

Book review

Beverly J. Rasporich. 2015. *Made-in-Canada Humour: Literary, Folk and Popular Culture*. Amsterdam: John Benjamins. Hardbound. 300 pp. ISSN 2212-8999

The concept of *humour* has gone through a lengthy process of change in its meaning. Being bound to the constitution of personhood in ancient medicine, *humours* represented the four fluids of the body, defining individual personality types by means of their combination and balance. In the 18th and 19th centuries, humour referred to a way of perceiving odd characters, situations or ideas. By the middle of the 19th century, *humour* was a trait of character, therefore becoming an emotional perception. As we understand it today, the term *humour* comprises “all forms of laughable representations” (Wickberg 2014: 350).

Made-in-Canada Humour is a journey through space and time in Canadian humour. Rasporich, Arts Professor at the University of Calgary, masterly creates a general picture of Canadian humour culture, thus revealing its particularities. What I particularly enjoyed about this research is the fact that the story line is easy to follow. The author structured the chapters geographically, leading the reader through Canadian humour from East to West. The strong point of the research lies in the large amount of examples provided, thus becoming a useful tool for scholars who study Canadian humour in particular, but also for those who want to understand better the Canadian culture.

Made-in-Canada Humour is an analysis of the way in which humour was understood in the 19th and 20th centuries. As she stated from the beginning of the book, Rasporich wrote it with the intent of recording cultural history, rather than developing humour theories. The author claims from the beginning that the issue she addresses is whether Canadian cultural identity revolves around ‘not being American’. Rasporich is intrigued by the cliché that Canadian cultural identity is more or less invisible. In this context, beginning with the study of literary humour and ending with the analysis of the forms of folk humour and popular culture, the author tries to establish to what extent humour and culture interact.

In the first chapter, “Antique humour”, the author focuses on humour in 19th century Canada. Generally, during this period, humour was used with the aim of educating people. Rasporich reviews the work of Thomas McCulloh, Thomas Haliburton and James de Mille, important humorists in Nova Scotia, but also the work of cartoonist J.W. Bengough in Ontario. Their work aimed at healing society of its evils through critical laughter. On the one hand, literary humour of this period was meant to inspire people to be more energetic and innovative. On the other, Bengough’s work laid the ground for 20th century cartoonists. Also, through his involvement in social reforms, Bengough played an important role in shaping the 19th century popular consciousness about national identity. The author concludes that, while literary humour emphasised society’s need to reborn, the cartoons, editorials and verses of J.W. Bengough represented fierce criticism of the political stage.

The second chapter, “Canada’s remarkable humorist Stephen Leacock”, is dedicated to the English-Canadian cultural icon, Stephen Leacock. As characterised by Rasporich, he was

“a man of Canadian privilege, of academic substance, social authority and international reputation” (p. 39). By closely analysing Leacock’s work, the author underlines this author’s contribution to modern humour, acknowledged since the birth of the “little man” archetype in literary humour (p. 52). Leacock presented the “little man” as a paradox: powerless and obedient, but, at the same time, in control of himself. In modern American humour, the “little man” became “the inept, the average, the middle-class citizen harassed by bureaucracy, technology and family” (p. 52). His ability to adopt different cultural identities, whether Canadian, American, English, or a combination of these, is reflected in his literary subjects. Rasporich persuasively concludes that Stephen Leacock “has the ability to stand midway between American and British cultures, mastering ambivalent irony and establishing a nascent Canadian identity” (p. 75).

Throughout the third chapter, “Folk humour in the country and in the city”, Beverly Rasporich outlines folk humour from West to East, defined as primarily oral and reflecting the attitudes, values and experiences of cultural groups. Within these groups, humour strengthens cultural norms and identity. Starting from the West with Bob Edwards, and reaching Newfoundland, in the East, Rasporich presents and discusses the forms of folk humour encountered. An artist of the oral tradition, Bob Edwards was also a skilled writer. He was part of the cowboy folk culture and fond of aphoristic sayings, humorous stories, jokes and tall tales. His characters made an important contribution to the western culture.

According to Rasporich, the West has a predominantly masculine culture as far as humour is concerned. Women, being the subject of humour in this cowboy culture of the West, were interpreted as “tricky, gossipy, competitive creatures out to get and manage their men” (p. 89). While, in the masculine culture of the West, women were the butts of humour, in the East, the Americans were the main butts of the Newfoundlanders who had a longstanding oral tradition and a culture of joke telling, developed as the result of a life of intricate survival (p. 98). Newfoundland was English’s first possession in North America. Due to the best fishing waters in North Atlantic surrounding it, Newfoundland was a territory disputed between the English and the French for a very long period. During World War II, Newfoundlanders felt threatened by the presence of American military bases on their island. Thus, “the only weapon of assertive defence” (p. 98) they were left with was humour, fighting for preserving their identity and personal dignity. They laughed at their triumphs as well as their troubles. The Newfoundlanders’ humorous culture developed out of the difficult periods they experienced. Therefore, humour is both a “face-saving” and a “life-saving” act (p. 106).

By analysing Western and Eastern folk humour, Rasporich observes that Canadian and American folk humour have similarities in terms of the mythical characters they share. The best example of a character with mythological status beyond borders, regions and communities throughout North America is Paul Bunyan. The tales about Paul Bunyan and his mythical ox, Babe, have survived from the outback to enjoy a wide-spread reputation. Both Canadians and Americans claim Paul Bunyan to be their own. James Steven, an American critic, argues that Paul Bunyan is “American from head to toe” (p. 98). Although the critic acknowledges that Paul Bunyan legends began with the Papineau Rebellion of 1837, he emphasises the American contribution to the success of the character.

