

And the Nobel Prize Goes to... Canada

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Abstract

Canadian studies might be considered a niche topic, while literature is often seen as comprising the works of a bunch of unknown authors from a far-away place. As Canadianist, you often have to deal with those people who ask you in shock: “Whaaaaat? Do Canadians have literature?”, especially when you are trying to explain that this is your field of expertise. But with the opportunity offered by the 2013 Nobel Prize in Literature, I hope that Canadian literature and Canadian issues in general will address a wider variety of readership and not only les connoisseurs. On the one hand, this paper aims to review a few facts and figures related to all the Canadian laureates of the Nobel Prizes. On the other hand, starting from the name of Alice Munro, I investigate briefly the worldwide literature winners, emphasising on contemporary Canadian women’s writing and demonstrating their incredible role within the international canon.

Keywords

Canada, Nobel Prizes, literature, women’s writing

The latest Nobel Prize for Literature was announced in early October and when the prize is awarded to a Canadian writer the event takes the proportions of a once-in-a-lifetime ceremony. As Canadianist, I could not have missed the opportunity to connect this world famous prize to Canada, famous Canadian researchers and Canadian literature. Some of us have been waiting for this moment for a long time: the magic moment when people realize that Canadians do have literature, and good literature, we must add, and that Canada is not America, although they share the same North-American continent!

But literature became just a pretext, a starting point, as there are two main ideas that this paper aims to emphasize. First, I would like to review the names and contributions of the Canadian Laureates for all the Nobel categories, attempting to answer to the difficult question: What makes Canadians be Canadians? Second, starting from Alice Munro, the 2013 literature winner, I also include a brief investigation of the Nobel Prize for literature laureates, with a

particular focus on women writers, expanding my comments to some of the numerous famous contemporary women writers in Canada, whose works deserve to be praised, read and analysed.

In order to understand the subsequent demonstration, a definition could be useful and if we were allowed to define a concept by the aspects it does not entail, we could argue that Canada is not the American 'melting pot', but an 'ethnic mosaic', and it is neither the British Empire, nor the French monarchy. We could not go on without mentioning that Northrop Frye wrote about the "garrison mentality" (Frye 1971: 225) that the early settlers displayed, shaped by a huge and inhospitable wilderness and the constant threat of attack from the Natives on whose land they had built their homes.

Having "*different* ideological baggage, baggage that includes not a revolution and a civil war, but a more conservative cultural history as a colony" (Hutcheon 1988: 3, emphasis in the original), Canadians felt the urge to a cultural identity dissimilar, if not opposite to the American or British models. Although this is not the only possible explanation, we could say that, due to (or because of) the vastness and wilderness of its territory, Canada is not a "melting pot" like its southern neighbour, but a "multicultural mosaic" lacking, quite naturally, the perception of "firm geographical centre or ethnic unity" (Hutcheon 1988: 3), variety being the key word. Consequently, Canada constructs, identifies and defines itself against several centres. Attaining "Canadian consciousness" and cultural "distinctiveness" (Frye 1982: 43) can be achieved only in opposition with the three historical nations: Britain, France and the United States, to which we must add the so long ignored Aboriginal element.

Following the scope of *The Who's Who of Nobel Prize Winners 1901-2000*, this first part of the paper is "conceived to give users quick access to basic information about all Nobel laureates and their achievements" (Sherby 2002: xiii), with a particular focus on the Canadian laureates. According to the official Nobel Prize website⁷, 17 announcements have mentioned "And the Nobel Prize goes to ... Canada", also including the 1976 literature prize awarded to the American writer, born in Canada, Saul Bellow. So, Canada has had two laureates for literature, three for physics, four for chemistry, four for physiology or medicine, three for economic sciences and one for peace.

