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In-Flight History: the
Canadian-Australian Literary Prize and
the Question of Nationalism

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**IN-FLIGHT HISTORY:
The Canadian-Australian Literary Prize
and the Question of Nationalism**

—Gerry Turcotte—

“Nations, like narratives, lose their origins
in the myths of time and only fully realize
their horizons in the mind’s eye.”

Homi Bhabha¹

It was a dreary and very cold winter’s day in Ottawa. One of those days when the footpaths are frozen over and every step is a chore—as though walking were invented by Sisyphus. Thinking back on this after so long in Australia, it amazes me that anyone ever attends literary functions in Canada. Making the journey up to the National Gallery, past the magnificent Houses of Parliament and the Peace Tower, my friends and I wondered if it was really worth the effort just to hear an Australian poet who would no doubt torture us with lyrics about perfect weather and perpetual sunshine. But we were *literary*, after all, and we’d never *seen* an Australian writer. And by Canadian standards, the weather was balmy.

As is usual with Canada, the building was drastically over-heated, and we sat there peeling off layer after layer of winter insulation, as a slightly disorganized gallery staff prepared for its guest. Finally, after a series of interminably long speeches, the Australian High Commissioner introduced his countryman: “Ladies and Gentleman, Mr Les Murray”.

The imposing poet stepped forth, glasses propped on his shiny head. He flicked through one of his books, mischievously looked up at the audience, and then read a poem called, “The dream of wearing shorts forever”. We should have hated him then, but he lifted us up in that dream, one perhaps more fervently wished for by us, than by any Australian. He could do no wrong after that.

When the reading was over the audience was herded into a large reception room, where we studied the leaflets we had been given earlier. This event, I discovered, was in honour of the Canadian-Australian Literary Prize, a long-standing award which sought to familiarise one country with the literature of the other.

“You ever hear of this before?” I asked my friend.

Her eyes were locked on the larger-than-life Murray. “Go and introduce yourself”, she ordered, ignoring my question and pushing me towards the poet. “Tell him you’ll be in his country soon.”

“Right”, I said, “And what’s he supposed to say? ‘Here’s my address. Drop by and see me sometime’?”

Half an hour later we left the gallery. I had Les Murray’s address in my pocket and an invitation to visit anytime I was in the neighbourhood. My friend was insufferable. And she was even more unbearable several years later when Les contributed a chapter to my book *Writers in Action*.

Well, this is how I *remember* the event. When I turn to my notes from those days I find that Les and I actually met in April and that the day was not *quite* as cold as my memory suggests. But what memory and records agree on is that I became obsessed with two things on that day: one was Australian writing, and the other was this little-known prize. The award had been given to some of the most challenging writers of each country, and yet it seemed to have had little to no impact on the general community. Les was the tenth winner, the fifth Australian, in what had been an at times controversial award. And no one seemed to know anything about it. I decided to find out why.

It was a more difficult task than I imagined. There was no apparent reason for its anonymity. As I spoke to official after official in Canada, all I discovered was that everyone involved with the prize thought it should be handled differently, though no one knew what to do about it. My response at the time was to read through the work of every

Australian winner: John Romeril, Thomas Shapcott, Roger McDonald, Barry Oakley and Les Murray. I had already read most of the work of the Canadian winners: Alice Munro, Michael Ondaatje, Leon Rooke, and Mavis Gallant. Since then the list has doubled to include: Jack Hodgins, Rodney Hall, Sharon Pollack, Elizabeth Jolley, Audrey Thomas, Georgia Savage, David Adams Richards, Louis Nowra and Rohinton Mistry.

This is an exciting and eclectic group and it occurred to me, as far back as 1984, how I could possibly solve one of the prize's marketing problems. What was needed was an anthology, something which could concretely represent the award's existence, and which could be sent from reviewer to publicist in the build-up to announcing the prize every year.

