What is Québécois Literature?

Rosemary Chapman

Published by Liverpool University Press

Chapman, Rosemary.  
What is Québécois Literature? Reflections on the Literary History of Francophone Writing in Canada.

Project MUSE. muse.jhu.edu/book/72706.

For additional information about this book
https://muse.jhu.edu/book/72706
Introduction

The question ‘What is québécois literature?’ may seem innocent and answerable. But, as is the case with many simple questions, the answer is not simple. As my subtitle suggests, the question provokes not answers but further queries and reflections. The shift from ‘québécois’ to ‘francophone writing in Canada’ emphasizes the problematic nature of terminology and classification in this field. As will be seen, the term ‘la littérature québécoise’ was only coined in the mid-1960s, in the very specific context of Quebec’s Révolution tranquille. If I choose to use the cumbersome phrase ‘francophone writing in Canada’ it is because it is a rather more accurate term to refer to the historical, geographical and generic range of literature written in French in Canada, within and beyond Quebec, by authors mostly but not exclusively of European descent. What constitutes ‘literature’ in francophone Canada varies from one historical period to another. As will be seen in Chapter 3, in the nineteenth century the term might be used to include sermons, speeches and works of history, whereas literature as taught in schools in the twenty-first century falls into four main genres: poetry (and song), prose fiction (the novel and shorter forms), theatre and essay. The predominance of religious and political rhetoric in nineteenth-century Quebec highlights the ways in which literary histories are a cultural product and serve a specific, local purpose. The literary canon of one culture is not a simple transposition from another. The chapters that follow will demonstrate the ways in which religion and politics have played an active role in shaping and mediating a particular canon to francophone Canada. Literary historians also make very different choices in the balance between genres within the canon which they construct. This may result in part from the status of the literature of France in the literary education of francophone Canadians, at least up to the 1960s, for whom the fables of La Fontaine and the works of seventeenth-century French
 Québécois Literature

dramatists represented unsurpassable models of literary achievement. Theatre in particular is neglected in the literary histories of francophone Canada, as Lucie Robert, for example, has pointed out.¹ This gap has to an extent been filled by literary histories and anthologies devoted to specific genres, whose own historiography has yet to be studied.²

However, this book will not track the way in which different genres have emerged and established themselves within the literary field, nor does it aim to offer an alternative literary history; rather it will reflect on the construction, function and operation of literary history in francophone Canada. It will explore the different ways in which the history of literary writing in French has been told, and the role played by education in the mediation of that literature. It will study how the narrative and the function of literary historical works have changed as the francophone Canadian population has moved from a colonial past to a postcolonial present and as the rise of Québécois nationalism has both strengthened and polarized not only the francophone population but also francophone literary culture within and beyond Quebec. In order to examine the phenomenon of literary history I shall be taking a number of pathways. These pathways follow a diachronic route in most cases but they operate on different types of material and view these from a variety of perspectives, ranging from the close examination of individual textbooks or curriculum statements to the comparison of a selection of volumes of literary history, and to the discussion of areas of the wide literary field of francophone literature in Canada which tend to be under-represented in the narrative of la littérature québécoise today.

These pathways will not together compose a complete picture of the literary history of francophone Canada, but they aim to open up the field and explore its potential for the future as well as some of the directions it has taken in the past.

My argument takes as its starting point the view that literary history is never neutral, never comprehensive, is as much about the present as the past, and has adopted and adapted a variety of methodologies over time and to suit different contexts. Any literary history maps a territory not only by what it includes, but by what it excludes. That begins with the way we choose to delineate a corpus or tradition of literature. What specific territory is implied or evoked when one speaks of the history of la littérature canadienne de langue française, of la littérature québécoise, of la littérature acadienne, la littérature franco-ontarienne or la littérature amérindienne francophone? Each of these terms suggests a different mapping, a different narrative, and also a
different historical context, structure or periodization. Bhabha argues that literary histories ‘are part [...] of the negotiable field of meanings, signs, and symbols, that is associated with national culture, national identity, national life’. The very notion of a national narrative takes on a particular complexity in the context of colonial and postcolonial cultures. As Said argues: ‘Nations themselves are narratives. The power to narrate or to block other narratives from forming and emerging is very important to culture and to imperialism, and constitutes one of the main connections between them.’ The reliance on national(ist) tropes has influenced the construction of literary histories of francophone writing in Canada in various ways. While recognizing the energizing role of Quebec nationalism in the emergence and affirmation of québécois literature in the second half of the twentieth century, it is also important to analyse the effects of such a narrative on the shape of literary history, on its focus, its inclusions and exclusions. If literary history became the site of contesting theoretical and ideological approaches in the 1960s and 1970s, the writing of literary histories has become still more problematic in the twenty-first century. The last three decades have seen further shifts and tensions working their way through the field of literary history in francophone Canada as a result of two opposed developments: the undermining of the national in favour of global movements and the proliferation of alternative, local, minority histories. In many ways the literary field has become ever more open and inclusive in its recognition of minority literatures and genres which target particular readerships; at the same time, many of the traditional components and methodologies of literary history (including categorization by period or genre and the notion of canon) have been undermined and questioned. Huggan asks whether literary histories ‘with their conceptual legacies of continuity and coherence, can accommodate such postcolonial/postmodern disruptions, such global flows and internal fissures’.

The first part of this introduction will discuss the nature and function of literary history, its underlying assumptions, its various narratives and its component parts. In particular it will consider the problematic nature of the focus on nation that has typified literary history since the nineteenth century, nationhood and nationalism being central to any discussion of the literature of a colonized population. What might a postcolonial history of literature achieve? It might expose and challenge some of the underlying assumptions and biases of earlier literary histories and the ways in which literary history has performed an ideological function. Equally it might reveal some of the omissions and
What is Québécois Literature?

the marginalizations which in themselves are telling in terms of colonial and postcolonial analysis.

The second part of the introduction will go on to consider how the writing of the literary history of francophone Canada has responded to a very particular colonial situation; francophones of European descent are both colonizers (of the indigenous population since first permanent French settlement in North America in 1604) and colonized (by the British after their victory on the Plains of Abraham in 1759 and the signing of the Treaty of Paris in 1763, which ceded New France to British rule). Given the variety of ways in which the production and dissemination of literature in French may have been conditioned by its colonial context, it will be useful to consider how patterns of colonial domination, between Europe and Canada and within Canada, have inflected the histories of francophone literature in Canada. Work in the area of postcolonial studies provides fruitful insights into many of the issues raised.

