

Writing in the Time of Nationalism: From Two Solitudes to Blue Metropolis

by Linda Leith

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Reviewed by Ronald Charles Epstein

Belfast-born author Linda Leith has lived in Montreal since 1963. Although she has published novels, a memoir and two other works of literary nonfiction, she is best known as the creator of the Blue Metropolis Foundation, which led to the establishment of the Blue Metropolis International Literary Festival.

Despite Leith's impressive literary credentials, one could describe her book with the same "high-concept" summary used to explain simple-minded feature films: literary community finds place, literary community loses place, literary community establishes new place. This is precisely what happened to Montreal's English writers, whose leading position in Canadian literature was symbolized by Hugh MacLennan's internationally successful novels, including *Two Solitudes*. After Quebec's cultural nationalists defined their literature as francophone Québécois, and anglophone Canadians backed that concept, Quebec's English-language authors were reduced to a state of marginalized isolation. Their recovery is symbolized by the international multilingual Blue Metropolis literary festival that Leith established. It fostered a cosmopolitan attitude that might encourage francophone Quebecers to view English-speaking writers as their own.

This is a personal history, with the emphasis on both words, although the writer does not explicitly define it as such. Although Leith is a participant in the city's literary culture, she covers a period that began before she was born. This means that she is a distant observer of the previous era, as well as an eyewitness to the past few decades' developments. Since she cannot provide complete objectivity, she acknowledges her limitations, even as she salts this account of her times with glimpses of her life.

Leith is a cultural patron who needed to be aware of Quebec's sociopolitical undercurrents because she required its francophone literati's cooperation. A telling example of the need for such understanding occurred in 1995, when she proposed a joint event that would involve the two major groups' key writers' unions. Nicole Blouin, her French-Canadian counterpart, informed her that they should "describe our event as taking place 'in two languages'" because "'Bilingual' pressed all the wrong buttons in the political minefield of Quebec . . ." (111). After she dodged the mines, she shows us the map and perhaps a scar or two.

This hard-won skill affects her chronicles. Leith refers to the postwar era as "The Good Old Bad Old Days" because Anglo-Quebec literature flourished in the corrupt, authoritarian atmosphere of Premier Maurice Duplessis's "*grand noirceur*." She points out that his unjust society benefitted francophone and anglophone elites. Ordinary Franco-Quebeckers were exploited by the latter. Many of their Anglo peers, including authors like Irving Layton, were disgusted. This account deconstructs the past, even as readers discover why it inspires nostalgia.

Accounts of succeeding decades serve both scholars and the casual readers. The latter are guided through Quebec's history with a recap of relevant events. They are well served by childhood memories. Leith recalls "nuns on the streets . . . when we first lived there in 1963 but, within a year or two, they had gone" (44). She describes how revolutionary changes affected English-speaking Quebecers such as herself.

Since Mordecai Richler's well-publicized attacks on Quebec nationalism have profoundly affected relations between its major language groups, his influence could be described as "the elephant in the room." Leith dealt with it by denying him access to her cultural projects, in order not to alienate the francophone literary community. Now that he is long gone, she carefully explains why he outraged them. She points out that "When French-speaking artists and intellectuals gave up on the possibility of recognition from English Canada, they looked instead for international recognition. Now here was Richler giving them a dressing-down in a prestigious U.S. magazine with an international readership" (101). Cultural anxiety is eloquently outlined, but its validity must be left for others to judge because the topic cannot be adequately addressed here.

When Canadian cultural nationalism energized its English-language literature, its centre of gravity moved westward. Although Toronto's gain was Montreal's loss, Leith is not a bitter loser. She admits that her knowledge of that city is limited, but acknowledges useful personal visits and literary contacts. She seems grateful for the help, but is not above a little cheekiness at the metropolis's expense, noting that "If there hadn't been a Toronto, we would have to have invented Toronto. Perhaps we did." (162)

This work places Montreal's literary culture in context, revealing its relationship to Canadian history and Quebec politics, a perspective that may broaden its appeal. The author is an "insider," but her material is not overly "inside"; that is, her assessment may not be too hip for your room. ♪

Ronald Charles Epstein reviewed *Reconquering Canada* for *Prairie Fire Review of Books*.

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