

**REGIONALISM, NATIONALISM AND INTERNATIONALISM
IN CANADIAN POLITICS, LITERARY CRITICISM
AND THE WRITING OF GARY GEDDES**

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ABSTRACT

In this century, but particularly in the past thirty-five years, Canada's politicians have been trying to find a way to define the country, which would be acceptable to its seven economically, ethnically and topographically disparate regions. The political battles which threaten the country's continued existence are echoed in its literary criticism, with various commentators arguing that Canadian literature is or should be regional, national or cosmopolitan/multicultural/international. This paper argues that Canadian literature, like that of all other countries, incorporates all of the above positions and illustrates that position by examining the literature produced by Geddes over the past twenty-five years.

Since the country was founded, critics and creative writers in Canada have been debating whether the country's literature is or should be regional, national or international. These literary positions are closely connected to political debates on the same issues which currently threaten the country's continued existence. Both its politics and its literature prove that Canada is a country which lacks a national identity and which is obsessed with trying to find one. A brief review of the country's history is necessary to explain our current dilemma.

The British Dominion of Canada was formed in 1867 as a federation of four eastern provinces. New Brunswick and Nova Scotia on the Atlantic coast and the central province of Ontario were settled primarily by the English, Scots and Irish with small French minorities and were officially English-speaking. Quebec, by contrast,

was primarily settled by the French, whom the English had defeated in 1759, with a politically and economically powerful English minority, much resented by the French, located largely in and around the large port city of Montreal on the St. Lawrence river. Quebec was officially bilingual because the French joined confederation only when guaranteed the right to their language, culture and Catholic religion. Tiny Prince Edward Island, off the coasts of New Brunswick and Nova Scotia and ethnically similar to them, was added in 1873, the three provinces forming the region known as the Maritimes.

The previously prosperous Maritimes became depressed when confederation shifted economic and political power to the provinces of Ontario and Quebec in the centre of the new country and in consequence participated little in the waves of immigration from the United Kingdom and all parts of Europe actively encouraged from the 1880s onward by a powerful federal government located in Ontario and anxious to expand westward. Ethnic diversity characterized the three new western provinces of Manitoba, Saskatchewan and Alberta, carved in 1871 and 1905 from the great grain-growing plains known as the Prairie region, and was characteristic too of the province of British Columbia on the other side of the Rocky mountains on the mild Pacific coast, added in 1871. Swift assimilation of the disparate ethnic groups in the western provinces was assured by making all of them officially English-speaking. The sixth region is the still largely undeveloped and unpopulated extreme north of the country, including the Yukon and Northwest Territories. In 1949 the seventh and last region was added, the large Atlantic island of Newfoundland, settled largely by the Irish and west country English. The country's ethnic diversity was increased in 1966 when an easing of immigration restrictions by the federal government brought many new Canadians from Asia, Africa and the Caribbean, but few of them settled in Newfoundland, the Maritimes or any part of Quebec apart from Montreal.

Federal governments, charged with the Herculean task of keeping these parts unified, have attempted a number of different solutions. Since 1957 they have tried to compensate for economic inequalities among the regions by distributing to the poorer provinces equalization payments taken from those which are rich, a generally popular policy. Equally popular in the 1960s was the effort to inspire a unifying nationalism by giving unstinting support to the celebration of the country's centennial. In the same decade the federal government attempted to downplay the country's colonial ties to Britain and inspire a new bicultural nationalism reflecting the country's French/English foundations by replacing the Union Jack with a new Canadian flag, by renaming the Royal Mail Canada Post, and by establishing in 1963 a Royal Commission on Bilingualism and Biculturalism which ultimately made bilingualism in French and English a requirement for employment in all branches of the federal civil service. The actual result of these changes was greater acrimony: all three enraged those of British descent and the third the many regions of the country which had no French speaking citizens for civil servants to talk to. How little such efforts pleased the French in Quebec was evident even before the centennial in the formation around 1963 of the violent Front de Libération de Quebec (from Canada). The FLQ kidnapping and murder of a federal minister in 1970 led the federal government to invoke the War Measures Act, an extreme response which angered many both within and outside Quebec. The same year saw the election to the Quebec legislature of the first few members of the new Parti Québécois, formed in 1968 with the expressed goal of achieving the peaceful separation of Quebec from Canada.

