Sparling, Don

**Canadas post-Communist literary footprint in the Czech lands**

In: *Canada consumed : the impact of Canadian writing in Central Europe (1990-2017).* Sparling, Don (editor); Kürtösi, Katalin (editor). 1st edition Brno: Masaryk University, 2019, pp. 51-67

ISBN 978-80-210-9368-3 (paperback); ISBN 978-80-210-9369-0 (online : pdf)

Stable URL (handle): https://hdl.handle.net/11222.digilib/digilib.81845
Access Date: 02. 04. 2025
Version: 20250401

Terms of use: Digital Library of the Faculty of Arts, Masaryk University provides access to digitized documents strictly for personal use, unless otherwise specified.

MUNI ARTS Masarykova univerzita Filozofická fakulta

Digital Library of the Faculty of Arts,
Masaryk University
digilib.phil.muni.cz

# Canada's Post-Communist Literary Footprint in the Czech Lands

**Don Sparling**

**Abstract**
The period since the end of the Communist regime in 1989 has witnessed an astonishing burst of Canadian writing being translated into Czech. The material translated covers a wide range of genres; not unexpectedly, commercial and/or niche fiction dominates, but writers of more serious literary work, whether in traditional genres or other critically acclaimed genres (for example, fantasy, science fiction and crime fiction), are also well represented. This article will analyze the trends that can be observed in the publication of works by Anglophone Canadian authors in Czech translation[1] and examine their impact as reflected in reviews in various media, discussion on blogs and other online sites, activities at literary festivals, and the experience of editors and translators.

**Résumé**
Depuis la chute du régime communiste en 1989, on assiste à une incroyable explosion du nombre des textes canadiens traduits en tchèque. Les textes traduits comprennent une multitude de genres; évidemment, la littérature commerciale et les œuvres écrites pour un public très spécifique dominent, mais les auteurs d'œuvres de genre sérieux, que ce soit les genres traditionnels ou d'autres genres acclamés par la critique (comme, par exemple, la fantasy, la science-fiction ou le roman policier), sont également bien représentés. Cet article analyse les tendances observées dans la publication d'œuvres d'auteurs anglo-canadiens en traduction tchèque et examine leur impact comme en témoignent les divers médias, les forums de discussion sur les blogues et d'autres sites en ligne, la programmation des festivals littéraires, et l'expérience des rédacteurs et des traducteurs.

1) Translations by Québécois and other Francophone Canadian authors post-1989 have been minimal. Only nineteen authors in all have been translated. Thirteen of these are represented by only one title; the group includes such important writers as Nancy Huston (*Lignes de faille*, 2008), Dany Laferrière (*Comment faire l'amour avec un nègre sans se fatiguer*, 2008) and Jacques Poulin (*Volkswagen Blues*, 1998). (In all fairness it should be noted that many leading Anglophone Canadian writers are in the same situation, among them Timothy Findley, Barbara Gowdy, Margaret Laurence, Rohinton Mistry and Rudy Wiebe). No Francophone author has more than 3 titles in the database: those with three are the graphic novelist Guy Delisle (*Pyongyang* and *Shenzhen*, 2009; *Chroniques de Jérusalem*, 2013); Nathalie Roy (the "chick-lit" trilogy *La Vie épicée de Charlotte Lavigne*, 2013–14); and Tecia Werbowski, a Polish-Québécois novelist who spends much of her time in Prague (*Hôtel Polski*, *L'Oblomova*, *Le mur entre nous*; all three appeared in 2000).

During the Communist period in Czechoslovakia, the translation of books by foreigners was, like almost everything else coming from "outside," strictly controlled. Both ideological and economic factors played a part in this, the result being that the number of titles published was very small.[2] This situation changed dramatically with the fall of Communism, when the country was flooded with translations of books of all types. And from all countries, something that proved highly beneficial for Canada and Canadian authors. For the period from 1948 to 1989, which delimits the years of Communist rule, the database of the Central European Association for Canadian Studies translation research project shows 117 entries for translations into Czech (each edition of a book is given a separate entry; the number of individual titles is about 80). For the twenty-eight years from the end of the Communist era in Czechoslovakia until 2017, the total is 881 entries, making an average of well over 30 per year.

However, this striking increase in the number of books published tells only half the story. What is more revealing is who is being translated, and the kinds of books being translated. An analysis of books that appeared in the Communist period reveals that the bulk is by authors who were already dead. Relatively few contemporary Canadian authors made the Communist cut: Hugh MacLennan (*Two Solitudes*, 1948), Mazo de la Roche (7 titles in 1948 and 1949), Farley Mowat (7 titles between 1961 and 1983; Mowat's fascination with the North struck a chord with Czechs, while his social criticism won him political points), Ross Macdonald (12 titles between 1970 and 1983 - by coincidence, the year of his death), Brian Moore (*The Lonely Passion of Judith Hearne*, 1969), George Ryga (*The Ecstasy of Rita Joe*, 1978), John Ralston Saul (*The Birds of Prey*, 1981), John Murell (*Memoir* and *Waiting for the Parade*, in 1984 and 1986 respectively), Christopher Hyde (*The Wave* 1988), and Margaret Atwood (*Bodily Harm*, 1989). Even fewer non-fiction works appeared: *Canada: The Communist Viewpoint* (1951), by Tim Buck, General Secretary of the Communist Party of Canada, was symptomatic, though Pierre Berton's *Klondike* (1976) was a welcome exception. By any standards, this is not only a minimal, but also an arbitrary and even eccentric, collection of authors and works, quite unrepresentative of Canadian literature at the time.[3]

2) Though the print runs of those books that were translated were often surprisingly high. For example, the first edition of *Catch 22* in 1964 had a print run of 28,000 copies, with print runs of subsequent editions steadily rising to the almost unbelievable 98,000 copies of the fourth edition in 1985, the last before the end of the Communist regime.