What is literary history?

Literary history is an activity that can take a variety of forms; traditionally these have included the chronological narrative account in one or more volumes; the anthology of extracts, representing the corpus of a literature; the encyclopaedia, repertoire or dictionary of writers or works. To this basis of what are essentially treated as reference works (but constructed in very particular ways and to particular ends by their authors, editors and readers) can be added academic works that are literary historical in function and methodology (bibliographies, theses, monographs, articles, etc.) and more recently web-based material including databases, reading lists and websites. Before turning to study the case of francophone Canada more closely it is important to clarify what it is that literary history does and how it has responded to recent challenges.

In Australian Literature: Postcolonialism, Racism, Transnationalism Graham Huggan outlines one of the many paradoxes that arise from the study of literary history: ‘There are few pursuits less fashionable yet more contentious than literary history. What is this outdated discipline that continues, in spite of itself, to be so up-to-date?’ The late twentieth and early twenty-first centuries have seen a range of discussions about the function and the plausibility of literary history. Literary history
in the Western tradition has its origins in nineteenth-century Europe. Under the influence of Herder, the Schlegel brothers and Mme de Staël literary histories were structured according to a developmental argument, presented as a narrative thread, which David Perkins sees as enduring into modern-day literary histories: ‘the assumption that the various genres, periods, schools, traditions, movements, communicative systems, discourses, and epistemes are not baseless and arbitrary groupings, that such classifications can have objective and valid grounds in the literature of the past, is still the fundamental assumption of the discipline, the premise that empowers it’. The use of the term ‘discipline’ by both Huggan and Perkins suggests that literary history operates as a distinctive, definable area of knowledge. Yet as Perkins points out, literary history has adopted many different methodologies which are drawn from a range of disciplines. Looking back at some of the ways in which literary history has been practised, he concludes: ‘Its major modes have been Hegelian, naturalist, positivist, geistesgeschichtlich, Marxist, formalist, sociological and, paradoxically, postmodern.’ (It is worth noting that in 1992 Perkins does not add the term ‘postcolonial’ to his list of approaches.) Such methodological approaches have been applied to a variety of corpuses from the literature of a nation, a region or a period, to the literature produced by a certain class, or by a specific ethnic or minority group. The resulting ‘histories’ may focus on the means of production and circulation of such bodies of work, their reception, their social or political impact, their readership or their literary forms. The very term ‘literary history’ exposes a central tension within literary histories, that of a relationship assumed to exist between the two terms ‘literature’ and ‘history’. Is literary history a history of literary forms, literary themes, literary language, or is it an analysis of the relationship between a specific history (material, social, political, cultural or intellectual) and its literary production? In either case, to what extent does the construction of a literary history depend upon notions of causality or genealogy? The picture is further complicated by the distinction between the activities proper to literary history, literary criticism, or indeed, the history of literature. As will be seen in Chapter 1, some literary histories tend much more towards literary criticism, others privilege historical context or the social and economic conditions of literary production to the detriment of the individual literary text. In Perkins’ view, ‘historical contextualism can interpret and account for elements of texts by referring them to relevant bits of the social and literary matrix, but it cannot grasp texts as aesthetic designs’.
While both Perkins and Huggan, from their different perspectives, are sceptical about the fundamental premises of literary history, neither of them is willing to dismiss such projects entirely. For Perkins the impossibility of the project of literary history is a product of our age: ‘we cannot write literary history with intellectual conviction, but we must read it. The irony and paradox of this argument are themselves typical of our present moment in history.’ For Huggan, while the traditional project of literary history is marked by its imperialist origins and the myth of a unified nation, the writing of literary history, informed by postcolonial and postmodernist approaches, is a valuable, if highly problematic, enterprise. Such caveats and paradoxes will apply to the following discussion of literary history and its application to the field of francophone literature in Canada.

While it would be difficult to argue that literary history constitutes a distinct discipline, given the range of forms and methods which it adopts, a number of central features recur by which we can recognize the genre. The writing of literary history involves the delimitation of a field of study in terms of space, time, language and genre. Whether the literature typically relates to a country (Brazil), a region (Brittany), a number of territories linked by language (la francophonie) or some other spatially defined category (the francophone diaspora in North America), its scope needs to be defined, and questions of eligibility for inclusion have to be addressed (involving criteria such as place of birth, period of residence, language of expression, etc.). Literary history requires a choice of periodization: the account must begin somewhere in history and must have a cut-off date; this time span is then typically divided into a number of shorter periods, or stages, based on historical events, on cultural and literary movements or developments, or some combination of the two. While the majority of literary histories study a corpus of literature written in one particular language, comparative studies of works in two or more languages exist, as do studies of the literature of a country in which a number of linguistic communities engage in literary production. The literary historian must select a corpus of works; in the process of selection, some texts are omitted, whether because they are deemed to be of lower quality, to be less representative, or to fail to correspond to the model which the literary historian is constructing. The selection process in turn relies on a certain understanding of what constitutes ‘literature’, both over time (as genres develop and move into or out of the sphere of the ‘literary’) and across the range of popular, minority and high culture. Through repetition
and dissemination, the works and genres most frequently selected or most fully discussed will tend to become part of a literary canon associated with that particular body of literature. Once the material has been selected it has to be classified, organized and presented to the reader. In addition to the main body of text, literary histories are often accompanied by paratextual material such as prefaces, indexes, bibliographies and appendices (typically a chronology of relevant historical, literary and cultural events). Each of these processes of selection, classification, organization and presentation poses problems which the literary historian must resolve in some way. As will be seen in Chapter 1, many of these decisions take on particular significance in the case of the history of francophone literature in Canada.

