

History and Region in English-Canadian Fiction: *The Big Why*⁽¹⁾

Christopher J. Armstrong

A renewed interest in historical matters is a salient feature of today's cultural landscape, encompassing both the popular imagination and the political arena. Take, on the one hand, the North American commercial market for history-branded products in film and television, genre fiction, and games; the importance of 'heritage' to the tourist industry; and the bewildering variety of popular appropriations ranging from the ongoing enthusiasm for family history to the activities of re-creationists such the Society for Creative Anachronism, not to mention reading circles, discussion groups and personal websites devoted exclusively to historical topics. While it would be fair to characterize this 'popular' historical imagination as nostalgic, commercialized, infused with personal meaning and often eccentric taste, there is clearly also a vital contemporary function for history in what Charles Taylor calls the politics of recognition. History has become an arena of political contestation in the struggle for group rights. In Canada, the late twentieth century turn to history has often reflected the politics of a settler nation in which

two conquered peoples--the national minorities of Quebecois and aboriginal First Nations--vie with a predominantly European anglophone majority. Add to this bicultural (English-French) and aboriginal dynamic the fact of Canada's multicultural character, officially recognized in 1971, and the added external pressures from its southern neighbour--since the postwar era an increasingly integrated 'branch-plant' economy--and we have an extremely complex postcolonial situation. Even within this complexity, region and regionalism--the legacy of colonial boundaries and the result of ongoing metropolitan dominance--remain an important feature of politics and cultural life. In this area, too, history and historical discourse serve struggles for recognition and identity, especially in the postmodern tendency of recent historical research and historical fiction to reject 'total history' in favour of particular histories and identities. This essay seeks to shed light on the literary use of history in Canada's eastern-most and youngest province, Newfoundland, and in particular in the pages of Michael Winter's recently published novel, *The Big Why* (2004), a faux memoir of American painter Rockwell Kent's brief but tempestuous Newfoundland sojourn at the beginning of the First World War. In the novel, Winter continues his exploration of the cultural politics of Newfoundland past and present, in particular the role of intellectuals in the construction of regional cultures.

There are good reasons to regard the historical novel as especially hostile to the politics of any particular social constituency or place. Properly a 19th-century invention, the form draws on

national crisis in order to affirm the nation-state order. Presenting an image of the social totality and the factional strife informing the crisis, such fictions stage the appearance of a heroic leader and the subsequent unification of the nation. So argues Georg Lukács in his monograph on the historical novel (32-36). In the novels of Sir Walter Scott (1771-1832) in particular, says Lukacs, an unremarkable representative of the middle class bears witness to the political strife of his time, becoming familiar with the (often extremist) representatives of the rival factions, but valorizing a typically English "middle way" through the chaos. Thus, the historical novel follows the lead of mainstream historical writing to affirm the nation of the present as an established fact, as the best possible outcome of historical struggle. But the writing of history and of historical fiction is in no way obliged to follow such a project. Indeed, the last few decades have witnessed a growing rejection of the national, or totalizing, approach to history and a preference for what could be called the little histories of classes, ethnic groups, and a host of neglected others. This desire to banish the 'totalizing' gesture that Lukacs identifies in the historical novel is usually attributed to post-modernism, in particular to a tendency in fiction that Linda Hutcheon calls historiographic metafiction. The trend, Patricia Waugh observes, reflects a recurring self-consciousness in literary fiction (5), in which the act of telling the story receives nearly as much attention as the story itself, which is not to say mere indulgence. If literary self-consciousness involves an interrogation of the structure of

fictional narrative, then the postmodern impulse has the potential to enlighten by calling attention to the 'fictional' nature of reality (11), including our understanding of the past.

Interestingly, at about the same time as postmodernism was developing as a literary tendency in fiction, English-speaking intellectuals were beginning to characterize Canada as a postmodern nation. In politics, for example, Canada has emerged since the 1960s as an increasingly decentralized federation, with Québecois and aboriginal First Nations, regional blocs and often strong provincial governments, not to mention multiculturalism, exerting considerable pressure not merely on federal powers but also on the legitimation of a common set of national symbols and traditions. It was, paradoxically, Prime Minister Pierre Elliot Trudeau (1919-2000), unanimously viewed as a staunch nationalist, presider over the establishment of both bilingualism and multiculturalism, who insisted that Canada would have two official languages but no official culture--hardly a polity in the mould of the European nation-state. Hence, it is fair to say that something resembling postmodernism--to rework François Lyotard's famous phrase--namely, an incredulity toward the metanarrative of the nation is a common Canadian structure of feeling. This has meant that, in the writing of history and historical fiction, there has been considerable challenge to the idea of a national school of history and to received views of Canadian history. As critics such as Linda Hutcheon (1988), Martin Kuester (1992), Marie Vautier (1998), Herb Wyile (2002), and Marc Colavincenzo (2003) have demon-

strated--to mention only the book-length studies--region along with class, race and gender have played an important role in shaping Canadian historical fiction of the last few decades.

