Books and Notions: The Canadian Popular Novel in the Nineteenth Century

This essay must have a rather long preamble. Publishing history in Canada in the nineteenth century is so sketchily documented, critical reviews of Canadian novels contain so little reference to possible readership of books, and sales records are so close to being non-existent, that generalizing about the popular novel in Canada is a baffling and bungling business. Yet it is important to speculate, at least, about what the most popular Canadian novels were, why they were so popular, and how their popularity cohered with or ran counter to the lure of contemporary British and American best sellers.

How do we set criteria for popularity? For Canada we cannot use the quantitative checks set up by Alice Hackett or by Frank Luther Mott, or those assumed by Claud Cockburn.¹ We cannot cite numbers of sales as a percentage of population, because the records of sales cannot be checked. From 1883 on, we can put some trust in the notes in Books and Notions (later Bookseller and Stationer), the trade journal of Canadian bookstores.² Professor George Parker promises us an important study of the Canadian book trade 1750-1900, but until this volume appears, we can only guess at the extent of sales before 1883.³ Meantime, we can learn something about publishing and popular taste from the Literary History of Canada.⁴ From Watters’ Checklist we can note books which

¹ See the discussion of methods of selection of best sellers in the opening sections of A.P. Hackett, 70 Years of Best Sellers (New York: Bowker 1967); F.L. Mott, Golden Multitudes (New York: Macmillan 1947); Claud Cockburn, Best Seller (London: Sedgwick, Jackson 1972).

² See Mary Vipond, ‘Best Sellers in English Canada, 1899-1918: An Overview,’ Journal of Canadian Fiction 24 (1979) 96-119. The difficulties she mentions in getting a clear picture of sales in the twentieth century are even greater for the period before Books and Notions began publication in 1883.


⁴ See H.P. Gundy, ‘Literary Publishing,’ in Literary History of Canada, ed. C.F. Klinck, 2nd ed. (Toronto: University of Toronto Press 1976) 1, 188-202 (henceforward referred to by the abbreviation LHC); C.F. Klinck, ‘Literary Activity in
went through many editions and can estimate which of these were most popular. Some help in estimating sales can also come from reading the journals of individual authors, although here Victorian notions of propriety and gentility set up barriers of silence. We can deduce something about sales from the life-style of authors, but here, too, evidence is muffled: for example, Marshall Saunders, daughter of a fairly wealthy man, undoubtedly made large royalties from Beautiful Joe (1894), but these royalties blended into a background of affluence. A man with no inherited wealth who managed to live on his profits as a writer (William Kirby, for instance) presumably had impressive sales, but his letters make only very general references to the actual profit. Complicated copyright laws and occasionally unscrupulous publishing contracts add to the difficulty of equating popularity with visible profits to the Canadian novelist.

Publishers' names give us some clues as to the extent of sales. Someone who published with the St. John Telegraph Publishing Company (Agatha Armour) or the St. John's Daily News (Rev. Robert Wilson) would not be likely to have had the circulation of someone publishing with Lovell in Montreal or Briggs in Toronto. Mrs. M.A. Sadlier, who published thirty novels between 1850 and 1884, published all but one with the firm of Sadlier in New York: an example of 'family' or 'vanity' publishing rather than of popularity. Or take James De Mille, who in-


5 R.E. Watters, A Checklist of Canadian Literature and Background Materials, 1628-1950 (Toronto: University of Toronto Press 1959); see the section Fiction;' pp. 169-302. From this section I assembled a year-by-year list of popular fiction (exclusive of short stories), comprising:

1820-29: 9 items
1830-39: 7 items
1840-49: 13 items
1850-59: 19 items
1860-69: 22 items
1870-79: 32 items
1880-89: 35 items
1890-95: 48 items

These titles are just the tip of an iceberg — or the sparks of a forest fire: Grant Allen, for example, published 39 titles between 1884 and 1900; Mrs. Moodie, 12 between 1853 and 1875.
dustriously published twenty-seven novels between 1858 and 1880, not to mention his posthumous books. Such productivity (in this case, of a man publishing with Harper's and with Appleton in New York) augurs wider distribution. The long string of titles suggests that his publishers got a good return from this author’s series of books. Yet the popularity may have been moderate — just enough to keep a not-too-busy English professor boiling his creative pot. Again, we have no direct references to the extent of his sales. On the other hand, finally, we know that May Agnes Fleming earned $10,000 a year in the 1870s.6

