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## Cyberidentities

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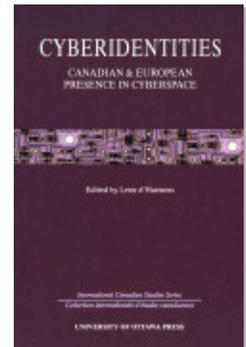
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## THE CENTRE FOR EDITING EARLY CANADIAN TEXTS (CEECT) AND CYBERSPACE

by Mary Jane EDWARDS

For the last sixteen years the Centre for Editing Early Canadian Texts (CEECT) at Carleton University in Ottawa has been preparing, with the help of computers, scholarly editions of major works of early English-Canadian prose. We have as a result participated actively in the technological revolutions of the past two decades. Despite our use of the electronic highway, Carleton University Press has so far continued to publish our critically edited texts in traditional paperback and casebound versions. With the price of books escalating, however, several of us have contemplated the possibility of mounting our editions on the Internet. In this paper I shall describe what CEECT does, discuss how we use computers, and explain why Cyberspace may not be a suitable medium for editions like ours.

### I CEECT

In the late 1950s, when I was an undergraduate at Trinity College, University of Toronto, Canadian literature did not loom large in our curriculum. In my first year of an Honours BA program in Modern Language and Literature, one of my two obligatory courses in English – I was specializing in English and French – was American literature. This course was to include at its end a brief introduction to the literature of Canada. We never quite got to “Can lit,” however, and certainly we were not examined on it. Later, in the final year of my Honours program, I read two or three French-Canadian novels as part of a course on modern French fiction, and in an English course on modern drama and poetry I was supposed to read some Canadian poetry. But the major writers, or those authors like William Butler Yeats and Thomas Stearns Eliot whom we were given to understand were central to the great tradition, took all our time. But even if our professor had elected to cover Canadian authors, we should have had difficulty acquiring the relevant texts, especially those that included early English-Canadian prose.

The situation *vis-à-vis* the teaching of Canadian literature and the availability of moderately priced reprints of Canadian works improved significantly in the 1960s, particularly after 1967, when our centennial celebrations focused the attention of Canadians on our past and created a demand for books about our culture. The first, and most important, of several series of reprints was the New Canadian Library (NCL), which McClelland and Stewart actually began publishing in the late 1950s. Its general editor, Malcolm Ross, aimed to provide a wide variety of Canadian prose and poetry from colonial to contemporary times. Despite his efforts, however, there were relatively few early prose works published in the NCL series, and those that were, through a combination of ignorance, indifference, and the high cost of reprinting small runs of long novels and other prose, were always shortened and often printed from a base text

that was itself flawed in various ways. The other series confined themselves almost exclusively to reprints of modern and contemporary authors.

Since the 1960s there have been several attempts to improve the availability of pre-1900 English-Canadian literature. Selections from the prose of our early writers have appeared in several anthologies, including *The Evolution of Canadian Literature in English: Beginnings to 1867* (1973), which I edited, and which, according to George L. Parker, who prepared CEECT's edition of *The Clockmaker, Series One, Two, and Three* (1835-36, 1838, 1840; CEECT 1995), was "the first anthology" to place writers like Haliburton "in a social and cultural context." When one searches for the volumes of these authors, if the early editions are not themselves available, one thinks now primarily of the microfiche collection of "over 70,000 documents" (Bonnely, 1997) relevant to Canada and mostly published before 1900, prepared by the Canadian Institute for Historical Micro-reproductions (CIHM). But one also remembers the photographic facsimiles in the "Literature of Canada Poetry and Prose in Reprint Series," published by the University of Toronto Press; the "corrected" reprints of earlier editions in the "Maritime Literature Reprint Series," published by the Ralph Pickard Bell Library at Mount Allison University; and such discrete items as Bruce Nesbitt's edition of Thomas Chandler Haliburton's *Recollections of Nova Scotia: The Clockmaker; or The Sayings and Doings of Samuel Slick, of Slickville* (1984), the first series of *The Clockmaker* that appeared in the *Novascotian*, the Halifax newspaper published by Joseph Howe, in 1835-36. None of these enterprises, however, has produced, or was intended to produce, the scholarly editions that at least some of our early prose works so richly deserve and that we so badly need, if we are going to understand as thoroughly as we must our Canadian past.