Implicit in all of this is the idea that nation is a symbolic construct, a network of representational spaces (flags, icons, landscapes, discourses, etc.) which may reflect but more often than not conceal political and economic realities. Urban political and commercial elites play a central role in shaping the material base of the nation, in which uneven development of resources and institutions invariably results. Region, on this reading, is an effect of uneven development. This, to be sure, is the case for Atlantic Canada⁽²⁾, where a range of factors have contributed to economic and political decline, resulting in the image of 'have not' region. With faltering industrial development and the volatility of resource markets, Atlantic Canada, and Newfoundland in particular, have sought other means of development. The province of Newfoundland, formerly a colony of England and for a brief period an independent nation, developed an economy based primarily on the fishery, resulting in the establishment of scattered coastal fishing communities called outports. By the turn of the century, with the establishment of improved communication infrastructure, tourism had begun to emerge as a tool of economic development in Newfoundland, "not as an alternative to industrialization but as a key component of the modernization of the economy" (Overton 11; author's emphasis). Drawing on the work of Henri Lefebvre, Dean McCannell, Jackson Lears, John Urry, and others, James Overton of Memorial University in St.

John's argues that a "particular version of Newfoundland was 'invented' for tourists" (17). Largely composed of middle class intellectuals, the movement for tourist development--comprising both 'insiders' and 'outsiders'--shared a broadly similar world view and aim, namely, that of promoting a Newfoundland national identity as well as publicizing the province as a "therapeutic space." Paradoxically, this "leisure ethos" is rooted in an ideology of romantic anti-capitalism, a complex of notions about the modern world and its effects on mental and physical health, including the idea that primitive nature can serve as an antidote to modern alienation. It is this class of intellectuals and this ideology that Winter's fiction explores in Newfoundland past and present.

Despite periodic residence outside Newfoundland, English-born Michael Hardy Winter (b. 1965) writes exclusively about the province, especially the urban milieu of the capital, St. John's (pop. 172, 918, 2001), and Corner Brook (pop. 20, 103, 2001), where he grew up. A graduate of Memorial University in St. John's, editor of a collection of short fiction from the Burning Rock Collective (1994) and co-editor of the now defunct Tickle Ace literary journal, Winter has produced two collections of short stories (1994, 1999) and two novels (2000, 2004) to date, the latest offering a work of historical fiction entitled *The Big Why*, which is set in Newfoundland just prior to World War One. *The Big Why* is a fictional memoir of American painter and socialist Rockwell Kent, who settled at Brigus, an outport community located about 80 kilometres west of St. John's. The novel

also features appearances by famed Newfoundland explorer Bob Bartlett and prominent Newfoundland judge D.W. Prowse (1834-1914), author of the exhaustive *A History of Newfoundland* (1895).

In many ways, the novel continues preoccupations with the ideology and social function of the contemporary artist and his/her ambivalent relations with the professional middle class. Offering a longer view of this class formation, the story of Rockwell Kent has the added advantage of allowing Winter to explore an historical instance of his ongoing interest in the artist as spy. Partly a victim of war hysteria, the opinionated, willful and often belligerent Kent--prone to flaunt his love of German culture and scorn authority--was eventually deported from the colony on suspicion of being a German spy. So much for the historical matter. Despite the shift to prewar Newfoundland there remain generic and stylistic continuities between the earlier fiction and the recent venture into historical territory. This raises questions about deliberate postmodern manipulations of historical realism and accuracy. In addition to these continuities, Winter has frequently foreshadowed future projects through his artist protagonist Gabriel English. Most significantly, *This All Happened* (2000), a fictional memoir set in contemporary St John's, finds Winter's writer-protagonist working on (but not completing) an historical novel about Kent and Bartlett, ruminating on how to infuse historical fiction with the spark of human of emotion, and populating his fictional past with the personalities and events of his own St. John's present.