But the famous Canada-America dichotomy has affected the self-image of the country and even the history of the Canadian Nobel

⁷ <http://www.nobelprize.org/> (accessed October 10, 2013)

winners. The way in which it was affected is best exemplified by the 15th Prime Minister of Canada in a speech in 1969. Pierre Elliot Trudeau referred to Canada as a mouse and to the United States as an elephant, remarking that the relationship of the two North-American countries is, from the perspective of the former, like being “in bed with the elephant”, the small animal being affected by every “twitch and grunt” of the beast. The main challenge is probably to avoid upsetting the big neighbour in the south and resisting the pressure it applies, as the cohabitation experience was quite dangerous and uncomfortable. I would next emphasise what Canadian Nobel winners have in common with the U.S.A. It is clearly the greatest irony for a country that coined the concept of Canadian anti-Americanism to share the worldwide recognition granted by the Nobel with its fiercest enemy. Capturing this unique variant of anti-Americanism means going back in time, before any anti-American feelings. Moreover, it can be implied, as suggested by Granatstein, that the French-English duality and anti-Americanism are central supporting elements of Canadian national identity (Granatstein 1996: 4), to which multiculturalism should be added to the present-day policies. Irrespective of these powerful sentiments the review of the Nobel winners seems to say a different story.

The Canadian Nobel Laureates in Physics

Strictly as a personal note at this point, I would like to remark that all Canadian Nobel laureates are connected to America to a certain extent. Consequently, the three winners of the prize in physics offered by The Royal Swedish Academy of Science were awarded the prize jointly with American researchers, thus, the name of Canada being slightly shadowed.

In 1990, the first Canadian physician to obtain the Nobel Prize was Richard E. Taylor, who, along with Jerome I. Friedman and Henry W. Kendall were praised, according to the nomination, “for their pioneering investigations concerning deep inelastic scattering of electrons on protons and bound neutrons, which have been of essential importance for the development of the quark model in particle physics”⁸, in other words for facilitating our understanding of matter.

⁸ http://www.nobelprize.org/nobel_prizes/physics/laureates/1990/taylor-facts.html (accessed October 30, 2013)

In 1994, another Canadian, Bertram N. Brockhouse shared his prize with the American Clifford G. Shull “for pioneering contributions to the development of neutron scattering techniques for studies of condensed matter”, in particular for his “development of neutron spectroscopy”⁹.

Last but not least so far is Willard S. Boyle, who was awarded a Nobel in 2009, together with George E. Smith, “for the invention of an imaging semiconductor circuit - the CCD sensor”, both working for Bell Laboratories, U.S.A. Charles K. Kao was also appreciated for “groundbreaking achievements concerning the transmission of light in fibres for optical communication”¹⁰.

The Nobel Prize in Chemistry for Canada

A simple observation of the biographical data of the four Canadian chemists awarded a Nobel connects us again to the U.S.A., the four of them being affiliated to American Universities at the time of the award.

Nominated “for his contributions in the field of chemical thermodynamics, particularly concerning the behaviour of substances at extremely low temperatures”¹¹ in 1949, William F. Giaquie was employed by the University of California, Berkley.

The 1983 laureate Henry Taube not only received his Ph.D. from the University of California, Berkley, and started his career there, but he even became an American citizen (Sherby 2002: 37), being a member of the faculty of Stanford University upon receiving the prestigious prize. He was appreciated “for his work on the mechanisms of electron transfer reactions, especially in metal complexes”¹² with considerable applicability in industry.

Sidney Altman shared Taube’s destiny in terms of American education and citizenship. Employed by Yale University in 1989, Altman was conferred the Nobel jointly with the American Thomas R.

⁹ http://www.nobelprize.org/nobel_prizes/physics/laureates/1994/ (accessed October 30, 2013)

¹⁰ http://www.nobelprize.org/nobel_prizes/physics/laureates/2009/ (accessed October 30, 2013)

¹¹ http://www.nobelprize.org/nobel_prizes/chemistry/laureates/1949/giaquie-facts.html (accessed October 30, 2013)

¹² http://www.nobelprize.org/nobel_prizes/chemistry/laureates/1983/taube-facts.html (accessed October 30, 2013)

Cech, “for their discovery of catalytic properties of RNA”¹³, a research with potential in the treatment of diseases.

Rudolph A. Marcus, born in Montreal, but a U.S. citizen later and working for California Institute of Technology (Caltech), Pasadena, was bestowed the prize in 1992. The prize motivation was “for his contributions to the theory of electron transfer reactions in chemical systems”¹⁴, being noted that “the Nobelists’ work has helped in the explanation of phenomena such as photosynthesis, electrically conducting polymers, chemiluminescence, and corrosion (Sherby 2002: 43).

