THE CANADIAN LANDSCAPE THROUGH POETRY

VOLUM I

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VOLUM I

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N E L A B U R E U i R A M O S

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INTRODUCTION

INTRODUCTION

1.— THEME AND AIMS

My first contact with Canadian poetry took place in the early eighties when I began to listen to and enjoy the songs of Leonard Cohen. At that time I didn't know Cohen was a writer though I remember having thought that he must be a very pessimistic artist to judge by the tone of his compositions. I didn't quite understand his message but it seemed to me that this singer with a grave and penetrating voice had a tragic view of life for he invariably presented, as he still presents, pain, suffering and solitude as being inextricably mixed with all the pleasurable moments life can offer. As Don Owen remarks:

"Leonard's very concerned with the idea of taking his share of the pain, the necessity of losing at least as much as you win" (*1).

This early identification of Canadian art with pessimism, which I somehow made unconsciously, was confirmed to me a few years later when I began to read Canadian poetry in order to find a theme for my doctoral thesis. Because of my growing interest in Leonard Cohen I considered the possibility of delving into his life and work though, on the other hand, I was reluctant to concentrate on a single author because I feared that a long monogamous relationship would prevent me from experiencing the pleasures of knowing other ideas and modes of perception. I wanted to find a subject demanding research in many directions so as to gain an insight into Canada's literary personality. Leonard Cohen had given me a taste of his country and I felt like trying more of it.

With this idea in mind, I wrote to the cultural attachee of the Canadian Embassy asking for assistance and she kindly offered me the

possibility of using their library facilities. Once in Madrid, I was advised to read Margaret Atwood's Survival (*2) and Northrop Frye's The Bush Garden (*3) to become acquainted with the most recurrent themes and attitudes in Canadian literature. The experience was indeed enlightening for these books open a window onto Canada's imaginative landscape and some of the most important figures that move in it. They also reveal that the wilderness is the most important presence in Canadian literature for it has always been an inspirational source and a provider of symbols for the majority of Canadian artists. However, the reading of Survival and The Bush Garden was also disappointing because these books defeated my romantic expectations about the therapeutic qualities of a landscape so akin to our standards of natural excellence. In other words, since art is often the reflection and illustration of the landscape that produces it, I believed that the vastness and scenic beauty of the Canadian landscape might have elicited lofty sentiments and inspired the creation of noble and vigorous characters of epic stature.

Instead of this, I found a sense of man's weakness, fear and solitude when confronted by an indifferent and often hostile universe that refuses to be brought into subjection. Margaret Atwood points out that the feeling of alienation which characterises modern Canadian writing may be seen as a reflection of the pessimism that pervades contemporary art, though she believes that the Canadians' tendency to see and describe their country in negatives must be first and foremost related to Canada's historical and geographical characteristics. In Survival, she suggests that in Canadian literature the figure of the hero is generally replaced by that of a mere survivor who is a born loser and fails to achieve anything but to 'keep alive'.(*4) She also explains that this gloom results from the fact that the Canadian imagination is still conditioned and, to a certain extent, crippled by Canada's colonial past and the hardships of physical acclimatization:

> ***Bare survival isn't a central theme by accident, and neither is the victim motif. The land was hard and we have been (and are) an exploited colony; our literature is rooted in those facts.(*5)***

Then, after providing numerous examples to illustrate her points, Margaret Atwood concludes:

> *We must face the fact that Canadian literature is undeniably sombre and negative and that this to a large extent is both a reflection and a chosen definition of the national sensibility. (*6)*

In the same way, Northrop Frye alludes to the conflicting relationship that has always existed between Canadians and their physical environment and to the ways this conflict pervades the literature of his country giving it a very pessimistic tone. According to Frye, the Canadian artist's difficulty in coming to terms with nature is due to the sheer size and awesome majesty of the land and to the harshness of its climate. Frye puts forth the idea that in the middle of the Canadian wilderness the individual feels threatened and defenceless and that, for this reason, he often sees the physical world as a hostile force that seeks his destruction. This paranoic attitude towards nature suggests that, far from being a source of romantic inspiration, the Canadian landscape is likely to bring forth

the negative traits of the artist's personality. In a widely quoted passage, Northrop Frye summarises the dire effects that nature in Canada is thought to produce on the mind of the poet:

> ***Canadian poetry is at its best a poetry of incubus and cauchemar, the source of which is the unusually exposed contact of the poet with nature which Canada provides. Nature is seen by the poet first as an unconsciousness, then as a kind of existence that is cruel and meaningless, then as the source of the cruelty and subconscious stampedings within the human mind (...) Nature is consistently sinister in Canadian poetry. (*7)***

From this remark and also from Atwood's commentaries, I came to the conclusion that in Canada, as in Australia, the awareness of a colonial situation and the hardships imposed by the landscape had been turned to the advantage of art.

I mention Australia because in 1988 I completed a minor dissertation on the poetry of Judith Wright, a contemporary Australian artist. This piece of research, together with the course on Commonwealth literature I followed while I was reading for a degree in English at the University

of Barcelona, gave me an understanding of Australian culture. However, in spite of the similarities I found between Canadian and Australian literature, it seemed to me that Canadian artists, as depicted by Margaret Atwood and Northrop Frye, were far more sombre and pessimistic than Australian authors who had had to exorcise the ghosts of a lawless past and an eerie landscape which, in its vastness and aridity, was so far removed from European standards of natural beauty and physical amenity.

This awareness led me to the theme and main aim of my thesis: I would explore Canada's physical and psychic geography because I was convinced that Canadian poetry, like the Australian, must possess a streak of vitality and optimism that should exist alongside its much emphasized pessimism and despondency.

My choice of poetry responded to a personal interest in this literary genre and also to my desire to prove that poetry is a valuable aid in acquiring knowledge of any country. It records what the human imagination has responded to and

tells us things about physical environments that nothing else can tell us. Poets create a physical and psychological geography of place with an intricate pattern of trails that take the reader to the visible and unseen realities of the land they describe. It may be argued with reason that poets are great liars, as Yeats suggested, and that sometimes poetry distorts reality. There is certainly some truth in this but it is also true that it is generally some concrete event, place or experience that sparks artistic creation and that it is this spark, independently of the routes artists choose to follow, that constitutes the essence of the work of art. Poetry offers, in short, the possibility of seeing a country, in this case Canada, and of seeing it whole.

My decision to explore the Canadian landscape through poetry was followed by a long period of reading poetry that began in 1988 and continued in 1989 when the Canadian government granted me a Faculty Enrichment Award that allowed me to visit Canada for six weeks. I stayed in Toronto most of the time carrying out documentary research for my work and developing a course on Canadian poetry

written in English that I was to teach at the University of Lleida the following year. However, since I had decided that the theme of my thesis would be the exploration of the Canadian landscape through poetry and the analysis of the positive and negative emotional responses it had elicited from its artists, I devoted the last ten days of my stay to visiting part of the Rockies around Banff and Jaspers in south western Alberta and the prairies that stretch from the city of Edmonton to Calgary in the same province.

