Book Review of *Open Wide a Wilderness: Canadian Nature Poems*

Nancy Holmes, editor. Introduction by Don McKay.
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Review by JC Peters

In a current social climate of environmental end-times panic, literary interest in the natural world is resurfacing. After embracing and then rejecting Margaret Atwood's famous thesis that the central theme of Canadian writing is survival (especially against our terrifying natural landscape), Canadian Literature is returning to its roots—literally and metaphorically.

It makes sense, then, that the very first anthology of Canadian wilderness poetry would appear now. Nancy Holmes, compiler and editor of *Open Wide a Wilderness: Canadian Nature Poems*, offers us a collection that traces the Canadian psyche through landscapes from 1789 right up to 2008. And how times change.

Holmes notes in her preface that in her attempt to narrow down the massive, multiplying field of Canadian nature poems, she chose only poems in English, and only those about actual wilderness, as opposed to domesticated gardens and backyards. This lends a unique and interesting angle to the anthology as it follows our evolving attitudes toward the Canadian wild, from early panting over natural resources to sheer terror in the wind and finally through a genuine and humbled love and care for what we discover to be actually quite delicate.

The first piece, Thomas Cary's 1789 poem from *Abram's Plains*, celebrates the exploitable beauty of the Canadian landscape—beavers frolic in their silken furs while Cary salivates over the potential exploitation of this “infant world.” The last piece, Mark Callanan's 2003 “Barn Swallows,” in contrast humbly acknowledges the bird's beauty in its ancient habitat:

The swallows.
Who owns them? Probably
no one. Probably no
one but the wind.
Something as simple as that.

The evolution between these two attitudes is fascinating to read through. Many early pieces struggle to jam British cadence onto Canadian experience, with little success. Charles Mair's “The Last Bison,” for example, goes into colonial paroxysms thinking of this as-yet unpenetrated virgin Eden: “In winter's snow, in summer's fruits and flowers--/ Ours were the virgin prairies, and their rapture ours!” Interestingly, it appears here that it is the earlier female poets are that catch onto the need for a new language, for new images to describe the Canadian world. Isabella Valancy Crawford, for example, intuitively catches the lustful undercurrent of this powerful and fertile land in her 1884 poem “The Lily Bed,” which begins suggestively, “His cedar paddle, scented, red, / He thrust down through the lily bed.” Similarly, the fantastically appellationed Ethelwyn Wetherald notices in her 1902 poem “Unheard Niagaras” that powerful forces surge beneath the seemingly placid land. A truly Canadian image, even today: too polite to say how we feel, if we are seething, it is usually quietly, deep in our colonial bones. If channelled appropriately, however, an upsurge of repressed emotion in this country may be

powerful enough to fertilize real change (perhaps in relation to the climate?) that may be analogous to “the force that pushes up the meadow grass / that swells to ampler roundness ripening fruit.”

Susan Frances Harrison, or Seranus, finally articulates the problem of Canadian poetry up to this point in 1928 in a piece called “A Canadian Anthology (of Flowers).” She writes “I make a song of Canada to-day, / the song of her own flowers, not England's, nor / Another's but her own.” Here, now, Canadians may begin to write of their own experience of the land, not after the tradition of another country an ocean away.

Through this evolution comes the freedom to speak about uniquely Canadian problems with a very Canadian sense of humour. D. E. Hatt, for example, laments the “breed of big mosquitoes / Living in Queen Charlotte Isles” that attack every time “you want to take a snooze.” Now titles like Anne Wilkinson's “Nature Be Damned” or Patrick Anderson's “Song of Intense Cold” crop up like ice in your nose in a Quebecois January. The Canadian relationship with the land lies somewhere between indescribable awe and deep, burning hatred. Neurosis in a large space and the urgent need for body heat lead to some interesting poetic images—here we cannot omit mention of Robert Kroetsch's story of a gentle romance with a cow, or Lorna Crozier's observation that “Carrots are fucking/ the earth.” When it comes to Canadian nature poetry, neurotic and sexy are never very far, and rarely entirely without humour.

Throughout this poetic journey through the Canadian relationship with its land, Holmes leads us gently and never aggressively along her chosen paths. The poems are accompanied simply by the author's name and dates. Don McKay's essay “Great Flint Singing” serves as an introduction to the anthology, and offers a general academic overview. McKay provides information and some analysis of the major thrusts of Canadian nature poetry through the ages, focusing on the idea primarily of the “inappellable,” the mysterious and irrepressible desire to speak about what cannot be spoken about, to name the unnameable, to penetrate, but truly, intimately know our natural world. Holmes's selections were largely influenced by this essay, and McKay provides rich avenues to follow with further study.

This book will be greatly useful for any student of Canadian poetry, Canadian culture, or nature poetry in general. The common theme of the desire for an intimate knowledge of the land is reflected in the intimacy this collection creates with its simple and unadorned offerings. It opens itself to either guided or self-study, and should certainly find its way to the shelf (or bedside table) of any Canadian interested in her roots, her country's roots, or maybe even those horny carrots thrusting mysteriously in the wilderness of her backyard.