3) It should be noted that a surprising number of Francophone authors were also translated – thirteen in all – and that the selection offers a far better picture of the literary scene in Francophone Canada during that period: Gérard Bessette, Marie-Claire Blais, Marcel Dubé, René-Daniel Dubois, Gratien Gélinas, Robert Gurik, Anne Hébert, Claude Jasmin, Antonine Maillet, Jacques Poulin, Gabrielle Roy, Yves Thériault and Michel Tremblay. In addition, work by other leading authors appeared in the monthly journal *Světová literatura* [World Literature]. Most of this was due to the efforts of the leading critic and translator Eva

The period since 1989 has witnessed a remarkable change. Exploring the database, one comes across the names of such important contemporary authors as Margaret Atwood, Leonard Cohen, Matt Cohen, Douglas Coupland, Robertson Davies, Patrick deWitt, Timothy Findley, Brad Fraser, William Gibson, Barbara Gowdy, Tomson Highway, George Jonas, Thomas King, Margaret Laurence, Ann-Marie MacDonald, Daniel MacIvor, Yann Martel, Anne Michaels, Eden Robinson, Rohinton Mistry, Daniel David Moses, Alice Munro, Michael Ondaatje, Mordecai Richler, Carol Shields, Drew Hayden Taylor, Miriam Toews and Rudy Wiebe. Significantly, these cover all the classical literary genres – the novel, the short story, life writing, poetry and drama. Most of them have been recipients of one or more of the major literary prizes in Canada – the Governor General's Award for English-Language Fiction and the Giller Prize – and not a few have been awarded the (Mann) Booker Prize or a Commonwealth Writers' Prize. In addition, however, there is very strong representation in fields that had hitherto received less critical attention – detective fiction (Eric Wright), science fiction (A.E. van Vogt, William Gibson, Robert J. Sawyer, Robert Charles Wilson), fantasy (Steven Erikson, Guy Gavriel Kay, Tanya Huff). Literary criticism is present (Northrop Frye, Lubomír Doležel), as is communications theory (Marshall McLuhan), political philosophy (Charles Taylor), history (Margaret Macmillan, Gordon Skilling) and popularization of the social sciences (Malcolm Gladwell). Somewhat surprisingly, religious texts have a prominent place, in particular those by Henri Nouwen and Jean Vanier.

All this is to leave aside books that fall within the very general term of "commercial fiction," a category that accounts for somewhat over half the entries in the database.[4] If one looks at the top fifty authors in the database, the balance is slightly in favour of those writing more serious literature as well as various kinds of serious non-fiction; they outnumber the writers of commercial fiction 27 to 23. But if one takes into account the number of entries, the relationship is exactly the reverse: now it is the writers of commercial fiction who dominate, accounting for 54 percent of the entries. The reason for this is clear: unlike the writers in the first group, these are authors whose cult-like following often leads to a demand for further titles and this also means that at least some of their books go into second, third or even further editions. Their popularity is also reflected in the larger print runs their books tend to enjoy. The types of fiction they write vary greatly. Joy Fielding, for example, is known for her thrillers and mystery novels (23 titles, 54 entries). David Morrell (32 titles, 43 entries) claims for himself primacy in the field of "modern action novels"

Janovcová. For a discussion of the translation of Francophone Canadian literature into Czech see Kyloušek 2012.

4) There are no clean, objective criteria for assigning a particular book, a particular genre, or even a particular author, to this category. In the end personal judgement, however invidious, must be the deciding factor.

("Bio"); many display much violence, most famously *First Blood*, on which the Rambo film series was based. Writers of romantic fiction are numerous, the most prominent being Mary Balogh (10 titles) and Sylvain Renard (5 titles); various sub-categories also come into play here, including romantic historical fiction (Pauline Gedge – 10 titles; Sandra Gulland – 4 titles) and even erotic romantic fiction (Opal Carew – 1 title). Sienna Mercer writes mostly for young girls; 11 titles in her "My Sister the Vampire" series have been published in Czech. There is even a special niche for books dealing with horses that are aimed at young girls. Angela Dorsey is the front-runner here; rather amazingly, she can claim 25 titles to her credit. Sharon Siamon comes in a poor second, with "only" 9. And one could continue at length, naming dozens of other authors and many other genres: virtually every type of popular commercial fiction is present in the total body of books by Canadians that have been translated into Czech since 1989.

By any standards, the rich cross-section of Canadian writing that has been translated into Czech is remarkable. It can even be said to be doubly remarkable, since it must reluctantly but truthfully be admitted that Canada as such is not a priority for Czech publishers. Klara Kolinská is a tireless promoter of Canadian literature, as teacher, popularizer and translator. She has characterized the position of Canada in the Czech publishing world quite bluntly:

> It's very clear that there is absolutely no conscious policy to publish Canadian titles. The publishers are not interested at all whether the text is Canadian or not; it is, rather, whether the title is interesting as such, and, of course, whether it is already successful elsewhere. (Kolinska 2011)