**Forms of literary history**

In *Is Literary History Possible?* Perkins divides literary histories into two main shapes which he designates as narrative literary history and encyclopaedic literary history. From the nineteenth century onwards narrative literary history has been the dominant form; it has a point of view, presenting texts, events and literary movements as ‘constituents of a discursive form with a beginning, a middle and an end, if it is Aristotelian narration, or with a statement, development, and conclusion, if it is an argument’. This point of view refers not only to the individual or collective values of the authors concerned; as Jonathan Arac argues, “The history of literature involves both historiography (“subject”) and historicality (“object”). [...] As historiography, the history of literature is an activity in the present.” The narrative draws on notions of causality and coherence in its attempt to give shape to the account. Such notions are often emplotted by means of metaphors (of origin, growth to maturity, victory and defeat). The alternative shape is the encyclopaedic form, which is structured as a series of separate and sometimes short essays or entries on works, authors, movements or aesthetic styles. Multiple authors are usually involved and these authors may well adopt a diverse set of approaches. Before turning to consider the ways in which narrative literary history has been used to construct the nation, the central protagonist of most literary histories of Canada, I wish to explore further the notion of encyclopaedic literary history and discuss the model of reading that it encourages.

One of two examples of encyclopaedic literary histories discussed by Perkins is *A New History of French Literature*, produced by an editorial team led by Denis Hollier and first published in 1989. Contributions
What is Québécois Literature?

came from 165 scholars, the vast majority of whom were university academics in the USA, each responsible for one, or occasionally more, entries. Entries are arranged chronologically, with dates appearing in various forms (1754?, December 1761, 1914–1918, 6 February 1945). The coverage leaves gaps: the 1890s have three entries while the first decade of the twentieth century has only one. In his introduction to the volume, Hollier comments on the purpose of this choice of structure: it aims to avoid both continuous historical narrative, which ‘artificially homogenizes literature into linear chronologies’, and the alphabetical dictionary, which ‘introduces masses of often irrelevant information’.¹⁴ Individual entries differ vastly in scope, focus and approach but follow a consistent format. After the date there follows a ‘headline’ announcing an event which in turn indicates the point of departure for the more wide-ranging essay that follows under a further heading. The entries for the period 1890–1910 illustrate the layout and typography:

1892
Oscar Wilde Tries to Have His Salomé Performed in London with Sarah Bernhardt in the Title Role
Writing and the Dance

1895
Gustave Lanson Publishes His Histoire de la littérature française
Literature in the Classroom

1898
Emile Zola Publishes ‘J’accuse’, an Open Letter to the President of the Republic in Which He Denounces the Irregularities Leading to Dreyfus’ Condemnation
The Dreyfus Affair

1905, 9 December
The Legislative Assembly Passes the Law concerning the Separation of Church and State, Ending the Concordat of 1801
On Schools, Churches and Museums

As is evident, entries may be triggered by literary events or other events which may have literary repercussions, sometimes at a much later date, or which may bring to a head a situation that had long predated the event. Hollier juxtaposes events of a varied nature ‘to produce an effect of heterogeneity and to disrupt the traditional orderliness of most histories of literature: essays devoted to a genre coexist with essays devoted to one book, institutions are presented alongside literary movements, large surveys next to detailed analysis of specific landmarks’ (xix). The
volume (over 1,150 pages long) avoids ‘comprehensive’ presentation of authors, periods, genres or movements, each of these appearing through a series of lenses, in different connections and from various perspectives. Such fragmentation is seen by Perkins as preventing the literary historian from offering a sophisticated and coherent understanding of the past: ‘Encyclopedic form is intellectually deficient. […] Because it aspires to reflect the past in its multiplicity and heterogeneity, it does not organize the past, and in this sense it is not history. There is little excitement in reading it.’15 This is one point of view, but one which I do not share. Perkins suggests that ‘a reader who acquired his information only from A New History of French Literature would not know why Proust is a topic at all’.16 Yet, as can be seen from the examples above, the events chosen have more than anecdotal interest and the reader who follows a path of their own making through the volume, through cross-referencing or searching by author, date or genre, will draw together or contrast a range of types and sources of information. Such a reading supplies what Perkins himself argues cannot be found in a narrative literary history; that is, ‘diverse durations, levels of reality, sequences of events, and multiple points of view’.17

Nor is Hollier’s ‘encyclopaedic’ literary history so thoroughly postmodern that narrative does not appear. In fact many of the entries adopt narrative forms and devices found in more traditional literary histories. As the following example illustrates, entries can be read as a series of micro-narratives, rather than a series of fragments. The entry for 1895 written by Antoine Compagnon, ‘Gustave Lanson Publishes His Histoire de la littérature française’, leads into an essay entitled ‘Literature in the Classroom’. The author sets the event in a historical context (the longstanding opposition between Benedictines and Jesuits, between philology and rhetoric, and between particularists and generalists; the dominance of rhetoric-based literary study in the Napoleonic universities; the effects of the defeat of 1870 on the status of rhetoric and its displacement by literary history under the Third Republic). Looking forward from 1895 Compagnon then discusses the impact of Lanson’s promotion of literary history throughout the educational establishment, its various distortions, and the 1960s dispute between ‘the old Lansonian Sorbonne and the nouvelle critique […] which claimed to take its inspiration from Ferdinand de Saussure’s linguistics, Freudian psychoanalysis, Marxist sociology, and so on – that is, from the social sciences’ (823). The entry closes with a reflection on the waning of New Criticism and the ongoing opposition between
generalists and particularists. The account is broadly linear; it uses personification and adopts a rhetoric of emergence, conflict, growth and decline in phrases such as the following: ‘After the Revolution […] particularism took refuge in the Academy of Inscriptions and Letters, while rhetoric flourished in the Napoleonic universities established in 1803’ (819); ‘In 1890 literary studies thus seemed condemned to decline’ (820); ‘[Brunetière] fought the rear-guard struggle’ (820); ‘the destiny of French literary history’ (822); ‘Lanson came at just the right moment’ (821). The historical account includes a final reflection from the moment of writing and its author makes a number of evaluative comments as when he praises Lanson’s 1903 *Programme d’études sur l’histoire provinciale de la vie littéraire en France*, commenting ‘Unfortunately, this excellent programme was not realized until the *Annales* historians systematically undertook it during the 1960s’ (822). The reference to *la nouvelle critique* cited above displays a more ironic narrative voice: ‘which claimed to take its inspiration from Ferdinand de Saussure’s linguistics, Freudian psychoanalysis, Marxist sociology, and so on – that is, from the social sciences’ (823, my emphases).

