

AN ANTHOLOGY OF
CANADIAN LITERATURE
IN ENGLISH

SIMON FRASER UNIVERSITY



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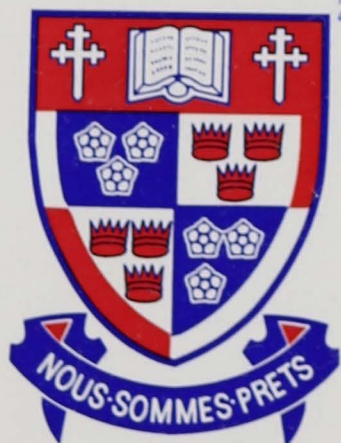


Revised
& Abridged
Edition

Edited by
Russell Brown
Donna Bennett
& Nathalie Cooke

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CONTENTS

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS xi

INTRODUCTION xv

FRANCES BROOKE

From *The History of Emily Montague* 2

SAMUEL HEARNE

From *A Journey from Prince of Wales's Fort
in Hudson's Bay to the Northern
Ocean* 18

DAVID THOMPSON

From the *Narrative of His Explorations in
Western North America, 1784-1812* 27

OLIVER GOLDSMITH

The Rising Village 36

ANNA BROWNELL JAMESON

From *Winter Studies and Summer Rambles
in Canada* 50

THOMAS CHANDLER HALIBURTON

From *The Clockmaker* (First Series)
The Trotting Horse 57
The Clockmaker 60

CATHARINE PARR TRAILL

From *The Backwoods of Canada* 64

SUSANNA MOODIE

From *Roughing It in the Bush* 71

CHARLES SANGSTER

From *The St Lawrence and the
Saguenay* 99

From *Sonnets Written in the Orillia
Woods* 101

ISABELLA VALANCY CRAWFORD

A Battle 104

The Camp of Souls 105

The Dark Stag 107

Said the Canoe 108

SIR CHARLES G.D. ROBERTS

The Sower 112

Tantramar Revisited 113

The Winter Fields 114

The Flight of the Geese 115

The Skater 115

As Down the Woodland Ways 116

When Twilight Falls on the Stump Lots 117

BLISS CARMAN

The Eavesdropper 121

MARGARET LAURENCE

To Set Our House in Order 424

JAMES REANEY

The School Globe 437

The Alphabet 438

The Lost Child 440

Starling with a Split Tongue 440

PHYLLIS WEBB

Lear on the Beach at Break of Day 443

Marvell's Garden 443

The Glass Castle 445

To Friends Who Have Also Considered

Suicide 446

For Fyodor 447

Eschatology of Spring 448

ROBERT KROETSCH

F.P. Grove: The Finding 451

Seed Catalogue 452

TIMOTHY FINDLEY

Stones 467

JAY MACPHERSON

From *The Boatman*

The Thread 481

The Boatman 482

The Anagogic Man 482

The Fisherman 483

A Lost Soul 484

ALICE MUNRO

Something I've Been Meaning To Tell

You 486

MORDECAI RICHLER

The Summer My Grandmother Was

Supposed to Die 500

ALDEN NOWLAN

Temptation 510

The First Stirring of the Beasts 511

Country Full of Christmas 512

Canadian January Night 512

On the Barrens 513

LEONARD COHEN

You Have the Lovers 516

A Kite Is a Victim 517

Suzanne Takes You Down 518

Two Went to Sleep 520

Book of Mercy 520

Everybody Knows 521

LEON ROOKE

A Bolt of White Cloth 523

RUDY WIEBE

Where Is the Voice Coming From? 532

GEORGE BOWERING

From *Kerrisdale Elegies*

Elegy Two 540

Elegy Five 544

JOY KOGAWA

Obasan 550

Where There's a Wall 555

Road Building by Pick Axe 556

Minerals from Stone 558

AUDREY THOMAS

The Man With Clam Eyes 560

ALISTAIR MacLEOD

As Birds Bring Forth the Sun 564

JOHN NEWLOVE

Four Small Scars 570

The Double-Headed Snake 571

- Samuel Hearne in Wintertime 572
 Ride Off Any Horizon 574
- JACK HODGINS
 By the River 578
- MARGARET ATWOOD
 This is a Photograph of Me 585
 Progressive Insanities of a Pioneer 586
 From *The Journals of Susanna Moodie*
 Further Arrivals 588
 The Planters 589
 The Wereman 590
 Departure from the Bush 590
 Death of a Young Son by Drowning 592
 Dream 2: Brian the Still-Hunter 593
 Thoughts from Underground 594
 Tricks with Mirrors 595
 Marrying the Hangman 597
 Variation on the Word *Sleep* 600
 Another Elegy 600
 The Resplendent Quetzal 601
- PATRICK LANE
 Because I Never Learned 612
 Albino Pheasants 612
 Stigmata 613
 The Witnesses 614
 The Long Coyote Line 616
 Monarch I 616
 Weasel 617
 There Is a Time 618
- DENNIS LEE
 Civil Elegies
 1 620
 2 623
 9 624
- FRED WAH
 I lie here and wait for life again 628
 Waiting for Saskatchewan 628
- Relation speaks 629
 Elite 3 629
- CLARK BLAISE
 Eyes 631
- GWENDOLYN MacEWEN
 Icarus 636
 Manzini: Escape Artist 638
 The Portage 639
 Dark Pines under Water 640
 From *The T.E. Lawrence Poems*
 The Real Enemies 640
 The Void 641
 The Death of the Loch Ness Monster 642
 Polaris 643
- DAPHNE MARLATT
 From *Steveston*
 Imagine: a town 645
 Coming Home 646
 At Birch Bay 646
- SANDRA BIRDSELL
 The Wednesday Circle 648
- MICHAEL ONDAATJE
 The Time Around Scars 656
 Billboards 657
 Letters & Other Worlds 658
 Pig Glass 660
 Light 661
 From *Running in the Family*
 The Cinnamon Peeler 663
 'The space in which we have
 dissolved—does it taste of us?' 664
 To a Sad Daughter 665
- PAULETTE JILES
 Rock Climbing 668
 Horror Stories 669

Night Flight to Attiwapiskat 670
