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Report

Rapport

**“Place and Memory in Canada: Global Perspectives”
Cracow, Poland, 30 April – 3 May, 2004**

The Cracow conference was a feast of coinciding. In addition to bringing together over 150 academics from around the world, Cracow marked the 3rd Congress of the Polish Association for Canadian Studies as well as the 3rd International Conference of Central European Canadianists. The conference period also straddled the May 1st accession day for new European Union states. On Friday evening Canadians, New European Union members and others could watch fireworks and festivities honouring the event. The conference venue was the very comfortable Polish Academy of Arts and Sciences, which linked conference-goers to a long tradition of intellectual activity in Cracow – as we learned during the official opening on Friday afternoon.

The event began in earnest with a reading by novelist Wayne Johnston, author of such contemporary classics as *The Story of Bobby O'Malley*, *The Divine Ryans* and *The Colony of Unrequited Dreams*. He read from the last of these, reminding Europhiles and sceptics alike of the time Newfoundland voted to join Canada. *Colony* is a fictional biography of Joe Smallwood, the man who spearheaded the referendum campaign that brought Newfoundland into confederation. The passage read by Johnston pointed out how slim the margin of victory in that referendum was, while Johnston's personal anecdotes about his anti-union family reminded us that place and passports are not always a matter of choice, and that single events are remembered very differently by different individuals. Neither place nor memory is a given.

Another bonding cultural event was provided on Sunday night, when the Canadian Embassy in Warsaw rented the cinema *Ars* to show director Denys Arcand's universally acclaimed film *Les Invasions Barbares*. For those living in countries where the film had not yet been released, this was a welcome chance to see the film that had collected such awards as the Best Foreign Film Oscar and the “Prix du scénario” at Cannes. The film was as thematically fitting as Johnston's reading, dealing as it does with memory as it takes us back to the cottage on the lake seen previously in Arcand's *Le Déclin de L'Empire Américain*.

The other productions enjoyed *in plenum* were Myrna Kostash's insightful talk entitled “The Next Canada Revisited”, followed a few hours later by an evening of poetry featuring Joanna Paluszkiewicz-Magner's translations of Émile Nelligan, as well as Nancy Burke's presentation of her own poetry. The Sunday plenary session on “The Place of Canada and Canadian Studies” involved a number of speakers from across Europe and North America. The speakers involved in this session introduced their various activities and centres, then took us beyond the past of Canadian studies and considered future directions.

The rest of the conference, of course, was devoted to individual papers on “Place and Memory in Canada”, a topic that lent itself to a wide range of approaches. While the call for papers invited insights into the various ways that place and memory are intertwined, the papers themselves examined the topic in many ways. The topic was examined on national, territorial, regional and ethnic levels, and

considered from group or individual perspectives. Thus, papers were heard on, among other things, the link between territorial, national and political urges in Canada, the “new” territory of Nunavut within Canada, the regional attitudes of Nova Scotia and Newfoundland, and the special narrative space of Parliament Hill.

Narrative proved an important thread, as speakers spoke of national and collective memory with regards to icons such as Louis Riel and even the highly recognized, marketable and manipulated Royal Canadian Mounted Police image. Others focused on “minor” Canadian narratives, tuning in on voices such as Polish communities in Canada, Italian-Canadian and other ethnic writers, and extending the antennae even to the highly personal family narrative of how a *tourtière* recipe passes through the generations. Still others focused on myth and narrative, examining how the two work together and are constructed in authors such as Thomas King. Many presenters showed that history, story and myth are not that far apart.

Though literature dominated the conference, at least in terms of the number of papers presented, presenters reached beyond the CanLit canon. This does not mean, however, that the “old reliables” were ignored. In addition to a bevy of Margaret Atwood and Michael Ondaatje papers, other familiar faces from the Canadian scene were re-examined, including Robert Kroetsch, Margaret Laurence, Alice Munro, Mordecai Richler and Gabrielle Roy. Such variety of topics, such a desire to reach out for the “new” and re-examine the “old” attests to the fecundity of Canadian Studies in this region.

Though most of the participants were from the host country, elsewhere in Central Europe, or Canada, the rest of the world was amply represented. We had ample opportunity to exchange ideas over coffee or the book display in the Polish Academy, catch up with old friends – and make new ones – at one of the fine dinners, or travel the ambient streets of Cracow in the tram tour organized for the first evening. All in all, a successful conference that went off without a hitch.

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