Not surprisingly in the light of these developments, the federal government switched its attention from biculturalism to multiculturalism. Proclaimed official policy in 1971, passed as the Canadian Multiculturalism Act in 1988, the declared goal of this legislation is the preservation and enhancement of Canada's multicultural heritage. According to Karim H. Karim's 1989 report on the country's response to this policy, commissioned by the federal Department of Multiculturalism and Citizenship, the "public favoured a multicultural national identity," but "multiculturalism was often viewed by the press as being an obstacle to nation-building and to the integrity of a national identity and a national culture." He found apprehension in both French and English communities "regarding the erosion of basic Canadian values by immigrant cultures" and fear among journalists and academics that multiculturalism would lead "to an inverse racism" and to "ethnic power brokers" (Karim III).

Karim does not mention that Quebec's response to these federal initiatives has been to move in the opposite direction. In 1976 its officially federalist Liberal government changed Quebec from the only province officially bilingual in both French and English to the only province in which French is the only official language. Quebec residents who were neither English nor French-speaking were forced to send their children to French schools rather than the English schools the majority had previously favoured. In the same year the province elected the separatist PQ to power. René Lévesque, the Parti's first leader, called multiculturalism a "notion devised to obscure 'the Quebec business,' to give an impression that we are all ethnics and do not have to worry about special status for Quebec" (Bissoondath, "A Question"). However, in a 1980 provincial referendum, the majority of Quebec voters elected to remain within Canada.

The next federal effort to find a solution was to collect all the provinces and the federation of native peoples together to revamp the constitution. After months of agonized negotiation and the expenditure of millions of dollars it produced the Meech Lake Accord. The general thrust of this very complex proposal was decentralization: a weakening of the federal government and greater power to all the provinces. Put to a national referendum in October 1992, the Accord was defeated, and Quebec, outraged by the failure of a proposal it had supported, formed a new federal separatist party, the Bloc Québécois. In the 1993 federal election the Bloc became the national parliament's official opposition, winning that position by a hair over the Reform party, another brand new party which won the majority of seats in Western Canada where it was formed, largely to reflect Western dissatisfaction with preferential treatment for Quebec.

The next development in this seemingly endless battle was the Parti Québécois's decision to hold another referendum in the province, in October 1995, asking Quebecers to vote either to remain in Canada or to support a sovereign Quebec. The stay in Canada side won by the narrowest possible margin: 50.6% to 49.4%.

The federal election of June 1997 served only to increase these divisions, splintering the country into five regional blocks. The Liberal party retained power with a much reduced majority gained primarily in the province of Ontario but also in Prince Edward Island and Newfoundland. The Reform party became the official opposition, dominating the three Western provinces of British Columbia, Alberta and Saskatchewan but gaining no seats elsewhere. The Bloc Québécois retained control of Quebec. New Brunswick and Nova Scotia elected primarily Progressive Conservative and NDP candidates (Wilson-Smith).

When we turn to look at views of this country's literature in this century, before the tumult of the past 35 years, we find literature in French and in English exist and develop in almost complete isolation from each other, despite the fact that the city of Montreal was a very important centre for writers in both languages. For English speaking writers whose careers began in the first half of this century the chief battle was between the "cosmopolitans" and the nationalists. The first group, led from the 1920s onward by the very influential Montreal born poets Frank Scott (1899-1985) and A.J.M. Smith (1902-1980), argued that since Canada was a raw young country barely past the colonial and settlement stage, without any native literary traditions that deserved emulation, Canadian writers should look outward not inward for their inspiration. In his 1927 poem "The Canadian Authors Meet" Scott mocked the prevailing colonialism of "puppets" who "percolate self-unction/ Beneath a portrait of the Prince of Wales," laughing at their narrowly nationalistic reverence for "Canadian topics" and for the first two generations of post-confederation poets, "Carman, Lampman, Roberts, Campbell, Scott." He ends with the lament: "O Canada, O Canada, Oh can/ A day go by without new authors springing/ To paint the native maple..." (248). Scott's ideal of international humanist universality is neatly summed up in his 1952 poem "Creed":

The World is my country
 The human race is my race
 The spirit of man is my God
 The future of man is my heaven (89)

Despite this international literary stance, as a prominent constitutional lawyer Scott was a key figure in many national social and political debates. With his bilingual Montreal background, he was a natural choice for membership from 1963 to 1971 on the Royal Commission on Bilingualism and Biculturalism, which decided to shape the country on the linguistic foundations of its two founding cultures, ironically at exactly the same time that the government's relaxation of immigration policies was making that concept of Canada less and less a reflexion of the country's actual ethnic composition.