North Shore of Lake Superior: The
Truth 672

bp NICHOL

From *The Martyrology* 675
landscape: 1 684
lament 684

BRONWEN WALLACE

The Woman in this Poem 686
Joseph Macleod Daffodils 688
Testimonies 691
The Watermelon Incident 693

ROBERT BRINGHURST

Deuteronomy 696
Essay on Adam 698
These Poems, She Said 698
The Reader 699

LORNA CROZIER

Poem about Nothing 700

Forms of Innocence 702
Fathers, Uncles, Old Friends of the
Family 703
Afterwords 704

MARY DI MICHELE

Luminous Emergency 706
Snapshot 710

DAVID ADAMS RICHARDS

A Rural Place 712

ROHINTON MISTRY

Squatter 728

DIONNE BRAND

At the Lisbon Plate 744

ERIN MOURÉ

It Is Only Me 756
Barrington 757
Professional Amnesia 758
Miss Chatelaine 759

INDEX 760

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Fred Wah

b. 1939

Born in Swift Current, Sask., of Chinese and Scandinavian parents, Fred Wah moved with his family to Trail, B.C., when he was four, and grew up there and in nearby Nelson. As a teenager he played trumpet in a band called the Kampus Kings (Lionel Kearns was the saxophonist). He left the Kootenay region in 1959 to study music at the University of British Columbia; there he became involved with the *Tish* group of west-coast writers that included Daphne Marlatt and George Bowering. Interested in the poetics of the Black Mountain school (particularly in its emphasis on simple syntax, concreteness, and a desire for organic rather than inherited literary forms), Wah studied with Robert Creeley at Albuquerque, New Mexico and later, as a graduate student, in Buffalo at the State University of New York, where he also worked with Charles Olson, the founder and major theorist of Black Mountain poetics. He returned to the Kootenays in 1967, and worked as a teacher at Selkirk College in Castlegar, B.C., and as head of the creative writing program at David Thompson University Centre in Nelson. He now lives in South Slokan, between Nelson and Castlegar.

Since 1961, when he was one of the founding editors of *Tish*, Wah has been active as an editor of literary magazines. In New Mexico he founded and edited *Sum* (1964-5); in Buffalo he worked on the editorial staff of *Niagara Frontier Review* and *The Magazine of Further Studies*; in Castlegar he edited *Scree*, as well as an anthology of West Kootenay writing and photographs. Since its inception in 1965, Wah has been a contributing editor to *Open Letter*, which has served as a forum for discussions of contemporary writing and poetics in Canada; he was also a co-editor of its sister electronic literary magazine, *Swift Current*.

Wah has published several books of poetry: *Lardeau: Selected First Poems* (1965), *Mountain* (1967), *Tree* (1972), *Among* (which includes work from his first three books; 1972), *Earth* (1974), *Pictograms from the Interior of B.C.* (1975), *Selected Poems:*

Loki is Buried at Smoky Creek (1980), *Breathin' my name with a sigh* (1981), *Owner's Manual* (1982), and *Waiting for Saskatchewan* (1985), for which he received a Governor General's Award.

Always interested in the poet's connections with place—a general concern of the *Tish* group—Wah has rejected traditional prose forms as a way of articulating those connections. His poetry, which records his explorations into the world of sight and sound around him, is sometimes difficult and demands to be read aloud. It expresses place through the experience of sound, in such early poems as 'Song' ('What a wonderful way/ To come into the city/ All over the bridge/ O/ver/the bridge'); through explorations of the relationship between visual and verbal representations, in *Pictograms from the Interior of B.C.*; and through an investigation of the relationship with particulars of place and with parents, in *Waiting for Saskatchewan*. In this last collection, Wah grapples largely with the influence of his father. The 'Elite' sequence of prose poems, which takes its name from the family café in Swift Current, deals with the poet's return to the prairies and his desire to understand his father, a figure who dominates the collection. 'Relation Speaks' is a poem about returns of a different kind. Here Wah tells us that knowledge must be collected, though the links and connections sometimes become clear only afterwards. Wah feels the importance of Saskatchewan, for instance, long after he leaves it; and the significance of his father emerges only after his father's death, which is being mourned in this collection of poetry.