The Canadian Winners of the Nobel in Physiology or Medicine

The prizes granted for Canadian medical researchers take us back to another aspect of the Canadian dilemma – Canada’s British imperial roots and the struggle to detach from them.

Frederick G. Banting, the youngest Medicine laureate to date, shared the 1923 prize with the Scottish John J.R. Macleod, however, both of them working for the University of Toronto. For a Romanian, the motivation is the most intriguing one, as the two researchers were considered the discoverers of insulin. From the very beginning the nomination was considered incomplete as Banting had been collaborating with his medical student Charles H. Best, while Macleod was working with James B. Collip in his Toronto lab. They were the true discoverers of purified insulin that the world knew of at the moment, but previous research had been done separately in Germany and Romania¹⁵.

According to the two online encyclopaedias, as early as 1869, Paul Langerhans, a German student from Berlin, noticed the two types of cells of the pancreas, his discovery, the islet cells bearing now his name (islets of Langerhans). Twenty years later, the Polish-German physician Oskar Minkowski and Joseph von Mering were the first to establish a relation between the pancreas and diabetes, which facilitated the future research.

¹³ http://www.nobelprize.org/nobel_prizes/chemistry/laureates/1989/ (accessed October 30, 2013)

¹⁴ http://www.nobelprize.org/nobel_prizes/chemistry/laureates/1992/marcus-facts.html (accessed October 30, 2013)

¹⁵ According to Encyclopaedia Britannica and Wikipedia at:
<http://www.britannica.com/blogs/2011/07/discovered-insulin/> and
<http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Insulin> (accessed January 8, 2014)

Romanian Nicolae Paulescu started his experiments between 1914 and 1916 in order to obtain an antidiabetic pancreatic extract. Unfortunately, because of World War I, Paulescu interrupted his research and only published his findings in 1921. In addition, his political views as founder of the National Christian Union, a precursor of the Iron Guard, could have also given rise to interpretations.

A Nobel laureate himself, August Krogh was one of the scientists who nominated Banting and Macleod, the other two collaborators being forgotten and no other previous discoveries being mentioned. It is only as an epilogue to this entry of the official website that Paulescu's name is mentioned, along with Joseph von Mering and Oskar Minkowski's, all considered "as worthy, perhaps worthier, Laureates for this prize"¹⁶.

The list of Canadian winners continues with Charles B. Huggins who in 1966 is awarded the Nobel "for his discoveries concerning hormonal treatment of prostatic cancer" along with the American Peyton Rous "for his discovery of tumour-inducing viruses"¹⁷. 1981 was marked by the expertise of three researchers, the Canadian David H. Hubel and his American colleague from Harvard Medical School, Torsten N. Wiesel dividing half of the prize "for their discoveries concerning information processing in the visual system", while the other half was going to Roger W. Sperry for a totally different contribution to the field¹⁸. Employed as well by an American university, Ralph M. Steinman is awarded posthumously the Nobel, "for his discovery of the dendritic cell and its role in adaptive immunity" (2011), but his family receives only half of the prize, as the other half goes to another innovation¹⁹.

Canada and the Prize in Economic Sciences

No obvious changes can be remarked in the distribution of the prizes for the analyses in economics: American organizations had

¹⁶ http://www.nobelprize.org/nobel_prizes/themes/medicine/lindsten/ (accessed January 8, 2014)

¹⁷ http://www.nobelprize.org/nobel_prizes/medicine/laureates/1966/ (accessed February 11, 2014)

¹⁸ http://www.nobelprize.org/nobel_prizes/medicine/laureates/1981/ (accessed February 11, 2014)

¹⁹ http://www.nobelprize.org/nobel_prizes/medicine/laureates/2011/ (accessed February 11, 2014)

already attracted the specialists of their northern neighbour or the Canadian contribution to this domain was always co-authored.

The Sveriges Riksbank Prize or the Nobel Prize in Economic Sciences for 1996 had a long history. According to *The Who's Who of Nobel Prize Winners*, William S. Vickrey solved the issues concerning the income taxation in general terms, not being able to solve it mathematically. Twenty-five years later the Scot James A. Mirrlees identified the missing condition and the two were granted the award “for their fundamental contributions to the economic theory of incentives under asymmetric information” (Sherby 2002: 63-64).

