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Susan Glickman. *The Picturesque and the Sublime: A Poetics of the Canadian Landscape*. Montreal and Kingston: McGill-Queen's UP, 1998. Pp. xi, 212. \$50.00.

"I came to the study of Canadian poetry late," volunteers Susan Glickman in her preface to *The Picturesque and the Sublime*. "A poet myself," she explains, "I wanted to know more about my antecedents, and perhaps because I never studied 'Canlit' formally, my reading remained a private pleasure—without obligation, and without preconceptions. It was random and idiosyncratic . . ." (vii). Suggesting later that she is "not interested in constructing a master narrative," Glickman describes her book as

a collection of essays in literary history, not the unfolding of a thesis. Continuity is implied by the chronological order of the pieces, coherence by the repetition of themes and variations, but the structure of the book, and of the essays themselves, is ruminative rather than linear. Like the poets who roam through this work, I too wish to wander, ponder, and digress, according to the dictates of the landscape. (x)

A promising but misleading catalogue from an author who asserts, at the same time, that her "mandate is twofold: to illuminate the contributions of European theories of the picturesque and the sublime to Canadian depictions of nature, and to explore the critical reception to poems informed by these aesthetics" (x). More narrowly, it is "the argument of this book that eighteenth-century aesthetic conventions *still* inform English Canadian poetry, particularly the poetry of landscape" (ix), which, she contends, articulates an understanding of the sublime that is "unique to this country; indeed, because of its profound contribution to the ideology of our first writers, it is one of the formative ideas of Canadian culture" (59).

In "An Introductory Ramble through the Picturesque and the Sublime," Glickman provides a lively genealogy of topographical poetry, from classical pastorals and georgics through the local knowledge informing John Denham's *Cooper's Hill* (1642). "What is new" in Denham's poem, Glickman argues persuasively, "is the poet's insistence that he is describing a real and specific scene that speaks to him of his own time and place" (6) rather than constructing a vision that adheres strictly to models from elsewhere and before. From this vantage point, Glickman's argument unfolds elegantly, balancing the ideas of Gilpin, Burke, and Wordsworth, all of whom contributed to the emergence of a new understanding of the sublime that accentuated the forces

of awe and terror. The sublime evolved into both “a new kind of religion” (ix) and a new poetic, one that “interested itself in how nature made one *feel*, as opposed to how it looked, what moral lessons it taught, or how it could be exploited to make a more comfortable life” (viii).

Philosophic backdrop in place, Glickman moves to a series of essays that overlay the picturesque and the sublime onto a hitchhiker’s guide to Canada’s poetic history, beginning with Thomas Cary’s *Abram’s Plains* (1789) and wandering through Susanna Moodie’s “Enthusiasm” (1831) and Charles G.D. Roberts’s “Ave! An Ode for the Centenary of the Birth of Percy Bysshe Shelley” (1892). These chapters are solid but unspectacular, more a gathering together of familiar ideas than a pushing into new territory. The final two pieces shift the focus into the twentieth century by way of an essay that is, by turns, insightful (on the ambivalences fissuring Roberts’s later sonnets) and puzzling (her claim that W.W.E. Ross is regarded “with reverence” by “the critical establishment in Canada” [117]). Her closing essay follows a similarly uneven pattern: a fresh reading of Paulette Jiles’s “Song to the Rising Sun” complements thoughtful glances toward Canada’s burgeoning eco-poetic; a revisiting of the *Preview-First Statement* bickering retreads tired ground; and an unconvincing positioning of Margaret Atwood’s “Progressive Insanities of a Pioneer” suggests reading it as an inferior “reworking” of Earle Birney’s “Bushed.”

Despite Glickman’s prefatory posturing, this is a thesis-driven study that remains, admittedly, “limited to English-language poetry” and is “by no means encyclopaedic” (x). As Glickman acknowledges, “other, perhaps better, poems might have been considered than those I have chosen. I hope that those who recognize my lapses will remedy them. Nothing could please me more than knowing I had provoked more serious discussion of these issues” (x). Fair enough, but such caveats ring hollow given that Glickman discounts the argument of D.G. Jones on the grounds that “in order to support [his] thesis he . . . takes to selective quotation and ignores contradictory evidence” (51). Or when she points out that the “laudable ambition” informing Gaile McGregor’s *The Wacousta Syndrome* (1985) is undercut by “generalization and some rather selective quotation” (55). Curious charges coming in a book that is itself tendentiously selective, touching only cursorily, if at all, on a number of poems that might challenge Glickman’s thesis in provocative and valuable ways. One wonders why D.C. Scott’s “The Height of Land,” Archibald Lampman’s “Heat,” or E.J. Pratt’s “The Titanic” were not given substantive attention. Moreover, to write of early Canadian reactions to the sublimity of Niagara Falls without mention of Hennepin’s famous 1697 sketch is an oversight (or was it a choice?) that points to serious limits to

Glickman's proposed poetics, as does her unwillingness to engage the work of early explorers, cartographers, and natural scientists. Scholars interested in a more inclusive "poetics" of early Canadian landscape will be better served by W.H. New's *Land Sliding: Imagining Space, Presence, and Power in Canadian Writing* (1997) or Victoria Dickenson's *Drawn From Life: Science and Art in the Portrayal of the New World* (1998).

Problematic, too, are Glickman's attempts to reinscribe Arnoldian disinterestedness as a viable stance from which to launch her polemic. A faithfulness in the acuity of the mythical "unbiased reader" (56) pervades this book; indeed, she reminds readers that the "propensity of critics speaking from prejudice to make errors is well-known" (121). On the one hand, such confidence allows her to chastise McGregor for allowing "negativity to lead . . . into outright nonsense" and to conclusions that are "absurd" (56) as well as to accuse Atwood of "[d]isingenuously underplaying her own academic training" (54) in *Survival* (1972). On the other hand, she can argue, apparently without prejudice, that the "critic who has most consistently given early Canadian poetry unbiased and attentive readings is D.M.R. Bentley" (22). Bentley's biases aside, it is a dated theoretical stance that only diminishes her argument.

Ironically, it is when Glickman drops these Arnoldian presumptions that her own book begins to deliver its critical promise. Her overview of the tenacity of Frye's garrison thesis as "simply a given among many critics even now" (55), though far from original, is appropriately thorough, as is her argument that, until recently, it has been too readily accepted "that our poets demonstrate 'terror' in their encounters with the wilderness, but little awareness of the *prestige* of terror as an aesthetic category during the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries." Rather than exploring terror as a "transitional" stage, critics, iterating Frye's negative construction, have aligned it "with colonial timidity," "post-colonial neurosis," or an expression "of a uniquely local pathology" (45), the latter most influentially in Atwood's *The Journals of Susanna Moodie* (1970).

Honoured with both the Gabrielle Roy Prize (Association of Canadian and Quebec Literatures) and the Raymond-Klibansky Prize (Humanities and Social Sciences Federation of Canada), *The Picturesque and the Sublime* clearly made an impression on the "critical establishment" in Canada. Candidly, I don't understand what all the fuss was about.

Klay Dyer