Chapter 2
Reinterpreting History from a (Neo-)Marxist Perspective: Social, Intellectual and Literary Background

Literary expression may take the form of acceptance, outcry, revolt, sublimation or mythology. Whatever its register, its significance can be gauged only by relating it to a given society.

(J.-C. Falardeau, Notre société et son roman 76)

...the work is finally always written by a socially disappointed or powerless group, beyond the battle because of its historical, economic, political situation; literature is the expressions of this disappointment.

(Roland Barthes, The Pleasure of the Text 39)

When the problem of connecting isolated phenomena has become a problem of categories, by the same dialectical process every problem of categories becomes transformed into a historical problem...

(Georg Lukacs, History and Class Consciousness)

...the best interpretation is the one that accounts for the most elements in the process of reading, offers the most coherent explanation of the text, and simply makes the best sense of the literary work as a whole.

(Zhang Longxi, The Tao and the Logos: Literary Hermeneutics, East and West 195–96)

There is no document of culture which is not also a record of barbarism.

(Walter Benjamin, qtd Terry Eagleton, Literary Theory: An Introduction 2008:187)

Northrop Frye, in the “Conclusion” to the first edition of Literary History of Canada (1965), notices with remarkable perception the composition and approaches of the contributors: they come from divergent disciplines; they all attempt to interpret, theorize and summarize the significance of one part of the Canadian imagination—be it fiction, poetry, drama, history or political science. Manifested are his warm endorsement and appreciation of Carl Klinck’s valiant efforts to pull scholars from so many diverging fields. Such a comprehensive or near total perspective on literature as part of the Canadian culture or imagination certainly goes against the grain of Frye’s own more formalist approach to literary studies so vigorously championed...
in *The Anatomy of Criticism* (1957). And yet, Frye’s relatively recent gesture should come as a welcome sign, as contemporary criticism moves in a direction away from the purely literary: a sure sign of this would be Linda Hutcheon’s open-minded embrace of “theory” having made its rapid entry into literary studies and curriculum; and to appreciate it one need only to examine her “Preface” to *The Canadian Postmodern*, a work that includes, as if in answer to Frye, her “Conclusion” to *Literary History of Canada* (1989) under W.H. New’s editorship. Thus, in spite of Terry Eagleton’s *After Theory* (2003) announcing, rather prematurely for the Canadian literary-cum-critical impulses and historical projects, the declining influence and currency of “theory”, we continue to use this multiple-discourse theory, not just because it embraces what Fredric Jameson characterizes as the “totalizing” vision that guards against the fragmentation of reality and compartmentalization of knowledge and alienation resulting thereof, but also because such a vision facilitates our writing, or rather, rewriting of Canadian literary history from a Marxist and neo-Marxist points of view and avoids what Louis Althusser perceptively calls the ideological blind spot. Furthermore, Gayatri Spivak, speaking in an international context at Qinghua University in Beijing in 2006, voiced her disagreement with Eagleton’s assessment by citing the staunch Chinese Marxist Zhou Enlai’s famous saying: “It is too soon to pass judgment yet” (own translation). For many countries in which the Marxist tradition and/or legacy has been marginalized or buried, deliberately or unwittingly, the project of unearthing or rediscovering the whole, interrelated past and passed-over history has yet to commence.

Examined from this new angle, the multiple essays in Klinck’s book of the 1960s vintage stand in a somewhat disturbing, curious isolation, each interpreting the Canadian writings from a more or less disciplinarily independent perspective (*The Bush Garden* 214). What follows here purports to be at once synthetic and concentrated: an attempt to bring these major contributing factors—social, political, economic, philosophical and so on—to bear on the reinterpretation of part of the cultural phenomenon that is literature. So in a Marxist dialectic, we will conduct a reading of the social text—a much larger text—as if it were literary; we also attempt to arrive at a “best” possible understanding of literature (in the vein of Zhang Longxi’s argument quoted above) by examining the interplay or interaction between literature and society as one interconnected “whole” text.

The 40 years or so from the mid-1910s to the mid-1950s in Canadian history were decades of constant social and economic unrests, of intense political and ideo-