All these speculations about sales are based on research into authors whose books are listed in Watters’ Checklist or mentioned in the Literary History of Canada. But the famous and admirable checklist was based on holdings in Canadian libraries. Such holdings are screened usually against the vulgar, i.e., against one form of the popular book. We can spot these popular unstated books by reading critical comments on the ‘better’ books. Scornful side glances tell us what ‘everyone was reading’ in contrast to what ‘everyone ought to have been reading’ — the critics’ choice.7 In the half-world of the genuinely popular book of the nineteenth century, many leading specimens moved, flourished and disappeared without trace except in someone’s attic holdings of best-loved though shaming books. These books are rarely mentioned in literary histories, but gross numbers show their popularity both in the short run and over the years.

Out of this series of questions raised and problems mentioned, a list of names can be assembled of Canadian novelists who wrote what were probably very popular novels in their own homeland: John Richardson, Wacousta (1832); Rosanna Leprohon, Antoinette de Mirecourt (1864); Margaret Murray Robertson, Christie Redfern’s Troubles (1866); James De Mille, The Lily and the Cross (1874); May Agnes Fleming, The Dark Secret (1875); William Kirby, The Golden Dog (1877); James MacDonald Oxley, Archie of Athabasca (1893); Marshall Saunders, Beautiful Joe (1894); Grant Allen, The Woman Who Did (1895); Gilbert Parker, The Seats of the Mighty (1896); and Ralph Connor, Black Rock (1898). These are the books written by Canadian writers which were presumably sufficiently in key with general taste to enable a large sale.

Three other titles, dubiously Canadian, or dubiously novels, might be

6 Fred Cogswell, ‘Literary Activity in the Maritime Provinces: 1815-1880,’ LHC, 1, 125

7 My colleagues, Douglas Daymond and Leslie Monkman, kindly let me use their collection of criticism of the novel, soon to be published. Their study will throw interesting light on critical views of fiction in Canada in the nineteenth century.
added. John Galt’s Lawrie Todd (1830) sold very well, but was set in the States and was written in an English jail, by a Scot. Galt was indeed powerful in his impact on Canadian life but had been a resident of Canada for only a little over four years. 8 Haliburton’s The Attaché (1843) sold very well, perhaps because of its European setting, and the plot thread is carried just firmly enough from sketch to sketch to justify considering it (unlike the other Sam Slick books) as a novel. 9 Third and most important in terms of sales, both in its own time and throughout the century, is Maria Monk’s Awful Disclosures (1836). The author (or co-author, for she collaborated with an American hack-writer) was a nun, escaped or evicted from a Montreal convent; how much of the story was fiction has remained an important question. 10 (I will return to Maria Monk and her probably fictional imitators. ) These three books raise the inevitable question: Is a Canadian best seller or a Canadian popular novel, one by a Canadian and/or one with a Canadian setting? If we are discussing ‘best sellers in Canada,’ the answer is simple. Of the books most read in Canada throughout the century, very few were Canadian in authorship or in setting. If we want to study best sellers in Canada with a view to illuminating changing tastes and interests of Canadian readers, we will read a somewhat modified version of Mott’s list of best sellers in America, the modification reflecting, of course, a greater openness to English and Scottish novels. Of the books listed above, perhaps only Parker’s Seats of the Mighty, with a possible addition of Kirby’s Golden Dog, would qualify as overall best sellers. My present intention is to limit consideration to books by Canadians or to books focusing on obviously Canadian themes.

The contribution of these books to Canadian readers, thin as it was, is significant. The books whose sales came anywhere near to rivalling those of Dickens or Harriet Beecher Stowe, Ian MacLaren or Charles Major, reveal important Canadian nuances. Looking at the books on an all-Canadian list, we find that we are considering not just a sub-set of American taste. There are patterns here not explainable in any simple way, but suggesting interesting side-lights on Canadian concerns. I propose to spell out the sequence of Canadian-based popular books listed


10 Mott, 245-7
above, relate them to publishing history and set them against other books which come close to the 'best guess' list. I propose also to present a speculative thesis about recurring motifs in this list and a more tentative speculation about the reasons for these recurrences.

