

Dagmara Drewniak

"The Routledge Concise History of Canadian Literature", Richard J. Lane, London-New York 2011 : [recenzja]

TransCanadiana 5, 218-220

2012

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Dagmara Drewniak
Adam Mickiewicz University

Richard J. Lane (2011), *The Routledge Concise History of Canadian Literature.*
London and New York: Routledge; 249 pages.
ISBN 978-0-415-47046-9

Richard J. Lane, an established critic and scholar, has published on various topics within the field of literature and literary theory. One of his recent undertakings is *The Routledge Concise History of Canadian Literature* (2011), which is an interesting attempt at presenting the history of Canadian literature from its beginnings to the present day. It is a text which will be of great value to readers interested in Canadian literature, alongside W. H. New's canonical *History of Canadian Literature*, *The Cambridge Companion to Canadian Literature* edited by Eva-Marie Kröller, and more recent texts such as Faye Hammill's *Canadian Literature*.¹

What Lane's text offers, apart from its conciseness (only 249 pages), is an interesting and engaging combination of well-known and less popular texts by various Canadian authors, supplemented with a discussion of the historical context of these works and an invaluable insight into literary theory. The book comprises maps, glossaries of terms, and sections with suggestions for further reading, and at the end of each chapter there are concluding remarks summarizing, in point form, the most important issues raised in the chapters. Moreover, there are also some sections (marked in grey and distinguished from the main text) devoted entirely to explanations of key terms and ideas for the current discussion (e.g. orature in Chapter One and Native Canadian Gothic in Chapter Seven, to name just a few).

The fact that it is a concise history results in a necessary selectiveness of authors, facts and titles. Yet, Richard J. Lane's work surprises readers with its

¹ This subjective list of titles is composed on the basis of their availability and the frequency with which they are chosen by Polish students of Canadian literature. Richard J. Lane, in a section called "Further Reading," adds a few more titles to this list.

complexity and innovative way of dealing with such a concise history of literature. For instance, it offers a very detailed Table of Contents which delineates the issues that the book discusses. It is very informative and portends an absorbing text about important and recently debated issues such as performative ethnicity (e.g. page 17), feminist readings of war texts (page 85) and the reflection of the experience of residential schools in aboriginal drama (page 167). The content of the book does not disappoint, as it presents insightful, though brief, interpretations of texts that match the specific aspects of literature under discussion.

The Routledge Concise History of Canadian Literature is divided into nine chapters plus a preface, acknowledgements, maps, the above-mentioned glossary of terms, a guide to further reading, a long list of works cited, and an index. The first chapter presents first peoples and colonial narratives, and consists of historical background as well as a discussion on the works written by George Copway (an Ojibway author) and Pauline Johnson (a Mohawk poet) to illustrate the literary dimension of indigenous cultures. Chapter Two presents a debate on Canadian romanticism and the formation of the Canadian canon, and includes a presentation of Confederation Poets and Edward Hartley Dewart's writing. The third chapter deals with the rise of the Canadian novel in the 18th and 19th centuries. It renders the idea of the new world novel seen as a continuation and simultaneously a subversion of the traditional European mode of novel-writing. As an example, Lane chooses some canonical texts such as Frances Brooke's *The History of Emily Montague* as well as William Kirby's and Major John Richardson's works alongside Susanna Moodie's and Catherine Parr Trail's perspectives on exploration, an approach which definitely breaks with the tradition of perceiving settlement as a male-dominated undertaking. Chapter Four deals with the literary response to the First and Second World Wars, and consists of presentations of various texts ranging from war poetry, the volume from Lucy Maud Montgomery's pastoral *Anne of Green Gables* series devoted to WWI (i.e. *Rilla of Ingleside*), through popular fiction and absurdist and existentialist approaches to the two wars (Charles Yale Harrison and Colin McDougall respectively). Chapter Five presents Canadian modernism by considering Canadian poetry of the period (e.g. E. J. Pratt), Canadian Jewish writing (A. M. Klein), the writing of Sinclair Ross and Sheila Watson, as well as such issues as ethnicity, experimentation, bildungsroman, and intertextuality. The following chapter provides an insight into the second half of the twentieth and the first years of the twenty-first centuries, offering a wide range of topics from identity to gender and sexuality on the basis of iconic Canadian women writers such as Margaret Laurence, Margaret Atwood (including recent novels such as *The Year of the Flood*, published in 2009), Alice Munro, Joy Kogawa, Aritha van Herk, Carol Shields and Dionne Brand. Chapter Seven discusses contemporary indigenous literature within a variety of literary genres such as drama, novels, poetry,

political journalism and a creative transgression of these. Among many names mentioned in this chapter, one finds Eden Robinson, Thomas King, and Tomson Highway, as well as a whole group of writers who are mentioned only in passing, though it is very significant that they have found their way into such a handbook (e.g. playwright Nora Benedict and novelist Ruby Farrell Slipperjack). Chapter Eight draws on the phenomenon of Canadian postmodernism with its cherishing of historiographic metafiction (George Bowering and Linda Hutcheon), the metafictional parodies of Leonard Cohen and Robert Kroetsch, the magic realism of Jack Hodgins, and generic hybridity of Michael Ondaatje, to list only a few aspects of postmodernism out of the vast overview presented by Lane. Last but not least, Chapter Nine discusses the famous Canadian postcolonial paradigm. This chapter refers to the most recent phenomena on the Canadian literary scene, such as Lee Maracle's and Thomas King's refusal to accept Canada as a postcolonial country, Roy Miki and Smaro Kamboureli's project "Trans.Can.Lit," and, among others, the growing interest in African-Canadian texts.

Despite its inherent brevity, Richard J. Lane's *The Routledge Concise History of Canadian Literature* is a necessary and invaluable source of knowledge both for students of Canadian literature and culture as well as teachers dealing with various aspects of North American literary output. What can be observed throughout the entire book is the author's inclination to incorporate the theory of literature into his study (he has published widely in this field). His interpretations are frequently based on theoretical concepts such as liminality, polysemy, phallocentrism, *écriture feminine*, and the controversy concerning auto/biography. Lane's book leaves its readers, however, with a feeling of insufficiency, as some sections present only a brief summary of a trend or a mode of writing (for example, there is only a one-paragraph "discussion" of Monique Mojica's works on page 168, and some of the above-mentioned theoretical issues are mentioned only in passing). But this is probably the price the author had to pay for attempting to squeeze the "whole" history of Canadian literature into the format offered by the publisher. The unquestionable value of the book is, undeniably, an attempt to put certain trends, phenomena, and names in order, which facilitates a deeper and more universal outlook on Canadian literature. Through its accessible language and style, Richard J. Lane's history is a must for students and anybody interested in various cultural, political, literary and historical aspects of Canadian studies.