While encyclopaedic literary histories might draw on various features of narrative literary history within a series of micro-narratives, the apparent fragmentation and incoherence of the volume as a whole can offer the reader a more intellectually stimulating and more open-ended read than does a traditional, linear and didactic literary history. Equally, it should be recognized that many readers of narrative literary histories may well read such histories in a non-linear way; that is they may access the information they require with the index as a guide, using the literary history as a reference work which they read selectively. While segments of the discourse of causality will still emerge from the passages consulted, the overall coherence will be undermined or obscured by such a reading. This can in turn disrupt the narrative thread of the literary history. Narrative and encyclopaedic literary histories should not be understood as opposites (as Perkins himself acknowledges). Rather the two forms should be understood as the extreme points of a spectrum, one which results not only from the format, content and voice of the text but also from the reader’s own construction of the text. In response to his own question about whether literary histories ‘with their conceptual legacies of continuity and coherence, [can] accommodate such postcolonial/postmodern disruptions, such global flows and internal fissures’, Huggan suggests that attempts to write alternative or revisionary literary histories tend to result in a compromise between ‘the various policing
mechanisms\textsuperscript{18} (such as periodization, classification, canon) and new pluralist modes of imagining the nation.

\textit{Literary history, the nation and nationalism}

While, as E. D. Blodgett argues in \textit{Five-Part Invention: A History of Literary History in Canada}, ‘not all literary history is explicitly organized around the nation’, he continues: ‘Somewhere, however, the nation is present, if only implicitly, and in most cases the nation is the dominant.’\textsuperscript{19} The presence of the nation as a recurrent figure in literary history dates back to the appearance of national literary histories as a genre, which coincided in the Western world with the rise of nationalist movements in the nineteenth century. According to the German philologist J. G. Herder, it is the possession of a common language that ensures the unity of a people:

Without its own language, a \textit{Volk} is an absurdity, a contradiction in terms. For neither blood and soil, nor conquest and political fiat can engender that unique consciousness which alone sustains the existence and continuity of a social entity. Even if a \textit{Volk}'s state perishes, the nation remains intact, provided it maintains its distinctive linguistic traditions.\textsuperscript{20}

The function of literary history as a tool of nation-building can be seen as a logical development of such a definition of national consciousness. Indeed Herder stresses the important role of education as one means of reinforcing the historical consciousness of a people, a process which will be examined in Chapters 2 and 3.\textsuperscript{21}

Herder’s notion of a national consciousness was based on the sharing of a common language; modern-day nationhood is more problematic. In the case of Canada, there are of course many ‘national’ histories (of the anglophone settlers, francophone \textit{colons colonisés}, First Nations, Inuit or ethnic minorities), yet these are not all easily identifiable with a single language. In the case of many communities and individual members of the First Nations population, language has been lost in the process of colonial acculturation. The relationship to language may be further complicated by the bilingualism or plurilingualism, forced or chosen, of individuals and communities. For many communities in Canada, the relationships between nationhood, language and literature are fraught with ambivalence and paradoxes. Blodgett’s study is in part an attempt to destabilize the traditional equating of nation with a shared national idea, the better to recognize the presence of the other (language, ethnicity, minority): ‘Thus the point of the trans-national
frame that is not designed so much to internationalize Canada as to open it up to its several selves. Sylvia Söderlind also reflects on the way in which any attempt to create a national narrative should be studied as much for what it forgets and what it excludes as what it includes: ‘Any critical practice that uses an adjective like “Canadian” to delimit its object of study is inevitably engaged in a nation-defining, if not a nation-building enterprise, and the inclusions and exclusions effected by a critical community will reveal something about the kind of nation it prefers to imagine.’ Such an awareness of the exclusions effected by nation-shaped narratives in literary history is relevant to any culture. But when successive layers of colonization, external and internal, come into play, the writing of a nation-shaped literary history becomes both more urgent and more problematic.

*The national, the colonial and the postcolonial*

In *The Empire Writes Back*, Ashcroft, Griffiths and Tiffin discuss the characteristic preoccupations of literature in invader-settler societies which they outline as follows: the relationship between social and literary practices in the old world and the new; the relationship between the indigenous population and the incoming settler population; the relationship between their imported language and the new place. Although the authors are concerned here with invader-settler societies established by British colonization, similar concerns are relevant to the francophone population of Canada, in that the history of their literature can be seen as a process torn between the need to legitimize itself and to differentiate itself in relation to the former colonial power. As Hutcheon points out, the relationship between colony and empire casts a long shadow: ‘the literary histories (like the social histories) of both former colony and former empire are always intrinsically complex, internally and externally relational, and mutually implicated; these qualities make these histories crucial to their nations’ self-understanding’. In this context the writing of a national literature becomes a significant act, ‘an important element in the establishment of an independent cultural identity’. But because of the double layer of colonization under which the French colony was in turn colonized by the British, the relationships shift and become more complex. This ‘doubling’ effect has been used by a number of critics to explore the psyche and the cultural life of the francophone population of Canada. Jean Bouthillette, writing in 1972, describes the effect of British colonization on the national consciousness of French Canadians in just such terms:
Quand nous tentons de nous saisir comme peuple, ou de nous projeter sur le monde, une présence s’interpose. Où que nous regardions, infailliblement nous rencontrons l’Autre – en l’occurrence l’Anglais –, dont le regard trouble notre propre regard. Le Canadien français est un homme qui a deux ombres. Et c’est en vain que nous feignons d’y échapper: l’ombre anglaise nous accompagne toujours et partout. Et dans cette ombre nous devenons ombre.27

Bouthillette sees the overcoming of this alienating model of French-Canadian identity (‘dissipée dans la servitude canadienne’) by Quebec nationalism in the 1960s and 1970s as the point at which the nation can at last be constructed: ‘Ce que nous trouvons à la place – et qu’il faut construire –, jeune, moderne, enraciné et ouvert au monde, c’est le peuple québécois, soit un groupe culturel, homogène par la langue, et qui cherche – dans son nationalisme décolonisateur – son expression politique totale.’28 But, of course, the francophone population was not only the object of British colonial rule and of anglophone domination but also the continuing agent of the internal colonization of the indigenous population.