Surely every traveller arriving in Quebec was stirred as much by the strange silent grilles of the Roman Catholic convents as by the lordly power of the Citadel. The title of an 1824 novel suggests the first of the recurring themes of the popular novel in Canada: *St. Ursula's Convent, or The Nun of Canada*. Mrs. Beckwith's Kingston publisher (Thompson) and later her Waterdown, New York, one (Adams) gave her books very limited circulation, yet this Maritime author had recognized a saleable indigenous theme: the mysterious, vaguely menacing life of a Roman Catholic convent. The theme would be worked into many a popular book, including those of Kirby and Parker. It got scandalous impetus from the runaway success of Maria Monk's *Awful Disclosures*, the pornographic account of liaisons between nuns and priests in Montreal religious houses. Stories about convent life had been popularized by the Gothic fad in England. This literary convention fused with the piquant impression of French-Canadian nunneries. *Maria Monk* lingered on as a scandalous but recognizably Canadian popular story.

Meantime, two other themes had had a first success. John Galt's *Lawrie Todd* in 1830, followed by the less popular *Bogle Corbet* in 1831, capitalized on readers' interest in the everyday life of working-class settlers, shopkeepers, and manufacturers. Such stories of the ordinary life of people working hard for a living, not romanticized, not on their way to riches, may reflect actual Canadian poverty in climate and in resources. Once again, an imported literary convention — the Dickensian romance of work-lives — fused with the Canadian facts of proletarian life. Third, in 1832, Richardson's *Wacousta* (published in London by Cadell, by Kay and Biddle in Philadelphia) brought readers the military excitement of forays, drumhead trials, sieges and parleys. Again, the military story reflected a fact of Canadian life. The literal garrison remained part of the British colony in contrast to American emphasis on civilian defence. For a peaceable kingdom, Canada continued to produce a great many war-like novels. Richardson's next major book struck two blows for nationalism: it was entitled *The Canadian Brothers* and was published in Montreal (1840) by Armour and Ramsay as well as in New York (1851) by Dewitt and Davenport (under the title, *Matilda Montgomerie*).

In 1842, however, ambitious Canadian publishers were adversely affected by the passage of the imperial copyright law. Amendments in 1847 added new problems rather than removing the old ones. When Richard-
son's Monk Knight of St. John was published in New York in 1850, confusion in the book trade added to some inherent flaws to keep this book from the popularity it might have expected — given the combination of gothicism, catholicism and militarism implied in the title and the sensationalism of its plot.

Cheap British books pirated by American publishers and cheap American books publicized in American periodicals, widely circulated in Canada, stimulated some Canadian imitators, no doubt, but made competition difficult. The major house to attempt such competition was that of Lovell in Montreal. Out of the stable of writers whom he pushed and prodded came the next of our popular novels. Rosanna Eleanor Leprohon's Antoinette de Mirecourt is a garrison story with a difference: a story of a British sergeant and a colonel, not presented as warriors but as suitors of a romantic French-Canadian girl. Antoinette de Mirecourt has all the qualities for a best seller: good detail, pertinent moral issues, a sprightly style, a rose-coloured ending. It never rivalled the sales of its best American and British competitors, but it did sell very well, and its sales were much increased by the fact that it had almost instant translation and publication in French. This was a rare phenomenon in Canadian publishing history and a strong testimonial to Lovell's enterprise. The only francophone novel which had had comparable popularity up to his point was Les Anciens Canadiens by Philippe Aubert de Gaspé.

Les Anciens Canadiens was published in 1863. It blended those three elements which had proved so popular with anglophone audiences: lively accounts of military action, faithful reproduction of the details of folkways and work habits of the habitants, and a romantic glimpse of convent life. (The heroine considers becoming a nun as a gesture of patriotic rejection of post-conquest peace.)

Throughout the 1860s, Lovell's aggressive attitude extended to a readiness to commission Canadian writers who were willing to try for a popular audience. Tension was mounting over the unfair advantage seized by American writers: they could claim Canadian rights simply by crossing into Canada and registering their work as a Canadian imprint. In 1868, Lovell published a book showing his awareness of the continuing appeal of the Canadian theme: Ellen E.A. Ross's Violet Keith, or Convent Life in Canada. An Ottawa firm aiming to rival Lovell was Hunter; in 1869 it published a sample of the second recurring theme: E.W. Forrest's Ned Fortescue, Roughing it Through Life.