This was confirmed by one of the leading Czech book editors, at a conference in Prague in 2016, who explained the commercial pressures that drive most Czech publishing houses (Zahradníková 2016); unfortunately Canadian literature lacks a high profile in the Czech Republic and is not a "brand" in the way that, for example, "Nordic" or "Latin American" literature is. And though there are individual professional translators who have translated a number of Canadian authors, it cannot be said that any specialize in them. Nor would it be possible to survive on Canadian translations alone. Klara Kolinská again: "And as for translators, they don't care at all whether they are working on a Canadian text or not" (Kolinska 2011). This is both true and not true. The majority perhaps feel that way, but some do have a "special relationship" with Canadian literature. Ironically, and luckily, Klara Kolinská herself is one of them: her translations of four novels and eleven plays make her by far the most prolific translator of serious Canadian literature into Czech. Another translator, Petr Pálenský, is responsible for three of the four novels by Mordecai Richler that have

appeared in Czech. In his case, this goes back to an undergraduate course he took as a university student, where he was "captivated" by *The Apprenticeship of Duddy Kravitz* (Kolinská, "Pálenský"). Roughly a decade later, by then an established translator, he approached the Argo publishing house, known for its "Anglo-American" series, with the proposal that they publish the novel. The success of that first translation (2003) led to his subsequent translations of *Solomon Gursky was Here* (2004) and *St Urbain's Horseman* (2009).[5] This is a clear confirmation of Kolinská's statement concerning the lack of any deliberate policy on the part of publishers in favour of publishing Canadian titles, as well as being a valuable insight into the serendipitous way in which many publishing houses in the Czech Republic operate.

This article will not deal with commercial fiction. Instead, it will focus on three particular groups of translations. First, serious ("quality") work by older Canadian authors, writers who had died before 1989. Second, serious literary fiction and poetry by contemporary authors, both those working in more established genres as well as those active in genres that have come to be critically praised more recently. And third, various kinds of non-fiction. The authors dealt with can boast four or more Czech entries in the translation research database. In an article of this length it is not possible to cover all the writers that fall into this category; instead, selected authors will be treated, and work that has appeared in other than book form (for example, short stories or individual poems published in magazines and journals, whether in print or online) will also be mentioned. A central concern will be an attempt to give some idea of the Czech reception of these authors and their work.

However, judging impact when it comes to the Czech cultural scene is not an easy task, for a number of reasons. The number of titles published by an author, and whether they went into subsequent editions, is of course the baseline. However, less easy to determine is the print runs of the books in question. Until the end of the Communist period this was always included in the copyright page, but since then this practice has been universally abandoned in the Czech Republic and, for whatever reason, publishers and editors are in most cases unwilling to supply figures. Nor is it easy to search out texts that have appeared other than in book form, in journals and magazines. Before 1989 it was, perhaps paradoxically, less difficult, since during that period there was a fairly limited number of possible sources. Most important was the bi-monthly *Světova literatura* [World literature], which began publication in 1956 and contained translations of prose and poetry from around the world along with articles on specific authors and literatures – in 1980, for example, it published twenty-four poems by Leonard Cohen (1980/3) and in 1988 nineteen poems by Robert Bringhurst (1988/2). In its 1993/4 issue it offered a "small anthology of contemporary Anglophone Canadian poetry"

5) The translator of Richler's fourth novel, *Barney's Version* (2012), was Klara Kolinská.

comprising twenty-two poems by Margaret Atwood, Lorna Crozier, Christopher Dewdney, Don Domanski, Mike Doyle and Michael Ondaatje. Unfortunately the journal lost much of its *raison d'être* after 1989, and after a series of increasingly slimmer issues ceased publication in 1996.

The self-proclaimed successor to *Světova literatura* is *Plav*, a "monthly for world literature," which began publication in 2005. It offers a mixture of translations and critical articles, with each issue devoted largely to one particular theme, country, genre and so on. Canada has done reasonably well by *Plav*. In 2010 issue 7–8 was devoted to "Solitude in Canada." It included poems by thirteen authors (Earle Birney, Al Purdy, M. Travis Lane, Margaret Atwood, Fred Wah, Don McKay, Dennis Cooley, Lorna Crozier, Tim Lilburn, Don Domanski, Christopher Dewdney, Di Brandt and George Elliott Clarke), interviews with the literary critic Smaro Kamboureli and the First Nations playwright and novelist Tomson Highway, short stories by Thomas King, Rohinton Mistry and Deborah Willis, and an excerpt from Charles Taylor's fascinating essay "A Canadian Future?"[6] Six years later, issue 2016/10 had as its theme "Canada's First Nations." An introductory essay by Klára Kolinská on the power of the word in the oral and literary traditions of the First Nations was followed by an interview with the Tłı̨chǫ/Dogrib novelist and short story writer Richard Van Camp. Prose excerpts by Leanne Simpson, Van Camp, Joseph Boyden and Tomson Highway were included, as well as poetry and prose selections by George Kenny, the Czech translations printed in parallel with their Anishinaabemowin/Ojibwe originals. Finally, 2017/7, devoted to Inuit literature across the North, contains a brief introduction by Klára Kolinská and Zdeněk Lyčka devoted the literature of the Aboriginal inhabitants of the Artctic and translations of prose pieces by Alootook Ipellie (accompanied by his own illustrations) and Sean and Rachel Tinsley-Qitsualik. What is of course striking about the authors presented over the years by *Plav* is the significant proportion of Aboriginal writers, undoubtedly a reflection of the Czechs' age-old fascination with the original inhabitants of North America.