From the time that we received our first grant from the Social Sciences and Humanities Research Council of Canada in 1981, the mandate of the Centre for Editing Early Canadian Texts has been to prepare such editions. So far, eleven volumes have appeared in the CEECT series. They include Frances Brooke's *The History of Emily Montague* (1769; CEECT 1985), considered to be the earliest Canadian novel; James De Mille's *A Strange Manuscript Found in a Copper Cylinder* (1880; CEECT 1986), a fantastic romance frequently classified as science fiction; Susanna Moodie's *Roughing It in the Bush or Life in Canada* (1852; CEECT 1988), an autobiographical narrative about life in Upper Canada in the 1830s; and John Richardson's *The Canadian Brothers* (1840; CEECT 1992), an historical tale about the War of 1812 based on its author's own experiences as a gentleman volunteer on the northwest frontier in 1812 and 1813. Our most recent publication is Catharine Parr Traill's *The Backwoods of Canada* (1836; CEECT 1997), a series of letters that provides an account of her life in the country north of Peterborough in the years immediately following her emigration from England to Upper Canada in 1832. In preparing these editions we follow more or less the principles and procedures associated with the so-called Greg-Bowers-Tanselle school of Anglo-American editing. Thus, each edition has a critically edited text with such supporting apparatus to document how we established the text as a list of "Emendations in Copy-text," and an "Historical Collation" that records variant readings among the authoritative versions. Because we wish to ground each critically edited text in its British North

American and Canadian contexts, we surround it with an introduction, annotations, and other apparatus that explain the history of its creation and publication and locate its contents in their own time and place.

## II CEECT AND COMPUTERS

One reason why we have been able to make the progress that we have in this ambitious Canadian editorial and cultural project is that from its beginnings we went “hi-tech.” We began to plan CEECT in the fall of 1979. I remember the shock that I felt when at one of our meetings in October of that year, a colleague suggested that we really should consider computerizing our as yet unnamed and ill-defined enterprise. From then on, with increasing frequency, at ever greater length, and with progressively more detail, the use of computers in editing in general and in our editing in particular was discussed as we answered the ultimate – and in some ways ultimately revolutionary – question: should we computerize CEECT? At the time the most sensible answer to this question was by no means clear. There were microcomputers that were chiefly programmed for word-processing. There were programs written for mainframe computers that would edit texts in various basic ways, compile concordances, and even run collation programs to compare texts. But systems of programs that would help in the preparation of scholarly editions like ours were few. Even if one did manage to hear about them, furthermore, the language or languages in which the programs were written, the software of which they were a part, and the hardware on which they ran, were frequently incompatible with the languages, software, and hardware available at Carleton.

Still, what had been done and what we were assured could be done by the specialists in Computing Services at the University convinced us that the computer would help us to analyze efficiently the data that we gathered about our works, and to reach the level of accuracy that we desired for our editions. And thus we began the dual process of entering versions of the works that we were editing on the computer so that they could be manipulated electronically, and of inventing the programs with which to manipulate them. By 1987 students in Computer Science at Carleton, whom we employed each summer, had prepared a series of seventy discrete programs that were written in five different languages. These programs, designed to run on Carleton’s mainframe computer, not only allowed us to collate our texts in various ways but also to do word searches, prepare parts of the apparatus, and act as our own compositors. Even now, although we have progressed through several generations of microcomputers, personal computers, and laptops, we still use these programs on the mainframe.