British publishers continued to put out some books by Canadians. Mrs. Moodie, for instance, had published her fairly popular Flora Lindsay in 1854 with Bentley (Richardson's first publisher and also John Galt's). The major non-Canadian rival for Canadian sales was the Lon-
don Religious Tract Society. Margaret Murray Robertson's *Christie Redfern's Troubles* (1866) sold very well, and a long list of pious tales kept steady hold on popular sales. A very popular book with a more timely appeal had a short but sharp sale: James McCarroll's *Ridgeway*, privately published in 1868 in Buffalo, gave a great many readers a view of the Fenian raids. Back east in Halifax, the continuing link with American markets continued. The Maritimer James De Mille had begun to sell to American publishers his rich series of stories. The best, though probably not the most popular, was *The Lily and the Cross* (1874). Besides his New York connection with Harper and Appleton, De Mille kept a steady flow of popular boys' stories coming from the Boston firm of Lee and Shepard.

In the 1870s, the publishing centre moved to Toronto. Hunter, Rose emerged as a major popular house. One very successful book from this new centre (although this one came from the house of Adam and Stevenson) was Agnes Machar's *For King and Country* (1874). In 1872 Lovell and Adam had united in trying to get British copyright law changed. By 1875, Canada was indeed pushing toward reform of copyright: now, American writers, in order to claim Canadian advantages, had to be domiciled in this country and had to print here.

Hard on the heels of this achievement came a publishing event of great importance: William Kirby's *The Golden Dog*, published first by Lovell in Montreal in 1877, proved a runaway success. Here, for the first time since *Wacousta*, we have a major seller in long-run terms. Here we have a book picked up for cheap reprint by American, British and Canadian firms. And here we have a book fusing all those motifs that had worked so well with Canadian audiences even when presented by less skilful pens than Kirby's. From its first pages, *The Golden Dog* presents glimpses of convent life, accounts of daily toil, and the colour and stir of military parades.

But in most books of the 70s, it was the humdrum rather than the colourful which predominated. Many a story had as subtitle some such phrase as 'A Tale From Real Life.' The Lovell group of writers and the Hunter, Rose group in Toronto shifted their tone from melodrama to moralizing. By the time the new journal, *Books and Notions*, began to inform booksellers of trends in sales, those trends reflected a taste for piety and pathos. The lists also show the emergence of two important new publishers: Briggs and Bryce, both in Toronto. Books like J.E. Collins' *Annette the Métis Spy* (Rose 1886) and Campbell Shaw's *A Romance of the Rockies* (Bryce 1888) joined Annie Savigny's *A Romance of Toronto* (Briggs 1888) to suggest the geographic range of popular Canadian plots. The Riel tensions perhaps added to interest in Indian romance. G. Mercer
Adam and A.E. Wetherald produced *An Algonquin Maiden* with Lovell in Montreal in 1887, capping the upswing.

But 1886 had brought troublesome news. England and the United States of America did not sign the Berne agreement, and Canadian publishers had no protection from the influx of pirated novels during the next few years. 'Between the upper and lower millstones of British copyright publishers and American piratical publishers of British books, the business of book publishing in Canada has been ground to powder,' said William Kirby to the Royal Society in May, 1883. 11 *Bookseller and Stationer* (the new form of *Books and Notions*) took up what cudgels they could in defence of Canadian publishers, and the publishers themselves tried such dodges as Lovell's moving of a branch to New York at Rouse's Point to ensure American rights. In 1891 a limited reciprocal agreement was signed by Canada and the United States; in 1893 *Bookseller and Stationer* began running comments on sales and from 1897 on, began to issue regular lists compiled on a very complicated point system from information supplied by bookstores. Similar lists had been appearing in the States since 1895 in *The American Booklist*. From this point on, we are able to compare Canadian sales with American sales and to note, for instance, that in 1896 Gilbert Parker's *The Seats of the Mighty* not only topped Canadian lists but appeared third in the list of best sellers in the USA.

As for *The Seats of the Mighty*, it comes as no surprise to find in it our old friends, the military man, the cheerful hardworking labourer, and the Mother Superior, all playing a part in this vastly popular novel. But the lists of best sellers show some new emphases and some shifts in the old preoccupations. There are, for instance, a number of books concerned with what the 1890s called 'The Woman Question,' for example, Grant Allen's *The Woman Who Did* (1895). There is also a group of best sellers with Scottish-sounding titles, such as May Agnes Fleming's *The Heiress of Glen Gower* (1892) and J.M. Oxley's *Donald Grant's Development* (1892), followed by the same author's *Archie of Athabasca* in 1893. These titles may represent a response to the great popularity of Ian MacLaren, J.M. Barrie and other Kailyard writers in the old country. It was also, however, the culmination of a thread of interest in Scottish heroes which had been a consistent part of Canadian popular reading since Richardson's *Wacousta* and Galt's *Lawrie Todd*.