*Plav* is an exception in being devoted solely to translation. Various other journals and magazines also publish translations, but more as an exception than a rule; very seldom are these Canadian works. This does not hold true to quite such an extent for one particular category – science fiction and fantasy. Two magazines in particular, *ikarie* (1990–2010) and its successor, *Pevnost* (2010 to the present), have included a number of translations of work by Canadian authors. Nevertheless, it would appear that the total number of short stories, poems and other texts by contemporary Canadian authors that have appeared in journals since 1989 (leaving aside *Světová literatura* and *Plav*) barely exceeds thirty – Margaret Atwood, for example, has had five

6) Francophone Canada was also represented, in the form of a poem by Jacques Brault and short stories by Monique Proulx, Sylvie Massicotte, Roch Carrier and Jacques Ferron.

texts in all (flash fiction, essays and an excerpt from *Cat's Eye*), Michael Ondaatje four poems and an excerpt from *Anil's Ghost*. Around half are science fiction short stories by four authors – A. E. van Vogt, Robert J. Sawyer, Cory Doctorow and Steve Stanton.[7] There may be more, but the large number of literary journals in the past twenty years that have led very brief, and very obscure, lives, makes it extremely difficult to come up with a final number. However, if the concern here is for impact, this is not important: any translations of work by Canadian writers that may have appeared in such minor and ephemeral journals will have had very minimal, if any, wider reach. Rather, when speaking of impact today, one must turn to the Web.

Online media have come to play a central role at present in the reception of literary texts, at least in the Czech Republic. Print-based newspapers and magazines continue to publish reviews of new books, though less frequently than formerly, and the weekend literary supplement is by and large a thing of the past, though it lingers on in the form of special supplements offered by a few newspapers and magazines before the summer holidays and Christmas.[8] However, what is published in print (newspapers, magazines and literary journals) also appears in their online versions, with the added value that a review of a new book is on occasion accompanied by an excerpt from the text, a luxury the print version is unable to offer for simple reasons of space and cost. More important, however, are the many online sites that have sprung up in the past twenty years that are exclusively devoted to literature. Pre-eminent among them is *iLiteratura.cz*, an extremely comprehensive online literary portal run as a not-for-profit organization. *iLiteratura.cz* informs readers about upcoming new titles, publishes brief annotations as well as extended reviews of both Czech books and foreign books in translation, provides critical analyses of texts, presents profiles of individual writers, offers excerpts from their works. It interviews authors and translators, reports on important literary events both in the Czech Republic and abroad, discusses more general literary topics, and has special sections on four groups of texts: *belles-lettres* (fiction, poetry, drama and children's literature); non-fiction; comics (and film); and what it calls *relax* – crime fiction, science fiction, humour, historical fiction, fantasy and romance. The *iLiteratura.cz* site is aimed at the general public, but maintains high standards; its contributors include academics, professional translators, authors and journalists specializing in literary topics. When it comes

7) It should be added that short stories by Canadian authors also appear in science fiction and fantasy anthologies, which are very popular in the Czech Republic.

8) Currently, the country has only two major print periodicals that may with justification be termed "literary," *Tvář* and the Brno-based *Host*. However, the main concern of both is the Czech literary world. Though they do include commentaries on foreign authors and reviews of translations, these strike one as somewhat random, and one does not get the impression that they follow international developments in the world of literature very closely. Little has appeared in either journal that relates to Canadian literature or Canadian authors.

to Canada, very few "quality" Canadian authors whose work has been published in recent years in the Czech Republic have failed to be noticed in *iLiteratura.cz*, and in the case of many authors several articles, of varying types, have been devoted to them. In addition, there have been general essays on Canadian literature and interviews with translators of Canadian texts and writers themselves.

Online literary sites, at least in the Czech Republic, tend to have a half life even shorter than that of print journals. Nevertheless, at any given time many do exist, often specializing in some specific genre or genres. Crime fiction, to take an example, has its online home at *Centrum Detektivky*. Particularly notable, however, is the parallel universe of the "science fiction–fantasy–horror" crowd, of special interest here because of the many Canadian authors in this area that have been translated into Czech. These genres are the focus of several online portals, the most notable at the present time being the webzines *Fantasy Planet*, *Sarden* and *XB-1*. All three cover most of the same areas as *iLiteratura.cz*, though they appear to be even more active in providing reviews of new publications. Also, given their specializations, relatively more space is taken up by reviews of translated texts, to the benefit of foreign authors, Canadians included. Finally, one feature that distinguishes them from the more "standard" online literary portals (for example, *iLiteratura.cz*) is the markedly greater engagement of their readers, who are very active and even passionate in online discussions of books, authors and even translations, agreeing and disagreeing with other readers' views, giving tips and so on. This reflects what is evidently greater "commitment" to the genres of their choice than one normally encounters in the case of readers of mainstream literature.

Against this background, let me now turn to an examination of the three main groups of books mentioned earlier that have been translated into Czech since the end of the Communist regime in 1989. First there is "quality" work by older authors – Ross Macdonald, Ernest Thompson Seton, E.A. van Vogt, Stephen Leacock and Lucy Maud Montgomery. All are Canadian classics – and all had either died or stopped producing work by this period. What is noticeable about all of them, with the exception of Seton, is that their translations are largely restricted to the first half of the period. Ross Macdonald had begun to appear in Czech during the Communist period, but the great bulk of the items in the database – 28 out of 43 – date from the ten years from 1993 to 2002, an average of almost three publications a year. Before 1990 only one short story by A.E. van Vogt had appeared, in an anthology; his period of popularity lasted from 1992 to 2007 (21 items). In both cases the readership of these two authors has been largely limited to fans of their particular genres, crime fiction and science fiction, respectively. The other three authors have had much broader appeal among Czechs. Stephen Leacock, too, had first been published in the Communist years (7 entries), but enjoyed a boost in