Smith's poetry, as Anne Compton has argued, is a fusion of the native and 17th century British metaphysical, but with the latter by far the more important. In an essay originally written but rejected as a preface for the 1936 anthology *New Provinces* he edited with Scott, first published in George Woodcock's *Canadian Literature* (24 (Spring): 6-9), Smith stated his anti-nationalist position bluntly: "We do not pretend that this volume contains any verse that might not have been written in the United States or in Great Britain. There is certainly nothing specially Canadian about more than one or two poems. Why should there be? Poetry today is ...either cosmopolitan or provincial..." (Klinck 586).

The nationalists in this generation of writers, on the other hand, argued that it was essential for Canadians in a barely settled new country with a tiny population to escape their inherited cultural subservience to the British motherland as well as the social, economic, cultural and political power of that English-speaking Goliath to the south. The writer's duty was to forge a national cultural consciousness. Most prominent among them was novelist Hugh MacLennan (1907-1990). Knowing well that the tiny Canadian market for original native writing forced Canadian publishers to bring

out titles jointly with British or American firms whose readers had little interest in Canada, he made two abortive attempts to produce novels with international settings before recognizing he must write about the country he knew. For the next forty years he produced numerous novels, set primarily either in his native Nova Scotia or the Quebec to which he moved in 1935, yet utilizing these regional settings to focus on national problems and a consideration of Canada's possible role in the modern world. His first novel *Barometer Rising* (1941) is set during the great explosion in Halifax harbour in 1917; his protagonist, like the country, cannot gain an identity until the colonial past, engendered in violence, had been violently destroyed. His now famous 1945 novel *Two Solitudes* was the first work by an English speaking writer to delineate the long-standing hatreds between French and English in Quebec from World War I through World War II, but it ends optimistically with a symbolic marriage between the feuding French and English families about to enlist in that international conflict. No such optimism about French-English relations is to be found in his *Return of the Sphinx*, the novel MacLennan published in the country's centennial year with a message about the rise of violent separatism in Quebec that the celebrating country did not want to hear. The federalist cause of his protagonist seems doomed and Yeats's "rough beast" is "slouching toward Bethlehem to be born."

The chief complaint of literary critics writing about Canadian literature in the first fifty years of this century is that it had produced no writers of the first rank in any genre who could stand as equals among the best to be found in Britain or the United States. Ironically it is in the last three decades of political turmoil threatening the nation's existence that Canadian literature has flourished as never before. There cannot be another country in the world which has seen so great an increase in the quantity and quality of its creative writers in a mere thirty years. And the chief credit for this cultural flowering goes to the same federal governments which have failed so notably to create political unity. Through the Canada Council, established in 1957 "for the Encouragement of the Arts, Letters, Humanities and Social Sciences" (Pacey 19), federal governments have poured millions of dollars into grants for individual writers; subsidies for publication of Canadian books, literary magazines and literary criticism; support for translation of French literature into English and English literature into French; a readings and writers-in-residence program which assists universities and other community centres across the country to bring writers from other regions for short or extended periods. Provincial governments have also given more modest financial support to regional cultural projects.

Efforts have been made to bridge the gap between French and English writers. The desire to appease French Quebec is evident in the very political name: The Association of Canadian and Quebec Literatures, given to a bilingual learned society established in 1974. The first *Literary History of Canada*, published in 1965 and revised in 1976, was limited to literature in English but the *Oxford Companion to Canadian Literature*, published in 1983, although written entirely in English, gives extensive coverage to French-Canadian writing. The *Oxford Companion* also makes a token gesture toward the native peoples dispossessed by the European invasion and toward the new multicultural policy by including entries on Indian and Inuit as well as Ukrainian and Yiddish literature (Toye, VII & VIII).

It is noticeable, however, that the French-English conflict which has so dominated the political arena has rarely been a subject for Canada's creative writers outside Quebec. That theme is, on the other hand, pervasive among writers in both French

and English from Montreal. The majority of the province's French writers, such as Montreal playwright Michel Tremblay, have been closely associated with the Parti Québécois. The English speakers, like Hugh MacLennan or Mordecai Richler, are staunchly Federalist.

