

REVIEW

Medievalism in English Canadian Literature from Richardson to Atwood.
By M. J. Toswell and Anna Czarnowus. D.S. Brewer, 2020. Pp. 210.

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Medievalism in English Canadian Literature was published in the *Medievalism* series of Brewer & Boydell. It is the first volume in the series focusing specifically on one national literary context. As the editors stress in their introduction (3), study of specific national or ethnic contexts, in general, is a relatively new development in the field of medievalism studies. The book does not constitute a sustained, unified analysis of the phenomenon in English Canadian literature, but rather an eclectic collection of contributions – twelve articles in total, written by Polish and Canadian scholars – quite widely varying in terms of subject matter and methodology. The editorial introduction by M. J. Toswell and Anna Czarnowus usefully identifies links and intersections between articles, at the same time freely admitting that no clear or seamless picture emerges from the mosaic. None could, of course, given the temporal and thematic scope of the collection.

The solid introduction is one of the highlights of the volume. The editors explain at length the nuances and specificities of the multifaceted Canadian medievalism. They point out the importance of its colonial context and certain overlaps with medievalisms of other settler colonies, such as Australia. They also indicate the different flavours of medievalism in anglophone and francophone Canada, its links with US medievalism, its complicated relationship with Indigenous histories, and mention its engagement with non-European multicultural influences. The editors also delineate two major strains of Canadian medievalism: the notional and the “direct” one. The importance of the latter in Canada, they stress, seems somewhat unusual. The direct medievalism is characterised by its sustained focus on the medieval period itself, attempts at reaching at an accurate picture of the era through its documents, texts, languages; rather than focusing on the reception of the period in the 19th century or on the Middle Ages as a set of culturally circulated images, notions, and motives that produce a sense or “notion” of what it might have possibly been.

The introduction facilitates the process of reading and making connections between the articles that follow and which usually eschew attempts at broader generalisations as to the nature of Canadian medievalism. Rather, they tend to be in-depth studies focusing on a limited number of texts by one or two authors, though often far-ranging in terms of analysis and contextualisation. The contributions are arranged chronologically, by the period from which the discussed texts come, ranging from the 19th to the 21st century, and they reveal both types of medievalism at work, though earlier authors treat the Middle Ages with less licence than authors of more recent works. The scope is quite broad: the analysed texts range from early Canadian novels – such as *St. Ursula's Convent* (1824) and *Wacousta* (1832) – and periodicals; through poetry, drama, and fiction of 19th and 20th century greats – Archibald Lampman, William Wilfred Campbell, Earle Birney, Robertson Davies and Margaret Atwood – to a variety of 20th and 21st c. fantasy novels by Kit Pearson, Charles de Lint, Guy Gavriel Key, Patrick DeWitt. The collection gives a nice, though limited review, of the uses of medievalism in different genres (the novel is most strongly represented, but examples of long poem, story, drama and essay are also included). Intriguingly, given the prominence of female writers in Canada, the majority of those discussed are male. And given the importance and richness of ethnic and racial minority writing in contemporary Canadian literature, which the editors recognize in the introduction, it is somewhat surprising that all of the authors discussed are white. While the reason for this preference is probably quite simple, because directly related to research interests of the scholars engaged in the project, I still see it as a weakness of the monograph. I would at least expect a direct, thoughtful reflection on the issue in the introduction. As it stands, it might seem that medievalism in English Canadian literature is a white domain. While it seems beyond doubt that till the second half of 20th c. it was indeed so, it would be interesting to examine the latter half of the century and the last two decades from this angle. If indeed ethnic and racial minority writers do not delve into medievalism, it would be interesting to read suggestions as to why. If they do, though, then perhaps more scholars should have been invited to the project to make the picture of medievalism in English Canadian literature a broader and fuller one. Nevertheless, the collection as a whole still makes an interesting and satisfying read. All the articles are based on solid research and detailed textual analysis for which rich cultural and literary contexts and linkages are provided.

The opening article by D.M.R. Bentley approaches relatively rarely discussed narrative poems by Archibald Lampman: “The King’s Sabbath”, “Ingvi and Alf”, and “King Oswald’s Feast”, alongside the unpublished “Arnulph” and “White Margaret”. The article demonstrates Lampman’s avid interest in the Middle Ages, and places his poems in the context of contemporary literary and cultural fascination with the era (especially Scandinavian history) in Britain and Canada,

discussions about the nature of Canadianness, and the poet's socialist beliefs. While the argument relies a bit too much for this reviewer's taste on plot summary and quotations (often quite long), this is not to the detriment of the overall rich analysis. The approach certainly allows the reader to get a good sense of the form and content of the texts, which is particularly valuable in case of the two poems available only in the National Archives. It is followed by two articles approaching *Wacousta*: Agnieszka Kliś-Brodowska puts Richardson's medievalist gothic in an interesting contrast with that employed by Julia Beckwith Hart in *St. Ursula's Convent*, while Anna Czarnowus uses the text to demonstrate the process of the transfer of gothicism and medieval romance from Europe to Canada, and the transformation of the latter into colonial romance. An important focal point of the latter article are functions of representations of Indigenous people in the novel. Czarnowus uses to good effect – as many critics of *Wacousta* do – the concept of “garrison mentality”, though she seems to mistakenly ascribe the coinage to Atwood (54), who, of course, used the term after Northrop Frye – it first appeared in his “Conclusion” to the *Literary History of Canada* (1965). Her contribution is followed by Brian Johnson's discussion of William Wilfred Campbell's play *Mordred* as an example of the author's reworking of Arthurian motives in the mode of “materialist medievalism”. He competently demonstrates the cultural and literary contexts that have shaped Campbell's medievalist approach, which he perceives as “part of [the] tradition of (post)colonial catachresis in the sense that, like its precursors, it creatively ‘misreads’ the sources of the imperial centre and inscribes through its misprision the inevitable (post)colonial disjunction” (67).