One year later, another couple, this time a Canadian working for Long Term Capital Management, U.S.A, and an American from Harvard University, impressed the Nobel Committee with their “new method to determine the value of derivatives”. Thus, Myron S. Scholes and Robert C. Merton were able to promote “a new formula that allows investors to more accurately determine the value of a stock” (Sherby 2002: 65).

Finally, in 1999, Robert A. Mundell takes credit individually for his research, although teaching at Columbia University since 1974, which confirms again my initial observations. The prize motivation was “for his analysis of monetary and fiscal policy under different exchange rate regimes and his analysis of optimum currency areas”, his contribution influencing the progress of the common European currency (Sherby 2002: 65)

The Nobel Peace Prize

I should remark that the only Canadian Nobel Peace Prize laureate surprised me, as, starting from the common association of Canada with the Peaceable Kingdom, I would have expected more peace prizes. Two historical moments are connected to Lester Bowles Pearson's name, the 1957 laureate. In capacity of Canadian secretary of state for external affairs, Pearson was the one to propose a security association between the U.S.A. and Europe, resulting in the founding of the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO). The “Father of the United Nations Forces”, as member and president, did not give up on his negotiation skills and helped the end of the Suez crisis of 1956, when Egypt had seized the Suez Canal, an international waterway. His contribution to peace brought him the highly-esteemed award for “doing ‘more than anyone else to save the world’ during the crisis”

(Keene 1998: 158). Pearson continued his career at national level to become the Prime Minister of his country between 1963 and 1968.

Concluding this part, we can remark that Canada has either been in the shadow of its big neighbour from the south or under the British influence. In spite of the conflicting political and social views, the Canada-U.S. relation maintains a strong economic connection, based on trade, oil reserves, NAFTA (North American Free Trade Agreement) and the concept of continentalism. Interestingly, in a military sense, the two states have in common “the longest undefended ... border in the world (Roste and Wilson 2011: 10) and, at the same time, a terrible inferiority complex that the Canadians do not seem able to overcome.

In my opinion, these might have been the factors that were the driving forces behind the Canadian researchers' departure to the U.S.A., looking for better studying and working conditions, for finally-aided academic research, in an attempt to achieve the American Dream, irrespective of the general negative perception.

Connecting the two parts of this article, it should be mentioned that the uneasy Canadian-American relationship is sometimes depicted in accusatory terms in literature, hinting at a constant discomfort and uncertainty in the Canadian mentality. For instance, in 1972, the narrator of Margaret Atwood's *Surfacing* shares her inner concerns:

It doesn't matter what country they're from, my head said, they're still Americans, they're what's in store for us, what we are turning into. They spread themselves like a virus, they get into the brain and take over the cells and the cells change from inside and the ones that have the disease can't tell the difference. ... If you look like them and talk like them and think like them then you are them, I was saying, you speak their language, a language is everything you do. (Atwood 1972: 139)

The Nobel Prize in Literature

Moving to the second part, 106 Nobel Prizes in Literature have been awarded since 1901, to 110 persons in total, as four prizes were divided between two authors. Because of the dramatic circumstances in Europe, the prize was not awarded on seven occasions: in 1914, 1918, 1935, 1940, 1941, 1942, and 1943.

In terms of facts and figures, the youngest Literature Laureate was Rudyard Kipling who was 42 years old the moment the prize was awarded in 1907. Doris Lessing is still ranked as the oldest Literature Laureate, as she was 88 when awarded the Prize in 2007. On average,

the age of the literature winners is 64. There are 25 languages these laureates have been writing in, the top three options for authors being English (27), French (13), German (13) and Spanish (11).

Between 1901 and 2013, there have been 13 women selected for this desired position in literature, a number which could be argued as extremely reduced in the whole context of the 110 winners. I am not trying to be an ardent feminist who favours women disconsidering qualitative criteria, I am simply reviewing the statistical data. The 13 lucky women come from various geographical areas, wrote or are still writing in various languages and cover most of the literary genres (Table 1)²⁰.