I contacted one of the major publishers in Canada, McClelland and Stewart, and sold them on the idea. With the awarding of the Canadian prize in 1985, I said, they would have the first decade of winners. It was a neat, appealing package, representing some of the most exciting writers each country had to offer. There was a discrepancy, it's true, between the Canadian choices and the Australian ones. First, all the Australians were male. Second, the Australian committee stuck more faithfully to the terms of the award, that they should nominate less fully established writers. Canada, on the other hand, had gone for its big names. Alice Munro, for example, was considered, even then, to "own" the short story pages of *The New Yorker*, and Michael Ondaatje, although a long way from his Booker prize-winning novel, was nevertheless a major author.

M&S agreed to pick up the book on the condition that they could find an Australian co-publisher. They subsequently wrote to every publisher in Australia only to discover that none would join them in a joint agreement. I stared at the list of refusals and shook my head disbelievingly. Perhaps I could chase up a publisher when I got to Australia, the executive at M&S told me. She would be waiting a long time to hear from me.

As I left Montreal in 1986, I heard that the Canadian winner of the prize was novelist Jack Hodgins. His short stories from *Spit Delaney's Island* were already legendary in

Canada. Although I had read his work, I never expected that he and I would become good friends, or that I'd be teaching his novel, *Innocent Cities*, which is set in both countries. For Jack the prize was the beginning of a love affair with Australia, one which would lead to his friendship with one of the Australian winners, Roger McDonald, and to a book celebrating their journey through the New South Wales' outback in search of shearers.

"This is great", he told me before beginning his trip into the outback, "I've always wanted to go there. Roger knows it like the back of his hand. We'll camp out under the stars. And think of all those shearers." I tried to feign enthusiasm, secretly humming "Click Go the Shears." It didn't work. It just didn't sound like the most promising non-fiction project, and I remember scrambling for something to say.

"What if it rains?" I offered lamely, trying to sound knowledgeable about these things.

"In the drought-stricken outback?"

Soon after I watched film footage of the Nyngan flood which had threatened them throughout their journey. Jack's book was published under the title *Over Forty in Broken Hill*, and Roger MacDonald's, entitled *Shearer's Motel*, went on to win the \$15,000 Banjo Non-fiction Award. At least I'd predicted the rain.

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In *Scribbling in the Dark*, Barry Oakley discusses a trip to the International Authors' Festival in Toronto, and mentions reading, in an in-flight magazine, about the Canadian "war of independence" of 1812.

That was the year the British and the Canadians repelled an American invasion. How many visitors have learned their basic facts about Australia the same way, out of the Qantas seat pocket? There are the big countries, countries whose history is part of the universal awareness. And there are those on the periphery, whose history you learn about from the in-flight magazines.²

Perhaps this is what the Canadian–Australian Literary prize is meant to combat—that extraordinary ignorance which exists among one people for another, not because of lack of interest, but because they listen too readily to the propaganda of more powerful nations who seem to suggest that the periphery exists solely so that the centre can have a place to go on holiday.

This is absurd, of course, and to some degree the prize has succeeded in bringing writers of the largest island on earth, to the second largest country in the world, and vice versa. With this exchange there has been an awakening of interest and knowledge, reflected in novels set in either or both countries, or in essays being written about cross-cultural experiences. It has seen a steady stream of exchanges and the continuing growth of organizations such as the Association for the Study of Canadian Studies in Australia and New Zealand, which represents a large network of academics and writers in the three countries.

The most recent Australian winner of the Prize, playwright and novelist Louis Nowra, demonstrates to what extent the cross-over of cultures is already at work. Vincent Ward's *Map of the Human Heart* is a co-production between a host of nations, including Canada and Australia, and is shot partially in the Canadian Arctic. It was scripted by Nowra, who spent a great deal of time in Montreal doing re-writes; so much time, in fact, that in an extract from his shooting diary which appeared recently in *Australian-Canadian Studies* he wrote, "As I sipped some wine an awful thought struck me: this film would never finish.... I would never leave Montreal. I would work on *Map of the Human Heart* forever." After winning the 1993 prize he was sent back there.

