

The Thesis and the Book

Laura Smyth Groening, *E.K. Brown: A Study in Conflict*
Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1993. x + 235 pp.,
photographs.

How does a dissertation become an important book? Many are written, but few are published. Start with an exceptional dissertation, such as Laura Smyth Groening's "Art, Vision, and Process: The Literary Criticism of E.K. Brown" (Carleton 1985). Focussing on the published criticism, Groening noticed that Brown modified the Arnoldian values of his early criticism as he became increasingly active in Canadian literature. His engagement with social issues culminated in the publication of *On Canadian Poetry* in 1943. Shortly thereafter, Brown changed again, so that in his 1948 *Matthew Arnold: A Study in Conflict*, he regards Arnold's social involvements as lapses from the ideal of "disinterestedness." With *Rhythm in the Novel* (1950), Brown evolved his own kind of "pure formalism." His death in 1951 at the age of forty-five ended a career that was remarkably successful despite its brevity. Groening's dissertation was already the best account of it.

Groening has now revised and expanded her argument, and the changes are almost always improvements — that is how a good dissertation becomes an important book. The title is now *E.K. Brown: A Study in Conflict*, echoing the title of Brown's 1948 book on Arnold. As Groening argues, "If *A Study in Conflict* is a testimony to the presence of tension in a critic's work, that critic is not Matthew Arnold, but E.K. Brown as he rejects the social dimension that was such a strong element in the criticism he practised in *On Canadian Poetry*" (138). Although this point was noted in the dissertation, it is held in focus throughout the book, which shows Brown gradually coming to a sense of conflict between Arnold's universal values and those of a new national literature. Before he

could write *On Canadian Poetry*, Brown "had to develop a greater awareness of the ways in which Arnold . . . could present problems for a critic like Brown who was as interested in the fledgling literatures of the New World as he was in the best that had been said and thought in the world" (50-51). Groening convincingly demonstrates that Brown discovered these problems through considering the evolution of American literature, especially in his 1934 *Dalhousie Review* article, "The National Idea in American Criticism": "By endorsing Emerson's rejection of the authority of the English tradition, Brown was, in some important regards, denying the universality of the terms for comprehending and evaluating art and supporting a theory that attributes standards of excellence to cultural historical experience" (96-97). So *On Canadian Poetry* "had been facilitated by [Brown`s] blending of the critical thought of Matthew Arnold with that of Ralph Waldo Emerson" (99). Groening then clinches her point by noting that Brown`s book "opens with a bemused rejection of Arnold's view on national literatures" (99).

New material in the book includes an expanded account of Brown's life: the whole first chapter is new, and there are new details throughout. Based on interviews and correspondence with Mrs. E.K. Brown, Leon Edel, Malcolm Ross, and many others, these additions are lively and pertinent. Groening also adds a fascinating account of the institutional politics at the various universities with which Brown was associated. Her meticulous research in various archives pays off in surprising ways, and the story she tells is instructive for anyone interested in the history of the discipline. After teaching from 1929-1935 at the University of Toronto, Brown was hired by the University of Manitoba, where, at twenty-nine, he became head of a troubled department. The problems arose in 1932, when "the university discovered that its bursar, J.A. Machray, who was also chairman of the Board of Governors, had embezzled nearly a million dollars from the institution" (41). In 1937, after weighing offers from Manitoba and Chicago, Brown returned to Toronto, where he taught until 1941. Then he moved to Cornell, where he chaired the English Department for three years, with a six-

month interlude as a speech-writer for Mackenzie King in 1942. The presence of seven Cornell Ph. Ds among a faculty of twelve distressed Brown, as did Cornell's business-oriented President Day. In Groening's summary, "The faculty was overworked, dispirited, and desperately in need of new blood. And . . . when Brown left the department, he was convinced that Day did indeed favour the idea of dropping English literature from the curriculum" (68). In other words, the good old days were no such thing. So in 1944 Brown was off to the University of Chicago, where he remained until his death. He had long been an admirer of Robert Maynard Hutchins, who became president of Chicago at the astonishing age of twenty-nine. "Overall," Groening concludes, "Brown seems to have been content with Chicago as he had been with no other university" (142). Nonetheless, he would have returned to Toronto as graduate dean in 1947 if Harold Innis had not threatened to resign if he did not get the position instead of Brown. At all of these universities, Brown worked tirelessly for curricular reform, which Groening situates in terms of academic debates then and now. Returning to her main thesis, she notes that "even as he preached against the modern trend and in favour of a humanistic withdrawal from everyday affairs, Brown himself was addressing social problems with as much determination as Matthew Arnold had addressed the British educational system in the 'The Twice-Revised Code' " (153-54).

Another revision is less a matter of details than of a modification in tone. As in the dissertation, Groening argues that "When Brown wrote *On Canadian Poetry* in 1943 he did something crucial for Canadian literature: he freed it from the inescapable, invidious comparisons with British literature that had characterized Canadian criticism from its beginning" (7). Now Groening is willing to admit differences between Brown's nationalism and hers; now she is flexible enough to concede that "Brown did not reject out of hand the practice of ranking Canadian poets with their British and American counterparts. Rather, he would first establish the existence of a national tradition. Then any ranking that took place would take place first of all within that tradition" (105). Doubtless there are other

modifications, but there is only one that I regret. In the dissertation, Groening argues that Brown's praise of Earle Birney's *David and Other Poems* (1942) "could not be any stronger unless he declared him one of the masters" (118). Now she merely notes that Brown celebrates Birney "in language that most closely resembles the discourse he used in *On Canadian Poetry*" (60).

Anyone who writes on Brown or the criticism of his era will be indebted to this fine book. If some of Groening's claims are more provocative than convincing, that is as it should be. I would take issue with two remarks from the concluding paragraph. "Brown," Groening writes, "was a