Year	Name	Country	Language
1909	Selma Lagerlöf	Sweden	Swedish
1926	Grazia Deledda	Italy	Italian
1928	Sigrid Undset	Denmark (resident in Norway)	Norwegian
1938	Pearl Buck	U.S.A.	English
1945	Gabriela Mistral	Chile	Spanish
1966	Nelly Sachs (shared the Prize with Shmuel Yosef Agnon)	Germany	German
1991	Nadine Gordimer	South Africa	English
1993	Toni Morrison	U.S.A.	English
1996	Wisława Szymborska	Poland	Polish
2004	Elfriede Jelinek	Austria	German
2007	Doris Lessing	Persia (now Iran; resident in the U.K.)	English
2009	Herta Müller	Romania (resident in Germany)	German
2013	Alice Munro	Canada	English

Tabel 1. Women Nobel Laureates for Literature

Canada has won the Nobel in literature twice, in 1976 represented by the American writer, born in Canada, Saul Bellow (a debated issue at the time and even at present) and in 2013 by Alice Munro. Leading our discussion towards women writers and Canada, I would like to create a context for the constant struggle to understand what makes Canadian literature Canadian.

²⁰ http://www.nobelprize.org/nobel_prizes/facts/literature/index.html (Accessed October 10, 2013)

Thus, we are entitled to ask ourselves: who is a Canadian writer?, the possible answers ranging from a person who has “a birth certificate or a passport or a certificate of citizenship” (Russell Smith in the article in *The Globe and Mail* on November 21, 2013)²¹, to complex definitions of literature provided by the critics.

Canadian literature: a construct bounded by the nation, a cultural byproduct of the Cold War era, a nationalist discourse with its roots in colonial legacies, a literature that has assumed transnational and global currency, a tradition often marked by uncertainty about its value and relevance, a corpus of texts in which, albeit not without anxiety and resistance, spaces have been made for First Nations and diasporic voices. (Kamboureli 2007: vii)

Although not satisfactorily complete, in including all the contributors to the field, this is a quintessential summary of what Canadian literature stands for nowadays. “Canadianness” cannot be detached from historical, geographic, economic, and social aspects, as suggested by Smaro Kamboureli in the quotation I provided above. In terms of administrative and literary criteria, Saul Bellow does not seem to fit the profile, Smith appraising Munro for being the first Canadian Nobel literature laureate.

But starting from the last articulation of the quote and owing Munro a contextualization, I consider it is compulsory to add AND WOMEN’S WRITING in order to offer a complete image of what Canadian literature stands for, while at the same time creating a framework for Alice Munro.

In order to understand the incredibly important role Canadian women writers have fulfilled, my focus will be narrowed down to English-Canadian literature and to novels, although at least short-story writing has to be mentioned in relation to Alice Munro, the “master of the contemporary short story”, as the Nobel committee motivated their choice. In order to introduce the current understanding of the notion of Canadian literature, we have to remember the shift from a sense of Anglo-Saxon Canadian identity to the variety of voices that multicultural Canada has encouraged to speak.

One of the main assumptions that this analysis is based on is that Canadian literature is “distinctive” and that Canadian women’s fiction can be considered problematic for the two issues it

²¹ <http://www.theglobeandmail.com/arts/books-and-media/why-do-we-struggle-with-what-makes-canadian-literature/article15536056/> (Accessed January 16, 2014)

encapsulates – “nationality and gender” (Howells 1987: 1). Canadian literary tradition and the numerous female voices (some representative names will be mentioned below) demand an answer to the question that Howells was asking in 1987: “Why are there so many good Canadian women writers?”. One of the possible answers lies in “the ideological coincidence between nationalism and feminism” (Howells 1987: 3). Or we can move on to Howells’s subsequent analysis of the prominence of Canadian women writers on the international stage, their access to literary prizes and above all, the rich ethnic and racial background of the respective writers (Howells 2003: 1). Her arguments for the possible answers to “Who am I?” and “Where do I belong?” connected with the 1990s generation are clearly a new version of Northrop Frye’s inquiry “Where am I?” and the literary context before the 1960s. The need to place oneself spatially, characteristic of the settler mentality, was being replaced by the need to place oneself in a conceptual framework, as a consequence of the new theories on identity.

