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Frye as Forefather?: *The Bush Garden* and Canadian Ecocriticism

***The Bush Garden: Essays on the Canadian Imagination* by NORTHROP FRYE**

House of Anansi Press, 1995 \$19.95

Is Northrop Frye a forefather of ecocriticism in Canada? While I am wary of the Freudian resonances that might accompany that term, here they seem oddly appropriate given the uneasy relationship between Canadian ecocriticism and Frye's work. Frye, a fixture at the University of Toronto's Victoria College for his entire career, is more widely known for his *Anatomy of Criticism* and his foundational work in archetypal criticism, a school of literary theory which has since more or less passed out of fashion. However, Frye was also deeply committed to Canadian culture, not only teaching Canadian undergraduates and writers at Victoria College but also producing a series of essays and reviews in *The Bush Garden* alongside work for the Canadian Radio and Television Commission which helped to make space for emerging writers and artists in the 1950s and 60s. And it was his work to help foster Canadian literary culture that lead Margaret Atwood to state that Frye "took our ambitions seriously" when others were more likely to respond incredulously to any confession of desire to be a writer (402). But, for Canadian ecocritics, what is even more interesting and frustrating are Frye's pronouncements on the Canadian imagination and its deep connection to the natural landscape. These claims, articulated most forcefully in his "Conclusion" to Carl F. Klinck's ground breaking *Literary History of Canada*, inaugurated a wave of thematic criticism in the 1960s and early 1970s in the critical work of D.G. Jones, Atwood in

Survival, and John Moss. Consequently, Frank Davey led a wave of resistance to this stream of criticism in his now canonical essay "Surviving the Paraphrase." I suggest that this hesitancy to engage with Frye's work on Canada remains a lingering effect of Davey and others' virulent, and mostly justified, repudiations of Frye's generalizations and far-ranging statements on English Canada's cultural evolution.¹

For this essay, I re-engage Frye's work in *The Bush Garden* as a reflection on how his comments, conceptualizations, and criticism are a key part of the Canadian ecocritical family tree. I am limiting myself to this volume in order to make the task more manageable, so it means that changes Frye makes for the second version of the "Conclusion" or any of his later comments and writing on Canada in *Divisions on a Ground* will not be addressed here. I also call on the help of several other critics to make sense of just how important Frye's work has been even as Linda Hutcheon states "he was both part of the problem and part of the solution" in terms of understanding postcolonial and ecological studies in Canada (150).

Frye's discussion of Canada's relationship to the land begins as early as 1943 in an essay called "Canada and Its Poetry." he also claims that the defining identity of the nation is its status as colony: "Canada is not only a nation but a colony in an empire. I have said that culture seems to flourish best in national unites, which implies that empire is too big and the province is too small for major literature . . . The imperial and the regional are both inherently anti-poetic environments, yet they go hand in hand; and together they make up what I call the colonial in Canadian life" (135). Frye's vision is always national in orientation, yet he diagnoses Canada's

ambivalent relationship to Britain in stark terms here and suggests that this postcolonial ambivalence is the heart of the problem in Canadian literature. As a result of being a colony, Canadian poetry displays an “evocation of stark terror. Not a coward’s terror, of course; but a controlled vision of the causes of cowardice. The immediate source of this is obviously the frightening loneliness of a huge and thinly settled country” (140). Frye builds on Donald Creighton’s Laurentian Thesis and expands it to the social imagination so that Canadian writers are always aware of how thin their grasp is on the vast continent cut off from mother England. Frye would repeat this analysis seven years later in a 1950 review of E.J. Pratt’s *Towards the Last Spike*. In this poem, Canada “appeared in a flat Mercator projection with a nightmarish Greenland, as a country of isolation and terror, and of the overwhelming of human values by an indifferent and wasteful nature” (10–11). This diagnosis of the Canadian imagination is visible throughout many of the pieces in *The Bush Garden*. In many ways, it is a central thread of the collection. Frye would hold to this analysis throughout his career, articulating it most fully in the “Conclusion” that ends *The Bush Garden*. It is important to note here that this is one of the first instances where a relationship to the natural world is asserted as important to Canadian literature. John Gibson’s “Introduction to the New Series of the *Garland*” in 1843 is perhaps the first text to suggest the potential of the Canadian landscape for creating great works of art while Sara Jeannette Duncan’s refutation of the harshness of Canadian climate inhibiting literary work in *The Week* in 1886 are early signs of the importance of the natural world to Canadian literature, yet Frye is the first to articulate it so powerfully

and consistently (35, 113). While these early notices focus much more on a positive response to the natural world, Frye takes a negative tone, suggesting that the vastness and amoral coldness leads to terror.