popularity after 1989, with 14 entries in the database, the last from 2007. Lucy Maud Montgomery's publishing record was more compact; aside from *Anne of Green Gables*, published in 1982, virtually all the others (8 entries, 5 titles, with *Anne of Green Gables* being reissued again twice) appeared in the three years 1993–1995. However, this does not reflect the actual popularity of the books' heroine with Czechs. Anne is undoubtedly the only Canadian literary character to whom a Czech website has been dedicated (*Anna ze Zeleného domu [Anne of Green Gables])* and she even has a Facebook group, *Spřízněné duše Anny Shirleyové [Anne Shirley's soulmates]*. Both the 1985 TV miniseries of *Anne of Green Gables* and the 2016 TV movie have been shown here. There is also an audiobook of the novel available in Czech; only *The Handmaid's Tale* and two compilations of stories by Stephen Leacock can boast the same. Anne continues to resonate with readers. To take an example at random, the very popular Czech novelist Kateřina Tučková (born 1980) has spoken of her discovery of the Anne books at the age of twelve or thirteen as being the impulse that made her want to become a writer; she even, at that age, felt compelled to compose an additional Anne book (Tučková). Czechs seem taken by Anne, feeling she is close to them in a way that recalls the appeal of Jane Austen's characters to many readers in the English-speaking world. And indeed this widespread popularity, and perhaps even a resurgence of interest in her, lies behind the publication in 2017 of two competing editions of *Anne of Green Gables*, each by a different translator.

Of all these authors, however, the most continuously popular has been Ernest Thompson Seton. Czechs have had a long love affair with Seton, beginning with his first translation into Czech in 1909 (see Sparling 2015). He has by far the most entries in the database, a phenomenal 145, with 24 of these from 1990 on; the most recent dates from 2018. His continuing popularity is a product of the way that, in the course of the past century, his ideas were absorbed by and became a fundamental component of the outlook and practice of a wide range of voluntary groups, from those focused on young people – Scouts, hiking clubs, the YMCA, organizers of summer camps – through to those at the adult level engaged in activities as diverse as environmentalism, the study of aboriginal peoples, and simply the promotion of the joys of "nature" in the Czech countryside (including that odd corner of southeastern Bohemia known as "Czech Canada"). No other Canadian writer comes remotely close to Seton in terms of awareness among Czechs or influence on Czech society as a whole. As a result, Czechs are so familiar with his work that there is no need for reviews or other forms of publicity when his works are re-issued: they simply keep on selling of their own accord. In a similar way, his name pops up quite naturally in conversation, especially when people speak about important influences in their lives. Just recently, a candidate who had run for the Czech Presidency in January 2018, the former diplomat Pavel Fischer, was asked in an interview what author he would not

be afraid to sit beside for ten hours in a plane, or be marooned with on a desert island. "Daniel Defoe or Ernest T. Seton," was his ready reply (Fischer). It is hard to imagine any other country in the world – Canada, alas, included – where readers would have a clue who he was talking about.

The second group of writers to be dealt with are contemporary authors of serious fiction and poetry, both those working in traditional genres and those in genres more recently accorded the epithet "serious." Six authors comprise the former category: Margaret Atwood (17 entries), Alice Munro (10 entries), Michael Ondaatje and Leonard Cohen with 8 entries each, and Mordecai Richler and Yann Martel, each with 4 entries. Munro and Cohen are treated at length elsewhere in this collection (see "Alice Munro and Leonard Cohen: Becoming Czech" (pp. 161–173). Richler, though one of Canada's greatest writers, is not currently fashionable anywhere. Nevertheless, the four titles translated into Czech are more than in any other country in the Central European region, and the appearance of his work has been greeted by favourable online reviews and discussions. *iLiteratura.cz* has been particularly noticeable in this respect, with a long study of Richler and his career as a writer (Kolinská, "Richler, Mordechai"), a review of *The Apprenticeship of Duddy Kravitz* (Kolinská, "Učňovská léta") and the interview with his main translator (who is also, rather unexpectedly, the leader of a cult cross-over metal band), mentioned above.

Turning to Yann Martel and Michael Ondaatje, one can see very clearly the role of international recognition in promoting an author's work. Martel's star flashed across the literary heavens in 2002 when he was awarded the Man Booker prize for *Life of Pi*. This led to him being invited to the Prague Writers' Festival in 2003 as a guest of honour, and in 2004 the novel was translated into Czech – his first in this country. The following year saw a translation of his short story collection *The Facts Behind the Helsinki Roccamatios* – a book that it is difficult to imagine being translated if its author had not already had some cachet with Czech readers. His firm place on the Czech literary scene was confirmed when his two later novels, *Beatrice and Virgil* (2011) and *The High Mountains of Portugal* (2017), were both translated into Czech immediately upon their publication in English. International recognition in Ondaatje's case was slightly different. In 1992 he too had received the Booker Prize, for *The English Patient*, but the novel was only translated into Czech five years later. In this case what undoubtedly triggered the translation was the lavish and extravagantly (over-)praised film of the book, which was released in 1996 and went on to sweep the awards at the Oscars and all the major international film festivals. The publication of *The English Patient* was followed by that of four more works by Ondaatje within five years: his memoir *Running in the Family* (1998), the verse novel *The Collected Works of Billy the Kid* (1999), *In the Skin of a Lion* (2000, in two editions, one of which was, very unusually, a bibliophile edition, printed on hand-made paper, with special binding

and illustrations), and *Anil's Ghost* (2002). A second edition of *The English Patient* followed in 2007, and *The Cat's Table* in 2013.

