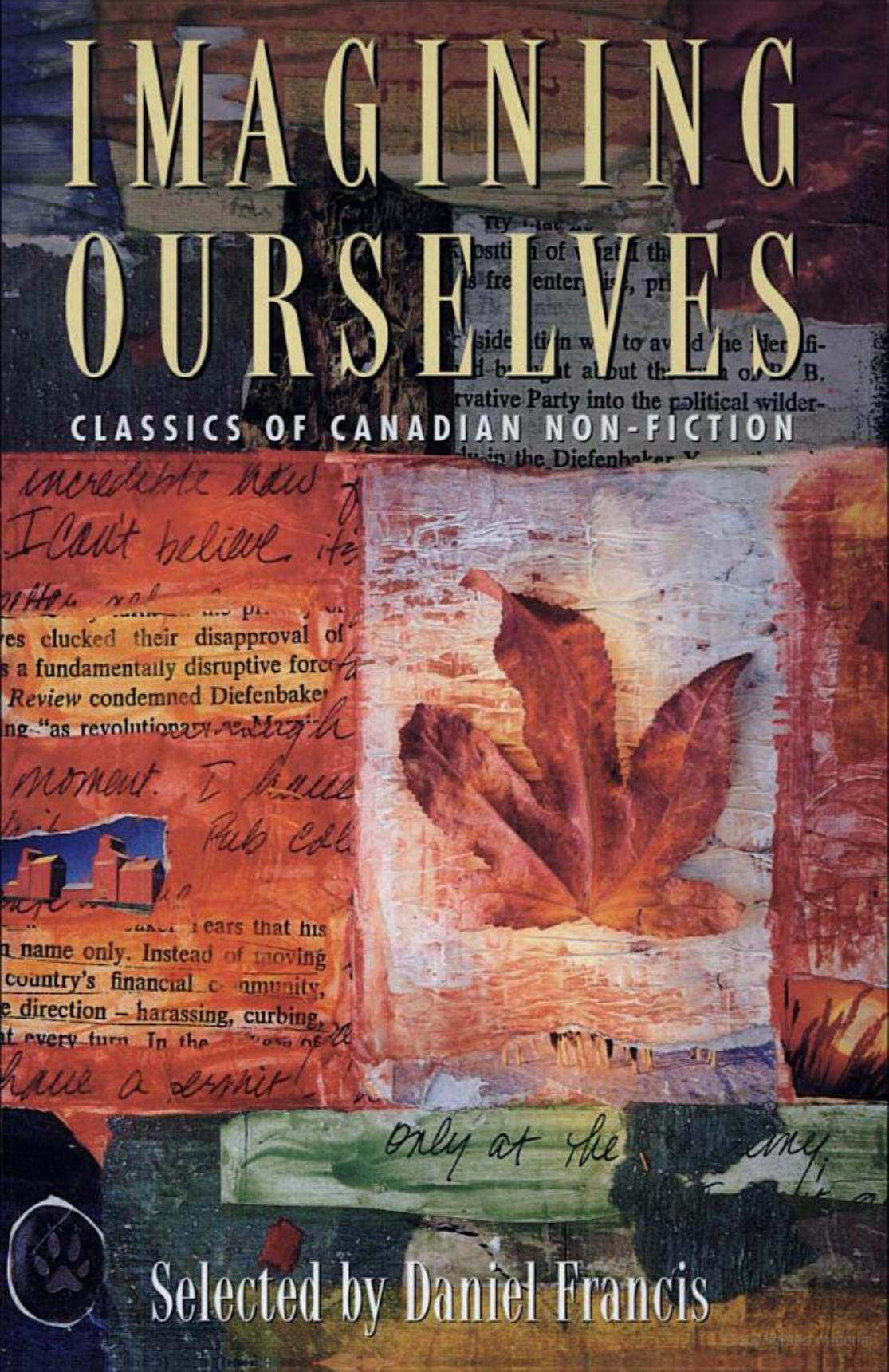
IMAGINING OURSELVES

CLASSICS OF CANADIAN NON-FICTION



Selected by Daniel Francis

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INTRODUCTION

For almost twenty years I have been a writer of books and articles about Canada. Most of what I have written I think of as history, or more specifically popular history, but certainly all of it can easily be labelled non-fiction—a category of writing that had never impressed itself on me as very meaningful. For most of my writing career I was never aware that I might be working in a tradition. Naturally I read a lot of non-fiction, but I read it for information, and not for any imaginative experience. In fact, non-fiction writing has for most of my writing career been perceived generally as "easier" than fiction writing, engaging the imagination on a somewhat lower level than the more "serious" work of novelists and short story writers. Outside of the worlds of journalism and the academy, almost no writers made a living at it. When the historian Donald Creighton published his biography of John A. Macdonald in the 1950s, it was considered remarkable and even a little outrageous for a writer of non-fiction to strive for literary effects, or to describe what he was doing in literary terms, both of which Creighton was at pains to do. Non-fiction was not supposed to have literary pretensions.