The next two chapters are dedicated to the golden age of Canadian humour. Chapter 4 deals with literary humour and Chapter 5 with print humour and cartoons.

Rasporich starts the fourth chapter by thoroughly presenting and analysing the work of satirical poets who contributed to the 20th century Canadian literary humour. She then focuses on fiction writers who offered a wide range of humour genres as a way of drawing attention to their cultural communities. In the 19th century, there was no room for feminine humourists or jokesters. The 20th century was the time to bring changes. North American culture was

reshaped by means of the feminist movement. In discussing the golden age of Canadian humour, Rasporich underlines the importance of feminist literature. Irony is used by women to underline the shifting realities of the human conditions, to reveal female dilemmas and promoting equality between genders. Feminist satire is revolutionary and powerful, meant to provoke change. The conclusion drawn by Rasporich in her analysis is that literary humour of the 20th century was used as a tool for achieving cultural recognition or power.

As previously mentioned, the fifth chapter is dedicated to print humourists and cartoonists. Beginning with the 19th century, the number of newspapers dedicated only to humour started to increase. Illustrated newspapers represented an important part of the country's life. By the 1920's they had become the main form of mass media. Unlike literary humourists, print humourists and cartoonists created light humour, whose main purpose was to entertain. By presenting the works of the important print humourists and cartoonists of the 20th century, Rasporich outlines the direction of the resources they used to create humour: they started from presenting the life of male camaraderie and moved to topics of the day, such as hockey and its heroes, politicians and politics.

Joking about minority groups has always been a constituent part of a culture's humour. In the sixth chapter, "Joking at the margins", the author deals with two important aspects of minority jokes: ethnicity and gender. Although representing an old form of entertaining, this type of joking is very popular in the modern world (p. 210). The pleasure of joking about minority groups is provided by the feeling of superiority granted by the joke. In her analysis, Rasporich notices that minority groups also use humour to their advantage, with the intent of revealing the truth, but also of strengthening group values. When minorities are victims of injustice, they use humour to joke about themselves, counteracting the stereotypes behind the jokes. Minorities joked about themselves also with the intent of being acknowledged by the dominant group and included in the society.

The author points out that in the 19th and 20th centuries, minority-targeting humour was more accepted than it is today. In Canada, its rejection was caused by the emergence of two movements: multiculturalism and feminism, which laid emphasis on the ideals of equality for all, individual rights and freedom.

In the last chapter, "Popular comedy on stage and in the media", Rasporich presents radio, stage and mass media humour. Due to the increasing development of mass communication systems, the line between Canadian and American comedians started to disappear, thus establishing, according to the author, a symbiotic relationship between comedians of the two countries. Both Canada and the U.S. had their own comic heroes, whom they exported. The doors for early comedians have been opened by the two World Wars. These groups of comedians had the role of entertaining the troops. Moreover, due to limited opportunities in Canada, a great number of comics migrated to the U.S. Their talent has influenced American humour in a great number of ways; they have made contributions as writers, performers and Hollywood characters. Much of the contemporary U.S. media humour appeals to most of the Canadians. The life experience expressed in sitcom humour can amuse both Americans and Canadians. In a similar way, Canadian sitcoms also have this potential of crossing the borders. In her last chapter, Rasporich presents the similarities between American and Canadian present-day humour and comments on the free joking trading between the two countries. However, she reaches the conclusion that Canada remains a separate nation with different culture assumptions and a different history. Canadians will continue to create hilarious jokes about their U.S. neighbours.

From the beginning of the study, Rasporich states that her intention is to persuade the reader "into a consideration and appreciation of the functions of humour, its cultural significance in a number of mediums and the artfulness of its invention" (p. XIII). However, this extensive study most likely addresses a particular group of readers, due to the large

amount of reference to Canadian history and geography. The study can be regarded as a presentation of humourists and their work rather than a discussion on the functions of humour.

The book is structured both geographically and chronologically. Rasporich starts guiding the readers through Canadian humour beginning from the East (Chapters 1 and 2) and reaches the West in the third chapter. The next chapters dedicated to the golden age of Canadian humour are structured chronologically. This structure reveals itself when trying to understand the comparison in the third chapter between Western and Eastern humour culture. To a non-native Canadian reader or to one unfamiliar with Canadian history and geography, this task of understanding requires some research. Thus, the question that came up revolved around the reason why Rasporich presented certain humourists. Undoubtedly, these are representative of the Canadian humour culture, but it is not clear why she focused on presenting English Canadian humourists and their work and barely brought into discussion French Canadian influences.

Although the author stated that she is concerned with seeing whether Canadian culture revolves around being American or not, she does not clearly mention the conclusions she has reached. Given the breadth of the study, these particularities of Canadian culture have not been adequately discussed. It would be more interesting for a non-native reader to understand the attitudes and the themes that are specific to Canada's humour culture. In addition, while she claims that the chapters can be read independently, most of them are tied to previously mentioned themes, humourists or concepts. Nonetheless, Rasporich managed to present the information in such a way that the research becomes a story of Canadian humour.

In the European context, similar studies have recently been done for Polish (Brzozowska & Chlopicki 2012) and Hungarian (Litovkina *et al.* 2012) humour cultures. These studies were published in the international series *Humour and Culture* edited by Wladyslaw Chlopicki. To my knowledge, a similar research has not been done for Romanian humour culture. Therefore, Rasporich's study can be regarded as a starting point for further research, representing a great opportunity to bring contribution to the field of humour studies.

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