



Struggle and Story: Canada in Print

The Thomas Fisher Rare Book Library, University of Toronto

20 March–9 September 2017

Retired Director of the Thomas Fisher Rare Book Library, Anne Dondertman, is quite right in her Foreword to the exhibition catalogue of *Struggle and Story: Canada in Print* that the “Fisher exhibition will no doubt be one of dozens if not hundreds of exhibitions celebrating our nation held throughout the country during 2017 [ie., Canada’s sesquicentennial of Confederation, the uniting of the provinces into a country]” (5). I agree – and I think Library patrons will also – with the two reasons that she gives in setting this exhibition apart from any other: first, she notes “the deep knowledge of the curator,” Pearce Carefoote, who “enthusiastically embraced this challenge almost from the time he first joined the staff in 2002” (5); second, she writes of the extraordinary repository of unique and Rare documents of Canadiana preserved at the Thomas Fisher Rare Book Library through traditions “even predating the establishment of special collections [of the University of Toronto] as a separate department in 1950” (5). We see on display in this exhibition the richest of literary and historical gems of our often-undervalued or culturally hyphenated ‘Canadian’ past, many items talked of in Canadian schools or displayed virtually via television documentaries, but seldom experienced in the physical, material sense, indeed objects rarely – if ever – subjected to the penetrating critical acumen of a mind like Carefoote’s.

Let us begin with some of the items that many Canadians may recognize from recent media exposure but which few would be able to experience in person without this exhibition. In 2013, through the courageous generosity of Helmhorst Investments Limited and the Department of Canadian Heritage Movable Cultural Property Program, the Thomas Fisher Library was able to acquire, at a cost in the millions of dollars, “[s]ome 229 of [British General James] Wolfe’s autographed letters [that] remained in private hands from the death of Wolfe’s mother in 1764 until they were purchased for the Fisher Library” (49–50). The purchase of [these letters](#), covered on [national news](#), returned to Canada a record of the intimate thoughts and meditations of a celebrated patriot and soldier. Wolfe witnessed first-hand a wide range of military campaigns and skirmishes before his untimely death leading the British forces to a victory over the French General Louis-Joseph de Montcalm-Gozon, Marquis de Saint-Veran, at the Plains of Abraham, during the Battle of Québec, a decisive victory in the Seven Years’ War. To accompany a selection of the more evocative and eloquent letters of this military ‘Renaissance’ man, the first written by Wolfe when he was

just 13 years old, the last written only two weeks before his death at age 32, Carefoote includes a volume that few would know was even in the University's collection. Famously on the eve of his glorious conquest, Wolfe is said to have declared to his lieutenants of Thomas Gray's *An Elegy written in a Country Church Yard* (1751), "Gentlemen, I would rather have written that piece than take Québec tomorrow" (51). This exhibition has on display Wolfe's "otherwise unremarkable" ninth edition of Gray's famous poem, which was celebrated "as the University of Toronto's seventh million volume in 1988" (50-51).

Of the other items on display, another also stands out for its media currency - in this second instance an item exemplifying the drive to explore the distant reaches of the Earth in 'the age of exploration.' In September 2014, the wreck of the H.M.S. Erebus was discovered in an underwater diving expedition at the bottom of the eastern portion of Queen Maud Gulf, with the discovery of its sister ship, the H.M.S. Terror, following close on, in Nunavut Bay in September 2016. These two ships have become iconic in the story of man's struggle to overcome the perils of the natural world as both were commanded by the daring John Franklin (1786-1847) and lost in his Arctic expedition to discover 'The Northwest Passage' of 1845-1848. Carefoote draws attention to this story of fearless determination in the face of Mother Nature's obstacles, as he did some years ago in [a special interview for CTV News](#), by showing and describing [a holograph journal of Owen Stanley](#) (1811-1850), the Terror's previous commander. The diary speaks in minute detail of daily life in Canada's furthest reaches during the 'age of exploration' - with "reports of polar bear encounters," the "hazards of anchoring one's ship to rolling icebergs," and of methods to combat boredom should your ship be "frozen in sea ice" (during Stanley's stint as Captain he "hosted a masquerade party on board" and "created an observatory for himself on the ice with a revolving roof made of blanket" [18]). Although the names H.M.S. Erebus and H.M.S. Terror have become part of a national lexicon, the personal histories of Stanley's crew show a humorous, less tragic side of the struggle against 'death by landscape.'^[1]