Laurel Ryan in her article on “Orientalist Medievalism in Early Canadian Periodicals” demonstrates that Canadian medievalist writers of the latter half of the 19th century often chose literary locations other than Scandinavia or Arthurian Britain. Somewhat surprisingly, as she notes (83), one of the prodigiously used settings was the medieval Middle East, explored in stories, poetry, and essays published in periodicals. Unsurprisingly, the writers' agenda was related to the nation-building process, construction of a Canadian national identity, and imperialist project of the time. Ryan focuses specifically on Agnes Maule Machar's essay of 1876 in which she interprets fragments of Omar Khayyam's *Rubaiyat* and his autobiography, Susanna Moodie's story “Achbor: An Oriental Tale” (1843), and John Hunter-Duvar's poetic romance “The Knight and the Maiden: A Legend of the Crusades” (1877) to show how they construct not only “a now-oriented past, but also a here-oriented there” (84).

Attitudes of 19th c. writers lingered well into the 20th century. For example, David Watt in his article on Robertson Davies's *The Rebel Angels*, interpreted as an example of the Collegiate gothic (the term borrowed from the name of the architectural style), explores ways in which Davies, yet again, transposes European past into Canadian present, and considers issues related to national identity. In

many ways in his various texts Davies continues also the colonial erasure of the presence of Indigenous peoples – an act that Watt sees likewise as deeply medieval (110). The article concludes with the suggestion that, while Davies probably was not consciously exploring “anxieties concerning the legitimacy of institutions on treaty land as well as an uncertainty about what their cultural inheritance might look like” (110), still the Collegiate gothic is a tool that allows for a reading of his novel as “implicitly preoccupied” with the issues. The implicit preoccupation is demonstrated in the whole genre through its focus on issues of legitimacy and inheritance, and a careful construction of a set of continuities and filiations with the Old World. Watt closes the article with what I understand as a call to read the genre of the Collegiate gothic through its “lost chances”: the erasures and violence not openly explored, but rather invisibly inscribed in it.

The two articles that follow are presided over by Chaucer and his enduring influence on contemporary writers. M.J. Toswell persuasively discusses the parameters of Earle Birney’s self-imposed role of a public poet creating a national literature as consciously modelled on the example of Chaucer. Dominika Ruskiewicz, on the other hand, sees Margaret Atwood’s uses of the medieval as – to a large extent – Chaucerian, in the sense that she draws freely from the treasure chest of the era and its literature as a reservoir of a common past and heritage in a way similar to Chaucer’s use of the common European heritage – both past and present. She proceeds to discuss more specifically Atwood’s literalisation of the conventional link made in medieval texts between women and food in some of her writings, notably in “Cressida to Troilus: A Gift”, in the context of three retellings of the Troilus and Criseyde story by Chaucer, Henryson, and Shakespeare.

Chaucer is also evoked by the title of Cory James Rushton’s article “Lost in Allegory: Grief and Chivalry in Kit Pearson’s *A Perfect, Gentle Knight*” – a story exploring the medievalist trope linking mental illness and chivalry in the setting of 20th c. Canada. One of the characters loses himself in the character of Lancelot – that he acts out in the family role-playing game designed first as a coping strategy – so much that he retreats from real life.

Sylwia Borowska-Szerszun and Ewa Drab in their texts analyse examples of Canadian fantasy fiction in the context of the romance tradition. Borowska-Szerszun deftly compares Guy Gavriel Kay’s *A Song for Arbonne* and Charles de Lint’s *Yarrow: An Autumn Tale* against the background of the romance as a vehicle of cultural memory, demonstrating how the novelists construct contemporary meanings out of medievalist material. Drab attempts an investigation into the Canadian difference of medievalist fantasy, using as her examples Guy Gavriel Kay’s *Ysabel* and Steven Erikson’s *Gardens of the Moon*, and concludes that there is nothing specifically Canadian about the texts. Rather, generic medievalist tropes seem to inherently belong now to the genre of fantasy.

In the closing article, the reader encounters Patrick DeWitt, who – as Michael Fox, the author of the text, concludes – displays in his text neither Canadianness (not even in his choice of settings) nor any grounded or perhaps even conscious use of medievalism, which should be considered as accidental at best. The article focuses, nevertheless, on “The Medieval Methods of Patrick DeWitt: *Undermajordomo Minor*”, which form an undercurrent of the novel. Fox argues that the methods and motives are rooted in “immersion in folktale, genre that predates yet still permeates the medieval” (190). He develops his discussion through comparisons between Tolkien’s *Hobbit* and DeWitt *Undermajordomo Minor*, to show the intricate reworkings of folktale in the genre of fantasy.

Overall, *Medievalism in English Canadian Literature from Richardson to Atwood* is not only a rare, but also valuable contribution to medievalist studies in the context of Canada and Canadian literature. As with any thematic collection of articles that has the ambition to cover (selectively) over two centuries of a national literature, while it is potentially interesting to a range of readers – a variety of literary scholars, but also educated lay aficionados of Canadian literature, for example – the majority will pick and choose rather than read it in its entirety. The beauty of this collection is that any pick will prove to be a fortuitous one if one looks for solid scholarship and clarity of argument.