

White Civility: The Literary Project of English Canada. By DANIEL COLEMAN.
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0-8020-3707-7.

Much recent criticism on Canadian literature concentrates on the ways in which literary texts resist both White normativity and the privileging of British ancestry. Daniel Coleman takes a step back from this, asking: 'How did this normative concept of (English) Canadianness come to be established in the first place? What are its elements? What is its genealogy? And how might an understanding of the process of its establishment enable twenty-first century Canadians to anticipate and resist its continuing coercive power?' (p. 5). It is rather surprising that no one has thought of writing a book like this before, considering how important and fascinating its subject is.

Coleman notes that multiculturalism is widely held to represent Canada's progressiveness, but suggests that this is only the most recent manifestation of an ongoing ideal of Canadian civility whose definition and borders have shifted over time. He points out that, 'at the same time that civility involves the creation of justice and equality, it simultaneously creates borders to the sphere in which justice and equality are maintained' (p. 9), and that the work of maintaining the civil ideal while policing its borders is performed, in different ways, by a whole variety of literary texts. Coleman concentrates primarily on popular fictions, poems, and journalism, because such writing can reveal 'the unstable dynamics between the official symbolic history of the nation and its fantasmic repressed histories' (p. 35). He analyses texts published between 1850 and 1950, a period in which monocultural nationalist discourse first flourished and then was challenged by mass immigration, and in which, he suggests, Canadian literature was 'overwhelmingly characterized by allegorical or formulaic representations' (p. 37). This view of early Canadian writing is crucial to his argument, and has to some extent determined his choice of writers. They include William Kirby, Philippe-Joseph Aubert de Gaspé, Thomas Raddall, Gilbert Parker, Ralph Connor, Emily Murphy, Nellie McClung, Margaret Murray Robertson, Robert Stead, Frederick Philip Grove, and Hugh MacLennan.

Since the discussion covers numerous books which have been rejected in recent decades as excessively romantic or too conservative for modern tastes, a certain amount of recovery work has been necessary. This includes summarizing plots, which can be tedious but is unavoidable since the argument is often predicated on the patterning of plots and the pairing or contrasting of character types. The detailed close readings are organized around four allegorical figures who were repeatedly used to personify the Canadian nation: the Loyalist brother, the enterprising Scottish orphan, the muscular Christian, and the maturing colonial son. All of these, Coleman argues, contributed to the privileging of White Britishness in 'English' Canada, but this racial ideal did not correspond to the supposedly degenerate Britishness to be found in Britain. Rather, popular literature celebrated a form of renewed, colonial Britishness, derived more from Scottish than English traditions, which had apparently evolved because 'the rigours of life in a stern, unaccommodating climate demanded strength of body, character, and mind while it winnowed away laziness, overindulgence, and false social niceties' (p. 24). While Coleman discovers this ideal to be fairly consensual among most of the writers he studies, he appends a final chapter on 'Wry Civility', which complicates the picture by exploring ironic fictional renderings of the claims of White civility (by James De Mille, Sara Jeannette Duncan, and John Marlyn).

There is not space here to do justice to Coleman's arguments, which are intricate and sophisticated, although never unduly abstract or difficult to follow. He is admirably self-aware about his own critical project, and his book is meticulously

researched and coherently structured. *White Civility* is an extremely persuasive and carefully argued study, and deserves attention from all scholars of Canadian literature.

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