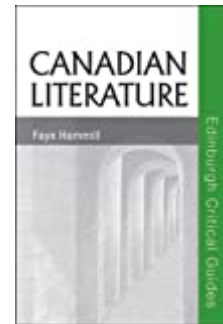


H-Net Reviews

in the Humanities & Social Sciences



Faye Hammill. *Canadian Literature*. Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2007. xxvi + 220 pp. \$120.00 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-7486-2161-3; \$32.00 (paper), ISBN 978-0-7486-2162-0.



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A Little Bit of Everything for Everyone

Faye Hammill's *Canadian Literature* is a thematic critical overview of English Canadian literature, designed for an undergraduate audience, combining postmodern and postcolonial close readings of fiction and poetry with theoretical discussions of the themes around which the book is structured: ethnicity, wilderness, desire, and history. The texts selected for analysis represent a mix of canonical pieces with less discussed contemporary works that tackle new issues and concerns in modern Canadian literature.

Hammill's overview has a little of everything for everyone. It opens with a sixteen-page chronology of Canadian history and literature, which maps historical events in parallel with literary events in Canada, and ends with a section on student resources. While extremely useful for locating in time the works selected in the book, the chronology charts historical events that apply to both anglophone and francophone Canada, yet the "literary events" it mentions are exclusively English Canadian or indigenous. In fact, despite its title, *Canadian Literature* focuses exclusively on the literature produced in English

in Canada by English Canadians, immigrants, or Aboriginal writers who wrote in English. The author clarifies her position in the introduction, in which she argues that French Canadian literature evolved separately from English Canadian literature and ought to be studied as such. Nevertheless, occasional mentions to the role of French Canada in shaping or challenging the emergence of a homogeneous Canadian national narrative may have done a lot to enrich the picture that the book paints of the evolution of Canadian literature in general.

Canadian Literature is divided into an introduction, four thematic chapters, and a conclusion, followed by an extensive section devoted to student resources. In addition to a brief historical account of English Canadian literature, the introduction also provides the reader with background on critical theory and canon-making. Therefore, it covers such topics as the arbitrariness and constructedness of any literary canon, emphasizing the artificiality and contradictory notion of a "national literature" when there are several competing versions of nationalism. The brief section on the evolution of indige-

nous literature in Canada offers a welcome illustration of the problematic nature of the idea of a “national literature.” This part is complete with an explanation of the correct terms to be used, including a historical account of the complexities of the term “Aboriginal” in the context of the variety of native populations coexisting in the history of Canada.

The book continues the thematic exploration of English Canadian literature. Each of the four units opens with a brief theoretical section that lays out the methodological grounds for that particular chapter, mentions the names of important scholars in the field, and ends with a close analysis of five novels for each section. The first chapter, “Ethnicity, Race, Colonisation,” throughout the close readings of the texts and its conclusion, raises the problem of incorporating “ethnic” literature in the national canon without devaluing it or forcing alien modes of interpretation on it. At the same time, it introduces students to the need for perspective, point of view, and voice when examining colonial as well as “ethnic” texts.

The second chapter, “Wilderness, Cities, Regions,” takes up wilderness, a classic topic in Canadian literature, by examining the two ways in which nature has been customarily represented in literature: one that sees nature as threatening wilderness, and that belongs to the tradition inaugurated by such colonial writers as John Richardson and Susanna Moodie; the other, which sees nature as authentic, represents it as redeeming and promoting self-knowledge and healing, and which can be traced back to Aboriginal authors. In an interesting twist, Hammill connects the themes of nature and wilderness with the growing interest in regionalism in contemporary Canadian literature and criticism, pointing out the many “wildernesses” coexisting within the Canadian imaginary, and overlapping with regional identities. The chapter mentions recent explorations of the connection between Canadian literature and geography as manifestations of the postmodern quest for limited identities. In another interesting twist, the theme of wilderness is associated with the urban space that has replaced the uninhabited spaces of the colonial frontier stories. Through the selection of texts, this chapter ultimately seeks to connect classic wilderness stories with their postmodern reinterpretations, and explores the role of place and community in the lives of the characters.

The third chapter is the most unusual. Its theme of choice is “Desire,” and in dealing with sexual desire the author aims to connect it both with place and identity, as well as with the complicated dynamics of power at work

within the Canadian cultural and political space. Desire—sexual or not—becomes in Hammill’s interpretation the location of resistance to existing power relations, norms, and cultural categories in Canada. In the close readings of the works selected (generally twentieth-century writers from Martha Ostenso to Leonard Cohen and Dionne Brand), Hammill comments on the eroticization of space, absence, and longing, and attempts an exploration of the history of marginalized groups in Canada—Jews, Blacks, and natives—by using politicized representations of sexual roles.

The final chapter, “Histories and Stories,” focuses on the ways in which literature—both fiction and poetry—draw their inspiration from and reflect history with an emphasis on the process by which the past is constructed and distorted by memory and nostalgia. By looking at twentieth-century rewritings of historical moments in the Canadian past, the chapter foregrounds the impact of contemporaneous ideologies of race, nation, empire, or gender on shaping colonial literary accounts of Canadian history and, implicitly, on influencing our modern understanding of the past based on those accounts. The conclusion to *Canadian Literature* does not offer concluding remarks, nor does it bring together in any unified way these four themes that Hammill proposes as guidelines for her study of English Canadian literature. Instead, it tackles the cult of celebrity of the writer in contemporary Canada, exploring its significance for understanding the modern value of cultural hierarchies and their creation in the current transnational context.

Hammill’s selection of texts and themes is completed by a useful list of student resources that includes both electronic and reference resources, as well as an extensive thematic list of questions for further discussion. For each of the four themes proposed, the author provides an additional list of alternative primary sources with very brief descriptions. A glossary follows, explaining terms ranging from the meaning of the “Confederation” to “Aboriginal” in Canadian culture.

As a critical overview of Canadian literature, the thematic organization of Hammill’s book may be somewhat confusing for a student, since it deprives the works of the historical and cultural context the book sets out to deconstruct. At the same time, its focus is clearly on the literature written during the second half of the twentieth century, with only three exceptions: Francis Brooke’s *History of Emily Montague* (1769), L. M. Montgomery’s

Anne of Green Gables (1908), and Martha Ostenso's *Wild Geese* (1925). Earlier colonial texts are mentioned only in passing, often taken for granted as landmarks in the evolution of Canadian literature, and used as examples to illustrate the evolution and reinterpretations of norms, categories, or events in the postmodern age. The close readings of the novels and collections of poetry selected occasionally leave the reader desirous for more depth and for a better explanation of the broader cultural and aesthetic significance of the works in the context of Canadian literature.

Nevertheless, in its thematic and critical approach to the texts, and especially in its rich and very well-documented section on further readings, questions, and alternative primary texts, Hammill's *Canadian Literature* remains a good resource book for undergraduate students taking a course in Canadian literature, as well as for instructors in search of fresh ideas and themes for designing their classes or for including Canadian texts in their existing curricula.

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