But in recent years non-fiction writing in Canada has been finding a place in the literary world, although it's a place that remains hard to define, and books of non-fiction by Heather Robertson, Myrna Kostash, David Macfarlane, Terry Glavin, Maggie Siggins, Mary Meigs, Michael Ondaatje, Ronald Wright, and others are now among the finest writing in Canada in any genre. It is the appearance of these books that set me to wondering whether in fact there might not be such a thing as a Canadian non-fiction tradition. In particular, I wanted to know where this so-called "new non-fiction" came from. Did it have any relationship to its pre-modernist forebears? In an attempt to answer these questions I decided to read, in some cases re-read, a broad range of Canadian non-fiction published since the first explorers began writing about the country. The result is *Imagining Ourselves*, a collection of extracts from some of the most popular and interesting non-fiction writing in Canada over the past three centuries. I have chosen only from published books,

not from essays or journalism or other forms of non-fiction writing. And I have chosen only English selections; this is an anthology of original writing, not translation.

Imagining Ourselves is not an attempt to create a canon. The books represented here are not presented as necessarily the *best* of anything. Each of the selections in *Imagining Ourselves* represents an interesting moment in the development of Canadian non-fiction writing, either because of their subject matter or the narrative skills they employ. Another editor would choose a completely different set of titles, and they might be just as valid. What I am attempting to do is to describe with examples the evolution of non-fiction writing in English Canada in the hopes of proving something, to myself if to no one else: that this country has a long tradition of excellent writing—literary writing—in the non-fiction genre. *Imagining Ourselves* is merely an appetizer; it is hoped that readers will go on to indulge themselves in the full menu.

But what about that term, non-fiction? Increasingly, it is a red flag guaranteed to infuriate the people who write it. Non-fiction, because it is defined by what it is not, seems an inadequate, even condescending, label to describe what they do. In fact, the expression *non-fiction* entered the language only as recently as about 1907, according to the Random House dictionary, perhaps as a category of display that booksellers found handy in arranging their shelves. Certainly the writers of previous centuries included here would have had no idea of themselves as writers of a thing called non-fiction. But in this century the anomaly seems to have taken a firm hold. Biography, autobiography, essay, memoir, cookbook, textbook, technical manual, all are "not fiction." Recently on the non-fiction best-seller list, Leonard Cohen's latest collection of poetry was sandwiched between *The Hidden Life of Dogs* and the memoirs of the victim of an incurable disease. Also on the list were a plea for a "new" feminism, three memoirs by retired politicians, and a how-to book about staying young through natural medicine. Can a term which encompasses so many different types of writing have any meaning?

More importantly, the basic distinction between fiction and non-fiction has broken down. Not so long ago everyone seemed to agree that the purpose of non-fiction was to convey information. It was writing which was empirical, fact-based. Fiction, on the other hand, conveyed experience. It did not describe things that had actually happened. But this

distinction has never really been valid. As the selections in *Imagining Ourselves* reveal, non-fiction writers have always leavened their facts with generous portions of dramatic licence. From the beginning, writers of non-fiction have been self-consciously literary. By that I mean that they have worked and reworked their material, sometimes employing the devices of fiction, in an attempt, not to convey information, but to share experience with their readers.

Early explorers often hired editors to transform their raw journals into appealing narratives for the general public. One of the most famous incidents in Canadian history, the murderous attack on the Inuit at Bloody Fall near the Arctic coast, became so because of Samuel Hearne's harrowing description of it in his book, *A Journey to the Northern Ocean*, published in 1795. But recently, academic sleuths have determined that Hearne, perhaps with the help of a ghostwriter, may have invented some of the more lurid details, including the presence of a young Inuit girl impaled on a spear, a detail which contributed so much to the notoriety of the affair at Bloody Fall.[1] Hearne was not the first writer, and he was certainly not the last, to break the empirical constraints of non-fiction. In his own day he was very much in the mode of the sensationalist travel writer who sought to sell books by spinning exotic tales filled with hyperbole and even downright lies. More modern examples include the novelist Frederick Philip Grove, whose autobiography *In Search of Myself* won a Governor-General's award for non-fiction in 1946, then turned out to be largely a fabrication, and Grey Owl, the Englishman who wrote as an Indian. Unlike Hearne, Grey Owl and Grove were using autobiography to invent new identities for themselves (although this may be seen too as a strategy for selling more books). But whatever the motive, the point is that most non-fiction is factually suspect. Only the most unwary readers believe everything they read.