However, if on the one hand we could not speak about Canadian literature without mentioning Northrop Frye’s studies (*Divisions on a Ground* and also the “Conclusion” to the second edition of *Literary History of Canada*), his theories are part of an old-fashioned critical thinking. On the other hand, the British academia considers that even Howells’s articulation of these questions in 2003 moved beyond the issues of belonging and nationalism. Various writings such as Frank Davey’s book, *Post-National Arguments: The Politics of the Anglophone-Canadian Novel since 1967* (1993), or the collection of essays edited by Smaro Kamboureli and Roy Miki (*Trans.Can.Lit: Resituating the Study of Canadian Literature*, 2007), from whose “Preface” I quoted above, or the notions of multiculturalism, trans-nationalism, diaspora, etc., demonstrate a distinct preoccupation of the present-day Canadian studies and consequently of the various tools which could be used to approach it.

In his *Dictionary of Literary Biography*, W.H. New discusses the difficulty of dividing Canadian writers into chronological periods and the struggle to define terms such as “Canadian writer” and “Canadian writing”. Neither of these “is bound by the strict history of nationhood, the strict geography of political affiliation or setting or residence, or the strict and limiting adherence to a single, finite ‘Canadian sensibility’” (New 1986: ix). Often “subjective and arbitrary” (ix), his divisions in the volume – covering the period before 1918, the

one dedicated to the interval between 1920 and 1959, and the volumes on post-1960 writers – remain relevant to the understanding of the beginnings of a genuine Canadian literary canon. The *Cambridge Companion to Canadian Literature*, edited by Eva-Marie Kröller, dedicates a whole chapter to “Writing by Women”, reiterating the problem of chronological arrangements, which Howells calls “‘generational’, with an emphasis on literary mothers and their inheritors” (Howells 2005: 198)

Although in his chapter, entitled “Fiction”, W.H New divided literature in decades and discussed the 1950s as a mainly male period, “MacLennan’s decade”, and the 1960s as the decade of Malcolm Lowry and of Margaret Laurence, this does not mean that there were two separate groups. The writings of the generations of authors overlapped, there were both men and women, hence the difficulty to organise the volumes of biographies that New was talking about in the “Foreword” to his dictionary. In turn, the 1970s ushered in “science fiction ... the surreal, the absurd” (New 1976: 233-34) and gave a voice to ethnic minorities.

W.H. New also states in another book that one can notice a “continuity with the past” of the fiction between 1960 and 1973 (New 1976: 233), connecting it to pre-war literature. The fiction of the ‘60s and early ‘70s was characterised by features such as: “academic, sometimes arcane, usually middle class in its affirmation and rejection of values”, also concerned with psychic effects, the presence of landscape, questioning personal and societal values (New 1976: 233). Above all, “the decade of the 1960s had a palpable effect on Canadian writing” (New 1976: 233), an effect which Linda Hutcheon considers as extending up to the ‘80s, exemplified by the focus of fiction on “ecology, peace, civil, and women’s rights” (Hutcheon 1990: 73).

In this context, the prominence of the second generation of writers is easily understood. Various authors associated themselves with the “tribe”, as Margaret Laurence named the group of writers active at her time: Mordecai Richler, Adele Wiseman, Alice Munro, Robert Kroetsch, Rudy Wiebe, Marian Engel, and younger writers such as Margaret Atwood, Dave Godfrey, and Graeme Gibson who discovered a Canadian literature in its own terms (Laurence 1978: 19), and whose names have acquired international renown. If we just quote some of the personalities named by New in the two volumes dedicated to *Canadian Writers Since 1960*, then the literary stage in the post-1960s was also populated by other figures: Bill Bissett (deliberately not

capitalised), Austin C. Clarke, Leonard Cohen, Frank Davey, Timothy Findley, Dennis Lee, Jay Macpherson, John Metcalf, Michael Ondaatje, Phyllis Webb.