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1 This new orientation is probably most fittingly described by Wayne Booth’s term “ethical” (Booth 1988), a term that characterizes, if not encompasses, not only the deconstructionist practice of the later Derrida (Booth 1988:124; the former has been accused, justly for the most part, of being apolitical and ahistorical), but also the Kristeva (1987:115) and Spivakian feminist approach and the Eagletonian (1990) and Jamesonian (1991) totalizing literary, political and cultural projects. Having imbibed the political essence of literary and cultural studies from, and expressed heartfelt gratitude to, Jameson, Booth died in 2005; Jameson, in turn, graciously dedicated his recent major work to Booth.
logical confusion as well as of heated literary and critical controversy. Particularly, in the late 1920s with the Crash and through the 1930s in its aftermath, the intensity of all these activities in terms of epoch-making potential can only be matched, in recent modern history, by the times just before the French Revolution, about which the bewildered or ambivalent Charles Dickens in A Tale of Two Cities cannot but resort to tautological and anaphoric devices, as well as semantic contradictions (“It was the best of times; it was the worst of times,”…), or by the period preceding the Russian Revolution which resulted in the first socialist state, a revolution so drastic that Leon Trotsky’s Literature and Revolution, in a reworking of the Nietzschean superman (Übermensch or overman) formulation, proclaims with unreserved hyperbole, idealism and euphoria the birth of “new man” under an “emergent” (in Raymond Williams’s sense) socialist system. In both the French and Russian cases, not only is the whole economic base or infrastructure shaken, rent apart or transformed, but also a powerful and new political system came into being, phoenix-like, out of the shambles of an old one. The shocked reactions of Dickens or Trotsky as writers—the former being ambivalent, confused or lost; the latter, positive, Utopian, celebratory and prophetic—are fairly suggestive of the Canadian intellectuals’ mixed and ambivalent attitudes.

Canada of the late 1910s to early 1930s offered an interesting parallel, in rough political and ideological contours if not in specific socioeconomic details, to the French and Russian situations. On the one hand, with the former Soviet Union firmly established, a new model of society stood—socialism—as an urgent invitation to the whole world for a refreshing experiment, perhaps doubly so to Canada because of its geographical proximity in the north. This political ideal inevitably and constantly troubled many a liberal at the same time when it exhilarated the Left or rebellious with numerous and ever renewed political and ideological inspirations. Given the breathtaking and epoch-making novelty of the socialist model, we should be able to understand better why Marxist socialism suddenly gained ascendance precisely during the time when the capitalist world laid prostrate to a massive and protracted economic depression in the early part of this century. On the other hand, in its social and economic development, according to F.W. Watt (“Literature of Protest” 487) and Desmond Pacey (Creative Writing in Canada 276), Canada underwent a complete transition from a rural and semi-industrial country to an urban and industrial one. Accurate though such all-encompassing terms as “urban” and “industrial” may be, they will not lead us very far in examining the social realists’ artistic and political theories, moral sensibilities and craftsmanship; we need to explore more closely specific socioeconomic, political and ideological phenomena that aroused their response. This chapter thus calls for, in the first place, a quick review and analysis of significant events that affected the Canadian writers and their psyche most directly and deeply and, more importantly, a scrutiny of the profound impact of Marxist economic, political, social and historical theories on the Canadian intellectual landscape.
2.1 New Realities: The Great Depression, Mass Production and Waste, Industrialization and Marxist Economic and Social Discourse

Reverting to the concept of Marxist sense of reality dwelt upon previously, we do not need to seek far and wide to arrive at a pattern of complex responses: the Great Depression which began in 1929 and lasted for almost a decade was doubtless the major cause for the social realist writers’ sudden interest in the economic, their involvement in, or commitment to, social and political affairs; and this involvement reshapes, to differing degrees, their consciousness about the capitalist world, as much as their notions of social and ideological functions that literature might in turn fulfil to “change the world” (Marx). To begin with, right after the boom of the 1920s in the wake of the First World War, Canada, still basking in the glory of its rapid economic development just like many other capitalist countries, suddenly found itself plunged into the worst possible state of economy—depression for the longest-ever period in its history. Although some people at first hoped against hope that such disaster would be gone in good time, they soon lost hope as the depression expressed itself quickly in the bankruptcy of banks, the collapse of factories, the sluggishness of business and the unemployment of hundreds of thousands of people for what seemed to them at first a temporary and then a permanent time. Most paradoxical about the situation was of course this fact: there were more food and goods in the market than people could possibly purchase. To make it worse for the common folks, in order to keep the price as high as it was, if not higher, the capitalists buried a variety of goods and dumped plenty of milk, while millions of people were not having enough to eat and wear in a painfully sharp and ironic contrast. Relief camps and breadlines had to be set up to alleviate the suffering and starvation. Such an absurd situation on this large scale had never been witnessed in human history. What had happened to the whole world of capitalism? Could it remedy its own faults?

The answer to this problem necessarily brings all to the political or ideological implications of the Great Depression; and most Canadians learnt hard lessons in the interrelatedness of economics and politics. Although many people of different persuasions came forth with widely different explanations for the Depression, the two hotly competing and contending bodies of theory that held most sway during the past and even well into the present remain those of Marxist socialism and liberal capitalism. Some bourgeois economists predicted that a better time would be just around the corner if international trade was to balance itself (Douglas Durkin 1974:140); others blamed the activity of black spots on the sun; still others ascribed the worsening economic state to the drought that came just about that time upon parts of the land of North America: none would admit that it was the capitalist system that should be held responsible. But as time wore on, there were no signs of the recovery from the economic illness. Neither did people accept for long the explanation that held natural causes like the sunspots or drought accountable for the Great Depression nor did they credit the much-trumpeted notion of North American
Exceptionalism anymore. There must be something terribly wrong; but what that “something” was no bourgeois economists or theorists could, or rather, would, pinpoint. The task of “naming the system”, to quote Fredric Jameson (1991:418) in a totalizing fashion, remains to be accomplished by capitalism’s other: Marxist socialism.