The 1994–95 Canadian winner was a keynote speaker recently at several functions throughout Australia. Rohinton Mistry, born in Bombay, has lived in Canada since 1975. Already an award-winning short story writer, he made the move to the novel to see if he could write one. "I was curious to see if I could put out that kind of sustained effort, the stamina to keep inventing details over the long haul. I also wanted to make sure that the

novel would be a complete world unto itself, and so I wrote what I know best—Bombay, the family, human relations.” His first novel was an immediate success. *Such a Long Journey* won both the Canadian Governor General’s Award for Fiction in 1991, the Commonwealth Writers’ Prize in 1992, and was runner up for the Booker Prize in 1991.

More importantly, what Mistry’s novel makes clear is the relative nature of borders, an irony given the clearly nationalist charter of the Canadian–Australian Prize. One could wonder whether the mandate of such an award is contradicted by the fact that some of its winners hail from outside the country for which they are nominated—Michael Ondaatje from Sri Lanka, Elizabeth Jolley from England, Leon Rooke from the USA and Mistry from India—or that many of their texts invoke Canada or Australia only obliquely if at all. Much of Nowra’s early work is set in Paraguay, Russia or New Guinea; Ondaatje’s first books celebrate Eliza Fraser (*the man with seven toes*), an American gunslinger (Billy the Kid) and a New Orleans jazz musician (Buddy Bolden); one of Sharon Pollack’s plays focuses on Lizzie Borden; and Tom Shapcott’s *White Stag of Exile* is set largely in Budapest. Mavis Gallant, for her part, has spent most of her writing career living in Paris, and categorically refused to visit Australia when told of the award (although I believe she accepted the prize money).

To wonder this way is specious. It is much more convincing to suggest that these tears in the mythical fabric of homogeneity explain eloquently the diversity of each nation, and help to challenge reductive readings of place which serve only to delimit rather than to celebrate both countries. Such breaches in the uniform canvas are timely given the republican debate in Australia (consult Rodney Hall’s parable on republicanism in *Kisses of the Enemy*), and the increasingly militant separatist forces in Canada.³

As different as these “movements” may seem, they emerge from similar impulses—they address a questioning of simplistically determined models of region and place and they reflect the dissatisfaction or anxiety so many people feel in the face of disappearing evidence of stability and cohesion. That Australia has responded to this challenge by

seeking to consolidate its status as nation and Canada to eviserate it makes for interesting speculation.

Australian nationalism is a mixture of denial and wish-fulfilment. As its many formerly disenfranchised voices begin to organize and effectively to lobby for their right to speak, and as its indigenous peoples win increasing moral and legal victories over the system that oppresses them, the “melting pot” veneer of Australian culture becomes an increasingly shaky fiction. The monarchist/ republican debate is a convenient way to deflect attention from more pressing tensions, and of signalling a spurious cohesion in the midst of difference.

In Canada, as has already been suggested, divisive forces are already too far gone. Attempts to ratify the constitution were defeated through both the Meech Lake and the Charlottetown Accords, both rather tenuous attempts to accommodate the needs and special interests of the varied members of the confederation of Canada.⁴ Ironically, in striving hardest to heal the rifts, then Prime Minister Brian Mulroney and his policy makers simply underscored the wide inequities of the system of representation. “Why should Quebec be granted special status as a distinct society?” asked English Canada, to which the First Nations peoples added, “Indeed!” In the end Canadians voted against both attempts to emend the constitution, leading to the present situation in Québec (a referendum will soon be called asking Québeckers to vote on whether they want to remain part of Canada).

Essentially, both countries are attempting a type of Nationalist closure for largely similar reasons: to reassure themselves and the world that they are a stable, homogenous mass. That Canada has achieved the opposite, and that Australia may well do the same, is not surprising. Jacques Derrida has argued that the classification of genres invokes both an impulse for and a resistance to closure; that the more one seeks to define a form categorically, the more it simultaneously embraces and eludes definition.⁵ It is tempting to suggest the same of nationalisms: that the greater the efforts to narrow a field, to

define borders, the less likely the “contents” will fit. It is in the nature of heterogeneous societies that they should insist on their differences.