Setting aside these two major highlights of the exhibition, I feel that the exhibition, which is organized into eight 'parts' or 'cases' exhibiting themes of 'struggle,' excels against other exhibits of the like on two counts, mainly the pervasiveness of the thesis uniting the objects selected (the idea of Canada's 'story' as a 'struggle') and the quirkiness of many of the curatorial and authorial decisions, which render a number of conceivably very dull topics unexpectedly exciting. The structure consists of eight 'parts' ie., "The Struggle to

Understand,” 9–24; “The Struggle to Engage,” 25–40; “The Struggle for the Continent,” 41–60; “The Struggle for Survival: The War of 1812,” 61–70; “The Struggle for Responsible Government,” 71–82; “The Struggle for a Nation,” 83–104; “The Struggle to Belong,” 105–120; and “The Struggle for Identity,” 121–130.[2] Carefoote successfully achieves a logical through-line (or the “red thread of information” to locate the discussion in the Library and Information Science arena[3]) by connecting the ostensibly random to eight national concepts: 1.) The Literature of the Age of Exploration; 2.) European Perspectives on First Nations Peoples; 3.) The Fight for Québec; 4.) The War of 1812; 5.) The Rebellions against the Family Compact and Château Clique; 6.) The circumstances enabling the creation of the British North American Act (Confederation of Ontario [Upper Canada], Québec [Lower Canada], Nova Scotia, and New Brunswick); 7. Refugeeism and the justification of a Social Welfare state; and 8.) Canada’s participation in the ‘Great War’ as a cause of national unity and pride. Within this story arc, a few rather notable features stand out as the marks of an experienced and wise curator: in “The Struggle to Engage,” Carefoote explores in both macrocosm and microcosm early attempts to understand the ‘New World,’ permitting him to exhibit Agnes Chamberlin’s striking “[Original Watercolour Paintings of Canadian Wild Flowers](#)” (19; 19–20); in the exhibition catalogue, each ‘part’ is accompanied by a fold-out map, suggesting the significance of vast wilderness in Canada’s struggle; and, this exhibition, mounted in celebration of 150 years of Confederation in Canada, stops before covering literary materials created after Canada’s centenary year (1967), thus playing to the strengths of past librarians’ collecting (8).

In regard to the quirkiness of many of the selections and historical accounts, on the other hand, one needn’t look or read far to detect signs of Carefoote’s eye for the unusual and interesting. In addition to both the land-centered (10–11) and peoples-centered (27–29) volumes by Samuel de Champlain (1567–1635), which one would expect to find in such an exhibit, the exhibition offers displays of lesser-known works by Louis Hennepin (1626–ca. 1705), “among the earliest Europeans to witness the might and majesty of Niagara Falls” (11), and Louis Armand de Lom d’Arce, baron de Lahontan (1666–1715?), whose image of a beaver in *New Voyages to North-America* (1703) captures the essence of why some of his travel narratives are felt to have “the veracity of ‘the legends of the sea serpent’” (13). Carefoote’s choice of St. Marie de l’Incarnation’s *La vie de la venerable Mère Marie de l’Incarnation, première supérieure des Ursulines de la Nouvelle France* (Paris, 1677) allows

him to demonstrate how certain voices are louder than others in the taught histories of this country—not all Church pioneers subscribed to the doctrine that the conversion of native peoples to the teachings of Christ demanded that they sacrifice their culture and traditions to European ideals. (The narrative of her body’s exhumation for her book’s [frontispiece](#) serves to crystalize in my memory the name of this lesser-known saint [32]). Carefoote’s favourite item of the display, so he says on the [audio tour](#) accompanying the catalogue and display cases, is William Lyon Mackenzie’s self-printed broadside “Proclamation” (Buffalo?, 1837), in which the brazen Mackenzie declares himself “*Chairman pro. tem. of the Provincial Government of the State of Upper Canada*” (ie., Canada’s first Prime Minister) (77). There is the so-called “beaver map” (discussion, 44; illustration, 45); we have the story of Sir John A. Macdonald’s “new fur coat” in the celebrated William Topley portrait (Ottawa, 1883), donated by G. R. Renfrew & Co., the “antecedent to Holt-Renfrew” (101); there is the World War I [notebook](#) that stopped a bullet to save the life of the influential economic theorist Harold Innis (1894–1952) (123); and, to demonstrate changes in the design and features of the Canadian passport, there are early passport documents previously owned by the co-discoverer of insulin, Dr. Frederick Banting (1891–1941), and the distinguished journalist, whose collection of Cultural Revolution posters was recently on display at the Fisher, Mark Gayn (1902–1981) (132). In putting together the exhibition, Carefoote discovered spies’ notes pertaining to espionage on both sides of the 1837 Rebellion (78).