When I came back to Spain I brought with me as many anthologies on Canadian poetry written in English as I could buy and also history books, critical essays, maps, slides and brochures but, above all, I had the unforgettable experience of having visited the Ontario wilds, the rolling prairie and the savage beauty of Banff and Jaspers National Parks. I was then ready to read all my material and to decide the shape my work would take.

2. METHODOLOGY

2.1- THE STRUCTURE OF THE THESIS.

The first idea that came to my mind when I was considering possible ways of organizing this thesis was to move from east to west as European pioneers had done. I would first concentrate on poems describing the rugged coast of Newfoundland and the area around the Great Lakes and St. Lawrence Basin which are the chief focal points of Canadian history since it was in these regions that the first European communities established permanent settlements. The next stage would be the Canadian Shield, an enormous mass of Precambrian rock with an extension of about 3 million square kilometers and two billion years old. Its stony face has been scarred by geological aggression and healed by the refreshing waters of innumerable lakes and rivers that feed the Great Lakes and St. Lawrence River below.

From the Precambrian Shield and still moving west, I would enter and cross the seemingly

endless flatlands in Manitoba, Saskatchewan and Alberta to reach the impressive Rockies and the Pacific coast beyond. My poetic journey would end in the North, a sanctuary of silence and solitude which is the most mysterious and haunting of all Canadian regions.

Having decided the route to follow, I was ready to tackle the writing of my work with the eagerness and enthusiasm of a beginner. I particularly like the Spanish expression 'con el ardor del neófito' to refer to that bubbling up of energy and self-confidence that pushes the inexperienced student into the arena of a new subject. It was the reading of a remark by the contemporary poet Earle Birney that, without discouraging me, brought me down to earth because it made me realize that I would have to devote more time than I had available for the writing of my thesis to understand the complex relationship between man and nature in a country he describes as:

> ***A subcontinent, four thousand miles wide and a couple deep, bordering on three oceans. To comprehend it even physically is a prime challenge to any imagination; and to comprehend***

*the least part of it well and give it memorable and permanent form in art is a job of anybody's lifetime, a job requiring self-imposed solitude and exhausting concentration. (*8)*

The second warning came from my own awareness that I didn't have enough material to undertake such an enormous task. Although I returned to Canada in 1991, this time at my own expense, I realized that I would be obliged to narrow my subject considerably. Indeed, the only way of carrying out my project successfully was to remain in Canada for at least one year doing bibliographical research and travelling widely so as to be familiar with the places I was going to describe. Since this was not possible for personal and professional reasons, I decided to concentrate on the prairie and the North because I realized that these are the two regions that have had the strongest influence on the Canadian imagination. Besides, during my protracted period of reading, I had been especially attracted by the charming simplicity of prairie poetry and the religious, almost mystical significance that the North holds for many Canadian artists. North and

West would definitely be the cardinal directions in my work.

Although my initial project was very attractive, I soon realized that the advantages of my second and final choice were manifold. With regard to the prairie, the first interesting aspect was that the Canadian westward expansion, that is, the settlement of the prairies, constitutes a miniature replica of Canada's historical and literary realities. It reflects the aspirations of the early pioneers, their struggle for survival and the difficulties they had to overcome in order to create a recognizable local tradition. Thus, a journey through the Canadian prairies will also bring the whole country into focus.

Another advantage of analysing prairie poetry, which did not emerge until the 1930s, was that this analysis would give special relevance to my thesis for it would show that contemporary Canadian poets are still concerned with the relationship between man and the wilderness. During my first visit to Canada in 1989, I spoke

to some professors from the University of Toronto about my project. They all encouraged me and gave me valuable pieces of advice though one of them also suggested that to write about the relationship between man and nature in Canada might imply that Canadian culture had not survived adolescence. She also remarked that in Canadian literature there had been a shift from landscape concerns to an increasingly greater consideration for and interest in the contemporary social world.

Although this shift of emphasis cannot be denied, it is also true that there is an especially interesting trend in modern Canadian poetry which is characterised by a return to landscape themes though in a much less conventional way than the poets of Confederation, a century ago, who generally looked at nature through Romantic lenses. The contemporary writers who represent this renewed interest in nature are mostly from the prairies, either by birth or by choice, and show an increasing concern for the interaction between literature and geography. Artists such as John Newlove, Patrick Lane, Eli Mandel, Robert Kroetsch and Elizabeth Brewster, to

name just a few, see the external environment as being endowed with the hopes and fears of the pioneers and, at the same time, as the cause and mirror of their own psychic state. This interest proves that the wilderness still has a strong grip on the Canadian imagination as Elizabeth Brewster suggests in the following lines:

> *This is a land*
> *not settled yet by its generations of settlers*
> *wildness still lingers, and the unfriendly trees*
> *suffer, but do not shelter, man, their neighbours*
>
> *Yet beauty here is solemn*
> *with the freshness of some strange and morning world.(*9)*

These lines also illustrate the balance between the fear of and attraction to the wilderness that is characteristic of Canadian art. Prairie poetry is extremely interesting in this respect because it constitutes a microcosm within the wide canvas of Canadian literature. It includes numerous examples of the positive and negative responses that the Canadian landscape has elicited from its artists and, for this reason, it constitutes a splendid avenue of entry into Canada's imaginative landscape.

However, as I wanted to lay special emphasis on the affirmative vein that runs through the body of Canadian poetry, I decided to include the northward movement, that is, poems inspired by the North, both as a physical region and the symbol of Canada's idyosincrasy, as a means of tipping the scales towards the positive. One of the first impressions I had while I was reading Canadian poetry was that the North had entered the Canadian consciousness with great force giving Canadian literature a positive mythical dimension which had not been sufficiently emphasized. Canada is a northern country and Canadians are proud of this fact. I do not claim to have access to the deepest layers of the Canadian psyche, but it seems to me that no Canadianist can ignore the fact that the North is at the core of Canada's emotional identity. It represents a valuable reservoir of physical and spiritual riches that may transform the world into a more prosperous and humane place to live in. My aim is to prove that this feeling is widely reflected in Canadian poetry and that it unveils a positive literary trend that retreives the Canadian imagination from its much-emphasized

obsession with the limitations rather than the possibilities of human experience.

2.2- THE CHOICE OF POEMS.

