

PREFACE

THE STRUGGLE FOR AN ALBERTA LITERATURE

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In October 2005, the University of Calgary hosted the “Wild Words” conference, which aimed to bring a critical perspective to Alberta writing on the occasion of the province’s centenary. Admittedly, a one-hundred-year literary tradition is brief as literary traditions go, but Alberta’s literary roots are much older. They reach back to the orature of First Nations peoples and the colonizing exploration and travel literature of the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. In this tradition, one also finds various European cultural and linguistic streams associated with waves of immigration and settlement. The existence of historical depth is one thing; the matter of literary quality is another. Even the very concept of an “Alberta literature” is an issue. The Wild Words conference dealt with these matters in a wide-ranging and provocative examination of the work of prominent Alberta writers and so served as the starting point for this book project.

The idea of a distinct Alberta literary identity is a recent one, first formulated in George Melnyk’s two-volume *Literary History of Alberta* (1998,1999). But the concept has deeper roots. It began in an embryonic

form in anthologies of Alberta writing published in 1955, 1967, and 1979, all of which were associated with political landmarks such as Canada's centenary.¹ These three celebratory collections were then followed by literary anthologies of Alberta fiction – *Alberta Bound* (1986) edited by Fred Stenson, *Alberta Rebound* (1990) and *Boundless Alberta* (1993) both edited by Aritha van Herk, and *Threshold: An Anthology of Contemporary Alberta Writing* (1999) edited by Srja Pavlovic. More recently we have *The Wild Rose Anthology of Alberta Prose* (2003), a historical collection edited by George Melnyk and Tamara Seiler and *Writing the Terrain: Travelling Through Alberta with the Poets* (2005) edited by Robert Stamp. This fifty-year span of anthologies suggests that Alberta literature is a reality, and yet there has been no critical literary study of Alberta writers as *Alberta* writers other than the *Literary History*. The concept of Alberta writing as a distinct literature includes within it the evolution of a cultural framework that defines that literature. A cultural framework is both grounding and a context out of which literary production occurs. This volume applies contemporary literary theory to Alberta writing in support of the concept of a meaningful Alberta literature. But it does so in a preliminary way because the essays in this book deal with only a small portion of Alberta's literary reality. It is our hope to produce further volumes that bring scholarly attention to the work of numerous writers not dealt with in *Wild Words* as part of a continuing exploration of what it means to be an Alberta writer.

The idea that a province in Canada, other than Quebec, could have a distinct literary identity is novel and debatable, just as 80 years ago the idea that Canada itself had a distinct literary identity was novel and debatable. By the 1970s, Canadian literature as a concept had become commonplace. In the same decade, the concept of Prairie literature also became an accepted label to distinguish regional writing in Canada. The idea had been first articulated by Edward McCourt in *The Canadian West in Fiction* (1949) and was reiterated by Laurie Ricou in *Vertical Man/Horizontal World* (1973) and Dick Harrison in *Unnamed Country: The Struggle for Canadian Prairie Fiction* (1977).

A special Prairie Poetry Issue of *Essays on Canadian Writing* (1980) edited by Dennis Cooley of the University of Manitoba, who spoke at the 2005 Wild Words conference twenty-five years later, confirmed the validity and viability of the Prairie Literature concept. It was based on a regional division of Canadian literature. Once the concept of Canadian literature had been accepted, its diverse content was acknowledged. The PrairieLit concept had grown out of an era in Canadian history that linked the provinces of Alberta, Saskatchewan, and Manitoba into a single agrarian political

economy with a common cultural base. This unity began to unravel after World War II, when Alberta became the centre of Canada's energy industry. The resulting urbanization, industrialization, and new wealth distinguished Alberta from its two sister "Prairie" provinces, which remained, until the twenty-first century, have-not provinces. With a population in 2008 that was almost triple each of the other provinces and with an oil and gas economy (extraction, processing, and transportation) that was booming, Alberta evolved into a different kind of entity. The term "Prairie" made little sense when applied to post-1980 Alberta because the geographic designation was at odds with the economic and social realities of the province. But what could the replacement term, Alberta, mean?