The broader political debate of regionalism versus nationalism also has its literary counterpart. Most efforts to interpret our literature in terms of pan-Canadian patterns or international theories have originated in the powerful central province of Ontario, especially the metropolis of Toronto, provincial capital and unofficial financial and cultural capital of English-speaking Canada. By far the most influential literary critic from the 1950s through the 1970s was Northrop Frye (1912-1991), Professor of English at the University of Toronto. Believing in modes and myths of literature which are "transhistorical, collapsing history to sameness" (Godard 30), Frye seems in the same universal/international camp as A.J.M. Smith and Frank Scott, but when he concluded in 1965 that most Canadian literature suffered from what he called a "garrison mentality" which prevented it from advancing into the autonomous kingdom of the mythic (213-251), his unexamined *a priori* was very nationalistic: the assumption that one could make such grand generalizations about all literature produced in this country from sea to shining sea. His many student disciples, both writers and professors of English, spread this dictum across the country and developed equally nationalistic pan-Canadian theories of their own which went down very well as the country celebrated its centennial. One of the most notable of his pupils was poet and novelist Margaret Atwood who in 1972 published *Survival: A Thematic Guide to Canadian Literature*, dedicated to Frye and others of the Toronto school. Her *a priori* is "that every country or culture has a single unifying and informing symbol at its core" (31) and that Canada's is survival, the bare survival of a twice colonized people obsessed with an image of themselves as victims. Another of the pan-Canadians was John Moss whose *Patterns of Isolation in English Canadian Fiction* (1974) discovered peculiar advantages to the artist in the very fact of isolation as a persistent Canadian experience.

Countering such Procrustean efforts to chop or stretch our literature to fit into one king-size national bed are the regionalists. Not surprisingly, two of the proponents of the view that Canadian literature is and should be regional come from British Columbia and the Maritimes, two regions remote from and often politically opposed to the powerful centre. Since 1970 British Columbian George Woodcock has been a constant critic of a biculturalism which is irrelevant to Western Canada and advocate of decentralization of political power (*Canada and the Canadians*, 1970; *The Canadians*, 1979). In a 1980 lecture he asserted that "despite the constant political and economic efforts of central Canada to impose its hegemony on the rest of the country, Canadian literature, like Canadian painting, has always remained regional in its impulses and origins" (23). Unfortunately for his thesis, Woodcock's own prolific publications are predominantly international, including studies of Wilde, Orwell, Huxley and Herbert Read as well as travel books on Mexico, the Andes, Asia and India, and national; in 1959 he founded the influential periodical *Canadian Literature* and edited it until 1977.

At the opposite end of the country in 1987 novelist and critic Janice Kulyk Keefer, then a resident of Nova Scotia, produced *Under Eastern Eyes: A Critical Reading of Maritime Fiction*. She accuses Ontario literary critics of trying to marginalise Maritime literature by identifying so-called pan-Canadian themes which are irrelevant to

this region's writers. Despite what she calls "the magisterial myths set down by Northrop Frye" (25), she finds no "garrison mentality" in Maritime literature. She concludes: "we must conceive of Canadian literature in a pluralist sense—not as the offshoot of one homogeneous mythos but as a variety of ways of experiencing and articulating a shared world" (31).

A third possible regionalist position has been taken by writers from the Prairies who, while making no grand generalizations about Canadian literature produced in other regions, have insisted that writers born and bred on the prairies are inevitably regional because the particularly harsh and extreme climate of this region and its unique topography, ranging from the heights of the Rocky Mountains to 1000 miles of flat plain dominated by a vast sky, have shaped their creative imagination in a unique way. This thesis was first expressed in the first critical study of the region's literature, *The Canadian West in Fiction*, published in 1949 by Edward McCourt (1907-1972), novelist and professor of English at the University of Saskatchewan, all of whose novels contrast the mountains and the plains as shaping forces in the lives of his protagonists (Bogaards). The same position was reiterated by Henry Kreisel, novelist and professor of English at the University of Alberta, in his 1968 essay titled "The Prairie: A State of Mind" (Klinck 620-627) and repeated in 1973 by British Columbia professor of English Laurence Ricou in his book *Vertical Man/ Horizontal World: Man and Landscape in Canadian Prairie Fiction* and in 1977 by University of Alberta English professor Dick Harrison in his *Unnamed Country: The Struggle for a Canadian Prairie Fiction*.

Support for the federal government's multicultural policy has also come from literary critics in Ontario, the province which earlier produced Marshall McLuhan (1911-1980), the University of Toronto professor who popularized the term "global village" to describe the modern world in his 1962 study of media called *The Gutenberg Galaxy*. In 1990 Linda Hutcheon and Marion Richmond of Toronto's York University edited *Other Solitudes: Canadian Multicultural Fictions*. Its aim is to explore the nature of our cultural diversity in the fiction of contemporary writers who are immigrants or the children of immigrants from eighteen different countries and in interviews with them by Canadians of equally diverse backgrounds. Representatives of the two founding cultures as well as the native peoples are also interviewed in this most politically correct collection and the book concludes with a copy of the Canadian Multiculturalism Act. Its publication was understandably subsidized by the Multiculturalism Sector of the Department of the Secretary of State, but the opinions of the writers interviewed range from acceptance of the legislation to reservations or rejection for all the reasons given in Karim's report. A particularly vocal opponent is fiction writer Neil Bissoondath, who emigrated from Trinidad first to Toronto then to Montreal. Since he is fluently bilingual in French and English and lives at the country's centre, he supports the concept of a French/English bicultural national identity and has advocated that concept of Canada in the Toronto *Globe and Mail*, the country's one "national" newspaper in English (Bissoondath, "A Question;" Makin) and in his 1994 book *Selling Illusions: The Cult of Multiculturalism in Canada*. Not surprisingly, Janice Kulyk Keefer was one of many to give this book a very bad review.

