

# The Future of *Canadian Poetry*

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The results of the recent SSHRCC competition for Aid to Learned Journals have now been announced, and I have been informed that *Canadian Poetry* will not receive support. Needless to say, this decision is a source of great personal sadness and chagrin; I have been editor of the journal since its inception in 1977, and for nearly fifteen years have tried to make it a useful and valuable component of Canadian literary studies. My opinion is biased, of course, but I cannot help thinking that our discipline as a whole is diminished and threatened when any one of the learned journals that serves and sustains it is denied support, particularly a journal unique in its dedication to early Canadian literature and steadfast in its commitment to the refereeing process. I would like to think that *Canadian Poetry* has fulfilled the mandate and promise of which Richard R. Centing wrote in the October/December, 1977 issue of *Serials Review*: "This is not a little magazine. . . ; it is a serious attempt to define and investigate the Canadian poetry scene from its beginnings to the present . . . . *Canadian Poetry* has the capability to become an important working tool for literary scholars." It was on the basis of similar assessments from the academic and literary community in Canada that *Canadian Poetry* was supported by the SSHRCC for ten years between 1979 and 1989, by the Ontario Arts Council from 1981 onwards, and, throughout its existence, by the Department of English and Faculty of Arts of the University of Western Ontario. For the support of these institutions and the confidence of their administrators and advisors, everyone involved with *Canadian Poetry* will always be deeply grateful.

When *Canadian Poetry* was first denied support by the SSHRCC three years ago, numerous scholars wrote to the Director of the Council's Research Communication and International Relations Division to protest the decision. "I am very sorry indeed that the Council has taken this step," wrote Professor Germaine Warkentin of the University of Toronto; "*Canadian Poetry* is a journal of immense value, and its disappearance would leave a very noticeable gap among the small group of publications devoted to the academic study of Canadian literature. *Canadian Poetry* covers all areas of its subject, but it is particularly valuable to me because of the attention it gives to texts before the twentieth

century. The growth of the study of early Canadian literature is an important phenomenon of the last five years. Great strides are being made in this area, in the preparation of bibliographies, editions, and in the developing of new interpretative approaches. *Canadian Poetry* has played a very important role, partly in initiating and certainly in sustaining this growth. I hope that the Council will find itself in a position to revise its decision at some point and ensure the future of such an important publication." Similar views were expressed by scholars and teachers across the country. Professor Alec Lucas of McGill University wrote that "[a]s an adjunct to the history of Canadian literature, *Canadian Poetry* is most valuable, for over the years it has become, as a collected series of essays, a most significant history of Canadian poetry. I am especially impressed at the remarkable balance of literary criticism and literary history the magazine contains." Professor Carrie MacMillan of Mount Allison University wrote that she had "come to rely on the excellent articles in *Canadian Poetry* for [her] day-to-day teaching and for keeping abreast of this important area of [her] field. *Canadian Poetry* has contributed immensely to Canadian literature by providing a forum for the publication of some of the most important developments in poetry research in this country in the last decade. . . . The journal has been of great importance as well to my students, who have found [in it] excellent critical and bibliographical materials for their research." Professor Len Early of York University wrote as a member of the journal's Editorial Advisory Board — as someone "familiar with both its content and editorial practices" — to "affirm . . . the importance of *Canadian Poetry* as an essential scholarly periodical for the study of English-Canadian literature" and Professor Ken McLean of Bishop's University wrote as a subscriber who "regularly teaches Canadian poetry" to pronounce the journal "unique," "necessary," and "invaluable." Professor Susan Gingell of the University of Saskatchewan wrote that she had received the news of *Canadian Poetry's* "one-year termination grant" with "incredulity and distress because it seems to me that the journal is precisely the kind that the SSHRCC's mandate should make most secure."

In the competition to which this sample of comments refers, *Canadian Poetry* was recommended for SSHRCC support "if new funds are available" and placed on the "Waiting List." Those who wrote to protest this decision were assured by the Director of the Research Communication and International Relations Division that *Canadian Poetry* "ranked among the publications which were deserving of funding, but which did not fit into the available budget. It was evaluated by a peer review committee<sup>1</sup> in view of

the specific program criteria of quality of content, effectiveness, quality of editorial management, and quality of financial management." The amount of support *per annum* for which *Canadian Poetry* was eligible under the 1988 SSHRCC formula was \$3,360.00 — enough to keep the journal going provided that the Ontario Arts Council continued its annual grant of \$3,000.00. Fortunately, the OAC did so, and, just as fortunately, the Dean of Arts at Western, Professor T.M. Lennon, offered to support the journal through to the next SSHRCC competition in 1991.