The criterion I have followed to choose the poems included in this thesis has been my own response to them and their poetic power to evoke the atmosphere of a particular environment and its influence on people. Needless to say, the main aim of this thesis has also conditioned my choice of poets and their compositions. When I was reading prairie poetry, for example, I realized that cruelty and violence were recurrent themes that would be extremely useful to illustrate the negative relationship betwen man and nature postulated by Margaret Atwood and Northrop Frye. Thus, I looked for poets whose work could illustrate this reality convincingly. It was Rosemary Sullivan, a poet and professor at the University of Toronto, who suggested Patrick Lane and his volume Old Mother to me for in it I would

find the kind of response I was looking for. This does not mean that Patrick Lane and John Newlove, the other poet included in the chapter The Wilderness Within, are the only prairie artists who deal with the bleak and foreboding aspects of prairiescapes. Many other prairie poets have incorporated references to the fearsome nature of the land to their work. However, Lane and Newlove are two artists who have devoted an important part of their poetic production to stressing the psychological disorders caused by a vast and sparsely settled habitat.

As the analysis of negative responses to nature had to be contrasted with more positive stances, I selected Elizabeth Brewster, Dale Zieroth and Miriam Waddington because their work evinces a strong desire to invest the prairie with human warmth. The fact that this section entitled The Homemakers includes two women is not a coincidence. Prairie poetry shows that, on the whole, women writers provide a new and more humane insight into the land. They stress values such as endurance, serenity, continuity and affinity with the land and with natural processes

which have traditionally been associated with the female principle. Besides, their emotional attachment to the prairie is especially moving because, as is true with most women writers, they are not afraid of being intensely personal when they write. The poetry of Elizabeth Brewster and Miriam Waddington sounds genuine, forthright and refreshing and constitutes a valuable illustration of man's fusion with his physical environment.

Finally, I found that the writings of Eli Mandel and Robert Kroetsch were extremely useful to introduce the reader to the prairie geography and to reproduce the first impact that this environment is likely to produce on the mind of the visitor.

In the chapter devoted to the North, the choice of poems responded mainly to the demands of this thesis. This means that in spite of my preference for contemporary Canadian poetry, I felt compelled to include wide references to Confederation poetry in order to prove that the vital thrust which animates modern Canadian literature has always existed and that this thrust

was initiated by the Confederation poets, the first group of artists who gave Canadian poetry a distinctive colouring. Thus, while the poems in the prairie chapter have been arranged subjectwise, the pieces that conform the North section follow a chronological order. This arrangement is further justified by the fact that, unlike the prairie, the North has not produced any significant harvest of non-native authors simply because the Northwest Territories that include the Arctic islands are the least settled part of the country and the only one where the native population outnumbers that of European ancestry.

The section on the Confederation poets, who are treated as a group with similar concerns and ways of writing, is followed by two other parts devoted to Edwin John Pratt and Alfred Purdy respectively. The poetry of these contemporary authors reveals that they are indebted to the writings of the Confederation group with regard to their emphasis on the North as a spiritual dynamo and the emblem of the whole Canadian ethos.

The two parts of this thesis, one devoted to the poetry inspired by the prairie and the other dealing with the poetic responses the North has elicited, begin with a chapter (two in the second part) intended to introduce the reader to the historical background and geographical characteristics of each region. The reasons for including these sections are twofold. The first one is that Canadian poetry is so deeply rooted in the land that, very often, only a knowledge of Canada's history and geography may decode a poem. I could have dealt with the historical and geographical background gradually, whenever a poem required this kind of explanation. However, this procedure would have demanded long disquisitions that would have affected the clarity and cohesion of the text in a negative way.

The second reason for including chapters dealing with the history and geography of the prairie and the North is that this thesis is mainly addressed to Spanish students who are interested in Canadian culture. I hope that these introductory chapters help them gain an insight into the land and its people and that they also

help to encourage their own interpretation of the poems which follow and, perhaps, a desire to do research in other directions.

2.3.- BIBLIOGRAPHY.

One of the main problems I had during the writing of this doctoral thesis was the difficulty in finding the books I needed. In spite of my two trips to Canada, I have often been obliged to fax a bookshop in Toronto and another in Paris to ask for material. Unfortunately, the answers were often disappointing for the books I needed were either out of print or not available at that moment. This problem, which may perhaps appear as a lack of foresight on my part, is due to the fact that a piece of research generally takes its own shape forcing us to follow new unsuspected directions. When I was gathering material for this thesis, I didn't consider the possibility of concentrating on specific authors. My original idea was to look for poems describing the

different physical regions existing in Canada. Eventually, I realized that by structuring my work around well-known Canadian authors I would not only bring the Canadian landscape into focus but also an important part of the country's literary panorama.

This decision involved the necessity of including a list of all the works published by the poets I was going to include in this thesis but, unfortunately, I could not have access to this information from Spain. For this reason, the first section of the chapter on bibliography entitled 'Poets' Works' is not complete. In the case of Confederation poets, for example, only their most representative works as well as the publication data of these volumes are stated. With regard to contemporary authors, I am aware that their recent publications may be missing. I hope to be able to complete this list in the near future since I intend to continue my research into Canadian literature.

The second section of the bibliography includes all the works cited and the third one

entitled 'Secondary Sources: Works Consulted' deals with the books I have read or consulted but have not cited in this thesis. In these three sections, the authors are arranged in alphabetical order. Finally, references appear at the end of each chapter and all the poems quoted in this thesis are printed in full in a separate volume. The poems are grouped by authors also arranged in alphabetical order.

By way of conclusion I would like to say that my analysis of the responses that the prairie and the North have elicited from the Canadian poetic imagination is not meant to be exhaustive. Yet, it is hoped that the patterns described in this thesis give the reader a feeling of Canada and offer some insight into the way in which the Canadian wilderness has entered imaginatively and mimetically into Canadian poetry serving as the figure and focus for much that has been important for individual poets and for the Canadian consciousness.

INTRODUCTION. NOTES

1. Don Owen, "Leonard Cohen: The Poet As Hero" in A Guide to the Peaceable Kingdom, William Kilbourn (ed.). Toronto: MacMillan, 1970, p.196.

2. Margaret Atwood, Survival. Toronto: Anansi, 1972.

3. Northrop Frye, The Bush Garden. Toronto: Anansi, 1971.

4. Margaret Atwood, Survival, op. cit., p.34.

5. Ibid., p.41.

6. Ibid., p.245.

7. Northrop Frye, The Bush Garden, op. cit., pp.141-142.

8. Earle Birney, as quoted by Desmond Pacey in Ten Canadian Poets. Toronto: The Ryerson Press, 1958, p.295.

9. Elizabeth Brewster, "Return of the Native" in Selected Poems of Elizabeth Brewster 1944-1977. Toronto: Oberon Press, 1985, p.29.