## III CEECT AND CYBERSPACE

Inasmuch as these programs have also involved shipping electronic versions of our texts from microcomputer to mainframe to personal computer, we have from the beginning been communicating electronically. We have also used the Internet in various ways. For several years I have taken advantage of the electronic highway to explore the holdings of libraries in various parts of the world and to converse with colleagues in Australia who

are involved in a project on Australian literature that is partly modeled on CEECT. A few months before the publication of *The Backwoods of Canada*, when, incidentally, our work on the edition was supposedly complete, a graduate student in History at Carleton, who had been a research assistant for Michael A. Peterman, the editor of the CEECT text, went on the Net to ask for help in identifying the source of a reference in Traill's narrative that we had not found. The answer, Oliver Goldsmith's *The Vicar of Wakefield*, came back almost immediately. I was delighted, but also chagrined, for we should have recognized the allusion ourselves. During the same period, from my office in the Institute of Commonwealth Studies at the University of London, where I spent the fall of 1996, I was able to communicate with Michael on such matters as the location of a letter by Catharine Parr Traill at the Suffolk County Record Office in Ipswich, Suffolk. From London I was also in frequent correspondence via electronic mail with my research assistant and secretary at Carleton.

We have versions of each of our texts, including, most importantly, the CEECT scholarly editions, in electronic form. We have electronic links to people and places around the world. With the increasing cost of our books – the price of our paperbacks, for example, has risen from just over Cdn\$5 to just under Cdn\$30 in the twelve years that they have been appearing – and the fragility of all University presses, including Carleton University Press, in Canada, we have at least two incentives. Why, then, should we not practice Entrepreneurship, use the most contemporary means of Communication, and send our exempla of Canadian Culture and Identity into Cyberspace? Why not, indeed?

There is one obvious problem: our codes for paragraphs and other features of the text, developed almost fifteen years ago, do not conform to the new standards, insofar as there are standards. We or someone else, therefore, would have to rewrite our works in certain ways. And that would cost more money, personpower, and time than CEECT has. Inevitably it would also involve the inscription of errors into our editions. But even if these difficulties could be overcome, I still have reservations, the first of which follows from the issues of compatibility and portability that I have just raised.

### 3.1 Obsolescence

Having lived through almost two decades of the electronic revolution, I have not only worked on many generations of hardware, but I have also learned my way through several programs of software. These experiences have been exhilarating, for it is always gratifying to acquire new skills. They have also been costly from the point of view of money and time. Above all they have been wasteful, particularly of data. With every change we have faced three choices with regard to our information. We could transport our data to the new machine; we could abandon our data on the old machine and hope that we could continue to read it for a short time at least; or we could save our data in a different medium, in our case that of print. Over the years we have opted for the last solution. We have hardcopy versions of our data, therefore, but insofar as they only exist electronically on obsolete machines, or disks, or tapes, in obsolete languages, or

programs, we have lost our ability to manipulate them. As the generations of computers multiply and the information we store on them explodes, in fact, I have a vision of a labyrinth of dead hardware and dysfunctional software that is so huge and complex that it withstands even our most innovative version of Ariadne's thread, and therefore withholds our now forever unattainable and therefore permanently unknowable information. My other reservations are less apocalyptic.

### 3.2 Cheapness

One of the arguments that I have heard in support of Cyberspace is that it is cheap. For those of us who teach at universities, especially at universities whose administrators have decided that computers cost less and are far less trouble than colleagues and support staff, our hardware, software, hydro, communication systems, and even ergonomic chairs and tables do come apparently without cost. "Cheap" becomes "expensive," however, when one begins to purchase these items for oneself. And many people, including many of those general readers at whom we partly aimed our editions, choose not to spend their money on what they often consider pretty pricey toys. There are others, however, who for various economic, and social, reasons have no choice about their use of Cyberspace: it is simply not available to them. These people include the poor; they also include more women than men and, one suspects, in Canada at least, more native Canadians than other Canadians and more blacks than whites. Books, in fact, especially if they can be borrowed from public libraries, are still, it seems to me, the pre-eminent democratic medium for the transmission of at least certain aspects of both popular and high culture.