In June, 1991, application for support was duly made to the SSHRCC Program of Aid to Learned Journals. The grant for which *Canadian Poetry* was now eligible under a revised formula was \$4,508.00, an amount that also reflected an increase in the number of the journal's subscribers. This time, however, the "selection committee<sup>2</sup> which reviewed [the] application did not recommend support." Its report reads as follows:

The committee noted the efforts of the journal to be an economical and attractive refereed publication. The committee noted the increase in subscriptions further to the active advertising campaign, as well as the financial and editorial stability of the journal. However, although it is distributed to a few foreign institutions, the committee felt that the international outreach of the journal was unnecessarily limited, especially given the strong international interest in Canadian studies and particularly Canadian poetry in English. It was also noted that only 1/4 of the contributors were women and that there were virtually no articles on the many women poets writing in Canada, with the exception of Crawford. There was little evidence in the articles of contemporary critical debates or theoretical perspectives.

Thus in light of the reservations expressed above, the committee regretted being unable to recommend a grant.

Support not recommended.

To anyone familiar with the contents of *Canadian Poetry*, it will be obvious that the latter part of this report is a crude caricature of the journal. Since Crawford is the only well-known woman writer from nineteenth-century Canada whose reputation rests primarily on poetry, she is bound to receive special coverage in a journal that strives to focus attention on early Canadian poetry. Nor is *Canadian Poetry* as bereft of material by and about women as the

report implies. In numbers 20-28 (Fall/Winter, 1987 to Spring/Summer, 1991) there are articles and documents on Dorothy Livesay (2), Margaret Avison (2), Margaret Atwood, Paulette Jiles, Mary de Micheli, Gwendolyn McEwan, and, yes, Crawford by Fiona Sparrow, Susan J. Schenk, Barbara Godard, Pamela Banting, Mary Joy MacDonald, K.M. Quinsey, Nathalie Cook, Liza Potvin, and Margaret Calverley. There are also pieces on various male poets by Linda Rozmovits, Helen Lynn, Susan Glickman (2), Sister M.L. McKenzie, Laurie Kruk, Mary Lu MacDonald, Carol W. Fullerton, Manina Jones, Rachel Feldhay Brenner, Wanda Campbell, Robin Edwards Davies, C. Nelson-McDermott, and Anne Compton. Among the articles by male scholars about female writers are pieces on Avison, P.K. Page, Adele Wiseman, and "Harriet's Monroe's *Poetry* and Canadian Poetry." (Daphne Marlatt and Barbara Carey are also discussed in my own Preface to number 27, " 'Along the Line of Smoky Hills': further Steps towards an Ecological Poetics.") If there are not more pieces by and about women writers in *Canadian Poetry*, it is because no more have been submitted and judged acceptable by the journal's Editorial Advisory Board and independent referees. It must be left to statisticians and demographers to determine how much more than one quarter is actually the fraction of female contributors to *Canadian Poetry*, as well as the relation of this true figure to the percentage of females among scholars of Canadian poetry. It may safely be left to the less numerically inclined to decide the extent to which the articles, documents, and reviews in *Canadian Poetry*, including those whose approach is traditional or conservative, do or do not participate in "contemporary critical debates or theoretical perspectives."

What, then, of the future? I confess that my initial response to the recent SSHRCC decision was resignation. If *Canadian Poetry* was to be a victim of "political correctness," so be it. The journal would end with number thirty, an issue appropriately in honour of Carl F. Klinck, the general editor of the *Literary History of Canada* and a founding member of the Editorial Advisory Board. But I came to realize that the slap in *Canadian Poetry's* face had not been administered either by the SSHRCC or by the discipline as a whole, but by a committee of six whose judgement should no more be meekly accepted than left unchallenged. Extensive consultation with scholars across the country strengthened my resolve, as did the support and encouragement of colleagues at my own university. Thanks once again to the generous financial assistance of Western's Dean of Arts, Tom Lennon, *Canadian Poetry* will thus continue until the next SSHRCC competition. As

before, it will be devoted to "poetry from all periods and regions in Canada;" as before, it will be thoroughly and expertly refereed; as before, it will solicit and welcome submissions by and about writers of both sexes; as before, it will publish material generated by contemporary as well as traditional methodologies.