PART ONE

THE PRAIRIE

CHAPTER ONE

THE PRAIRIE: A LAND IN THE MAKING

1.1.- CANADA: THE LARGER FRAMEWORK

The Canadian nation, or rather, the Dominion of Canada as it was originally called, came into being in 1867 by the British North American Act whereby the provinces of Quebec, Ontario, Nova Scotia and New Brunswick formed a federal union. Behind this important historical event lay political and economic reasons that cannot be overlooked because they contribute to an understanding of the history

of the Canadian west and of the growth and development of its poetry which, like the rest of Canadian poetry, evinces a deep concern for wilderness and space.

Since 1783, when the American Republic was created after the War of Independence (1775-1783), the loyalist colonies in the Acadian region, (today Nova Scotia and New Brunswick), and the St. Lawrence area, had been on their guard against the annexationist dream of the United States. This fear of being swallowed by their neighbour to the south became more intense and justified after the 1812-14 Anglo-American war which was a failed attempt on the part of Americans to fulfill their dream of seizing the lands that were still under British rule. With regard to Canadians, the conflict not only confirmed their fear of the unionist ambitions of the United States, but it also strengthened their loyalty to the British Monarchy and to all that this institution represented and increased their visceral distaste for American democracy which was

contemptuously referred to as 'the rule of the rabble'.

However, it was the American Civil War (1861-1867) that contributed most to the decision to create a Canadian confederation. During this war, there were many periods when the relations between Britain and the United States were marked by extreme tension. The cotton factories of Great Britain depended on the Southern States for supplies of raw material and, for this reason, the Northern blockade destined to impoverish the economy of the Confederate States had dire effects in Britain, especially on the cotton mills in Landcashire. Another source of conflict between Britain and the United States was the fact that ships were fitted out in British ports and sold to the South to be used as warships against the North. Eventually, Britain stopped selling ships to the Southern States because of the inevitable tensions with the North that resulted from this trade. In addition to this, most British leaders sympathised with the

South, which had an aristocracy something like their own, although the majority of people in Britain and in the North American colonies found slave-ownership particularly distasteful. The British colonies in North America had long prohibited slavery and had given refuge to many runaway slaves. Towards the end of the American Civil War, however, many Southerners took refuge in what is now Canadian soil and some of them even planned raids against the Northern States. Only one of those raids took place and although the provincial government in the British colonies punished the raiders as soon as they returned, the American government resented the incident which, it was felt, should have been prevented.

Raids were also planned in the United States against the Northern British colonies by the Fenian Brotherhood - a society of Irishmen who sought to force the British to give Ireland its freedom. The Fenians made raids against Upper and Lower Canada (today Ontario and Quebec respectively) and although they were

driven back by the militia in the British colonies and punished by the USA government, these incidents undermined the already strained relationship between the two countries. At the end of the American Civil War, the British government sent over ten thousand troops to strenghten its forces stationed in the northern part of the American continent for fear that the huge army that had defeated the South could be used to invade the British North American colonies.

Against this political situation, confederation seemed to be the wisest solution not only because the creation of a nation would be a deterrent to invasion but also because of the economic advantages that could be derived from the union of the British North American colonies. It is important to point out here that most colonists, whether of French or British origin, joined forces to prevent annexation to the United States and to create a Canadian confederation. The British and the 40.000 American loyalists who had moved north

after the War of Independence rejected the North American republican destiny for ideological reasons. The French did so too for the same motive and also because the Americanization of the whole continent would have seriously endangered their survival as a people whose rights to use their law, language and religion had been guaranteed by the Quebec Act in 1774.

As for the economic advantages of confederation, both the British and Canadian authorities realized that they would derive material benefits from a friendly divorce. Britain was well disposed towards this separation because the costs associated with the maintenance of the North American colonies was excessively high. Besides, the new philosophy of free trade which pervaded British policy in the 19th century was not compatible with a protective economic system. London wished to find a formula whereby they could grant more independence to the colonies and retain their old privileges. As Kenneth

McNaught remarks, the British government was prepared:

> *(...) for a devolution of power without actually relinquishing imperial direction of trade, foreign policy and defence. (*1)*

On the other side of the Atlantic, the colonies hoped that confederation would bring about the growth in wealth and population that Americans enjoyed. Besides, in 1866, the United States had not renewed the Reciprocity Treaty signed in 1854 whereby the British North American colonies and the United States had agreed to lower their tariffs. Because of the American negative to renew this official agreement in retaliation for British trade with the Southern States during the Civil War, the British North American colonies worried about the possible resulting loss in trade and thus began to think of trading with one another.

The creation of a Canadian nation would also legitimize the aspirations for progress

and expansion of the British North American colonies. Thus, one of the first decisions taken by the government of the newly-created Dominion of Canada in 1867 was to purchase the Northwest Territories from the Hudson's Bay Company which had held them in trust until 1869. These territories included the entire region north and west of Ontario to the foothills of the Rockies in western Alberta and as far north as the Arctic Ocean.

The Hudson's Bay Company had been created in 1670 when King Charles II of England granted a charter to the British merchants trading in the area around Hudson Bay in order to compete with the French for the western fur trade. The King also gave the Company the right to govern all the lands draining into the Great Bay.

At that time, that is, in 1670, the two main entrances to the northern part of the American continent were the Saint Lawrence-Great Lakes Basin and the Hudson Bay. The former had been discovered by Jacques Cartier

in 1535 and the latter by Henry Hudson in 1610. These two avenues of entry into Canada help explain the existence of two competing trading networks. In 1602, the French King, Henry IV, granted the first of a series of fur-trade monopolies that allowed the French to establish numerous trading posts in a wide area covering the region of the Great Lakes and the Mississipi Valley. Paradoxically, two Frenchmen, Pierre Radisson and Médard Chouart, Sieur de Groseilliers, started the English trading enterprise. Having failed to come to an agreement with the Governor of New France, these two Frenchmen travelled to Britain in search of patronage. They persuaded some British merchants to explore the rich area around Hudson Bay and this first expedition was so successful that King Charles II granted a Royal Charter to the Company in 1670.

The existence of two trading enterprises, the French and the British, sparked off a long period of rivalry between the two countries

which finished, at least officially, in 1763 when the Seven Years War was brought to an end. At the Treaty of Paris, France agreed to hand over its North American possessions to the British except for the little islands of St. Pierre and Miquelon off the south coast of Newfoundland which were kept by the French as bases for their fishing fleets. The 1763 Treaty marked the end of French dominance in North America and the beginning of British hegemony in the northern part of the American continent.

After the Treaty, the Hudson's Bay Company, retained the exclusive right over the Northwest Territories until 1869 when they reverted to the Crown that transferred them to Canada the following year. However, most Arctic islands belonged to Britain and were not transferred to the Dominion of Canada until 1880.

1.2.—THE SETTLEMENT OF THE CANADIAN WEST

It was out of the Northwest Territories which the Canadian government purchased from the British that the three prairie provinces were created. Manitoba, the most eastern of the provinces came into being by the Ottawa Manitoba Act of 1870 and Saskatchewan and Alberta were established by the Autonomy Bills of 1905.