Needless to say, however, by far the most translated writer in this group has been Margaret Atwood, with 11 novels and 4 collections of short fiction now available in Czech. Rather surprisingly, after the publication of *Bodily Harm* in 1989 new translations followed rather unevenly, with just three more in the 1990s. It was only with the publication of *The Blind Assassin* in 2001 – tellingly, a year after she had received the Booker Prize for that very novel – that the pace picked up; between then and 2009 another nine titles appeared, plus a reissue of *Surfacing*. Then came an eight-year pause, broken in 2017 with the appearance of *Hag-Seed: The Tempest Retold*. As of 2018, only three of her novels (excluding the Maddaddam Trilogy – see below) have not been translated into Czech; what is disappointing, however, is that two of these, *Cat's Eye* and *Alias Grace*, are among her most unusual (and arguably most complex) works, though with the latter now the subject of a television mini-series the absence of this title in Czech may soon be remedied. In a country where science fiction and fantasy are extremely popular, it is also puzzling why *Oryx and Crake* should be the only title in the Maddaddam Trilogy to have been translated into Czech. These "missing" titles are also odd because Atwood herself is very popular in the country. Twice (in 2000 and 2008) she was a guest author at the Prague Writers' Festival; more recently, in 2017, she was the recipient of the Franz Kafka Prize, a prestigious award co-sponsored by the Franz Kafka Society and the city of Prague. On all these occasions she has been much fêted: she has given interviews for newspapers and magazines, been covered on radio and appeared on television, signed copies of her books at book launches of Czech translations of her works, held public lectures, given readings and taken part in panel discussions. Rather fittingly, when in Prague in October 2017 to receive the Franz Kafka Prize, she took part in a reading at the Václav Havel Library followed by a discussion forum that was moderated by the head of the library, Michal Žantovský, a former dissident and later diplomat whose mother had been Atwood's first translator back in 1989. Her books are reviewed regularly in all the media, print and online, portraits of her often appear in connection with the launching of a new translation. Interestingly, she is viewed as something more than just an author: with some frequency she is referred to as a "writer and activist" – her ideas and concerns, and not just her texts, are often discussed in articles about her, and questions in this area come up in interviews with her when she is in the Czech Republic. The Czechs' broad familiarity with her works is evident when one goes to *Databazeknih.cz* [Database of books], an interactive online site for the general public. It simply lists books (by both Czech authors as well as by foreigners whose works have been translated into Czech), with a brief paragraph characterizing the work in question along with publishing details, indication of genre, and so on. Everything is

then left up to readers. Their entries form a very lively record of what individual books mean to them and how they would evaluate them (there is a five-star system). All of Atwood's books that have been translated into Czech are to be found in *Databazeknih.cz*, and the readers' comments are a cross-section covering the complete spectrum from enthusiasm to rejection. Reading through them brings insight into how and why her books are actually experienced by ordinary readers and why they value them – a welcome counterweight, and correction, for those accustomed to academic analyses of her work.[9]

It is with the general public that quality literature outside the traditional genres finds its most enthusiastic audience, since more traditional literary circles – academics, critics, many translators – still tend to look down on these literary upstarts. This is clearly evident, for example, in the main organization grouping Czech translators, the Obec překladatelů – literally, the Community of Czech Translators, though they have chosen as their official English name the classier sounding Czech Literary Translators' Guild. Each year the association awards various prizes for literary translations, and a look at the list makes it quite clear that "literature" in their understanding is literature with a capital "L" – virtually all the awards have gone to translators of more "highbrow" kinds of fiction, poetry, drama, essays and memoirs. This was certainly true of the Canadian works translated by those who have been honoured by the Guild – Alena Jindrová-Špilarová in 2003 for her translation of Munro's *"Something I've been Meaning to Tell You" and Other Stories*, and Miroslav Jindra in 2015 when he was inducted into their Hall of Fame in recognition of his lifetime accomplishment as a translator and of having been awarded the State Prize in Translation in 2009, which explicitly highlighted his translation of Cohen's *Book of Longing* within the larger body of his translation work.

In response to this widespread undervaluation of less conventional types of fiction among certain Czechs, its defenders established the Akademie Science Fiction, Fantasy a Hororu[10] in 1995 with the aim of promoting this wide body of literature by, in particular, awarding annual prizes in various categories. Here again, translations of

9) A random selection of comments on Atwood's *The Handmaid's Tale* (*Příběh služebnice*) "An Orwellian book for women - what more can you want? ... The jumping back and forth in time (which would otherwise bother me) works wonderfully here. And that open ending, so everyone can think what he wants about it - in short, amazing, timeless, brilliant. "--- "I'm giving it 4 stars [out of 5 - DS] simply because I was really angry at that open ending. In fact it can't even be called an ending - the author simply wrote just the beginning. "--- "At the moment my favourite book, one I've read several times. A brilliant story that makes you think, a strong main character .... a hair-raising feeling alternating at times with a feeling of hopelessness. I'm speechless ... It keeps resonating in me, invades my thoughts. A brilliant book. "--- "Well .... I was brave and read my way two-thirds through it. In four months. Even so, I skipped over every third page. It was simply no go ...Too drawn out, boring, chaotic. " --- "The sense of hopelessness is devastating ☹ It's worth reading ☺" (Atwood).

10) The names of these three genres in Czech have been taken over unchanged from English, a form of homage to their historical origins.