If Samuel Hearne invented the story of the Inuit girl and the spear, you might say he was lying. But lying is a word which has little meaning in literature; so often *liar* is just another word for *writer*. Of course, when we use a cookbook we expect that by combining the ingredients for spaghetti sauce we will not end up with a cheese soufflé. But cookbooks and car manuals aside, most non-fiction is, to say the least, unstable. Trying to match it to the real world is like trying to nail the proverbial jelly to the wall. For writers of non-fiction, the facts are only part of the story;

their response to the facts, what they make of them, is the rest of the story, and is often more important. The American journalist Janet Malcolm makes this point about non-fiction. It is actually fiction that is dependable, she argues, in the sense that the events of a novel are "true" in the context of its own imaginative world. In the case of non-fiction, however, we almost never get the truth. Instead, we get a version of the truth. "Only in nonfiction," writes Malcolm, "does the question of what happened and how people thought and felt remain open."[2]

If the distinction between fiction and non-fiction is not always clear, neither is the distinction between literary (or creative) non-fiction and its more prosaic variants. The term creative non-fiction has come into widespread use in the past decade to describe forms of non-fiction which employ fictional elements or strategies. Clearly, there is a distinction to be made between writing which merely wants to impart information and writing that wants to draw the reader into a shared experience. Whether or not creativity is the distinguishing feature is not as clear. Most writers seem to agree that it is not. The search for a new label will doubtless continue, but if non-fiction itself no longer means what it used to, it seems pointless simply to pile up adjectives in front of it. I am inclined to agree with Andreas Schroeder who proposes that we "just get rid of generalized, umbrella-type labels like Fiction and Non-fiction altogether—they've become hopelessly imprecise anyway—and just stick with the specific ones, such as novel, memoir, essay, parable, biography, history, poem, documentary, commentary and so on."[3]

We only really need a new label if we are dealing with a new phenomenon. Is there anything new about the "new" non-fiction? The selections included in this volume demonstrate one thing at least: that from the earliest days non-fiction writers in Canada have been producing books which deserve to be called literary. In other words, they have been recording their experience in imaginative ways. I have mentioned the example of Samuel Hearne. Susanna Moodie likewise took a form familiar in her day, the emigrant's handbook, and embellished it into what in the twentieth century is often called a non-fiction novel. Ernest Thompson Seton used his observations of animals to virtually invent a new genre, the realistic animal story. Wallace Stegner combined short story and memoir to recreate his prairie childhood. It turns out that creative non-fiction, or whatever you want to call it, has been around since the

earliest explorers put quill to paper. It is a mistake to read early Canadian writers as if they were not every bit as "literary" as more modern ones; in other words, to think that there is no tradition of Canadian literary non-fiction.

If a tradition exists, what are its defining characteristics? Canadian non-fiction is about any number of things, from shamanism to lesbianism to hockey. Its earliest form was the explorer's narrative, very much in the mode of the travel account which had been in vogue since the invention of the printing press. The journals of early adventurers, rewritten or edited and published as books, proved immensely popular with reading audiences fascinated with the exotic details of life in "uncivilized" places. In Canada, the appeal of explorers' accounts continued into the twentieth century with the books of Vilhjalmur Stefansson, and still finds echoes in the contemporary popularity of travel writing. A close ally of the explorer's narrative is the "Frozen North" memoir, the recollections of life "North of 60" by a retired fur trader, Mountie, or missionary. The "Frozen North" memoir usually has a title something like *Memoirs of an Arctic Arab*, or *Land of the Frozen Tide*, or *Policing the Top of the World* and is invariably described with adjectives such as informative and useful. As yet, none of these books has achieved literary distinction, but each addition to the genre serves to keep alive our belief that we are a distinctively Northern nation, which is to say that they contribute to our imagination of ourselves.

Once the colonization of Canada was well underway, the settlement process became the major concern of non-fiction writers for several generations. Beginning with Susanna Moodie and her sister Catharine Parr Traill and continuing down to the modern period with Wallace Stegner and James Minifie, the "sod-hut memoir" proliferated. At its worst, this form was tedious and predictable, bogged down in the details of pioneer life. At its best, it helped a pioneer society take imaginative possession of its own landscape and provided the country with a myth of struggle and progress to justify its existence.

Other Canadian non-fiction writers were especially attracted to the natural world. Ernest Thompson Seton wrote animal stories; Grey Owl wrote about wilderness preservation; Emily Carr wrote about the isolated native villages of the B.C. coast; Roderick Haig-Brown wrote about the joys of sport fishing. Nature writing was a popular sub-genre that sought meaning in the wilderness and solace in the company of wild things.