The settling of the Canadian prairie provinces, a process that began in the last decades of the nineteenth century and continued throughout the twentieth, must be seen as part of the colonisation of the west in the North American continent. The western part of the United States began to beckon immigrants first and it was not until the best lands south of the USA border had been occupied that settlement began to spread through the three Canadian prairie provinces. To a great extent, the lack of interest in the Canadian plains was due to the negative reports of explorers who

had ventured into that region. As early as 1690, just over twenty years after the founding of the Hudson's Bay Company, Henry Kelsey, an explorer working for this private trading enterprise, set out from the English port of Fort Nelson, at the mouth of the Nelson River, on an expedition to western Canada. Kelsey travelled across northern Manitoba and, following the Saskatchewan River, reached the heart of the prairies. Apart from exploring the area, his aim was to visit some Indian encampments in order to persuade the natives to take their furs to the English posts of Hudson Bay rather than to the French forts.

Henry Kelsey's journey lasted for two years and his reports of Canada's hinterland were extremely negative. Kelsey, who was also a poet, laid emphasis on the desolation and sterility of the place, an impression that was probably created by the sight of a treeless landscape which was, for a European, an unequivocal sign of barrenness. In his article "Changing Images of the West", Douglas Francis

explains that it was not until the 1850s that the Canadian prairies were seen from a more positive perspective due to reports by experts such as the American climatologist Loren Blodgett who provided scientific proof that the Canadian west was a region suitable for agriculture.(*2) Blodgett's study, and other similar reports, contributed to the Canadian government's decision to purchase the Northwest Territories and to open them up for settlement. Besides, the optimism generated by the building of the Canadian Pacific Railway that reached as far as Calgary, in Alberta, by 1883, also encouraged the Canadian authorities to launch a promotional campaign to attract immigrants to the west. Finally, the Canadians' fear that the United States might occupy and eventually claim the vast interior plains was also behind the decision of the Macdonald cabinet in Ottawa to purchase and settle the Canadian prairies.

It was precisely to assert Canadian sovereignty in the west in the face of American competition that the Mounted Police was created

in 1873. This force was also established to avoid the chaos and violence that marked the American occupation of western lands. One of the tasks of the mounted patrols was to stop the whisky-smuggling across the border between Canada and the United States. The whisky was sold to the Indians in exchange for furs but the law forbade this trade and the mounted police saw to it that the law was obeyed. Their role was also to provide protection for the new settlers between Manitoba and British Columbia and to safeguard the building of the railway that would connect the eastern provinces with the new settlements on the prairies and the Pacific coast.

In spite of the mounted patrols, the Canadian westward expansion, like the American one, involved conflicts with the Métis (of mixed Indian and White descent, the latter mainly French) since as Henry Kreisel reminds us:

> *The conquest of territory is by definition a violent process. In the Canadian west as elsewhere on this continent, it involved the displacement of the indigenous population by often scandalous means. (*3)*

However, the settlement of the west in Canada was never as wild and bloody as it was in the United States. The critic Northrop Frye remarks that due to the creation of the Mounted Police:

> *(...) the Canadian expansion westward had a tight grip of authority over it that the American expansion, with its outlaws and sheriffs did not have in the same measure.(*4)*

This should not be interpreted in the sense that the Mounted Police exerted a repressive or tyrannical control over the prairie population. On the contrary, the new settlers and even some Indians soon came to respect the horsemen in red tunics for their honesty, justice and fair play, a respect which they have retained over the years to these days as is proven by the fact that the Mounties have

become one of the most cherished national emblems in Canada. During the settlement, the Mounted Police helped establish relations with the Indians preparing them for treaty negotiations and mediating in conflicts with the settlers. They also delivered mail, took census, collected custom duties, provided medical services, established meteorological records, issued relief supplies and acted as justices of the peace thereby allowing the federal government to cut costs by postponing permanent civil service appointments. But, above all, the presence of the mounted patrols helped alleviate the hardships of isolation and the dreariness of pioneering life on the prairie. The Mounties were also useful to put down rebellions like the one which broke out in northern Saskatchewan in 1885 and ended with the hanging of the Métis leader Louis Riel. Once again, during the 1898 gold rush to the Klondike in the Yukon Territory, the Mounted Police proved their worth which was officially recognized in 1904 by the King of England, Edward VII, who bestowed upon them the prefix

'Royal' for the great services the force had rendered Canada.

Within this atmosphere of 'police-controlled' expansion, immigrants from the United States, Asia, and an impoverished Europe continued to settle on the Canadian prairies in the hope that this portion of Canada would soon become their home. However, the physical and psychological adjustment to the new land proved to be a hard grind. The weather conditions, for example, were far worse than the prairie pioneers had expected. The recruiting policy of the Canadian government had been quite misleading in this respect because in order to encourage prospective settlers, the Department of the Interior had minimized the hardships of prairie life such as isolation and the rigours of winter which even people who came from the Russian steppes found difficult to bear. In his book New and Naked Land Ronald Rees remarks:

*The length and severity of the prairie winters unnerved even Central and Eastern Europeans. Russian winters were neither as hard nor as long. When Easter came without the accustomed signs of Spring, Ukrainians in particular, were anguished. Easter in the Ukraine is a celebration of the rebirth of life as well as of the Resurrection of Christ.(*5)*

The state propaganda never mentioned the fact that for endless months the prairie is sheathed in ice and snow. Neither did it refer to the winter blizzard, an extremely cold and violent wind that ravages the prairie during the cold season. The scorching summer heat and the prairie fires that proved to be the worst enemies of prairie farmers were also omitted in the official promotional literature. The leaflets issued by the Canadian government only insisted on the healthy effects of cold weather. In them, prospective pioneers could read paragraphs like the following:

The almost total absence of fog or mist; the brilliance of sunlight; the pleasing succession of the seasons all combine to make Manitoba a climate of unrivalled salubrity, and the home of healthy, prosperous and joyous people. (*6)

Besides, the brochures included pictures of cozy farmhouses snuggling with their outbuildings in a windbreak of trees and flanked by productive gardens and fields of grain and fodder. This was certainly an idealised landscape which was the antithesis of prairie starkness.

However, the Canadian authorities were not the only people responsible for the disillusion most prairie pioneers suffered as soon as they set foot on the new land. Some of these newcomers had embarked on a dangerous Atlantic crossing lured by the inviting letters of friends and relatives who had preceeded them. These people frequently embellished their descriptions of the prairie in order to satisfy their promotional inclination and to hasten the development of their colony.

The reality awaiting prairie pioneers proved to be very different from the one described in the government's romantic propaganda and in the letters of the pioneers.