Canadian authors have made their mark. *Spin,* by Robert Charles Wilson, was named best science fiction work in 2006. Six years later Guy Gabriel Kay's *Under Heaven* received the prize in the "Best fantasy and horror" category (beating out Steven Erikson's *Crippled God*, also in the running in this category) and was also nominated for "Book of the year" and "Best translation." In 2013 a collection of Erikson's *Malazan Book of the Fallen* novellas (*Blood Follows*, *The Lees of Laughter's End* and *The Healthy Dead*) was nominated for "Best fantasy and horror." A number of other Canadian authors have been nominated in various categories, among them William Gibson, R. Scott Bakker and Cory Doctorow. The most popular writer in this group is William Gibson, with 21 entries in the database, a figure that more than doubles the total number of titles (10). This is because several of his works have gone through second editions (*Idoru* and *All Tomorrow's Parties*) and third editions (*Count Zero, Burning Chrome* and *Virtual Light*), while that archetypal cyberpunk work, *Neuromancer,* has reached four editions. No other contemporary author of serious fiction has come anywhere near matching this popularity; what is even more remarkable, perhaps unique, is that no fewer than five of the novels (the only exception being *All Tomorrow's Parties*) have actually been retranslated for later editions, a luxury for the publisher and a remarkable testament to the strength of interest in his work and the seriousness with which it is regarded. Erikson and Kay follow in popularity after Gibson, with 15 and 10 entries in the database, respectively. In the case of these and all the other writers in this group, their work has been extensively reviewed and commented on, not so much in print media as in online portals, both those exclusively dedicated to science fiction and fantasy (*Fantasy Planet*, *Sarden* and *XB-1* and others) as well as *iLiteratura* and the all-embracing *Databazeknih.cz*. What is admirable about much that appears in these fora is its enthusiasm and its straightforward unpretentiousness, which does not in the least mean that the comments of these fans are any less acute than in the case of those writing about more conventional literary forms. Nor do these booklovers differ in their keen interest in meeting the writers they admire, as could be seen when Guy Gavriel Kay visited Prague in October 2012 on the occasion of the book launch of *Under Heaven.* Large numbers showed up to listen to the author speak about his work and ask questions of him – and also, of course, to ask for his autograph in their fresh copies of *Under Heaven* and many of his earlier works.

One final group of books remains to be examined – non-fiction. The authors in this group with four or more entries in the database are a motley crew: Malcolm Gladwell (10 entries), the literary critic Lubomír Doležel (5 entries), the essayist and editor Alberto Manguel and the philosopher Charles Taylor (4 entries each) and a number of authors writing on religious themes. Gladwell has become one of Canada's most published non-fiction authors internationally, so his presence in Czech translation comes as no surprise. His five books have all been translated into Czech, in many

cases fairly soon after they were first launched on the book market in English. More significantly, three of the books have been reissued: *The Tipping Point* has appeared in four editions and *Blink* and *Outliers* in two editions each. This testifies to a more than ordinary interest in his work, something confirmed by an internet search. It would appear that not many publications, print or online, actually reviewed his works when they appeared. And given the kind of books they are – starting from research in such areas as sociology, psychology and social psychology, Gladwell explores their sometimes surprising implications and unexpected impact – this is not surprising, as it is hard to decide exactly where they fit in. Nevertheless, many of the online portals promoting discussion of books include at least some, and often all, of Gladwell's titles, and the response from readers is unusually strong. This can be seen clearly on *iLiteratura* and *Databazeknih.cz*, for example, but less well-known online book discussion portals very often touch on Gladwell's books. More interesting is the surprising frequency with which his name comes up in articles in newspapers, magazines and journals, blogs and other media. Clearly his ideas have spread widely among the broad Czech public.

Lubomír Doležel is a special case. A literary scholar grounded in the Structuralist tradition of the Prague School, he left Czechoslovakia after the Soviet invasion in 1968 to become a professor at the University of Toronto in the Department of Slavic Languages and Literatures. Through a cross-appointment in1982 he became part of the university's renowned Centre for Comparative Literature. It was in Canada that he first came to the attention of the international community through his books on aspects of narratology and, in particular, the theory of fictional worlds, of which he was one of the founders and leading exponents. He returned to the Czech Republic in 2009 and died there in 2017 at the age of 94. Rather unusually, since his key works date from his time in Canada, and were all written and published in English, it was only with their translation into his mother tongue (either by himself or by the young Czech academic Bohumil Fořt) that Czech readers were allowed full access to his influential ideas. Needless to say, his work was covered very well by the leading literary journals, *Tvar* and *Host*.

Given the current debates in Western society on the question of social diversity, it is no surprise that Charles Taylor's *Multiculturalism: Examining the Politics of Recognition*, a highly influential and widely debated book that has become a focus for debates on liberalism, has seen two editions in Czech. Translation of this text made it available for widespread discussion and use in the Czech academic community. The other two titles by Taylor translated into Czech, *The Ethics of Authenticity* and *A Secular Age*, are key works in his oeuvre, and have elicited response in more specialized journals.

Finally, there are authors writing on religious themes, several of them. This was in some ways the most surprising finding of the research project, for two reasons. First,

there is little general awareness, in Canada or elsewhere, of its religious thinkers, or even that Canada has any religious thinkers at all. And second, on the contrary, the parlous state of religious belief in the Czech Republic is no secret. At the most recent census in 2011 only 14 percent of the population said they had an affiliation to a religious institution; another 6.8 percent claimed to have some kind of non-institutional-related religious belief. A very large proportion of the population – just under 80 percent – either had no belief whatsoever (34.5 percent) or did not indicate the state of their belief, if any (44.7 percent; Czech Statistical Office). This makes the country one of the least religious in Europe. Or perhaps even the least. This is the conclusion of the Pew Research Centre ("Religious Belief"), which puts the Czech Republic at the very bottom of the scale, with only 29 percent of the population believing in God; for comparison, the second lowest country in this scale is Estonia, with 44 percent. However, it is precisely this low level of religious awareness and interest, owing at least in part to the extensive official oppression of religion in the Communist years, that in the eyes of many Czechs made the translation of religious texts following the end of the Communist regime an imperative.

