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Published on H-Canada (April, 2010)
Commissioned by Stephanie Bangarth

The Idea of Canada in Victorian English Emigration Literature

With his *Emigration, Nation, Vocation*, Carter F. Hanson has produced a cogent, well-written, and historically grounded addition to the study of English literature. His consideration of the role of Canada in the English imagination is an important topic for the study of both English and Canadian intellectual history. Hanson’s description of the English middle-class desire for a landed vocation, and the way in which this desire shows up and is played out in British fiction and nonfiction about Canada, contributes to our understanding of middle-class Englishness in the Victorian era, as well as to our understanding of Canada’s role in the British Empire, both in reality and in the British imagination.

Hanson considers the changing English attitude toward Canada, and their view of the English emigrants’ role there, as exemplars of a larger English middle-class ideology of work. This ideology, he argues, went through two phases between 1825 and 1900. In the earlier period, roughly 1825 to 1870, the English middle-class ideology of the landed vocation led them to believe that their role in Canada was to recreate the British class system in the colony. This led English middle-class emigrants, in literature and in reality, to attempt to take on the role of landed gentry in the Canadian bush. Hanson examines how this ideology of the landed vocation worked itself out in both literature and memoir.

In the period between 1870 and 1900, Hanson argues, this ideology of work changed to focus on the individual, gendered emigrant rather than a family model. Rather than an English family arriving in Canada ready to remake their lives around a landed vocation, the new English literature of emigration was strictly gendered, written to be read by either boys or girls, and providing different messages to each. In stories for boys, western Canada became a site of work that would allow the emigrant to form himself into a manly, rugged individual. Stories for girls in the period emphasized the female emigrants’ role as that of recivilizing middle-class male emigrants.

Yet, as Hanson points out, emigration to Canada was an ambiguous matter in the English imagination. In fiction, middle-class emigration to Canada was framed as a result of the emigrant’s failure in English society. Canada was imagined as a place in which middle-class emigrants could regain their genteel status and carry on an imperial, civilizing mission. Yet these same emigrants were stigmatized as failures within the imperial system.

Hanson considers each of his two periods through a reading of fiction, and then both periods again through a reading of memoirs. He begins in chapter 1 by describing the landed vocation in Ontario, as seen in three novels: Catherine Parr Traill’s *The Young Emigrants* (1826), Frederick Marryat’s *The Settlers in Canada* (1844), and Elizabeth Hely Walshe’s *Cedar Creek* (1863). In chapter 2, “Masculine and Feminine Vocation in the Canadian West, 1870–1900,” he examines John Mackie’s *The Heart of the Prairie* (1899), James Morton’s *Polson’s Probation:*
A Story of Manitoba (1897), and Anne Mercier and Violet Watt’s A Home in the Northwest (1894). In each of these chapters, these works are put into a wider context of Victorian literature in general, and of Victorian literature about Canada in particular.

In chapter 2, Hanson takes care to distinguish English fiction about Canada from views of Canada produced by Canadian authors. Using Ralph Connor’s works as his example, he notes that Canadian writers were engaged in creating a vision of Canadian manhood, while English writers were more concerned with a general cultural redefinition of the “gentleman” in English class terms. In making this argument, Hanson states that English authors were “addressing a readership of prospective emigrants, as opposed to an audience born on Canadian soil,” and that it was this consideration that led them to “fundamentally recast the vision of the West and the meanings of manliness and work seen in Connor to make them relevant to the English public” (p. 53). Given the international readership enjoyed by Connor, as well as by English authors of adventure stories about the Canadian West, this argument that authors’ views of the West were produced for their readers seems somewhat untenable. It seems more likely that Canadian authors’ views of the Canadian West were determined by their own ideas about nation and the role of the West in the creation of Canadian nationality, while English writers saw Canada as one of many imperial sites of wholesome adventure.

Hanson returns to considering the idea of landed vocation in the settlement of Ontario in chapter 3, “Emigrant Gentlewomen and Colonial Vocation in Ontario, 1830-1870.” In this chapter, he considers Traill’s The Backwoods of Canada (1846), and Susannah Moodie’s Roughing It in the Bush (1852) and Life in the Clearings versus the Bush (1853); and also considers an anonymous work, Letters from Muskoka by an Emigrant Lady (1878). These autobiographical writings largely served to problematize the idea of the middle-class emigrants’ landed vocation, by calling into question the ability of middle-class settlers to recreate the English class system in the Canadian bush.

Chapter 4, “The Anxiety of Englishness and Hybrid Identity in English-Canadian Emigrant Writings, 1880-1900,” focuses on the way that the relatively new existence of the Canadian nation changed the emigrant experience. These English emigrants were not arriving in a colony, but in another nation, which meant that they had to deal with the challenge of how and whether they would become Canadian, or if they could retain their English nationality as emigrants. Hanson examines Richard E. W. Goodridge’s two books, A Year in Manitoba: Being the Experience of a Retired Officer in Settling His Sons (1882) and The Colonist at Home Again; or, Emigration not Expatriation (1889); and the writings of Frederick DelaFosse, English Bloods, English Bloods (published in 1930) and his unpublished “Reminiscences.” Both of these authors, as Hanson points out, produced works that were atypical of English emigrant literature. The reader cannot help but wonder about the broader relevance of these particular works, and why they were chosen as exemplars of the English emigrant’s identity crisis within the Canadian nation.

Hanson concludes by framing his discussion with Sara Jeannette Duncan’s The Imperialist (1904). In this conclusion, as throughout, Hanson explicitly refuses to consider whether the writers in his study should be considered part of Canadian literature. His argument that these writers were concerned with the English condition, and that Canada served mainly as a canvas on which these ideas were played out, emphasizes the Englishness of his source material, and thus the non-Canadianness of his subject. Nevertheless, Hanson’s study is an important contribution to Canadian studies. It is important to remember that Canadian and English authors shared, to a large extent, a language and a literary culture. There is every reason to believe that English fictions and nonfictions about Canada were read in Canada. Thus, while these works shaped the imperial view of Canada, they also influenced Canadians’ views of themselves and their nation’s place in the world, and are thus of great concern to those who want to know what it means or what it meant to consider oneself a Canadian.

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