Two-thirds of the way into Keepers of the Code: English-Canadian Literary Anthologies and the Representation of Nation, Robert Lecker writes, “[a]t the risk of quoting myself too often…” (250). Since Lecker is no mere academic kibitzer but also an anthologist writing about anthologies, his concerns about hogging the spotlight are understandable. But by no means does he quote himself too often. On the contrary, he shows admirable objectivity as he guides the reader through the history of the Can Lit anthology, beginning with John Simpson’s 1837 The Canadian Forget Me Not for MDCCCXXXVII and ending with Brian Trehearne’s 2010 Canadian Poetry, 1920-1960. The result is a perfect combination of canon-questioning and imagining Canada through literature, a task for which Lecker is ideally suited. The task of chronicling the way anthologies are put together is important because literary anthologies help determine how a nation imagines and represents itself, especially if those anthologies enter the classroom.

Readers of Lecker’s fascinating study might want to start near at the end—namely by skimming the chronologically-ordered list of prominent anthologies under “Works Cited.” Already there one can see trends Lecker analyzes with a keen and experienced eye. Whereas titles of 1970s anthologies take up over two pages, those of the 1990s fill a little more than half a page. The numbers themselves reflect the move from an emerging Canadian literature that an anthology editor could systematize and contain, however heavy-handedly, to one he or she could not control because the “idealized and unproblematized country celebrated by earlier generations of anthologists had ceased to exist.” (To be exact, Lecker does add wryly that no such country “had never existed, of course,” but in the past we at least could pretend it did.) (305).

Lecker’s slightly varying approaches to his chapters, along with his straightforward and jargon-free prose, keep boredom at bay as he focuses on the hundreds of anthologies Canada has seen since 1837. The first chapters cover 1837–1900 (12 anthologies), 1900–1922 (7 anthologies) and 1922–1943 (16 anthologies), and are replete with examples of lesser-known poetry about nation-building (“No eulogy to-day I bring / Of Canada’s fair fate, / Her greatness coming years may sing, / ’Tis ours to work and wait”) and, among other topics, football (“O wild kaleidoscopic panorama of jaculatory arms and legs.”). Neither of those verses made the cut for Lecker’s own 1982 Canadian Poetry: Volume One.

Counting titles gets tricky over the final four chapters, which divide the 20th and 21st centuries thus: 1943–1966 (25 anthologies); 1967–1982 (well over 50); 1982–1996 (24 anthologies); 1996–2010 (19

Book Review


Reviewed by Jason Blake, University of Ljubljana, Askerceva 2, 1000 Ljubljana, Slovenia blake.jason@guest.arnes.si
anthologies). As Lecker approaches the present, things get messy with Canadian literary anthologies because, like Canada itself, Canadian literature was growing in new directions. Whereas much of the 20th century had been obsessed with Mother England, anti-Americanism, and the native-cosmopolitan binary, recent decades have made it impossible to draw lines between editorial stances and selection processes. “If there is a line,” writes Lecker, “it is jagged and erratic, wobbling uncertainly between the making and breaking of the idea of nation. Anthologies in this period are energized because they inhabit such an uncertain national space” (225). By 1996, with the publication of Smaro Kamboureli’s Making a Difference: Canadian Multicultural Literature, one saw “the end of canonical innocence” (303) and since then there have been few attempts to envelop all of Canadian literary history within a single book. This, in spite of the continuing popularity of survey courses on Can Lit.

Anthologies are essentially canonical and exclusive, and these are constant themes in Keeping the Code. As Lecker notes, the editor of any anthology is necessarily an “arbiter of taste” (167) who decides what the reader should have access to. The book’s guiding metaphor is the anthological code of the title, what Northrop Frye called a “bureau of standards,” and editors are complicit, through selection of representative texts, in forming or affirming the nation. A safe or conservative anthology unlikely to rankle traditionalists or politicians (think tax dollars and book support) adheres to the code most obviously; a radical anthology works against the prevailing code and thus admits its presence – that is, even an anthology of experimental poetry is in dialogue with traditional collections, with more traditional codes of what Canadian literature should be.

Exclusion is a red thread throughout this volume, and not only in terms of which writers to cull. Lecker shows that Canadian anthologies have historically left out entire literary genres, voices and groups, surprisingly for an endeavor so conscious of representing Canada.

**Genre**

In keeping with 19th century ideals of poetry best embodying the nation, anthologists did not include prose until 1922 (which is unfortunate, given the excruciating poetry Lecker quotes at times). This anti-prose bias was slow to die, and by the time Robert Weaver published Canadian Short Stories in 1952, only three anthologies of Canadian short fiction had been published, suggesting that pre-war Canada was a nation of avid poetry readers.

**Voices and groups**

Native Canadian writing, French-Canadian writing in translation and “immigrant” literature were long ignored, meaning that for much of the past, Canadian literature basically meant WASP literature. In the case of French-language writing, things appear to be getting worse. Though there were earlier attempts to bring French-language writing into the anthological fold, since after 1982 anthologies have announced “kind of de facto separation between two cultures” (263). In that sense, editors have given up on dreams of unity.

**History**

Even in their sometimes desperate search for Canadian Topics, editors have repeatedly ignored events outside their office windows, not acknowledged social changes in their selections or introductions. Generations of anthologists have assiduously avoided major turning-points, including the Winnipeg strike of 1917 (102), the Great Depression (141), the First World War (162), the various “challenges that marked the 1970s” (256), and the “defining existential moment” of the 1995 referendum (18). Who Killed Canadian History?
anthologists, it seems. This is especially unfortunate in light of the need to update reading lists as Canada evolves and as its demographics change.

The final chapter, “Keeping the Code, 1996–2010,” is the most fun to read. Here Lecker inserts himself and muses on his own anthologizing experiences, recounting the material concerns and the hard choices that go into forming an anthology. Alice Munro’s recent work is simply too long; the Canadian long poem, likewise; Anne Carson’s recent poetry is too pricey; publishers can be reluctant to add new voices to existing anthologies (if it ain’t broke…); and so on and so forth. If anyone asks me to help construct an anthology, I will run screamingly away.

After Lecker had whittled down his Open Country: Canadian Literature in English (2007) to a manageable size, peer reviewers informed him it was “too heavy.” Literally. “I needed to create the Weight Watcher’s version of a national literary canon” (337), quips Lecker. Such trivial-seeming matters like copyright and book dimensions can have great consequences for conceiving of a national literature, especially if an anthology manages to enter the school or university classroom.

Lecker’s book is admirable in all regards, including his honesty. He sails us through canon debates without succumbing to Harold Bloom-style rigidity about a finite list of must-read works or serving up jargon-laden rants against the very idea of a canon. As Lecker states in the introduction: “I am particularly drawn to those collections that express a deep-seated anxiety about their editors’ own attempts to assemble a picture of the nation that refuses to cohere” (4). One can never get an anthology or canon “right,” but, as Keepers of the Code shows, it is worth trying.