLC* itself is in excellent health. Indeed, with issues expanding from an average of eight articles each over my first five years to twelve each over my last five and beyond, the journal you're holding in your hands, or staring at on your screen, has become more like a succession of well-stocked boxcars full of good things than the proverbial engine that could. We have every reason to be optimistic as we look forward to our fiftieth anniversary! In the meantime, for as long as Cynthia, Kathryn Taglia, Ian LeTourneau, and the outstanding transnational team that supports them continue their fine work, *SCL/ÉLC* will do its part to help Canadian literature studies reach new heights.

NOTES

¹ Editors' note: This poem is included as the opening item in this volume.

² On 15 May 1947, the Historic Sites and Monuments Board of Canada unveiled "Poets' Corner," a monument on the University of New Brunswick campus to honour three poets from Fredericton: Charles G.D. Roberts, Bliss Carman, and Francis Sherman.