At the beginning of the twenty-first century national consciousness remains a problematic issue for literary history in Canada. Blodgett analyses the ongoing effects of external and internal colonizations on Canadian literary histories by drawing on the Lacanian model of the mirror stage, the point at which the child moves from the Imaginary (the period of close identification with the mother) to the Symbolic (the stage at which the child seeks to acquire the discourse and the power exercised by the father): ‘Much of Canada’s national self-awareness has developed in a complex manner involving (at least) two mother countries. Internal perceptions of colonialization are also apparent in histories of First Nations, Inuit, Acadian, and Quebec writing.’29 The political alienation produced under colonial conditions means that the process of liberation is also more complex, the discourse which is acquired being ‘not simply the language that the “Father” has always spoken in Lacan’s sense, but rather an ambiguous discourse that in many ways is neither of “here” nor “there”. It is a special vernacular that literary historians gradually build into their argument of change as difference.’30 And Blodgett sees the emphasis on vernacular difference, sometimes appearing in the form of linguistic hybridization, as being most apparent in the history of québécois, First Nations and Inuit writing, that is, in those communities whose colonial history has involved both external and internal colonization.
If the process of developing a national literature, and of writing a literary history of that literature, is a significant part of the process of decolonization and central to the concerns of postcolonial studies, the focus on the nation can prove to be problematic and risks replacing former essentializing notions of nationhood, of race and culture, with a locally produced substitute. As Ashcroft, Griffiths and Tiffin argue: ‘The impetus towards national self-realization in critical assessments of literature all too often fails to stop short of nationalist myth.’ Could it be that postcolonial literary histories (by which in this instance I mean the history of the literature of a previously colonized population) serve a specific, limited function within the historical shift from the colonial to the postcolonial and that the impact of globalization will render such histories obsolete? If literary history is unable to challenge and displace the model of the nation as homogeneous and uniform, then the answer will be yes. Mads Rosendahl Thomsen, in common with many commentators on world literature, would suggest that literary historians have failed to reflect in their practice that ‘within the last decades [...] the concept of culture has gradually become more and more widely defined as non-essentialist, hybrid and contingent’. And yet it is precisely by returning to study the tensions, the shifting shapes and the various discourses of literature produced under specific colonial contexts and in their aftermath that one can best hope to recognize the complexity and variety of literary expression in a formerly colonized territory. In presenting the case for studying Australian literature, Huggan points out that it cannot simply be categorized as a ‘branch’ of English literature, nor is it simply an anti-colonialist literature. Rather, he argues, Australian literature has steered ‘a not always careful path between metropolitan accommodation and postcolonial resistance’. Nor, he suggests, is any literature a purely national phenomenon: ‘Australia’s literature is a distinctively, even defiantly national achievement; but its writers just as unmistakably belong to the wider world.’ In the twenty-first century, the role of literary history is not to choose between the national and the global, but rather to recognize the ways in which other cultures, languages, places and systems play a role in any literature, however specific and distinctive its local circumstances might be.
What is specific to francophone Canadian literary history?

The distinctiveness of Canadian literature in French (however that is to be defined) arises initially from the specific conditions of its production and the range of power structures that have operated. The francophone population in northern America has established a unique relationship to space as a result of their patterns of settlement, their different colonial experiences, the diasporic movement of the French-speaking population across the North American continent whether by deportation (in the case of the majority of the Acadian population between 1755 and 1763), exile or migration, and the contact of the francophone population with the indigenous population (in a variety of relationships – confrontational, evangelizing, assimilatory, collaborative, or marked by processes of métissage, both literal and figurative). These various relationships to North American space and to its first inhabitants can all be seen within the fundamental and ongoing colonial relationship. The problematic positioning of the literature of an invader-settler population, the social practices and power relations of which continue to an extent to be shaped by that original relationship to place, will remain a key consideration in any study of such a literary history. Immigration into francophone areas, from countries with or without a colonial history, has continued to add to the cultural diversity of Canadian literature written in French (as a first or second language). This tradition of writing, of publication and of reading has in addition to be considered in relation to the population of the territory colonized, the indigenous peoples. Colonial practices of evangelization and assimilation have resulted in the use of English or French by the majority of writers of aboriginal descent, whether as a first or second language, and the eradication of many indigenous languages. A growing corpus of aboriginal writing in French is now emerging alongside a well-established body of aboriginal Canadian writing in English. The ways in which literary historians have responded to their work will be discussed in Chapter 4.

The inclusion of francophone Canada in the field of postcolonial studies has always been contested by some who do not consider the case of former settler colonies to be fully comparable to the situation of colonies in which little permanent settlement took place, the indigenous population being governed by local representatives of the colonizer and their wealth returned to the imperial centre. However, as commentators such as Albert Memmi pointed out in a contribution in the early years of this debate, 'each domination is relative, and each is specific'.

In the course of a discussion with students at the Sorbonne the following point was made by one of the students, whose metropolitan French view effects a shift in the terms of the debate:

What is confusing, however, for French opinion, and for those Frenchmen who visit Canada, is the prosperity, if not real at least apparent, of the province of Quebec. It seems rather that there are two colonizing nations, one of which has got the upper hand. It is the Indians who are really the colonized race.37

The student’s perception recognizes that there are layers at work in this case of domination, and that domination is a relative but still real relationship of power. Although the debate is very much a product of its time in the late 1960s,38 the underlying point remains true. Power structures are relative. The perspective shifts, just as the centre shifts if one moves the position from which the system is experienced. The cases of former colonial societies such as Canada and Australia offer complex examples of the relative forms of colonial domination. Slemon suggests that it is precisely this complexity, or ambivalence, which has caused some postcolonial theorists to exclude what he terms the Second World (of settler societies) from their field, ‘because its modalities of post-coloniality are too ambivalent, too occasional and uncommon, for inclusion within the field’.39 Yet I (and he) would argue that it is precisely the ambivalence and uncommonness of the postcolonial (and colonial) experience that make it important to apply insights from postcolonial studies to the study of francophone Canadian literature.