The Europeans who arrived in the Canadian west were soon discouraged by the sheer size of the land, by its nakedness and its extreme temperatures. However, the worst drawbacks that prairie pioneers had to suffer were the feelings of isolation and nostalgia they experienced in the new world. The considerable distance between family dwellings aggravated this situation since it reduced the possibilities of communication that would have relieved the hardships of pioneering life. The general pattern of prairie settlement was a scattered one, each family living on a rectangular piece of land more than half a mile away from their nearest neighbours. Observers of this pattern of settlement were invariably critical and urged the Canadian governement to make prairie conditions more humane and tolerable by favouring the creation of larger communities. However, as Ronald Rees observes:

> ***Western Canada proved no more accomodating to farm villages than the rest of North America. The most durable villages were those built by religious groups, but by 1915 many of these had broken up and others were on the point of dissolution.(*7)***

Besides, the prairie population was a melting pot formed by Ukrainians, Hungarians, Scandinavians, Icelanders, Danes, Swedes, Germans, Chinese, French and English who clung to their language and traditions because these were the only sources where they could find the strength they needed to survive in the new world. Thus, the solitude of the prairie pioneer was not only a matter of physical isolation but of language and cultural barriers as well.

1.3.—REASONS FOR THE LATE EMERGENCE OF PRAIRIE LITERATURE

The literary history of the Canadian prairies shows that this region did not produce an immediate literary harvest. As had been the case with the first communities that settled around the St. Lawrence River and on the Atlantic coast, the first Europeans who arrived

in the prairies were too absorbed by the task of making their new environment physically liveable and economically prosperous to devote their time to metaphysical disquisitions or aesthetic meditations. These were, as E.K. Brown remarks:

> *(...) luxuries which should not be sought at a time when there was a tacit contract that everyone should be doing his share in the common effort to build the material structure of a society. That a poem or a statue or a metaphysic could contribute to the fabric of a nation was not believed. (*8)*

This utilitarian philosophy seems to have conditioned the life-style of pioneering communities not only on the prairies but in the rest of Canada as well. As we have already seen, the first explorers who arrived in what is now Canadian soil were exclusively concerned with the economic possibilities of the land. The fur traders had no interest in settling any particular area discouraged as they were by the sheer size and wilderness of the place and by the harshness of its climate. Their intention

was to make money and return to their country as soon as possible and this attitude was far from being poetic. Eventually, when settlement began, the physical and climatic conditions of the new world demanded that all the efforts of the pioneers be directed towards the achievement of physical acclimatization. On the prairies, where agriculture was, at that time, the only source of income, the landscape was not seen as a possible literary subject but as an antagonist that threatened the farmer's crops with hail, prairie fires, violent summer storms and winter blizzards. There was certainly nothing poetic about these natural disasters.

However, the late literary blooming of the prairies was not due solely to the pioneers' utilitarian philosophy and to the lack of artistic concerns to which E.K. Brown refers. The strong puritanism that governed prairie life was another reason for the prevailing indifference to literature that seems to have existed in the first prairie communities. As

puritanism equated sin with natural delight, the puritans condemned any activity from which the individual could derive bodily or mental pleasure. The practice of any form of art was especially reprehensible if it did not serve didactic and moral purposes and if it was only conceived as an outlet for deep personal feelings and as a source of sensuous gratification. The goal of puritan writing was essentially didactic. It was believed that literature, like any other form of art, should serve to instil values such as hard work, sacrifice, a stern morality, and a stoical disposition towards adversity. These values were considered to be weapons that the pioneer needed to fight an environment which, in its frightening vastness and extreme temperatures, appeared to be bleak and intimidating.

From a puritan perspective, the prairie, like the rest of the Canadian landscape, was not seen as a source of artistic inspiration but rather as an enemy that had to be brought into subjection. Very often, this hostility

towards the prairie was not merely the natural response of an individual who is placed in an alien and uncongenial environment. The puritan antipathy to the prairie landscape also had religious connotations.

To the pioneers with a strict neo-Calvinist frame of mind the new world was the land God had chosen for his people and the hardships they suffered were interpreted as the Lord's way of testing their faith. Consequently, all the drawbacks had to be stoically endured since they were the necessary prelude to everlasting salvation. The savage wilderness was full of evil forces that had to be constantly defeated by the virtuous newcomers. In the same way, the natives, who were part of this evil world, were seen as inferior beings who had to be dominated and, if possible, reformed. Thus, most prairie pioneers saw the landscape and its original inhabitants as obstacles that had to be overcome in order to achieve acclimatization. This task demanded great strength and effort and left little time

for artistic activities which were, for the puritan, an intolerable waste of human energy.

It may be argued with reason that not all prairie pioneers had a strict puritan bent of mind. The prairies beckoned immigrants from all over Europe, the United States and Asia who spoke different languages and held different religious beliefs. However, the vast distances, the isolation, the rigours of winter and other hardships of pioneering life were realities that all prairie settlers had to face. The land imposed such physical and emotional limitations on its dwellers that their inherited differences of language, culture and faith seemed irrelevant. Besides, two world wars and a period of economic recession in between helped reinforce the puritans' belief that in order to survive on the prairies the individual had to discard any activitiy interfering with productive work.

Fortunately, puritanism did not prevent sensitive people from turning to art but it

certainly conditioned their work to the extent that, for a long time, prairie writers avoided dealing with themes that could alarm puritan minds. Personal emotions tended to be suppressed and the only feelings to be expressed publicly were those connected with the life of the community and its representative men. A great number of Canadian artists and critics have commented on Canadian puritanism and its negative effects on the emergence and development of literature in their country. The contemporary poet A.J.M. Smith, for example, observes:

> *Nowhere is puritanism more disastrously prohibitive than among us, and it seems, indeed, that desperate methods and dangerous remedies must be resorted to, that our own condition will not improve until we have been thoroughly shocked by the appearance in our midst of a work of art that is at once successful and obscene. Of realism we are afraid, apparently because there is an impression that it wishes to discredit the picture of our great Dominion as a country where all women are chaste and the men too pure to touch them if they weren't.(*9)*

From this remark we easily infer that puritanism was not confined to the prairies but that it also shaped the collective personality of other Canadian communities. However, in his article "The Prairie: A State of Mind" Henry Kreisel tells us that, on the prairies, puritanism was more firmly rooted than in other parts of Canada because prairie settlements were small isolated communities whose survival depended on the strict observance of puritan tenets such as hard work, stoical endurance and the curbing of the passions. Kreisel writes:

> *The prairie settlements, insecure islands in that vast land-sea, have been austere, intensely puritan societies. Not that puritanism in Canada is confined to the prairie, of course, but on the prairie it has been more solidly entrenched than even in rural Ontario, and can be observed in something very like a distilled form.(...) the men and women who settled the prairie had to tame themselves, had to curb their passions and contain them within a tight neo-Calvinist framework. (*10)*

So far, we have made reference to two factors that seem to have retarded the emergence and development of prairie

literature. First of all, we have seen that prairie society was mainly concerned with physical survival, a concern that tended to exclude artistic activities. Then, we have dealt with the existence of a puritan philosophy whose premises based on the identification of sin with natural delight could not have been more inimical to those of art.