Six main religious writers have had their works translated: Henri Nouwen (19 titles), Jean Vanier (7 titles), John White, Eckhart Tolle and Roger J. Morneau (6 titles each), and William P. Young (5 titles). Nouwen and Vanier are Catholics, White, Morneau and Young Protestants. Tolle cannot really be pinned down; perhaps "eclectic spiritualism" would come closest to the ethos of his work. Despite the number of titles translated, it is very difficult to trace the response to the publication of these authors, what kind of impact they have had. In the case of White, Morneau and Young, the very small Protestant community in the Czech Republic – around 2 percent of the Czech population (Czech Statistical Office) – reduces the potential audience for their books very sharply. Tolle appeals to individuals seeking some kind of spirituality in general, but this is a very amorphous group; there is no clear locus for those interested in his ideas, and almost certainly individuals would come into contact with them more by chance or by word of mouth than through a focused search. The case of Nouwen and Vanier is in some ways puzzling. The number of books translated into Czech is impressive, and both figures have a commanding presence internationally in contemporary religious thought and practice; interestingly, Nouwen was strongly influenced by Vanier and his Arche communities for people with intellectual disabilities, and they had a close friendship. Yet it is very difficult to find any trace of either of them in official Catholic publications such as the *Katolický týdeník* [Catholic weekly] or *cirkev.cz* (the website of the Czech Conference of Bishops). So who reads their books is not at all clear. Nevertheless, the sheer number of titles by Nouwen that have been translated speaks for itself, and the impact of Vanier's ideas is evident. Vanier himself has been in the country twice (first, privately, in the Communist

period, and then in 2004), both times to meet with individuals committed to putting his ideas into practice. As of 2017 there is no Arche community in the Czech Republic that is part of the Arche Federation, but there are several groups inspired by Arche and by Faith and Light, an ecumenical movement of which he was also a founder that serves to help the mentally handicapped and their families. Vanier's visit in Brno in 2004 attracted participants from the Czech Republic, Slovakia and Poland, and was covered in the press and through the Christian radio broadcasting station Proglas.

In closing, it must be admitted that not all works written by Canadians have "Canadian content" or are perceived as being Canadian by their readers. But books, unlike rucksacks, don't need to be identified by Canadian flag labels. Even when the "Canadianness" of a work is not consciously perceived, or when the reader is unaware of the nationality of its author, something of whatever it is that makes the work "Canadian" will be conveyed. And in any case, a reading of great numbers of reviews and commentaries on the books in question indicates that in general most readers are quite aware of the nationality of their authors, and frequently refer to this when writing about them. The hundreds of Canadian writers who are translated into dozens of foreign languages serve as Canada's unofficial, unthanked ambassadors. And in the Czech Republic, at least, they have been doing a very fine job indeed.

## Works cited

Atwood, Margaret. "*Příběh služebnice*." *iLiteratura*. https://www.databazeknih.cz/knihy/pribeh-sluzebnice-4217?c=all.

Czech Statistical Office. https://www.czso.cz/documents/10180/20551795/17022014.pdf/c533e33c-79c4–4a1b-8494-e45e41c5da18?version=1.0.

Fischer, Pavel. "Moje čtení." *Ego*, 2018/6, 11.

Kolinská, Klara. Private communication, 2 November 2011.

————. "Pálenský, Petr." *iLiteratura*. http://www.iliteratura.cz/Clanek/15231/palensky-petr.

————. "Richler, Mordechai." *iLiteratura*. http://www.iliteratura.cz/Clanek/16187/richler-mordechai.

————. "Učňovská léta Duddyho Kravitze." *iLiteratura*. http://www.iliteratura.cz/Clanek/15225/richler-mordecai-ucnovska-leta-duddyho-kravitze.

Kyloušek, Petr. "La présence de la littérature canadienne française et québécoise en milieu tchèque." In Katalin Kürtösi and Don Sparling (eds), *Canada in Eight Tongues: Translating Canada in Central Europe / Le canada en huits langues : Traduire le Canada en Europe centrale*. Brno: Masaryk University Press, 2012, 31–38.

Morrell, David. "Bio" on personal Website, http://davidmorrell.net/bio/full-biography.

Pew Research Centre. "Religious Belief and National Belonging in Central and Eastern Europe." http://www.pewforum.org/2017/05/10/religious-belief-and-national-belonging-in-central-and-eastern-europe/.

Sparling, Don. "Ernest Thompson Seton: Bringing the Wilderness to Central Europe." In Waldemar Zacharasiewicz and David Staines (eds), *Narratives of Encounters in the North Atlantic Triangle*. Vienna: Österreichische Akademie der Wissenschaften, 2015, 259–274.

Tučková, Kateřina. "Psaní jako nemoc." http://www.mamtalent.cz/katerina-tuckova-psani-jako-nemoc.phtml?program=1&ma__0__id_b=8059&ma__0__id_kp=25480.

Zahradníková, Hana. Remarks at conference on "Czech Receptions of 'Other Literatures in English'," Metropolitan University, Prague, 22 April 2016. Notes taken by Don Sparling.