Although the names mentioned are not only those of women writers, many English Canadian authors also turned to the Canadian female literary tradition, as suggested by Steenman-Marcusse, resorting to Canada's distant past, "to their nineteenth-century pioneering, colonial foremothers" (Steenman-Marcusse 2001: 3) in order to find the true female Canadian identity. Catharine Parr Traill's collection of letters and diary fragments (*The Backwoods of Canada*, 1836) offers important information about survival in Canada and the experiences of the first women settlers, which inspired Laurence's novel *The Diviners*. Similarly, Margaret Atwood would also find inspiration in Susanna Moodie's settler experiences (one of Traill's sisters), turning them into a series of poems, once again confirming Steenman-Marcusse's theory. But we have to remark the presence of some other female literary celebrities whose writings paved the way for the next generation of worldwide famous Canadian female authors. Sara Jeanette Duncan's novel *The Imperialist* (1904) explores "imperial politics" (Hammill 2007: 9) and illustrates a small town society "ruled by conventions that cannot tolerate difference" (Bottez 2004: 41), giving at the same time, a sense of the national Canadian identity. The exciting series of novels by Lucy Maud Montgomery casting little Anne, the first one being *Anne of Green Gables* (1908), has been a success ever since, setting the story in what has been considered "an idyllic Prince Edward Island village" (Hammill 2007: 9). In this short list of models for the future generations, Faye Hammill also includes Marshall Saunders and Mazo de la Roche as representative for the 1920s.

Howells sees Laurence, Atwood and Munro as "mothers" of a whole generation of young artists as their reputations and their "strong voices have paved the way for the reception of many women writers since" (Howells 2005: 195). She also added, in the context of access to prizes, that all the three ladies of Canadian literature received their first Governor-General's Award in the 1960s: Laurence for her novel *A Jest of God* (1966), Atwood for her poetry collection *The Circle Game*, the same year, and Munro for her short-story collection *Dance of the Happy Shades* (1968). In the next decade, of the 1970s to the 1980s, all of them received their second Governor-General's Award.

As suggested earlier, the Canadian literary space was making room not only to the female voices, but also to the female ethnic and racial minorities, depicting their own habits and beliefs from the insider's perspective, by means of direct life experience. One of the first cases is Maria Campbell's novel *Halfbreed*, published in 1973, recounting Maria's childhood and teenage experiences in a Canada which was not yet ready for its ethnic and racial diversity, which had not witnessed the present-day social and cultural policies. While the Metis "laughed, cried, danced, and fought and shared everything", even the other ethnic minorities, immigrant groups such as the Germans and Swedes, were biased as "[t]hey didn't understand [them], just shook their heads and thanked God they were different" (Campbell 1973: 28).

The emphasis on contemporary women writers could continue with other names from the literary stage: Joan Clark, Alice Munro and Margaret Atwood (mentioned already), Dionne Brand, Shani Mootoo, Lee Maracle, Sandra Laronde, Eden Robinson. The messages of their writings went even further, interrogating the feminine (again), language, race, the diaspora, utopias, sexual relations, the connections between our world and the worlds beyond people's normal perception.

These short remarks about the Canadian literary context included here were meant to present a very general and for sure incomplete picture of the literary stage in Canada. But this year's Nobel Prize laureate deserves a more in-depth commentary.

Alice Munro is known for her numerous collections of short stories she has published over the years. In 1968 she published her first volume, *Dance of the Happy Shades*, followed in 1971 by a collection of stories entitled *Lives of Girls and Women*, which critics have described as a *Bildungsroman*. Other famous titles include *Who Do You Think You Are?* (1978), *The Moons of Jupiter* (1982), *Hateship, Friendship, Courtship, Loveship, Marriage* (2001), *Runaway* (2004), *The View from Castle Rock* (2006) and *Too Much Happiness* (2009). Her most recent collection is *Dear Life* (2012), in total 20 collections up to the present moment, which might be her final number, as she has decided to step out of the limelight.

Munro's short stories are set in rural communities and small towns in the south-west of Ontario, her home territory, focusing on ordinary people's lives. As Coral Ann Howells suggests, Munro is fascinated by the history and the geography of the small places where the plot is set, but she believes in a hidden side of it "a darker secret

world of scandal, violence, child abuse, and sudden startling deaths: ‘The part of the country I come from is absolutely Gothic. You can’t get it all down’” (Munro qtd. in Howells 2005: 200). From this perspective, Linda Hutcheon includes Alice Munro’s *Jubilee* in a series of other famous Canadian small towns: Margaret Laurence’s *Manawaka*, Robertson Davies’ *Deptford*, Margaret Atwood’s *Griswold*, Matt Cohen’s *Salem*, Graham Woods’s *Tamerack*, Jamie Brown’s *Shrewsbury* (Hutcheon 1988: 197), to which Nora Foster Stovel adds some British mythical places, such as: Walter Scott’s *Waverley*, Thomas Hardy’s *Wessex*, or the American author William Faulkner’s *Yoknapatawpha County* (Stovel 2008: 156).