The third cause for the late emergence of a distinctive prairie literature was the nomadic nature of the prairie population. Very often, the settlements on the Canadian plains were temporary. Some families decided to stay on the prairie only for the period of time required by the Canadian government before being granted a piece of land. To own a quarter section a settler had to live on it for three years, with an absence of not more than six months in any one year, and cultivate at least fifteen acres, of which ten were to be cropped. Once the patent to their homestead had been acquired, the new owners generally sold their

lot and moved to more inviting areas. These temporary settlers were normally those who had been forced into the open prairie once the more fertile lots near the rivers had been occupied. Inevitably, the prospect of leaving bred a certain indifference to place that prevented the establishment of emotional bonds between land and people which are essential to the birth and development of regional literature. As Dennis Cooley remarks:

> *Prairie people were forever moving away. In turn, that mobility reduced the permanence and intimacy with place which would have improved the prospects for local writing.(*11)*

The fourth reason to be taken into account when analysing the tardy appearance of prairie literature is the cultural inferiority complex that, according to most Canadian writers, has beset the Canadian psyche for a long time. In his article "Notes on the Canadian Imagination" the critic David Stouck writes:

> *Living in the shadow of two strongly-defined cultures, English and American, (not to mention the effect of France on Quebec), Canadian artists have always been self conscious of their cultural limitations and their relative insignificance in the international context.(*12)*

Similarly, William Toye refers to the cultural inferiority complex that seems to have controlled the hand of the Canadian artist for a long time in the following terms:

> *It was probably the most potent single enfeebling influence on the native voice and character; it prevailed long after Canada ceased to be a collection of colonies, well into the present century, and can even be detected today. (*13)*

This reference to the Canadians' tendency to place the highest value on things coming from outside Canada, which, incidentally, is an attitude immediately recognized by any Spaniard, can be better understood when related to the special circumstances that made Canada drift into nationhood. The critic Malcolm Ross reminds us that, in Canada, the transition from colony to nation:

*(...) was accomplished without a revolution, without a sharp cultural and ideological break from Europe, without the fission and fusion of civil war. (*14)*

From this remark we infer that war, suffering and death are essential to build a nation and that the blood shed in defence of the land constitutes a major source of national pride and the link that holds a people together. There is little of this in modern Canadian history if we compare it to the history of most European countries and to that of the United States. Canada was born out of a commercial transaction and was formed by two different people, the French and the British, who were never on good terms.

To these realities which did not foster feelings of national pride and identity, we have to add Canada's long political dependence from Britain and the powerful economic and cultural influence that the United States have always exerted on Canadian society. Officially, Canada was born in 1867 when the British

Parliament passed the North American Act. Politically, culturally and psychologically, however, Canada remained a colony by choice long after Confederation. In her book Portrait of Canada June Callwood points out:

> *Canada developed from people who consciously and with some considerable sacrifice chose structure rather than individualism and wanted a powerful state rather than citizen rights. While the American constitution speaks of liberty, the Canadian one says 'peace, order and good government'.(*15)*

Significantly, the country did not have a flag until 1965, the same year when the maple leaf was confirmed as an official national emblem. Moreover, Canada did not obtain its full political independence until 1977 when the Canadian government took power from the Queen of England to accredit and recall diplomats.

Canada's most influential writers have frequently deplored the country's political, cultural and economical subservience to Britain and, especially, to the United States. In 1971, for example, Northrop Frye wrote:

> *Canada is practically the only country in the world which is pure colony, colonial in psychology as well as in mercantile economics.(*16)*

The Canadian critic E.K. Brown explains what it means to be colonial in psychology saying:

> *(...) a colony lacks the spiritual energy to rise above routine, and it lacks this energy because it does not adequately believe in itself. It applies to what it has standards which are imported, and therefore artificial and distorting. It sets the great good place not in its present, nor in its past nor in its future, but somewhere outside its own borders, somewhere beyond its own possibilities. (*17)*

Other contemporary writers such as Alfred Purdy, Margaret Atwood, Irving Layton and Malcolm Ross, to name just a few, have also agreed on the idea that Canada's psychological independence has never been achieved as proved by the fact that the country has never ceased to grope for a single image of itself and is in a perpetual state of self-scrutiny.

In the light of these opinions, we may affirm that Canada's colonial situation, as described by Northrop Frye, also retarded the blooming of a distinctively Canadian literature. However, as in the case of puritanism, the Canadians' feeling of being a satellite country was particularly negative for the development of prairie writing as Dennis Cooley explains in the following passage:

> *If Canadians as a whole have suffered from the notion that intelligence exists or can be tested only out there somewhere (in France or England or the USA) Canadians have applied those kinds of notions within their own country. Every cosmopolite knows, or should know, that our national genius, by one of those extraordinary miracles of history, has chosen to reside within the city limits of Toronto. Given all the other circumstances which already meant nobody on the prairies could have much hope of becoming a legitimate poet, this ingrained prejudice virtually guaranteed such things wouldn't happen.(*18)*

Indeed, in Canada, the west has always been viewed as politically, socially and culturally less significant than central Canada and British Columbia with meccas such as Toronto, Montreal, Ottawa and Vancouver. When

the prairies began to be settled, the loyalists were already well established in those places and controlled the political and cultural activities in the Dominion. The loyalists shared a deep allegiance to the Monarchy and could not conceive of their existence outside the British Empire, divorced from the heritage they treasured. Literature was part of this heritage and, consequently, they were suspicious of any cultural pattern which had not been imported from Britain. Besides, since the prairie population was not entirely of British origin but included immigrants from central Europe and Asia, little attention was paid to their cultural manifestations. As Ronald Rees remarks, on the prairies non-British pioneers were constantly reminded that:

> ***They spoke an "inferior" language and possessed an "inferior" culture. Their response was the understandably timid one of a people who lacked the confidence to express their own traditions or to respond to the needs of the area.(*19)***

Everything seemed to conspire against the emergence and development of prairie literature. The practical, puritan and colonial bent of mind of prairie people were obstacles that the prairie muse had to overcome before her voice was heard, listened to and recorded. This did not happen until the noise of settlement had died out and a certain intimacy with place had been achieved. Only then did prairie dwellers realize that the physical occupation of the land did not suffice. Once the home had been built and the plough had penetrated the land fertilising it, the men and women of the prairies became aware of the fact that the imaginative conquest of their environment was as essential to their survival as the physical possession of the land. For the artist, the aim of this imaginative conquest was to transform the landscape into an emotionally accepted background against which his imagination could move unhindered. The physical world had to be observed, described, and, as it were, absorbed before the

writer could turn confidently to other concerns.