It is also noticeable that in the 90s many of the country's most prestigious awards for fiction have gone to late-arriving immigrants not from the two founding cultures writing not about Canada but about the cultures which shaped them. Our Governor General's Award for fiction in English went in 1990 to Italian-Canadian Nino Ricci

for *Lives of the Saints*, set almost entirely in Italy, and in 1991 to Indian-Canadian Rohinton Mistry for *Such a Long Journey*, set entirely in Bombay. The first winner of the new and prestigious Giller prize for fiction in 1994 was M.G. Vassanji, born in Kenya and raised in Tanzania, for *The Book of Secrets*, set in the borderland between these two countries. A runner up for the same prize was Shyam Selvadurai for *Funny Boy*, set in his homeland of Sri Lanka.

Another internationalist, not from the country's centre, is poet and English professor Michael Thorpe, who has taught at Mount Allison University in New Brunswick since 1970. The fact that he grew up and was educated in England and taught for several years in Turkey, Nigeria, Singapore and Holland before coming to Canada has determined his position far more than a mere 27 years in Maritime Canada. The title as well as the poems in his 1991 collection *Bagdad Is Everywhere* express this view but he has also responded to what he calls "the Internationalization of English-Canadian literature" since the easing of immigration restrictions in 1966 in a 1992 essay. Noting the above awards of our chief national prize to novels set elsewhere, Thorpe applauded the rich diversity such writers brought to Canada's literature and urged the country's university English departments to accept the fact "that Canadian literature is irrevocably international in content and concern—no mainstream, no Anglo-French 'canon'" (123). At the same time, however, he questioned the federal legislation, wondering "how much openness, freedom for contending views, convictions, images can a society tolerate?" (122). His fears were supported in 1994 when non-white members of the Writers Union of Canada split that group into two opposing factions with their request for a seminar on "Writing Through Race" from which whites would be excluded. They were ultimately denied government funding ("Conference loses grant") but found private support for their meeting (Dafoe).

Adding further fuel to the new internationalist fires in Canada was the development abroad of new schools of literary criticism, largely French in origin (Beauvoir, Derrida, Foucault) but in Canada often filtered through academics in the United States. For the last 25 years feminism and postmodernism, to name only two of various isms and posts, have been enthusiastically applied to Canadian literature. As Larry McDonald pointed out in 1995, "critics, such as Robert Kroetsch and Lorraine Weir, have joined [Linda] Hutcheon in rewriting our cultural history as a long rehearsal for the postmodern moment" (39). He goes on quite rightly to complain that this now dominant model among our academic literary critics

is not a model that addresses English-Canadian literature *as Canadian*, as culturally and historically *different*. It is not a model that resists the levelling tendencies of globalizing theories, that encourages reading Canadian texts in a way that particularizes them as embodiments of the ideas, beliefs, values, social relationships, politics, and structures of feeling that constitute our specific historical experience. (41)

What becomes very obvious after a considered examination of all the literature produced in this country, whether by the native born or by late arrivals shaped by other cultures, is that no neat formula can be manufactured to describe it and that probably only in Canada, a country obsessed with discovering its identity and with making its literature fit the criteria prescribed by various political positions, would so many be trying. I doubt Canada differs from any other country in having produced

some writers who have devoted their entire careers to defining one region, some who have lived in and written about more than one part of the country, some who have focussed their attention on national concerns and some whose settings, subject matter and sensibilities could best be described as international or cosmopolitan. Obviously too, in this country, as in all others, writers have also produced works which defy the kind of spatial categorization implicit in the first two terms and often also in the third. Who, indeed, would want to have a national literature so impoverished that it could be described, as Margaret Atwood insists, by “a single unifying and informing symbol”? It is both futile and misleading to try to contain creativity in such restrictive critical boxes.