Brydon uses the term ‘invader-settler colony’ rather than Second World, settler or settler-invader colonies in order to stress that ‘the narrative of settlement in itself ocludes and denies the prior fact of invasion’.40 I shall adopt her approach as it acts as a reminder of the presence of the aboriginal population even though much of the literary history of francophone Canada would initially seem to have been conducted as if it were largely the concern of francophone Canadians of European descent. Nevertheless, as will emerge, the representation of the aboriginal population and to an extent the aboriginal reader and writer are part of what makes the literary history of francophone Canada distinctive, and this is an important factor in the argument for including Canada, and Quebec, in the field of postcolonial studies. It is because of this need for nuance and the careful distinction between experiences of colonialism that Brydon defends the inclusion of Canada within postcolonial studies: ‘postcolonial frames of interpretation are
most enabling when they facilitate distinctions between different orders of colonial experience, rather than, on the one hand, conflating Third World and invader-settler societies as equally victimized or, on the other, banishing settler colonies from the sphere of “properly” postcolonial subject matter’. In the case of francophone Canada, this nuancing will include, for example, the awareness that one cannot conflate Acadie with ‘Quebec’, nor simply absorb aboriginal literature in French with québécois literature. This need for distinction and nuance is also crucial when one thinks of the use of the terms ‘nation’ and ‘nationalist’ with reference to francophone Canada. Brydon argues:

there are many different kinds of nationalisms, all of which need to be understood in context. [...] Such an interpellation may be especially fraught in a country such as Canada, where it has never been possible to forget that our national identity is neither unified nor natural but something that we work at reinventing and protecting every day. The implications for Quebec [...] are equally complex.

Francophone Canada has been deeply implicated in colonial processes and their implementation, both as an active, complicit participant and as a population colonized by the British and dominated by the anglophone majority, yet with ongoing relationships both with metropolitan France and with the indigenous population of the territories which they settled. The consequences of such an ambivalent positioning are clear when one thinks through the way in which the very notions of centre and margins become problematic as a result of francophone Canada’s double history of colonization. France, the historical colonizer and dominant cultural centre for francophone Canadians, has played various roles in its relationship to francophones in Canada, roles which did not simply change with the fall of New France. Indeed it can be argued that at various times and for various sectors of the population, France has been the colonial, controlling, culturally dominant centre, imposing its own criteria on questions of literary value, genre, language and form, validating individual writers, shaping the market, relegating québécois literature to a secondary or regional status; at other times France has represented an inspirational, liberatory model of intellectual and artistic freedom (in the interests of secularism and reason), of formal experimentation, a source of political progressivism, feminism and anticolonialism. Both Britain and the USA have at different moments provided alternative, attractive centres to the rigid traditionalism of Quebec’s Catholic establishment, and at other times have been powerful forces in a cultural field in which
the survival of a culture and a literature in French have seemed under serious threat. The fluidity of this positioning between a number of centres of cultural, political and financial power has resulted in a literary culture at once open and closed, receptive to influence and defensive of its traditions and its specificity, paradoxes which find expression in the meta-narrative of francophone Canadian literary history.

The history of a literature is also, whether explicitly or implicitly, the history of that literature’s institutionalization. A number of the processes of the literary institution will be discussed in the course of the following chapters, although the history of such institutions is not the focus of this book. It is important to recognize, however, that the development of such institutions has been shaped by the ambivalent positioning of francophone culture within the tensions and contradictions of its colonial context and its legacies. In most cases, institutions have been relatively slow to develop, or have prioritized a particular function in response to the fact of British rule, or to the minority situation of the various francophone populations of Canada in relation to an anglophone majority, be it at the level of city, province, state or continent. Key aspects of the institutionalization of a literature include publishing (and processes of promotion and censorship), dissemination (including libraries), education (and the curriculum) and consecration (including the work of critics, literary historians and a system of literary awards). These features have operated in a distinctive way and with a specific impact in francophone Canada as it gradually put in place the structures that established a more and more autonomous literary field, in its desire to separate itself from a dependence on metropolitan France and resist assimilation by anglophone Canada. As will be seen, this process of differentiation and self-assertion is ongoing, dynamic and strategic, a battle fought on numerous fronts.

One of the paradoxes of Canada’s colonial history is that the publication of texts in French in Canada only began after the Conquest, during the early years of British rule. With the fall of New France the previous supply of printed material from France was interrupted and although some editions of French literary works continued to be printed in New York and Philadelphia, the importing of literature directly from France did not resume for over fifty years. While the publication of newspapers, reviews and almanacs in French flourished in the early nineteenth century, it was not until the second half of the century that literary works began to appear in any number. Authors were badly served in Quebec by the late imposition of copyright legislation,
there being no copyright law in Canada before 1921, meaning that authors had little protection against pirating or plagiarism and little professional status. Additionally, the definition of ‘publisher’ was rather obscure into the early twentieth century (books often show imprimeur, imprimeur-typographe, imprimeur-éditeur or libraire-éditeur, which emphasizes the lack of organization of the sector) and authors often had to contribute at least some of costs of publication.

As is so frequently the case at so many levels of cultural, social and intellectual life in francophone Canada, the development of literary publishing in the nineteenth century was closely dependent on the involvement of the Catholic Church. In particular the Church’s control of education in Quebec (a control which in turn mediated a higher control from Rome) as it developed from the mid-nineteenth century onwards meant that it also had control over textbooks (a crucial source of orthodox thinking) and book prizes (a flourishing part of the industry until the 1960s). With the expansion of schooling, school textbooks represented an important source of income for printers, which meant that, since education was in the hands of the Church, printers and publishers tended to be unwilling to offend orthodoxy. School prizes also became an increasingly important part of the system, a source of income for publishers, a means of consecration for authors and a tool of ideological control (rewarding pupils with works aimed at further embedding orthodox beliefs). Up to 1870 school prizes were mostly works by French authors (classical texts, biographies, histories or tales), but from the 1870s onwards a greater proportion of prizes were by French-Canadian authors, so establishing an early canon of French-Canadian literature that included works by Laure Conan, Aubert de Gaspé père, Antoine Gérin-Lajoie, Abbé Ferland, Patrice Lacombe and François-Xavier Garneau. The general mood of compliance between the publishing trade, including lay/non-religious publishers, and the Catholic Church lasted into the mid-twentieth century and in Paul Aubin’s view served both parties well:

Ne faudrait-il pas y voir une assurance faisant l’affaire de ces mêmes auteurs et éditeurs: se plier aux normes assurait une participation aux bénéfices du secteur de l’imprimerie le plus rentable? Si telle est l’explication on devrait conclure que pour la promotion des idéologies, les producteurs de l’imprimé pédagogique et les censeurs avaient accordé leurs violons.