This sense of terror is most fully developed in Frye’s now infamous “garrison mentality.” In the “Conclusion,” he argues that “small and isolated communities surrounded with a physical or psychological ‘frontier,’ separated from one another and from their American and British cultural sources . . . are bound to develop what we may provisionally call a garrison mentality” (227). Canadians were constantly trying to keep the forbidding wilderness out and Frye traces this theme in various texts which, conveniently, support his view including works by F.P. Grove, D.C. Scott, and especially Pratt. Frye totalizes all responses to the natural world into one of terror, a move which leans uncomfortably towards environmental determinism and that tends to foreclose any of the rich discussions of early Canadian literature which have developed in the last 30 years. However, he does assert that at the heart of Canadian identity is a relationship to the land. One way to manoeuvre around this problematic generalization is to follow Ella Soper and Nicholas Bradley’s claim in their introduction to *Greening the Maple*: “If Frye and Atwood are not strictly ecological thinkers, their works nonetheless helped establish a context for later ecological criticism. The continuities and ruptures alike in Canadian studies show ‘nature’ to be a pivotal yet shifting and unstable concept and site of investigation” (xvi). Seeing the “garrison mentality” as one particular way to view the natural world rather than the only way, might allow ecocritics to recognize the importance that Frye puts on the natural world. However, the question of

whether we can read past his overdetermined conception of the natural world as a cold unconsciousness might still prove too difficult.

Nonetheless, Frye's emphatic declaration of the importance of colonialism in Canadian identity also makes his insights on the relation to the natural world that much more striking. It is not just that the natural world is threatening to early writers, but also that that same world must be harvested for other nations. Canada's status as a colony leads to an "arrogant abstraction" visible in the geometrical advance of "the long parallel lines of the railways, dividing up the farm lands into chessboards of square-mile sections and concession-line roads" (226). A foreign order is imposed on the landscape because Canada is not the master of its own land. The results of this violent grafting of imperial order on land is visible in the "human and natural ruins, of abandoned buildings and despoiled countrysides, such as are found only with the vigorous wastefulness of young countries" (148). Frye was explicit in critiquing the technological colonization of the land and its Native inhabitants even if his language for them now appears quite problematic. But I think his focus on Canada as a colony bears a productive parallel with Alberta's tar sands and the implications of strip mining vast segments of land to export a resource to the United States or China. Frye's refusal to delink colonization from the way we view the landscape is a productive mindset that still bears relevance for ecocritics today.

So what do we do with this perhaps illegitimate forefather? Is it possible to remove his own nationalist lens which seems dated now and, worse, blinding to contemporary concerns around gender,

race, environment, and poverty? Is it possible to read *The Bush Garden* through an ecological lens instead? Can we treat his impressive and far-ranging analysis of Canada's cultural evolution as a lively attempt to read the country itself as living organism? If nothing else, his insights on various Canadian figures remain valuable alongside his work on the painters David Milne, Lawren Harris, Tom Thomson while his assertion that the question "Who am I?" has proven less perplexing than "Where is here?" has inaugurated a lively and productive series of answers and rebuttals (222).² Margery Fee has recently warned that "to turn our backs on thematic criticism, as some critics suggest we should, is to fall into an even more treacherous swamp" (189). While I may not be as willing as she is to wade into the theoretical swamp of Frye's work, I certainly do not want to blot it from the map. Critics have quite rightly pushed back on the emphasis of theme over form, but in re-reading Frye's reviews in *The Bush Garden*, form was never far from his mind. Is it possible that his yearly reviews from the *University of Toronto Quarterly* show that to focus on theme alone is to miss what makes literature literary? If so, then *The Bush Garden* suggests that ecologically minded critics in Canada must also look beyond theme to form, modes of communication, and, especially, a vibrant reading public if they are to produce lasting insights.

I end with words from Frye himself which might speak to *The Goose's* unique position in Canada's literary landscape and to its many readers:

It may be that when the Canadian writer attaches himself to the world of literature, he discovers, or rediscovers, by doing so, something

in his Canadian environment which is more vital and articulate than a desk. (240)

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¹ However, there have been several attempts to recuperate Frye's work including, among others, Russell Morton Brown's "The Practice and Theory of Canadian Criticism: A Reconsideration," Linda Hutcheon's "Eruptions of Postmodernity," and, most recently, Branko Gorjup's edited collection *Northrop Frye's Canadian Literary Criticism and Its Influence*.
² See especially the 2001 special issue of *Essays in Canadian Writing* which takes up this question 36 years after Frye raised it.

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