That point is effectively illustrated by the body of work Gary Geddes has produced over the past twenty-five years. Though best known as a poet, this eclectic writer has not only practised his craft in all genres but has also ranged over matters regional, national and international as well as producing poetry which exists outside any particular time or place.

The conjunction of the regional and the personal is nowhere better illustrated than in the early (1971) collection of poems and photographs called *Rivers Inlet*. Born in Vancouver, he spent his first seven years there and returned to the Pacific coast, to a community called Rivers Inlet, after a five year sojourn on the Prairies, when his father exchanged unsuccessful farming for commercial fishing. British Columbia was his home until he left in 1964 to begin graduate studies in English at the University at Toronto. In the four brief meditations in this book, vivid descriptions of the British Columbia coastal landscape are interwoven with memories of himself, his family, and their neighbours. The people in these poems, like Wordsworth's leechgatherer, grow out of or have become one with the watery world they inhabit. In section one he tells us “Our gills ache/ from working overtime;” a room “has sheltered a thousand/ fallen mermaids and beached/ Ulysses.” His family are

Tenacious Scots, never far
from laughter and despair, clinging
to the shore like barnacles.
A nation of exiles, one foot
always in water.

The 1973 collection of poems and photographs called *Snakeroot* is equally a vivid evocation of the topography and climate of Canada's Great Plains and an attempt to recapture experiences which shaped him in those five boyhood years on a marginal Saskatchewan farm. In this region, man is not one with nature as in coastal British Columbia but is rather engaged in an elemental and ultimately hopeless conflict with it. Like prairie novelist Edward McCourt, Geddes sees the plains as the place “where life is lived/when we come down at last/from the mountains/ bearing/ our unspeakable dreams” (“plains”). He recalls the experience of all past immigrants trying to wrest a bare living from the soil in a region of climatic extremes, of “scorching prairie sun” (“terrain”) where “you are never far/ from winter, it hangs/ like an icicle in the mind” (“winter”). These “Children of wind, sleeping,/ damp cloths over their mouths... were called sodbusters, had/ come on the ‘free homestead’ plan,/ 10 dollars for 160 acres/ of rock and bone./ Putting down/ roots, breaking the land/ till the land broke them” (“children of wind”) as it broke his father when a hailstorm

destroyed his crop and his hope. He “simply packed,/shook the dust from his shoes,/ and moved out, leaving equipment/ and a hundred jars of saskatoons” (“last straw”). As adult poet trying to recapture this past he describes himself as yet another sobduster doing “the tough job of clearing,/ working with no script./ Stumps, interminable stones/ that clutter, impede growth./ I climb from the word/ down, rung after rung,/ through syllable and letter/ back to the thing itself,/ returning to origins” (“ladder grass”).

Although occasional poems on his youth in these two very different Western Canadian regions are scattered through his later collections, the only other volume devoted entirely to them is the 1986 collection of short stories he aptly titled *The Unsettling of the West*. They range in time and place from the bizarre experience of a Northwest Mounted Police officer stationed in Fort Edmonton in the early days of settlement (“The Unsettling of the West”), to the contemporary battle of wits between the native people and European invaders at a Rivers Inlet fish cannery, won handily and hilariously by the Indians (“The Pickling of Guingin”) through a record of the injustices suffered by Japanese Canadians interned after Pearl Harbour (“The Accounting”). He also includes a story based on his own experiences as a successful salesman of encyclopedias on the prairies in the 1960s (“The Book of Knowledge”) and another in which a young 60s Vancouver woman discovers the “superficiality and hollowiness of the literary and bureaucratic” world she lives in by comparison with the pared-to-essentials memories of an elderly prairie woman who has “accepted her own insignificance and thereby achieved a certain freedom, a certain grace” (“Common Ground”).