The outcome of this complicity between (the majority of) the publishing
What is Québécois Literature?

world and the Church establishment was a reinforcement of orthodoxy through legitimation and marginalization, delegitimizing any contestation whether in form or content, something which Louis Francœur sees entrenched by the late nineteenth century: ‘tout un PROGRAMME unificateur des différents systèmes signifiants de la culture québécoise au XIXe siècle qui est proposé par l’Institution. […] Bien davantage, cette Institution refuse de reconnaître comme littéraire tout système signifiant qui prétendrait se développer de façon isolée.’48 As Jane Everett points out, in the context of a dominant literary discourse which was based on utilitarian values of moral and national duty, writers who experimented with aesthetic forms such as symbolism were condemned to isolation and censure.49 In the first half of the twentieth century the dominant discourse of the literary institution was equally hostile to the various forms of popular culture which emerged, such as popular fiction serialized in the periodical press in the late nineteenth and early twentieth century and comics in the 1950s, seen as a genre likely to corrupt youth with the materialist values of the USA.50

Beyond Quebec the relationship between the Church and education took on a different role as a result of the threat of enforced assimilation through the banning of French-language education in the first half of the twentieth century. Still concerned with the survival of a Catholic and French culture, and adhering to the same traditional values, but from a minority situation in their various provinces, the francophone populations throughout the rest of Canada used the battle for educational rights as the focus of their resistance to anglophone (Protestant) domination in a series of campaigns, acts of resistance and accommodations.51 To teach francophone pupils to read French and francophone Canadian literature became an act of defiance and a statement of identity. Some of the consequences of this battle will be discussed in Chapter 2.

Censorship is an important factor in the shaping of a national literature. Pierre Hébert’s extensive research on the processes of censorship in Quebec, from the early years of New France to the present, proves one thing – censorship is the norm, however visible or invisible its workings.52 For over 300 years it was the Catholic Church that carried out the bulk of censorship in Quebec in its battle to impose intellectual orthodoxy and to combat the influence of ‘les mauvais livres’, through the publication of lists of dangerous reading matter, the blacklisting of publishers, the policing of bookshops, episcopal recommendations and proscriptions both at local level and from Rome. The Index, published
by the Vatican since the mid-sixteenth century until its abolition in 1966, proscribed a vast swathe of literature from France including the works of Voltaire, Rousseau, Diderot, Gide, Sartre and de Beauvoir. Nineteenth-century novels were judged particularly pernicious (possibly because of the assumption of a female readership). As Yvan Lamonde records, in 1868 47 per cent of all novels in print were on the Index. The Church in Quebec was helped in its task both by the zeal of figures such as Bishop Bourget, head of the diocese of Montreal from 1840, and by publications such as the monthly book review Lectures, published by Fides between 1946 and 1965, which attributed moral ratings to the latest works of French-Canadian literature. Over this twenty-year period the review judged as ‘mauvais’ (and hence proscribed) work by authors including Jean-Charles Harvey, Yves Thériault, Claire Martin, Jean-Jules Richard, Louise Maheu-Forcier, Gérard Bessette and Claude Jasmin, who together represent a fair cross-section of mid-century francophone Canadian literature.

After the Révolution tranquille the dominant ideological force was no longer the Catholic Church, whose influence had been diminishing since the 1950s, but the state. And while the all-too-visible structures of censorship had disappeared, this does not mean that a dominant (state) ideology or the ideology of particular interest groups did not continue to shape and control aspects of literary expression. On this last point Pierre Hébert argues: ‘Dans le sillon d’un postmodernisme qui n’entraîne pas que des vertus, le sujet censeur ne s’est pas dissous, il a éclaté: sa rationalité n’est plus codifiée, et ses armes sont d’autant plus redoutables qu’elles sont difficilement visibles.’ Two examples of the operation of censorship in the 1990s confirm Hébert’s point: Michèle Marineau was banned from the circuit of visits by writers to schools funded by the Union des écrivaines et écrivains québécois (UNEQ) and the Ministry of Education in Quebec because of the treatment of female sexuality in her award-winning novel Cassiopée ou l’été des baleines (1989); Reynald Cantin, whose novels J’ai besoin de personne (1987), Le Secret d’Ève (1990) and Le Choix d’Ève (1991) discuss incest and adolescent sexuality, saw his work boycotted by the school in which he taught and banned by the local school board.

The interconnectedness of the various elements of the literary establishment is also evident in the case of lending libraries. In the nineteenth century the bibliothèques paroissiales were seen as an extension of the school, and were run by the Catholic Church. The Church resisted the setting up of public libraries in Quebec as these
would be state run and would escape its direct control. Legislation in Quebec in 1890 transferred responsibility for setting up public libraries to the municipality, which, in turn developed a discourse of high moral and utilitarian purpose in response to anticipated criticism from the Church. In comparison with the francophone sector, the anglophone Protestant provision of public libraries developed much more quickly. Looking back from the present day, the achievement of the BAnQ (Bibliothèque et Archives nationales du Québec) is all the more significant, representing as it does a national (québécois) resource that is a model of accessibility and provision, catering for all from the archive researcher to the youngest of readers. Its mission statement includes the following aim: ‘BAnQ a également pour mission d’offrir un accès démocratique au patrimoine documentaire constitué par ses collections, à la culture et au savoir.’ In Quebec, the nation continues to be a meaningful term to refer to what its residents have in common. But as will be seen in the course of this book, the elision of nation with a specific geopolitical territory has consequences both for those within and those beyond the border.