'I lie here and wait for life again' is taken from *Breathin' My Name With a Sigh*, which George Bowering, in his introduction to *Selected Poems*, calls Wah's 'book of air, poems of the breath'. ('Wah' is equated with the sound of breathing out with a sigh.) The speaker in this poem tries to catch his breath, gasping for answers as he gasps for air.

I lie here and wait for life again¹

I lie here and wait for life again
 no one told me this happens
 not death but a consequence of it
 the physical isn't a world
 at least it wasn't this morning
 when I ran up the road out of breath
 yet that is what I most desire.
 Information. What leads up to death,
 is only information.

1981

¹'I lie here and wait for life again' first appeared in a manuscript edition (Coach House Press, 1978), and was later published in *Selected Poems* (1980). That version differs substantially from the one printed above, which is taken from *Breathin' my name with a sigh* (1981).

Waiting for Saskatchewan

Waiting for saskatchewan
 and the origins grandparents countries places converged
 europe asia railroads carpenters nailed grain elevators
 Swift Current my grandmother in her house
 he built on the street
 and him his cafes namely the 'Elite' on Center
 looked straight ahead Saskatchewan points to it
 Erickson Wah Trimble houses train station tracks
 arrowed into downtown fine clay dirt prairies wind waiting
 for Saskatchewan to appear for me again over the edge 10
 horses led to the huge sky the weight and colour of it
 over the mountains as if the mass owed me such appearance
 against the hard edge of it sits on my forehead
 as the most political place I know these places these strips
 laid beyond horizon for eyesight the city so I won't have to go
 near it as origin town flatness appears later in my stomach why
 why on earth would they land in such a place
 mass of pleistocene
 sediment plate wedge
 arrow sky beak horizon still waiting for that 20
 I want it back, wait in this snowblown winter night
 for that latitude of itself its own largeness
 my body to get complete
 it still owes me, it does

1985

Relation speaks

Relation speaks. Tree talks hierarchy loop subject returns.
 Knowledge a bag of things to be changed later to
 knowledge. Statement of instructions horoscope Wah
 language reads reading out of order in order to speak to
 itself feed picked up lists family and complete branches/
 worlds end there.

1985

Elite 3¹

I'm on the prairies this winter. I haven't been here in the winter since I was four years old. It's not Swift Current, or Speedy Creek as some here call it, but there are certain flavours which are unmistakeably part of us. The ethnicity here feels so direct. I mean the Chinese are still connected to China, the Ukrainians so Ukrainian, in the bar the Icelanders tell stories about Iceland, the Swede still has an accent, the French speak French. Here you're either a Wiebe or a Friesen, or not. What is a Metis, anyway? I know when you came back from China you must have felt more Chinese than anything else. But I remember you saying later that the Chinese didn't trust you and the English didn't trust you. You were a half-breed, Eurasian. I remember feeling the possibility of that word 'Eurasian' for myself when I first read it in my own troubled adolescence. I don't think you ever felt the relief of that exotic identity though. In North America white is still the standard and you were never white enough. But you weren't pure enough for the Chinese either. You never knew the full comradeship of an ethnic community. So you felt single, outside, though you played the game as we all must. To be a mix here on the prairies is still noticed. I remember going into Macleods in Swift Current a few years ago and sensing that most of the women in the store were just like Granny Erickson. I don't think you felt there was anyone else in the world like you.

1985

¹Pronounced 'ee-light' [Wah's note].

AN ANTHOLOGY OF CANADIAN LITERATURE IN ENGLISH

Revised & Abridged Edition

This annotated text for Canadian literature courses is an abridgement and revision of Oxford's popular two-volume *Anthology of Canadian Literature in English*. From the eighteenth century to the present, it provides basic texts for study, and also makes cross-connections between them, offering a context for the study not only of individual writers but of the literary culture of English Canada. While drama and literary criticism have been deleted from the abridgement, it contains updated selections from poets and fiction writers previously included as well as selections by writers new to the anthology—from early figures such as Sara Jeanette Duncan, Pauline Johnson, and Marjorie Pickthall to contemporary writers including Timothy Findley, Joy Kogawa, Fred Wah, Sandra Birdsell, Paulette Jiles, Bronwen Wallace, Lorna Crozier, David Adams Richards, Rohinton Mistry, and Dionne Brand. This abridged and revised anthology also contains updated, detailed introductions to the writers and their works, and annotations that will help make the selections more accessible to today's students.

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