In 1978 Geddes took up his present teaching job at Concordia University in Montreal, commuting to work from a farm in Dunvegan, Ontario. This rural Glengarry County corner of the Ontario region is commemorated in Section II of his 1993 collection *Girl by the Water*. Initially the reader assumes that the section title “Junkfood Pastoral” is simply borrowed from the title of the first poem but after reading the poems in the sequence Geddes has given them, one becomes aware of the significance of that pejorative adjective; this at first apparently idyllic pastoral world is infected from within and without by all the ills of the modern world. It is not, like Rivers Inlet or the rural Saskatchewan of *Snakeroot* self-contained. The first poem, “Junk Food Pastoral,” describes the hard but generally happy life of the neighbour who cuts Geddes’s hay: “ten loads in the heat of the day,/ binder-twine burning capable hands./ Rhythm of work. Smiles that take root/ in stomach wall or rib-cage “they don’t fade easily” (21). The second poem records another happy event, his assistance, wide-eyed children watching, at the birth of a colt (“Daylight” 23). The third humorously describes the prosaic but necessary rural task of emptying the family’s septic tank: “No rich archive to discover,/ no reservoir of dreams or deep images-/ sediment not sentiment” (“Weeping Tiles” 24). The fourth selection is elegiac, honouring at his death after an unhappy life an “illiterate and print-shy” neighbour for his shearing skills and his complete non-verbal understanding of his sheep (“Words like sheep...” 25-26). The horrors of the outside world intrude on this peaceful community in the next poem when a farm family hosts a Russian child on a “pilgrimage to clean air” after exposure to the radioactive fallout in Chernobyl. Sasha must return to a classroom “where the shattered globe lies on the floor/ like the shell of a cracked egg” (“Sasha” 27). The mood darkens further in the poem named with bitter irony “Happy Valley.” Near “Pleasant Corners School” in this community of “well-groomed farms and restored cottages” lives a businessman ironically named Mr. Love whose perfectly legal business it is to assemble and sell high-powered weapons, “death by direct mail,” for the killing fields of South America. Geddes concludes “Morality’s

a bore. Nothing/ compares with the maples, hardwoods, and rolling hills/ of Happy Valley. A perfect place to raise your kids” (28-29). Despite such preparation, the next poem “Fusiles y Frijoles,” guns and beans, comes as a shock, shifting the reader to scenes of barbaric cruelty and murder committed by those made in Canada guns in South America (30-31). Having so forced the reader to recognize how the cruelties of the modern global village impinge on this community, he enforces the contrast by next describing an idyllic Canadian family outing for ice fishing, skating and skidooing, yet even here the radio brings the outside world, in songs describing “the loneliness/ of long-haul truckers/ traveling through the night/ in Oklahoma” (“Ice-Fishing at Vaudreuil” 32). We are then shifted outward again by the experience of a neighbour who, like the poet, owns and lives on a farm but earns his living by practising another profession. This photographer must arrange to have his farmhouse and hives of bees cared for through the winter when he goes to Africa to capture its exotic images on film. He returns in the spring, when new life returns in nature, in the swarming bees and greening fields, but this world traveler’s “isolation remains,” his mind “restless in transit as it was back home” (“The Bees” 33-34). The Glengarry poems end violently, with the account of an observed highway accident in which a car, hit by a transport truck in dense fog, goes up in flames, the passengers incinerated in their seats, “halfway through a talk-show/ or Mozart sonata, morning coffee/ still on their breath, the announcer’s/ voice growing faint in the static of burning fat” (“Bog Fire” 35).

Violence also begins Section III of this volume, called “Two Moose on the Hunker Creek Road,” whose eight poems give his impressions of a visit to yet another Canadian region, the Yukon and Northwest Territories. The ironically titled “This Sporting Life” tells of a recent murder: “An independent woman is a threat/ to the abuser whose wife stays home/ out of fear. Big game guide/ and taxidermist, he prefers his women/ docile, stuffed, and easily mounted” (39). Geddes makes the reader aware of a climate far more extreme than that found on the prairies, where “each year when the river floods, buildings/ settle deeper into the earth” and even the sun chooses “to winter in Florida or Waikiki” (“Bonanza” 43), where truck windows are “cracked/ from ...extreme cold” (“Two Moose on the Hunker Creek Road” 50). He meets women who shift unhappily from one unsatisfactory lover or husband to another (“At the Downtown Hotel” 44-45; “Doing the Klondike Crawl” 46), who come to his reading at Yukon College, “its offices appropriately located/ above the liquor store,” to look at him “as if I’m the Tin Man and not wearing a shred/ of clothing” (“Sheet Metal” 47). The final poem, “Two Moose on the Hunker Creek Road,” whose title defines the group, like the Glengarry poems, links this remote North with the rest of the degenerate world. The diggings left from the Klondike Gold Rush are “a No Man’s Land/ of lost dreams. Not that different from scenes/ in *Robocop* on the hotel television”. “Chicago and Dawson City ... testimonies/ to ambition and greed, sister cities/ to Coventry, Hamburg, Nagasaki, Bagdad,/ and Sarajevo, places to try out the new toys/ and the new vocabulary —*smart bombs,/ collateral damage, ethnic cleansing,/ progress.* Conscience itself, obsolete and expendable as tonsils or baby toes” (50-51).