But there is also a significant moralistic dimension to the exhibit, which Carefoote’s efforts to focus the events of Canada’s history into a narrative trajectory, and to make the mundane entertaining, do not undercut. One sad state of affairs unearthed in the curation of this exhibit is the story of Nelson Hackett, a black slave who claimed sanctuary in what was Upper Canada. The exhibition includes a petition of “the Colored [*sic*] People of Hamilton to Sir Allan Napier MacNab” (Canada West, 1842) with autographs or marks of 178 of their number, requesting MacNab’s intervention to protect Hackett from kidnap and re-enslavement by masters who planned to take him, by force, to the United States (110–11). Despite laws protecting Hackett at the time, as Carefoote notes, “the newly arrived Governor General of Canada, Sir Charles Bagot (1781–1843)[,] quietly approved the extradition,” and the last we hear of Hackett he is receiving a tortuous whipping for defiance and re-sold to a Texas owner (112). Carefoote rightly notes that when thinking about these aspects of our history one cannot help but feel “a sense of shame” ([audio guide](#)). A more uplifting story, however, is

that of the early Irish settlers. Although there is in the exhibit a letter bearing the pitiful account of Mary Colon, whose husband died of drowning on the voyage from Ireland to Canada, leaving her with five orphan children (112-14), one can take solace in the statistics of integration and concession that Carefoote quotes: “Between May and October of 1847 more than thirty-thousand famine refugees, evicted from their Irish farms, disembarked at Toronto, whose population at the time was only twenty thousand people” (113). The peoples of Toronto struggled, and endured.

Struggle and Story: Canada in Print is a visually striking exhibition, and the catalogue is well-crafted. In addition to all the above, the exhibition boasts “the third recorded document printed in Canada and the oldest still to be found within the country,” a Halifax *Price Current* (1752) printed for Nathan Nathans (d. 1778) and Naphtali Hart, Jewish immigrants who migrated to Canada from the American colonies in 1750 (106); a copy of “An Act for the Union of Canada, Nova Scotia, and New Brunswick” [the British North America Act, which declares Canada a country] (97); and an album of early photographs by William Notman (1845-1930) – “Photographer to the Queen [i.e., Queen Victoria I]” (89) – recording views of the pristine wilderness surrounding the construction of the Canadian Pacific Railway.

Carefoote is one of Canada’s most celebrated and influential Rare Book Librarians, and his genius merits close perusal.

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Exhibition and Catalogue by Pearce J. Carefoote. Toronto: Thomas Fisher Rare Book Library (Printed by Coach House Press), 2017. 151p., ill.

[1] I allude here to Margaret Atwood’s famous short story of tragedy at a Canadian women’s summer camp: “Death by Landscape,” in *Wilderness Tips* (Toronto: McClelland and Stewart Inc., 1991).

[2] In addition to the eight “parts” of the exhibition catalogue, there is the equivalent of an “appendix” titled “Symbols of an Evolving Identity” (131-41) covering: “First and Second World War Posters” (131), “Passport” (132), “The Flag” – with an allusion to Stan Bevington’s involvement in the “flag wars” of 1964 (133), “The Anthem” (134-35), “Hockey” (135-36), “A Time to Celebrate – 1967” (136-37), “Confederation Coins and Currency” (137-38), “The Confederation Train” (138-39), and “Expo 67” (139-41). Carefoote’s strategic motive for the creation of the final section, which adds a case of objects to the exhibit, is not to end the



exhibition on a “down note” ([audio guide](#)).

[3] On the “red thread of information,” see Marcia J. Bates, “[The Invisible Substrate of Information Science](#),” *Journal of the American Society for Information Science* 50, no. 12 (1999): 1043-50.