A matter that remains briefly to be discussed is what the SSHRCC committee calls the "unnecessarily limited international outreach" of *Canadian Poetry*. By way of support for this contention (which, of course, rests on the arguable assumption that a national audience is inadequate for a journal devoted to Canadian poetry), the committee cites "the strong international interest in Canadian studies and particularly Canadian poetry in English." Now it is true that, owing in considerable measure to funding from the Department of External Affairs, there has developed an "international interest in Canadian studies." But in the field of literary studies surely that interest is less "strong" than polite and, in any case, focused much less on "Canadian Poetry in English" than on recent fiction in both languages. Could the answer to the SSHRCC committee's objection to *Canadian Poetry's* "unnecessarily . . . limited outreach" lie in expanding the journal to include prose? Perhaps this would also increase the number of subscribers within Canada, where, as the 1991 ACCUTE *Directory of Members* shows, the lists of teachers declaring a special interest in General Canadian Literature, Modern Canadian Literature, and Canadian Fiction are somewhat longer than the equivalent lists for Nineteenth-Century Canadian Literature and Canadian Poetry? After careful thought and much discussion, the idea of expanding *Canadian Poetry* to *Canadian Poetry and Prose* was rejected as decisively as the idea of terminating the journal. The mandate and purpose of *Canadian Poetry* could only be jeopardized by expanding it into a wider field that is already being well served by such publications as *Canadian Literature* and *Essays on Canadian Writing*. Nevertheless, an attempt will be made in the coming months to increase the number of subscribers to *Canadian Poetry* both nationally and internationally — to better the all time high with which, as the comments of the SSHRCC committee intimate, the journal entered the recent competition. New subscriptions and renewals are hereby solicited (\$15.00 for 1 year, \$27.00 for 2 years, and \$40.00 for 3 years).

A final note: in her letter explaining the SSHRCC's decision not to fund *Canadian Poetry*, the Director of the Council's Research Communication and International Relations Division, Mrs. Gail Larose, writes:

I would like to take this opportunity to inform you that [the Aid to Learned Journals] program will be evaluated by Council in 1992 [as] part of the regular evaluation process which helps Council to determine whether its programs continue to meet their objectives. Although journal editors will be consulted in the course of this evaluation, I would be pleased to receive your comments and suggestions in the meantime.

I would like to urge readers of *Canadian Poetry* to take a few moments to assist in the evaluation of the Aid to Learned Journals Program by writing to Mrs. Larose as Director of the Research and International Relations Division, Social Sciences and Humanities Research Council of Canada, P.O. Box 1610, Ottawa, Ontario, K1P 6G5.

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### Notes

1. Monsieur Walter Moser (Chair), Programme de littérature comparée, Université de Montréal<sup>1</sup>; Monsieur Jacques Allard, Département d'études littéraires, Université du Québec à Montréal; Professor Mary-Jane Edwards, Department of English, Carleton University; Professor Anthony Pugh, Department of French, University of New Brunswick; Professor Adrienne Kertzer, Department of English, University of Calgary; Professor John Walker, Department of Spanish and Italian Languages and Literature, Queen's University; Professor Richard Knowles, Department of English, Mount Allison University. [\[back\]](#)
2. Professor Louis-Gérard Kelly, Department of Linguistics, University of Ottawa; Monsieur Jacques Allard, Département d'études littéraires, Université du Québec à Montréal; Professor Martin Rumscheidt, Atlantic School of Theology, Halifax, N.S.; Madame Lise Lamarche, Directeur, Département d'histoire de l'art, Université de Montréal; Professor Paul Robberecht, Department of Comparative Literature, University of Alberta; Professor Barbara Godard, Department of English, York University. [\[back\]](#)

I should like to thank Jane Burns, Program Officer, Research Communication and International Relations Division (SSHRCC), for her speedy and genial response to my requests for lists of the committee members who adjudicated my

applications on behalf of *Canadian Poetry* in 1988 and 1991. According to Ms. Burns's letter of January 9, 1992 the rubric under which the 1988 committee operated was "Literature" and that of the 1991 committee "Literature/Classical Studies/Philosophy/Religious Studies/Fine Arts/Semiotics/Linguistics/and related disciplines." In her letter, Ms. Burns observes that "[d]ue to financial constraints, all committees in the Program of aid to Learned Journals were expanded this year to combine a number of disciplines."

**D.M.R. Bentley**