Taken together, this writing trajectory bears comparison another form of metafiction, the 'self-begetting novel,' which as Patricia Waugh points out, dramatizes the narrator's struggle to a state of conscious in which he or she could produce the novel in the reader's hand. According to Waugh, this form reflects a modernist emphasis on artistic vocation and consciousness, while in its postmodern variant, the metafictional text moves instead toward a sense of the abiding 'fictionality' of the world (Waugh 13-6). Much here deserves further comment, but I want to focus on the following line of inquiry: namely, that Winter's postmodernism lies not so much in any overtly formal properties of novelistic self-consciousness (narrative intrusions, frame stories, linguistic play) but in a recognition of the construction of the past through the activities of both the state and the private sector, of both 'insiders' and 'outsiders,' to advance the heritage industry, which as I have suggested, has been an important feature of Newfoundland's economic development since the turn of the last century.

Unlike the broad totalizing canvas of the historical novel, Winter favours an exploration of the private, intimate life. And as the study of oral history makes clear, memory, the memoir, and life writing in general make a difference in our understanding of past, revealing personal and often intimate factors informing the acts and beliefs of historical individuals. Winter's *The Big Why*, brings this approach to bear primarily on two renowned twentieth-century heroes--the Newfoundland arctic explorer Bob Bartlett (1875-1946) and the American painter

Rockwell Kent (1882-1971) (and who can dispute the role of heroes to our sense of history?). Kent occupies the narrative centre of the novel and overlays his account with the air of confession: "Part of me has always regretted my Newfoundland plans. That is the reason for this book. To discuss openly the very events that caused my will to be rebuked" (361). As a result of its intimate, confessional focus, a very different image of both emerges.

Recognized as a major American artist, writer and illustrator, Rockwell Kent was born in Tarrytown, New York, and began his training as an artist at age 10, eventually attending the New York School of Art. Kent also studied architecture at Columbia University but abandoned the course in order to take up art full time, coming under the influence of Abbott Henderson Thayer (1849-1921), an ardent transcendentalist and follower of Emerson, who also stimulated his interest in exploration. Kent was fascinated by the exploits of Roald Amundsen (1872-1928) and Robert E. Peary (1856-1920), and later developed friendships with such explorers as Knud Rasmussen (1879-1933), Peter Freuchen (1886-1957), and Vilhjalmur Stefansson (1879-1962) as well as Bob Bartlett. Through much of his life Kent travelled to far-flung, isolated locales, to explore, paint and often to take up residence: the remote Monhegan island, off the coast of Maine (1905), the outport of Brigus, Newfoundland (1914-15), Fox Island, Alaska (1918), Isla Grande de Tierra del Fuego (1922), and Greenland (three times in 1929 and 1931). A committed and outspoken socialist Kent often created controversy, and his career would later suffer because of his socialism. In 1938, he was

commissioned to paint a mural at the headquarters of the US Post Office, but he raised a storm by including an anti-government slogan composed in the language of the Inuit in the mural. From 1944 to 1953, he was president of the International Workers Order, a pro-communist group. Unsurprisingly, his reputation suffered greatly during the McCarthy era; and in protest to American hostility and neglect, he donated a great number of paintings and drawings to the Soviet Union, becoming a member of the national academy of Fine Arts and winning the Lenin Peace Prize in 1967 (whose prize money he donated to the people of North Vietnam). As a commercial artist he won considerable popularity: his prints for the 1930 Donnelly edition of Herman Melville's *Moby Dick* were widely praised and helped put Melville's work back in vogue in American critical circles. He also illustrated editions of Shakespeare's complete works, Voltaire's *Candide*, Goethe's *Faust*, Whitman's *Leaves of Grass* and many others. Kent was also a prolific writer himself, of non-fiction, memoirs of his travels and life writing, in particular, his 1955 autobiography *It's Me, O Lord*. That combined with his showing in more than 40 exhibits between 1928 and 1938 prompted the *New York Times* to declare (before his virtual disappearance in Cold War America), "That day will mark a prece-dent, which brings no news of Rockwell Kent."