### 3.3 Availability

Names like the "World-Wide Web" give the impression that material on Cyberspace is universally available. And certainly if one's universe is largely English-speaking and confined to such continents as Australia, Europe, and North America, then one does potentially have world-wide access. But this verity does not hold in other places. In the last few years I have had much to do with the Canadian Studies programs in India, programs that, incidentally, are rather generously supported by the Canadian government. I have as a result talked to, and worked with, many Indian academics both in their country and mine. Their main problem is the acquisition of Canadian material. To those who teach Canadian literature, I have suggested various solutions, including the use of microfilm and microfiche – for early Canadian texts I am constantly recommending the CIHM series, for example. I also enthuse about the value of electronic mail to establish where material on Canada is located in India. To these suggestions I have received one – may I say universal? – response. "But, Madam, you do not understand. We have so many power failures and other technical difficulties that even if we did have these media, we should not be able to get at them." India is a sophisticated country, and it has a thriving computer industry. Still, the best way to disseminate Canadian literature there is through actual copies of books and periodicals. What applies to India is also true for many other countries. At the present time, then,

Cyberspace cannot be used for the transmission of artifacts of Canadian culture to most of the world's population.

### 3.4 Copyright and copying

The texts that we have edited at CEECT are themselves in the public domain. The editions that we prepare, however, are copyrighted. They thus become subject to all the laws that govern copyright in Canada and elsewhere. These have become quite complex for a variety of reasons, including the photocopying industry that has developed in the last twenty years. In Canada, as a result, we have such organizations as the Public Lending Rights Commission and CANCOPY.

Since the idea of mounting our CEECT editions on the Net was first bruited, I have been trying to imagine how to solve the problems of copyright on, and copying from, the Net. If our editions were available in Cyberspace, should the User pay to read them? If s/he should pay, how much should the payment be? By what means should it be collected? If these editions were available on the Net, should we allow them to be copied? If they could be copied, should they be available for reproduction in their entirety or in part? Finally, given the ease with which, despite smart cards, computer hackers operate, how could the copying of all or part of these editions be controlled anyway? I have no answers to these questions, but it seems to me that these problems must be solved more satisfactorily than they are today if we are really going to send editions like those prepared by CEECT into Cyberspace.

### 3.5 Canadian culture and identity

So far the reservations that I have discussed are not limited to either a country or a culture. They have been and are being debated in various parts of the world. My thoughts on these subjects were stimulated, for example, by *The Politics of the Electronic Text* (Chernaik {...}, 1993), the proceedings of a one-day conference held at the Centre for English Studies at the University of London in 1993, that explored with a good deal of wit and wisdom the "problems" as well as the "opportunities" of electronic publishing. My final – and most serious – reservation is connected specifically to Canada and Canadian culture. I have spent almost two decades attempting to undo the damage done to early Canadian authors by largely foreign publishers who often stole our prose works, usually revised them to a greater or lesser degree, and always appropriated them culturally by wrenching them out of their original contexts. Having prepared reliable texts of these important early Canadian works, surrounded them with apparatus that help to explain their histories, and enclosed them in paperback covers coloured and illustrated to suggest aspects of their contents, I am, I think, justifiably worried about the preservation of the integrity of our editions in a medium like Cyberspace. This "inquietude," however, is more than that of a mother hen fussing over her chicks – and I certainly worry in this way in regard to these editions. My real concern is that if we do mount these artifacts in Cyberspace, even if we post them with all the guarantees of textual and other integrities of which we can conceive, their new existence in virtual

reality will change and shape them in unexpected and at this point, unknown, ways. Some of these transformations may well be neutral or even theoretically and practically desirable. Some of them, however, will surely detach these editions, as they float through electronic space, from their grounding in the historical and contemporary realities from which they came. These works, then, conceived by their authors as contributions to the medium of print, will almost certainly be weakened as witnesses to this culture of newspapers, periodicals, and books. Most importantly for Canadians, however, these foundation texts of our literature will definitely be damaged, perhaps even destroyed, as examples of Canadian culture and identity.

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