Sections IV of this collection, punningly titled “Relative Humidity,” is composed of intensely personal poems to or about members of his family. Equally outside any spatial (or temporal) category is the first section “Girl by the Water,” a series of 10 monologues by 10 witnesses to the culmination of a tragic love story set in no named place or time.. Each narrator sees something different in the actions of a young woman who throws herself into the sea to meet her drowned lover.

Section V: "Mao, Dreaming" falls in the international category but it has a Canadian connection in that Geddes has the melancholy spirit of the great Chinese leader reminiscing with the spirit of Canadian doctor Norman Bethune, lamenting his personal and political failures, assessing his medical assistant, well-aware that the "shifting waters of language" ensure that "Those commissioned to write/ histories made up fictions" ("small Talk" 116).

Geddes's 1995 collection *The Perfect Cold Warrior* contains nothing one could describe as regional or national but continues his poetic autobiography in its first section ("The Drive") concentrating on formative boyhood experiences in 1950s Vancouver, particularly his unhappy relationship with his father, then devotes the other two sections to international concerns: first, the casualties in the Israeli-Palestinian conflict, which he encountered personally during a 1993 visit to the West Bank, Gaza and Israel; and lastly a dramatic monologue in which Trotsky, in exile in Mexico, very much like Mao, meditates on the day of his assassination in 1940, on his present and past, his political and personal guilts, joys and fears.

No other native-born Canadian writer has devoted as much of his creative energy to matters international, past and present, as Geddes. A small illustration of a horse leaping into the ocean from a becalmed Spanish galleon inspired him to write in 1970 the brilliant poetic narrative of shattered ambition and cruel violence *Letter of the Master of Horse*. (Geddes, *PBSB* 12), revised and reprinted in 1980 in the volume called *The Acid Test*, together with a section of poems which cover modern man's inhumanity to modern man from Kent State to Vietnam and Cambodia and another which is a verse journal of travels in Europe and North Africa in the 1970s which also conveys the general sickness of our world. In 1981 he organized a cultural exchange which took seven Canadian writers to China, their impressions recorded in *Chinada: Memoirs of the Gang of Seven* (1982). Seeing on that trip the incredible 8,000 pottery soldiers constructed for the first Emperor of China, as protection in the afterlife, led Geddes to write in 1984 *The Terracotta Army*, a series of twelve monologues by members of that ancient society discussing their deranged emperor and his master potter. Two years later he published with George Liang a translation of the classic Chinese poets Li Pai and Tu Fu *I Didn't Notice the Mountain Growing Dark*. Many of the best poems in his 1986 collection *Changes of State* describe his sympathetic response to traditional Chinese art forms. The last work devoted to the Far East was the 1987 volume *Hong Kong Poems*, a powerful reconstruction of the experience of defeated Canadian soldiers in Japanese POW camps in World War II interspersed with prose vignettes which tell his own story in the 1970s.

Most recently Geddes's attention has focussed on South America. A reading tour to Chile in 1987 resulted two years later in *No Easy Exit/ Salida Difícil*, a poetic record of political oppression in that country dedicated to those who have fought it. In 1990, he edited with Hugh Hazelton *Companeros: Writings about Latin America*. In the same year, after a trip to Nicaragua, he wrote *Letters from Managua (Meditations on Politics and Art)*, seeing a striking similarity in the important role played by poets in forging a sense of nationhood in Nicaragua and among separatists in the province of Quebec.

Not surprisingly, since he teaches in Montreal, Geddes has been much involved in commenting on the French/English conflict, the national political dilemma which has bedeviled Canada for the past thirty years. He began in 1976 with *War & Other Measures*, its title an ironic reference to the imposition of the War Measures Act in

1970 but its main thrust an effort to get inside the head of the mad French-Canadian bomber Paul Joseph Chartier who had died in the men's washroom of the House of Commons a decade earlier when a bomb he intended for Parliament exploded prematurely. In 1977 after the election for the first time to political power of the separatist Parti Québécois he invited and collected essays from 32 Canadian poets, journalists, politicians, publishers and economists from every region and of every political stripe on this vexing question, titling it quite appropriately *Divided We Stand*. In 1978 he tried to bring some healing humour to French-English relations in the dramatic farce *Les maudits anglais*.

Geddes, then, is a Canadian writer who has refused to be bound within any single spatial context. He has examined his own unique personal history, with and without spatial referents, described vividly the unique qualities of four of Canada's seven regions, contributed largely to the discussion of national issues and lastly practiced better than any other native born Canadian Frank Scott's creed:

The world is my country
 The human race is my race
 The spirit of man is my God
 The future of man is my heaven

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