By means of one her topics in the ‘70s she suggests the “new feminist self-consciousness and sense of entitlement” of the woman writer (Howells 2005: 197). Same as Laurence’s *The Diviners* (1974), Atwood’s *Lady Oracle* (1976), Carol Shields’s *Small Ceremonies* (1976) and Audrey Thomas’s *Latakia* (1979), Munro’s *Lives of Girls and Women* (1971) casts a protagonist who is a fiction writer, this pervasive topic creating a strong continuity between these gifted women.

As all Canadian women writers, Munro confirms the rule and is modest, so modest! In 1973, in an interview with Graeme Gibson, she was simply saying about herself: “I’ve read about myself, you know, Alice Munro has produced little, and I think it’s a miracle that I’ve produced anything” (qtd. in Howells 2005: 198), more worried about the household duties that took up most of the women’s time and the general perception that writing “wasn’t part of the accepted thing for a girl or woman to do at that time”, as Munro herself suggested in an interview (qtd. in Howells 2005: 198).

Forty years later, first interviewed by Adam Smith, immediately after the announcement of the Nobel Prize, Alice Munro thanked for the Prize and said: “This is quite a wonderful thing for me, it’s a wonderful thing for the short story”, admitting her “unbelief” when hearing the news. She did not think of herself only, typically Canadian, but she hoped that this prize will bring a bigger readership to the short story in general, a genre in itself which should not be considered something that “people do before they write their first novel”²². Going back in time, to her letters, we discover the origins of

²² <http://www.nobelprize.org/mediaplayer/index.php?id=1961> (Accessed January 16, 2014)

these feelings. In 1986, Munro was a short story writer feeling uneasy with the reluctance of the publishers to print her work and the general expectations of stories to turn into novels. But supported by a good friend and exceptional editor, Doug Gibson, she started accepting her literary status and “that a book of short stories could be published and promoted as major fiction”, “a fairly revolutionary idea” at the time (Munro qtd. in Gibson 2011: 345)

On the special occasion of the Nobel, Munro had the courtesy to have a second longer telephone conversation with Adam Smith, although it is generally acknowledged that she does not give interviews. She advises on the benefits of writing short-stories, on the merits of this genre in itself, reminding of the time when she was young and responsible for taking care of her family. She speaks of the power of her stories “to arrest people, to shock them, to surprise them, to make them think of something a little different”²³. She refers to many exciting things, as she does in the Nobel lecture, “In Her Own Words” pre-recorded for the ceremony on 10 December 2013.

I would like to conclude in Alice Munro’s own literary words, seizing the Canadianess of her world. Randomly selected for this purpose, the collection *The Love of a Good Woman*, published in 1998 and awarded several times, drew my attention. In the title story, the description of the town makes us think of some small and forgotten places in Canada where nothing ever happens, ...

The planks and a heap of foundation stones and a lilac bush and some huge apple trees deformed by black knot and the shallow ditch of the millrace that filled up with nettles every summer were the only other signs of what had been here before.

There was a road, or a track, coming back from the township road, but it had never been gravelled, and appeared on the maps only as a dotted line, a road allowance. It was used quite a bit in the summer by people driving to the river to swim or at night by couples looking for a place to park. The turnaround spot came before you got to the ditch, but the whole area was so overrun by nettles, and cow parsnip, and woody wild hemlock in a wet year, that cars would sometimes have to back out all the way to the proper road. (Munro 1998: 12-13)

²³http://hwcdn.libsyn.com/p/4/c/e/4ce4fc7cca4871a0/2._Alice_Munro._Literature_2013.mp3?c_id=6499342&expiration=1394193632&hwt=345a4d3026c4a72d2021e3cf87311c43 (Accessed March 3, 2014)

...until, a gifted and dedicated citizen, one of the many mentioned in the pages above, makes the entire world think of, speak of and applaud Canada!

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