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**Murray, Heather. *Come, bright Improvement!:  
The Literary Societies of Nineteenth-Century Ontario.*  
Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2002,  
pp. xvi + 335; illus. CDN\$60.00 (cloth).**

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From the 1820s to 1900, Canada saw the flourishing of over three hundred geographically and chronologically scattered literary societies. Heather Murray's swath is a wide one and she deals with institutions as divergent as the York Mechanic's Institute, the York Library and Philosophical society, and the Chautauquas. Her history is really a remarkable story of community cooperative learning. It is important, however, in reading Murray to understand that nineteenth-century Canadian literary societies were not necessarily similar to today's book clubs although today's members will find a strong heritage in their experiences. They were at once vehicles for discussion, reading, politics, and learning.

But despite the book's strong historical focus, Murray is not a historian. As a professor of English, she is at her most comfortable when she attempts to place the phenomena of these societies in the context of Canadian literary history and theory. She argues that the literary societies allow us to begin to understand the importance of literature in Canada as distinct from literature about Canada. She further argues that her analysis has a place in revisiting the arguments within literary analysis of the difference between "reception" and "consumption." The records of the readers and visitors to the societies' meetings document a complex response, and they demonstrate the impact of lesser-known texts on the Canadian cultural environment. Indeed, Murray is very right when she emphasizes that early Canadian writers, who are often assumed to be working in a literary vacuum, had rather a rich and complex British and American context for their work. She emphasizes that the readers were not isolated and understood what they read in an equally complex context. She concludes that there was a continued dialogue and interaction between readers and writers. They found the ground for discourse in the literary societies rather than in the university classroom.

Murray is of course right in her observation that both what is read, who reads, and who listens are all critical. But she is not the first to have made that point, and for some peculiar reasons she has not rooted her discourse in the historiography of Canadian intellectual history. Without a doubt, one of the leaders in identifying the Canadian nineteenth-century soul is S. F. Wise. Yet she cites none of his key works, even if to dismiss them. His "God's Peculiar Peoples"<sup>1</sup> is a careful reflection on sermon literature. It has influenced a generation of intellectual historians. He argues that the sermons preached from the pulpits of Upper Canada were more than empty rhetoric. Indeed they were key instruments which both reflected and created the Upper Canadian mind. The clergy were considered responsible for the "truth" and the reinforcement of the establishment. They were explicit in the anti-American nature of the discourse. These pulpit pieces, Wise argues, had a profound impact on their listeners and were the foundation of Canada's subtle identity. This is reinforced again in Wise and Robert Craig Brown, *Canada Views the United States*.<sup>2</sup>

Wise's intellectual foundation would be irrelevant except for Murray's thesis. She accepts that Canada's literary societies and the self-education movements were largely rooted in the United States, although she accepts that the Canadian experience did have its own foundations, however tentative. Wise would have argued otherwise. On the surface there would seem no doubt that the American Chautauqua Literary and Scientific Circle was largely American despite efforts to ensure that there was Canadian content. Efforts to partner with the English National Home Reading Union seem not to have amounted to much. On the surface it would seem that even though Canadians were conscious of the American origins and impact of the Chautauqua, they had little hesitation in embracing its readings and programmes. Yet at the same time that American content and educational constructs seemed to determine discourse, there was a flourishing of Canadian imperially-rooted nationalism.

This is where Wise's insights might have helped. He argues that the Church of England clergy in particular saw Canada as an "Elect Nation," as a member of the British Empire. They were particularly concerned with the pollution of the Canadian order by the unruly democratic hordes from the south. This might help solve Murray's puzzle. Why were Bishop John Strachan and the Upper Canadian elite so reluctant initially to support literacy efforts through literary clubs and their cousins, the mechanics institutes? There should be no surprise since they seemed, from Murray's evidence, to be dominated by the very American reform elements that were the antithesis of what the northern experiment, Canada, stood for — the rejection of revolution. Murray's evidence does suggest that John Strachan was fighting a losing battle. Murray provides evidence to suggest that a continental education experience, even if tempered with occasional Canadian historical content, was inevitable. Perhaps Wise's assessments were just part of the quixotic quest by Canadians in the 1960s to find a unique identity.

Murray's evidence was collected in the 1990s and is broader than that collected by Wise in the 1960s. Yet, it is worth noting that Murray collected her evidence in the context of the drift to continental integration. She has, it might be argued, settled on her own "Whiggish" conclusions. She would argue that there was always a populist free trade in literature and discourse, and might offer that Wise's study reflects the thinking of the elite. Real opinion was being formed at the literary societies who appealed to the middle and rising middle class.

What is also peculiar is Murray's failure to cite Carl F. Klinck's *Literary History of Canada*<sup>3</sup> although she undoubtedly must have consulted the volume. Its perspective on literary societies, gleaned from a few paragraphs here and there, would have been worth reciting if only to directly refute Klinck in her text. He believes that the literary societies were the "hot beds" that nurtured the soul underpinning Canadian literature — a point that Murray tempers.