Gilbert Parker went on writing very popular books as the century wound to a close. In 1898 his *Battle to the Strong* tied for ninth place in
the American best seller list. On the Canadian most popular list a new star appeared. This was Ralph Connor, whose _Black Rock_ added to the popular piety of a mission story the old emphasis on work camps and on the manners of those who labour hard in construction and lumbering and railway building, all set against the sublime background of the Rockies. Another book slightly earlier had used the same setting and the same freshness of interest in the working ways of ordinary people. This was Phillipps-Wolley's _Gold, Gold in Cariboo!_ (1894), published in London by Blackie.

The story of popular novels of the nineteenth century might end, as it began, with a Maritime lady sending her story off to an American publisher. The lady now is Marshall Saunders; the book is _Rose à Charlotte_ (1898), and the publisher that very Page of Boston who, within a decade, would open up the biggest Canadian best seller of all, Lucy Maude Montgomery's _Anne of Green Gables_ (1908). _Rose à Charlotte_ was never as popular as Saunders' _Beautiful Joe_ (1894), but it is more clearly a novel and thus more obviously within the scope of the present study. _Rose à Charlotte_ is a last reminder of the charm for English-speaking Canadian readers of stories about francophone Canada, whether these stories be set in Acadia or in Quebec.

This study has not looked at French-Canadian readers' choice except for a brief glance at Phillipe Aubert de Gaspé's _Les Anciens Canadiens_. But the French-Canadian part of our culture is obviously deeply involved in two of the recurring motifs, the convent and the garrison. The third motif, fascination with work ways, does not effect a separation of books into the two languages: in the French novels as in the English ones, the reactions of ordinary men in an unbending climate, a primary resource economy, and a basically puritan ethic, have been seen as important, interesting and dignified. The popular novel in both languages in Canada thus turns out also to be, in part at least, a populist form — a novel of the ordinary worker.

The word 'popular' is often used pejoratively, and we may speak slightly of a book that is 'merely popular.' But popularity, it seems, is 'not so mere anymore.' Professor Mary Vipond speaks of the interest in such books for cultural historians: 'the revelation of the ideas and attitudes of another time.' Professor Vipond notes another interest in these books, more proper to literary critics, namely, as early parts of the evolution of Canadian literature, its themes, techniques, problems. Piously reading these old books as social historians or as literary critics,
however, we suddenly realize with a blush of self-awareness that we turn the pages with quickened interest not because they prove something about evolution or illustrate national motifs. We read the best sellers of the past basically because they give us the same pleasures they gave their thousands of readers when they first came out: they satisfy our basic need for vicarious experience; they lessen tension and anxiety; and they offer a pathway through the wilderness of human needs, fears and desires.

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**Popular Canadian Novels in the Nineteenth Century: A Tentative List**

John Galt, *Lawrie Todd; or The Settlers in the Woods* (1830)
John Richardson, *Wacousta; or The Prophecy* (1832)
Maria Monk, *Awful Disclosures of Maria Monk* (1836)
Thomas Chandler Haliburton, *The Attaché; or Sam Slick in England* (1843)
Rosanna Eleanor Mullins Leprohon, *Antoinette de Mirecourt; or Secret Marrying and Secret Sorrowing. A Canadian Tale* (1864)
Margaret Robertson, *Christie Redfern's Troubles* (1866)
James De Mille, *The Lily and the Cross* (1874)
May Agnes Fleming, *The Dark Secret* (1875)
William Kirby, *The Golden Dog: A Legend of Quebec* (1877)
James MacDonald Oxley, *Archie of Athabasca* (1893)
Marshall Margaret Saunders, *Beautiful Joe* (1894)
Grant Allen, *The Woman Who Did* (1895)
Sir Gilbert Parker, *The Seats of the Mighty* (1896)
Ralph Connor [pseud. Charles William Gordon], *Black Rock: A Tale of the Selkirks* (1898)

*Canadian Materials*