In the midst of all this, then, the Canadian–Australian Prize may well be celebrating a shaky reality indeed, if the premise for the award is merely to showcase a mythical uniformity of landscape. The wide variety of winners over what is almost two decades contests this reading, if only because it continually redefines and problematizes what it means to be Australian or Canadian. In doing so it encourages its readers to acknowledge, and hopefully to celebrate, the value of multiplicity and difference.

Despite this, as the prize approaches its second decade, and as its administrators in both countries decide whether or not the award will continue beyond this time frame, they will have serious questions to ask. Not just questions about whether the prize has achieved sufficient publicity, or successfully promoted the respective countries to each other (a legitimate enough query given the “goal” of the prize), but also whether it should continue to exclude French Canadian writers (or indeed any non-English writers in translation), whether indigenous writers have been given significant opportunity to be short-listed for the prize (none have won in eighteen years), and, in Australia’s case, whether women writers have had that opportunity as well (only two in nine years). Essentially, the question will be, has the Canadian–Australian Prize Committee done everything in their power to articulate the diversity of voices which speak beneath the aegis of Canadian and Australian nationalisms?

NOTES

¹ Homi Bhabha, “Introduction: Narrating the Nation”, *Nation and Narration*, Homi Bhabha, ed. (London: Routledge, 1990), 1.

² Barry Oakley, *Scribbling in the Dark: Lifetime Encounters with Fame and Family* (Queensland: UQP, rpt. 1993), 131.

³ As to the latter, Québec and its secessionist impetus is well known. More than ever the province seems close to achieving its mandate for separation from the rest of Canada. For the first time in the country’s history a provincial party, the Bloc Québécois—whose mandate is the dissolution of Canada as we know it—holds the balance of power in the *Federal* arena. What the Australian press does not

report on, however, and what is only ever touched on in vague terms by the rest of Canada, is that despite rhetoric to the contrary Canada has always had separatist elements. The first gesture Nova Scotia made in 1867 when Canada was formed, was to vote to leave the country. British Columbia's similar threats to separate from Canada, though not as widely publicised as Quebec's, are long-standing. And Newfoundland, Canada's poorest province, and the last to join Confederation, has always said it regretted its decision to join. In fact, when it became Canada's tenth province, its citizens wore black arm bands in grief.

And this does not even touch on the response of First Nation's peoples. The Cree, for example, have threatened to go to the World court if Québec secedes, arguing that a precedent for land grants has been set. The Inuit of Nunavut, for example, have recently won huge land claims against the Canadian Government. Yet even this recent settlement (which has yielded more than one-third of the Northwest Territories to Inuit control) has been contested by various indigenous groups who argue that the grant is "cosmetic", leading one youth group to name the deal, "None-of-it"! Canada's "constitution", as it were, has had as much to do with fragmentation as with cohesion.

⁴ The Meech Lake constitutional debate, also referred to as the "Quebec Round", was defeated in the spring of 1990; the Charlottetown Accord, known as the "Canada Round", ended in a referendum on 26 October 1992. For a superb analysis of the process of constitutional change in Canada and Australia, as well as a discussion of the Meech and Charlottetown Accords, see P. Russell, "The Politics of Frustration: the Pursuit of Formal Constitutional Change in Australia and Canada", *Australian Canadian Studies: A Journal for the Humanities and the Social Sciences*, Vol. 6, No. 1 (1988), 3–32, and P. Russell, "The Politics of Frustration II: Constitutional Politics in Australia and Canada since 1987", *Australian Canadian Studies*, Vol. 10, No. 2 (1992), 57–85, respectively.

⁵ "La Loi du genre/ The Law of Genre", *Glyph*, Vol. 7 (1980), 202–29.