The book is an interesting irony in design. As an addition to the University of Toronto Press studies in book and print culture, it felt an obligation to advocate the best standards in print communication. The third in the series, it is hard-bound with dust jacket, printed on acid free paper, with traditional typeface. No paperback, no digital edition, no lack of notes — it is a throwback to tradition. Indeed in an almost Victorian tradition, pages 170 to 335 are exhaustive and exhausting appendices. It is, however, for sale in Wal-Mart!

The Murray volume is critical of those who say there is a crisis in literacy and libraries today. Murray argues that there is real discourse amongst creators, readers, and listeners with one becoming the other at various times. While this would not appear profound, it has implications for our understanding of the role of books in the age of new media. Nostalgia for the literary societies is apparently on the increase. There are several high profile literary or book clubs today — with the most well known Oprah's. But these seem to be focused for the most part on seeing the "reader" as the "receiver" of information rather than engaged in the creation of a dialogue — unless one counts Oprah.

If there is little interaction between author and audience in the literary clubs, there is an increasing discourse in the new cyber parlour — the chat room — or the cyber seminar room, H-net. Increasingly as we fumble through the fog, it is apparent that there is shape to the future. Jay McGrath, a youth representative from Branch, Newfoundland, at the “Information Deficit: Canadian Solutions” conference held in Calgary in 2001, observed that the Internet has become a place rather than an instrument. The argument is found in more detail in Frits Pannekoek and David Mitchell, eds., “Information Deficit.”<sup>4</sup> If the Internet is now indeed a place, even if only a cyber place, then we should find places in it where discourse, learning, and self-improvement of the kind that Murray found in nineteenth-century Canada could now take place.

And indeed we do, although for the majority of those over twenty-five, the Internet is best an imperfect parlour or seminar room. The forms of community and intellectual engagement are still in their infancy and tend to mimic more traditional meetings — except for a few connected visually — without the sophisticated nuances of body language. The Internet has created multiple sites for discourse most based on “list-serv” software. The majority of the discussions are channeled by topic through the several hundred subject H-Net—Humanities net out of the University of Michigan. There are lists that discuss any and every type of literature, political and historical perspective. These “listservs” are never-ending mini-conferences. As Murray points out, the nineteenth-century literary societies were the product of complex interactions in which personal interactions, political affiliation, education, race, social status, age, and gender really mattered. While some would argue that the Internet allows anonymity, in fact it does not. The community of readers and discussants is sufficiently small, and identities are required to participate in the discussions. If an unknown participant becomes too aggressive, it is not long before their intellectual pedigree is “outed.” While the force of the argument will still garner respect in the “listservs,” as in the nineteenth-century parlour, the frailties of one’s intellectual and social antecedents did matter.

But there is a difference. While it could be argued, as Murray does, that the nineteenth-century literary society acted as an agent of social cohesion, the current cyber literary society allows instead for perfect fragmentation. There are literally hundreds of humanities listservs out of the University of Michigan, each with its own narrow focus. In the third edition of the Association of Research Libraries Directory, there were over 1,152 listed e-conferences or discussions. In the fifth edition of the ARL Directory released in May 1995, 3,118 e-conferences were recorded. The number is continuing to grow at incredible rates. It can be argued that the fragment of discourse militates against broad interdisciplinary and social impact that marked much of the early literary societies. Some will also point out that Murray herself provides ample evidence in her voluminous appendices that there was significant fragmentation in early Canada as well. Every community had at least one and often several societies fractured along the lines of politics and social status. Today, however, the fragmentation is more likely by subject and intellectual perspective.

The new medium will allow an endless experimentation in communication and in the creation of literature. The promise that Murray sees in the literary societies as environments for discourse in which authors, readers, and audiences are one, can happen again. The potential for a new dynamic does exist, as do examples. In 1991, the University of Calgary Press published Robert Belton, *Sights of Resistance*.<sup>5</sup> The book appeared in part in print form, in part on compact disc, and most important of all on the web. There, the author agreed to engage in online conversation with readers for a defined period of two years. Over 280 individuals actually contacted the author and engaged in discussions that Belton accepts strengthened and challenged his assumptions. In the future, it should be possible to have a perpetual discussion between creator and audience in a truly ongoing interactive way. What this could do for the creative process is yet to be determined! But the experiment will not be new: it will be in the tradition of Murray’s literary societies.

Notes

1. S. F. Wise, "God's Peculiar Peoples," in *The Shield of Achilles Aspects of Canada in the Victorian Age*, ed. W. L. Morton (Toronto: McClelland and Stewart, 1968).
2. S. F. Wise and Robert Craig Brown, *Canada Views the United States: Nineteenth Century Political Attitudes* (Seattle: University of Washington Press, 1967).
3. Carl F. Klinck, *Literary History of Canada* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1965).
4. Frits Pannekoek and David Mitchell, eds., "Information Deficit: Canadian Solutions Conference, Policy session, & Reports, Oct. 29-31, 2001 Calgary, Alberta," *Canadian Journal of Communication* 27, no. 2 (2002).
5. Robert Belton, *Sights of Resistance: Approaches to Canadian Visual Culture* (Calgary: University of Calgary Press, 1991).