Most recently, since the 1960s, non-fiction has attracted writers from marginalized communities which had not been able to get their concerns into print previously. It used to be very rare, for example, to have Aboriginal Canadians writing books about their own experience. That was left to sympathetic Whites, or Imaginary Indians like Grey Owl. Then writers like Maria Campbell and Harold Cardinal broke the silence, discovering in memoir and personal history a way to articulate the history and grievances of their people. Immigrant communities have also found their voices (examples in this anthology are Myrna Kostash, Michael Ondaatje, and Eva Hoffman), along with gays and lesbians (see the selection from Mary Meigs's memoir, *Lily Briscoe*), the sexually abused, and the politically progressive. Apparently this is where literature from the margins begins, in personal testimony. In fact, the most obvious feature of Canadian non-fiction writing today is the great variety of writers who are employing it, often in quite innovative ways, to tell their stories.

As it has become more inclusive, non-fiction writing in English has also changed its tone. Mainstream Canadian non-fiction writers adopted the romantic mode. Their work is hopeful, heroic, celebratory. It describes the ultimate triumph of civilization over the forces of nature, and the successful emergence of a new nationality. So, for example, William Francis Butler (*The Great Lone Land*, 1872) discovered in the prairie west a vast hinterland available for the civilizing. Susanna Moodie (*Roughing It In The Bush*, 1852), for all her negativity, argued that wonderful opportunities existed on the colonial frontier. Richard Maurice Bucke (*Cosmic Consciousness*, 1901), the religious mystic from London, Ontario, believed that mankind as a whole was on the verge of a spiritual revolution. All of these writers, and most of their contemporaries, were essentially optimistic in outlook.

Romance continues to be a popular mode, as evidenced by the success of popular historical writers such as Pierre Berton and Peter C. Newman, both of whom write unashamedly patriotic stories full of swashbuckling heroes and dramatic events (or, in Newman's own words, "feisty characters and remarkable circumstances"). However, best-sellers aside, the mood of Canadian non-fiction has darkened considerably in the past couple of decades. One does not look to writers like David Macfarlane or Michael Ondaatje or Mary Meigs in search of patriotic celebration.

For some it is irrelevant, for others a cruel joke. Triumph has been replaced by irony; life seems generally more complicated. In books like *Maps and Dreams* or *Lost in Translation*, language and imagination are the subject, along with the difficulty of using them to communicate experience. Today we read writers like Berton and Mowat with a comforting (or, perhaps, discomforting) sense of nostalgia.

This is, of course, the modern attitude; and there is nothing uniquely Canadian about it. But the more sombre mood also reflects the emergence of other voices in our literature—feminist, aboriginal, ethnic—which do not share the self-confident optimism of the dominant culture. These voices are more interested in subverting the mainstream than in upholding it.

Thirty years ago Northrop Frye argued that Canadian literature is notoriously preoccupied with the question "Where is here?"[4] No matter what they sit down to write about, our writers invariably end up writing about the kind of place they think Canada is, was, or ought to be. And by describing it, they imagine it into being for the rest of us. Most of the images we have of Canada, after all, are provided by the writers represented in this anthology, along with all the others. We imagine back to the prairie west before the White Man came and we think of it still as the "Great Lone Land" that William Butler described. Our knowledge of the Ontario backwoods comes to us through the memoirs of the genteel pioneers who lived there. We retain an appreciation for the wilderness, and for the North, though few of us ever go there, because so many of our writers have told us that we should.

In other words, I have found the non-fiction tradition for which I was looking, in the sense that I now realize that I have learned from books how to be a Canadian. And so have you, whether you have read the books or not. The images produced by the literature eventually transcend the literature; they become embedded in our knowledge of ourselves. They become the adjectives we use to describe ourselves: peaceable, unassuming, tolerant. The books contain the stories that produce the images that constitute the identity. What I have tried to do in *Imagining Ourselves* is to show this process taking place in the pages of some of our best non-fiction writing.

Notes

1. I.S. MacLaren, "Samuel Hearne's Accounts of the Massacre at Bloody Fall, 17 July 1771," *Ariel*, 22:1 (January 1991): 25-51.
2. Janet Malcolm, "The Silent Woman," *The New Yorker* (August 23 and 30, 1993): 138.
3. Andreas Schroeder, "Creative Non-Fiction Contest #5," *Event*, 21: 3 (Fall, 1992): 8.
4. Northrop Frye, *The Bush Garden* (Toronto: House of Anansi, 1971): 220.