A final example of the operation of the literary establishment in processes of selection, circulation and commodification of literature is the phenomenon of the literary prize. The creation of literary prizes maps the progress of the institutionalization of a literature, affirming the literary value of its products. It is a particularly good way of observing the different components of the literary institution (including publishers, the media, critics, political interests and the reading public) at work, defending and promoting their interests. As Graham Huggan argues, the literary prize system also confers power on those in a position of judgement and highlights ‘the continuing evaluative process by which the literary text is constructed as an object of negotiation’. In francophone Canada this process has never and will never be judged only within its national or local borders. Recognition from France has always played an important part in establishing authors and works on the international front, but has also played a role in legitimating francophone Canadian literature in its own right. The most famous examples of this effect are Gabrielle Roy, awarded the Prix Femina in 1947 for her first novel, Bonheur d’occasion; Marie-Claire Blais who won the Prix Médicis for Une saison dans la vie d’Emmanuel in 1966; Anne Hébert, awarded the Prix des Libraires de France in 1971; and Antonine Maillet, whose novel Pélagie-la-charrette won the Prix Goncourt in 1979.

The first literary prize to be established in Quebec was the Prix
David, first awarded in 1923. As it attempted to establish itself in the wider literary field, the francophone literary establishment needed to distinguish itself both from France and from (anglophone) Canada. However, as the terms of some literary awards of the post-war years show, a prize sometimes represented a way back into the literary ‘centre’, whether via translation in the USA or publication in France, as was the case with le Prix du Cercle du Livre de France (inaugurated by Montreal publisher Pierre Tesseyre in 1949 and awarded till 1987) which offered a cash prize plus a contract to publish in the USA and in France. In so doing, such awards continued to consecrate the centre of culture elsewhere.

The number of prizes expanded rapidly in the 1960s and 1970s, in line with the emergence of la littérature québécoise, mirroring a similar growth in anglophone Canada. Eight new awards were inaugurated in the 1960s and a further 22 created in the 1970s. In 1976 Statistics Canada reported that Canada (as a whole) had as many literary and journalistic awards as Britain, Australia and Switzerland, but fewer than France. By 1980 there were more than 70 prizes (at regional, municipal, provincial and national levels) for authors writing in French. But, as is in the nature of the processes of validation, tensions between these various levels continued, as the case of the Governor General awards illustrates. Set up in 1936, the prestigious Governor General awards are a symbol of Canadian cultural achievement. Yet until 1959 these awards were only made to works in English or in English translation. So, of the three awards received by Gabrielle Roy, only the final award was for her original work in French. The awards continued to be controversial in Quebec, because of their association with federal policy; protest in Quebec in the 1960s and 1970s was led by Hubert Aquin and supported by writers including Nicole Brossard, Victor-Lévy Beaulieu, Michel Garneau, Roland Giguère and Roger Langevin.

The prize system also illustrates the ways in which writers place themselves, and are placed within, more than one literary system, seeking multiple markets, but in so doing slipping beyond the fixed borders of a national literature. Thus the work of Antonine Maillet may be identified as Acadian, as québécois, as Canadian or as francophone. Similarly, Roy’s Franco-Manitoban origins are quite often mentioned by those who know that there are francophones in Manitoba, but from further afield she is usually classified as a key figure of québécois literature, or as a Canadian writer. Literary prizes confirm an author’s place within their system, sometimes belatedly when success has been achieved on another front. A recent example of this practice in operation is the case
What is Québécois Literature?

of Yann Martel and his *Life of Pi*, written in English, and submitted to and rejected by a number of British publishers before being published by Knopf in 2001. In its UK edition *Life of Pi* won the Man Booker Prize in 2002, an award which enhances worldwide sales dramatically. In 2003 the book was consecrated in Canada by winning both CBC Radio’s Canada Reads and *Le combat des livres* in its French translation. To complete the circuit of recognition and multiple belonging, Martel was awarded the South African Boeke Prize in 2003, and the Asian Pacific American Award for Literature in Best Adult Fiction for the years 2001–2003 in 2004. Its multiple and international recognition has now been followed by the 3D film adaptation by Ang Lee, the summit, perhaps, of recognition for a product of world literature.66

While prizes do not only create but also reinforce success, they also play a role in the processes of inclusion and exclusion from the ranks of a national literature. In francophone Canada this includes the incorporation within québécois literature of writers from the francophone diaspora in Canada (as in the cases of Maillet and Roy), and the recognition of aboriginal and métis writers such as Bernard Assiniwi and Michel Noël. In the last two decades in particular the prize system has also recognized a growing number of migrant writers (or ‘new stock’ Québécois, as opposed to *Québécois de souche*). A recent example is the award of the Prix Athanase David to Joël Des Rosiers in 2011.67

A further sign of the cultural confidence of the literary institution in Quebec is the award of the same prize in 2006 for the first time to a Quebec author working in English, Mavis Gallant. All these cases could be seen as examples of what Huggan refers to as the ‘commodification of “otherness”’.68 While Huggan is discussing the appropriation of postcolonial literatures by the cultural centre, notably in the prizing of postcoloniality in Booker Prize choices, literary awards in Quebec are choosing to recognize ‘otherness’ in a more flexible and plural understanding of national literature.

Underlying this book is the question ‘What is literary history and how has it functioned in francophone Canada?’ This introduction is followed by a chronology of key literary publications and events with a broad cultural significance (in and beyond Canada). Drawing on points raised in the introduction about the nature of literary history, Chapter 1 discusses a corpus of works of the literary history of francophone Canada from the mid-nineteenth century to the present. Chapter 2 considers education as the key mediator of literary history (and the prime target of literary histories). It explores the changing place of
literature in the curriculum in Quebec, primarily, but also looks at recent developments elsewhere in francophone Canada. Chapter 3 takes the literary anthology as a literary historical tool, recognizing what Coldwell terms the ‘power of the anthology not only to canonize but also to determine ways of reading’. Specifically the chapter will discuss the ways in which the literary anthology constructs the nation and how it represents the aboriginal population within the nation. Chapter 4 asks what a nation-shaped literary history excludes from its narrative, both from within and beyond Quebec. Taking two examples, aboriginal writing and the literatures of the francophone communities beyond Quebec, the chapter examines the place of these two areas within the history of francophone literature in Canada. The conclusion reflects on the shapes, omissions and functions of literary histories and on the possible roles and shapes of literary history in francophone Canada in the future. Is literary history, with its focus on the nation, obsolete, or might other forms and focuses take the genre forward?