Born in the outport community of Brigus in Conception Bay, on the Avalon peninsular of the island of Newfoundland, Robert Abram Bartlett followed family tradition, serving an apprenticeship in the Newfoundland fishing and sealing industry,

before joining the English merchant service. In 1898 he signed on with American arctic explorer Captain Robert E. Peary, and in 1905 advanced to captain of the *Roosevelt*, the ship in which Peary would conduct his most famous polar explorations, namely, his 1909 discovery of the North Pole. It was a feat in which Bartlett played an important role, receiving the Hubbard Medal from the National Geographic Society and catapulting himself to fame as an internationally recognized explorer. He won further distinction for his heroic rescue of the men of the Canadian Arctic Expedition in 1913-14, an episode in the background of Winter's novel. In all, Bartlett made some 40 expeditions into the arctic, logging more than 200,000 miles of ocean voyaging in his life. Today, Bartlett is a Newfoundland icon, and his residence in Brigus, Hawthorne Cottage, is now a provincial heritage site (Historic Sites Association of Newfoundland and Labrador).

Winter's Rockwell Kent takes shape in a retrospective narration of his Newfoundland exploits. He is an artist in quest of an authenticity disappearing in the modern age. Scorning a New York art scene in which abstraction is in vogue (or so he claims), he follows the advice of his friend Gerald Thayer, who insists that Kent must "move to a small place, the periphery, to a community that is one organism and does not change. That loves itself" (7). Meeting Captain Bob Bartlett in New York, Kent is attracted to Bartlett's character, especially a sense of belonging to place: "The exuberance of Bob Bartlett, the generosity of his laughter coupled with my own contempt for New York,

made me want to go to his country" (7-8), Kent surmising that "he must come from a wonderful place." Kent, for his part, confesses, "I had no sense of home" (8). Newfoundland and Kent's plans there fill a need for work and commitment to family, yet it seems also to be escape from the bite of temptation: "I wanted to focus on hard work and my family. I wanted to be faithful" (21). Indeed, although a declared atheist, Kent resorts to prayer: "I asked God to make me strong and make me love the things that were good. I wanted to love Kathleen. I wanted her to be enough and to be a vessel through which all the things of the world could be funnelled" (63). Kent feels the potential of being remade in his new land, to simplify if not escape his former self and to consciously fashion a new one. When quoted Thoreau's mantra 'I went to the woods because I wanted to live deliberately,' Kent replies, "That's me" (35).

The edenic gesture cannot escape the inevitable fall: the expected infidelity but also Kent's bearing the identity fashioned for him. On numerous occasions, he is brought face to face with the image mirrored by others, namely, that of a foreigner, an American from a privileged class. Kent, however, would prefer to be regarded not as "the painter," nor the worthy recipient his class privileges. Rather, he craves to be viewed simply as "a human being on a quest for the good life" (33). Yet in the more intense confessional moments of the novel, Kent realizes the futility of this wish. He even questions the motives that brought him in search of the simple life:

I was a modern man living an old fashioned life. I was

trying to blend the two and it seemed a bad idea I thought I could disappear in Brigus and lead a pure, natural life, free of suspicion. But I was misguided. My motives were not true. I didn't just want to live here, I wanted its customs to inform my work and make it unique. I wanted to make my name in Brigus. I was using the culture. I was exploiting it. And what I was creating is not what happened here. (271)

In addition to much else, *The Big Why* is about the motivations and effects of intellectual, especially artistic work, at the level of private life as well as that of public culture. Art that is true to life compromises, even betrays it, just as Kent's wish to be faithful to his wife fails. Similarly, the artist in search of the simple life, of an authentic culture in the modern age--an abiding theme of American (perhaps also Canadian) literature, as David E. Shi has demonstrated--cannot remain faithful to it, will betray it with his art. Yet there appears to be no escape from the dilemma. Men and women live increasingly rootless existences. The majority of them seek only survival--like many of the ordinary Newfoundlanders in the novel--while others are privileged enough to go in quest of the authentic. In this regard, the artist hero, the modern Ulysses, begins to look more like the tourist, a wayfarer for postmodern times.

Notes

- (1) Research for this essay was made possible by a special joint research grant (*Tokutei Kenkyu*) from Chukyo University, 2004-5.
- (2) The four eastern Canadian provinces of Nova Scotia, New Brunswick, Prince Edward Island and Newfoundland are typically grouped as a region under the name 'Atlantic Canada' for the obvious reasons of geographical location and a shared maritime dependence. Atlantic Canada is itself an amalgamation of 'the Maritimes' (NS, NB and PEI above), which joined Canada between 1867 and 1871, and Newfoundland and Labrador which entered confederation in 1949 after a narrowly victorious plebiscite. In this essay, I employ the term region with an emphasis on its implications for political economy, namely uneven capitalist development.

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