As we shall see now, this task was not easy for prairie artists and it was not until the 1920s that writers moved away from inherited literary patterns and Romantic attitudes towards the landscape and began to search for an idiom that could fit the prairie reality.

1.4.- ART IN THE MAKING. THE INFLUENCE OF IMAGISM

Before the 1920s, the artists who had concentrated on the Canadian prairie had clung to European modes to describe an environment that was far from being European. The result of this blind adherence to imported literary standards was that these artists reproduced a landscape that had European traits instead of

depicting the environment that actually surrounded them. This fact was not only due to the European vocation of the pioneers. It also responded to their psychological need to maintain emotional links with their homeland and to distract their minds from the disturbing feelings produced by the Canadian wilderness. The first prairie settlers, like other pioneers in the rest of Canada, were generally repelled by the geographical and climatic conditions of the land. In order to alleviate this negative impact and to relieve the pain of homesickness, the settlers tried to make their immediate environment look as familiar as possible by planting trees that reminded them of their homeland and by surrounding themselves with familiar objects they had brought with them to the new world. Similarly, the first prairie artists who painted or wrote about the land made it look like the portion of the old continent that was still fresh in their memories. Besides, prairie nakedness defied poetic description and, therefore, prompted their imagination to recoil in the direction of

more manageable European scenes. As a result of this, prairie pioneers inhabited the land physically but were emotionally very far away from it. Time proved to be the only antidote against this situation which has frequently been referred to as the cultural schizophrenia of the emigrant.

The positive aspect of this cultural displacement, which generally involved the conscious or unconscious refusal to see the real face of the prairie, was that it hastened the development of local communities and alleviated the settlers' feeling of nostalgia. We have seen that the first prairie literature was propagandistic. The official leaflets and illustrations advertising the Canadian west offered the image of an idyllic landscape, healthy, peaceful and suitable for cultivation. Eventually, both the words and the paintings proved to be unrelated to their subject. However, in the meantime, prairie art had filled the need for a sustaining myth and had, therefore, fulfilled the important function of

making the pioneer days more bearable. As Ronald Rees points out:

> *In pioneer societies art is analgesic, not a stimulant, the insecure and uncertain prefer romance to reality, sustaining myths to searing truths.(*20)*

After the 1920s, a new and more realistic image of the Canadian plains began to emerge. It was the prairie novelists who first opened an angle into the land as it really was and not as the early immigrants had wanted it to be. The question that may now come to mind is: why novelists and not poets?. Why did the prairies develop a tradition of fiction before developing a tradition of poetry?. A possible answer is that the harshness of the landscape and the life of prairie farmers did not lend themselves easily to poetic interpretation. The more austere and down to earth rhythms of prose seemed much more appropriate for the rendering of the pioneering experience on the prairie.

The first realistic novels published in the 20s were Martha Ostenso's Wild Geese (1925) (*21), Robert Stead's Grain (1926) (*22) and Frederick Phillip Grove's Settlers of the Marsh (1927) (*23). All of them depicted a hostile and alien environment that contrasted with earlier Romantic literature. The shift towards realism in fiction also took place in painting, especially through the work of Robert Hurley, an English painter who arrived in Saskatchewan in 1923. Hurley substituted the idealized images of the Canadian west with streams, gentle slopes and tree-clad valleys, for a flat and empty space the monotony of which is only broken by an endless line of telephone poles and a grain elevator silhouetted against a vast and expansive sky. This new vision was congenial with the international wave of abstract painting to which the prairie happened to be particularly suited. The poetic counterpart of this abstract approach in painting was the Imagist movement which, significantly, had been conceived on the Canadian plains. In his book Divisions On A

Ground Northrop Frye quotes the words of T.E. Hulme, the most prominent theorist of the Imagist movement, who in the course of a lecture said:

> *(...) the first time I ever felt the necessity or inevitableness of verse, was in the desire to reproduce the peculiar quality of feeling which is induced by the flat spaces and wide horizon of the virgin prairie of western Canada.(*24)*

Frye goes on to say that Hulme went to Canada in 1906 and lived there for eight months working as a farm labourer. The spartan prairie life and landscape entered his mind so deeply that he applied these special features of the terrain to the poetic language that characterises Imagism. Hulme realised that the starkness of the prairie demanded a simple and austere idiom that could reproduce the asceticism of the environment and also its impact on the individual.

These Imagist tenets were soon adopted by prairie poets who wanted to dispel the romantic aura that previous writers and promoters had

given to the land. The avoidance of the verbally ornate and the love for "le mot juste" as a way of rendering that which is special and unique in every moment and every object became the poetic credo of the first prairie poets who attempted to describe the land in a realistic way. Artists such as Robert Kroetsch and Eli Mandel began to concentrate on the essence of the prairie landscape and, consequently, flatness, vastness, silence and solitude became central themes in their poems.

Robert Kroetsch remarks that the articulation of these subjects has always been a difficult task for prairie poets in spite of Imagist guidelines and he explains the reasons for this difficulty:

> ***Our inherited literature, the literature of our European past and of eastern North America, is emphatically the literature of a people who have never lived on the prairies. We had, and still have, difficulty finding names for the elements and characteristics of this landscape. (*25)***

However, in spite of Robert Kroetsch's avowed difficulty with describing the Canadian plains, prairie poets have succeeded in conveying the land both as a physical fact and as a lived experience with precision and intensity. They have managed to render the prairie through an extremely simple idiom and through a variety of themes that surprises the reader who has been tempted to think that an apparently dull and uniform landscape can only elicit a dull and uniform response.

The following chapters deal with poets whose work will enable us to visualize the prairie and to experience the feeling of living on it. I will first concentrate on Robert Kroetsch and Eli Mandel who describe the physical aspects of the land and then I will turn to artists whose work reveals the different imaginative and emotional responses that the prairie has elicited from the sensitive individual. As the main aim of this thesis is to prove that Canadian poetry is not necessarily pessimistic, some of the poets

selected offer a negative vision of the prairie whereas the others contradict, with their work, the Canadians' much-emphasized terror with regard to nature. Patrick Lane and, to a great extent, John Newlove belong to the first group; Elizabeth Brewster, Dale Zieroth and Miriam Waddington conform the second.

Finally, I want to point out that although the prairie is the dominant theme in the following chapters, I have also tried to give an insight into the work of each poet included in the first part of this thesis in order to highlight the fact that the land and its effect on people are not their sole concerns. By doing this I intend to prove that prairie artists have managed to write in a vein that transcends personal differences while retaining their unique poetic personality. In other words, they have created a recognizable prairie idiom which does not blur their personal style.

THE PRAIRIE: CHAPTER ONE. NOTES

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