Regarding literature produced in Alberta, one can first look at the measure of provincial self-consciousness that critics find in creative works by asking, how expressive of its origins is a literary product? What do these origins mean? What should be made of the Alberta-centric contexts that inspire, inform, and transform that creative work in distinctive ways – ways that link it to other creative works produced by writers from Alberta? Second, one can examine how a particular narrative or body of narratives by a writer fits into a literary past, a heritage of writing that is the province's literary history. By positioning a work or a writer in the continuum of a literary tradition, one augments and expands that tradition. The discursive associations in the texts define the Albertan literary ethos, whether one is relating them to earlier texts or one is drawing distinctive parallels with contemporary works. Third, one can group literary works from Alberta into various categories of cultural grammar based on gender, class, ethnicity/nationality, language, generation, sexual orientation, and genres of writing. By doing so, one removes any sense of the monolithic or exclusive from the concept of an Alberta literature. The term cannot be considered a simple container of straightforward or obvious labels. If anything, this volume is inclusive of all genres and all backgrounds. This, in fact, may be the distinguishing characteristic of Alberta literature in the twenty-first century – its political, social, and cultural diversity. Finally, there is the unifying goal of creating a literary canon that captures that diversity. The formation of an Alberta canon awaits an acknowledgement from the writing, reading, and critical communities in the province, the region, and the country. The growth of scholarly analysis and discussion of Alberta writing can lead to the articulation of such a canon. However, we are too early in the process to do that.

Because the study of Alberta writing is not a regular feature of academe, though Alberta writers are studied in other contexts and under different rubrics, acceptance of the concept of Alberta literature as a valid field of

study remains an uphill struggle. The weight of historical prejudice and conventional negativity toward provincial identity in literature is a significant barrier. So the concept of Alberta literature remains contested by other boundary concepts and so becomes a work in progress. This volume is a step on the long road of legitimization.

Writers themselves prefer various terms of self-identification that suit their interests, with “Albertan” not high on the list. Likewise, their works of art are always open to numerous overlapping labels, depending on what aspect literary critics are keen on. In an era when poststructuralist, post-modern, and postcolonial thinking continues to be in vogue, though its influence is beginning to wane, the term “Alberta” may seem irrelevant to mainstream criticism. But it is, we would argue, no less “irrelevant” than terms such as “Canadian” and “Prairie” or even “Quebec” literature. Each of these terms needs to be understood as a general context framing numerous cultural grammars and influences that inform a writer’s identity. Alberta’s contemporary literary house is as dependent on global literary trends, the evolving political economy of the province, and the formative influences of linguistic change and developing critical theories as is any Canadian literature.

In the struggle for an Alberta literature, this volume is not blind to the challenges facing the concept. The philosopher Wolfgang Iser, in *The Range of Interpretation* (2000), states: “The task of interpretation is thus twofold: it has to constitute its subject matter, and it has to furnish understanding of what has been constituted.”² This volume attempts to do both. Future volumes will add to this body of criticism and thereby enhance the validity and viability of the concept of Alberta literature as a field of study.

We would like to thank our fellow organisers of the Wild Words conference – poet Tom Wayman, novelist Suzette Mayr, and Harry Vandervlist of the Department of English at the University of Calgary, playwright Clem Martini of the Faculty of Fine Arts, Special Collections librarian Apollonia Steele and Anne Green (Director of WordFest: Calgary-Banff International Writers Festival) for their participation in this task. While not a proceedings, this volume was inspired by the conference and the papers given at the conference. The combination of scholarly and creative energy that went into the conference by both organisers and presenters became the foundation for this book.

NOTES

1. The first was *The Alberta Golden Jubilee Anthology*, ed. W. G. Hardy (Toronto: McClelland and Stewart, 1955); the second was *Chinook Arch: A Centennial Anthology of Alberta Writing*, ed. John Patrick Gillese (Edmonton: Government of Alberta, 1967); and the third was *The Alberta Diamond Jubilee Anthology: A Collection from Alberta's Best Writers*, ed. by John W. Chalmers (Edmonton: Hurtig, 1979).
2. Wolfgang Iser, *The Range of Interpretation* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2000), 59.