On the other hand, Canadian Marxists or socialists tried every means to convince people of the inevitability of economic slump under a capitalist system. Historically, the founding of the Communist Party of Canada was a crucial event in disseminating Marxism since 1921 (Bobak 85; Mathews 1988:79), the same year the Chinese Communist Party came into underground existence in Shanghai, but it was the 1930s that witnessed the thriving of Marxism on capitalist economic bankruptcy: according to Mathews, “long before Marx was heard of, people in Canada were discussing conflicts that produced Marx’s analysis” (Marx 1988:58), but we submit that not until the Crash was a systematic and large-scale introduction conducted of wholesale Marxist theories of political economy and political philosophy. Canadian Leftists, now armed with Marxist economic and sociopolitical theories imported chiefly from the United Kingdom (Mathews 1988:52–53) and other parts of Europe, refuted the bourgeois theory of quick economic recovery by citing historical recurrences of economic slump under Western capitalism; they also frequently quoted Marx on the irreconcilable contradictions between the capitalist private ownership and the mode of social production, between the dwindling purchasing power of the working class and the frenzied speed of industrialization and mass production, as well as on the cycle of capitalist production and overproduction to show its inevitable crises and depressions (e.g. Livesay 1977:74). Thus, both factually and theoretically, the Marxists seemed to be able to seriously challenge and to defeat their bourgeois opponents. In particular, the Marxist theory of economy, or Marx’s economic determinism, became the vogue of the day, with many, especially the young and/or the thinking. This was the case with Durkin, Garner, Callaghan, Birney, Grove and Carters, as subsequent chapters will bear out specifically. So is it, demonstrably, with those not under our close discussion until the next volume: Margaret Laurence, Hugh McLennan, Dorothy Livesay, Margaret Atwood, Michael Ondaatje, Louis Dudek, Frank Scott, A.M. Klein, Leo Kennedy, Patrick Anderson and many others.\(^2\)

To further put to rout their capitalist enemy together with their liberal theories, the Canadian Marxists started introducing the new, fresh and formal concept of scientific socialism (as distinguished from the Utopian or Christian or Fabian socialism) both as a political theory and as a political movement to take the place of capitalism. Although the term socialism was not new in the minds of the more informed

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\(^2\)See Larry McDonald’s informative list of Canadian literati under various influences of Marxist socialism in *The Politics of Influence* and F.W. Watt’s “Literature of Protest” (see note 3 in this chapter); see also David Arnason’s “Introduction” to Dorothy Livesay’s *Right Hand Left Hand* (Erin, Ont., 1977) for Left magazines promulgating Marxism and left-wing activities from the last to the present century; see also *Essays on Canadian Writing*, No. 21 (Spring 1981), a special issue devoted to Earle Birney’s left-wing activity and political poetics
Canadians, as F.W. Watt notes correctly in his “Literature of Protest” (482–483), socialism as interpreted and developed by the Marxists took on new and multiple dimensions. In addition to the old concepts of equality and public ownership, the new characteristics emphasized class struggle and the role of the proletariat in overthrowing the capitalist society and in building a proletarian state. Furthermore, with the former Soviet Union as a tangible example of the first socialist state in the whole world to have avoided the Depression (Canada’s Party of Socialism 76), these Marxists believed, sometimes unthinkingly or uncritically, in the superiority of socialism over capitalism. Viewed in retrospect, the majority of the new Canadian socialists like some of the CCF members failed to understand fully the socialist tenets and goals because these tenets and ideals are historically developing concepts; however, they did dedicate their time and energy sincerely and tirelessly to the cause of the suffering masses. Ivan Avakumovic, in his ground-breaking Socialism in Canada, enumerates the problems under capitalism that the CCF-NDP, from its first day of founding in 1932 at the Calgary conference to date, had sought to alleviate: “poverty, scarcity, ill-health, unemployment, regional disparities, and class distinctions based on wealth and the absence of proper educational opportunities for the average...” (v.). If the Canadian socialists or communists have so far not succeeded in fulfilling all of these tasks, they have at least helped to foreground and solve some of the problems and alerted Canadians to most, if not all, of them. Indeed, their painstaking and prolonged efforts to heal or cure the social ills of the capitalist society have been both magnificent and admirable; and it is largely owing to them that Canada currently enjoyed the less individualistic and materialistic life with some sense of community and co-operation and with social welfare and medical care and so on—“communitarian” elements hardly imaginable in the United States (Robin Mathews 1988:1–17). The past few and current presidents of the United States since the older George Bush have repeatedly spoken, with un concealed envy, of Canadian social welfare and medical as lures for canvassing American voters.

Likewise, Canadian writers and critics reacted fervently to the aforementioned problems believed to be inherent in or inextricably connected with capitalism. Although direct correspondences between actual socioeconomic and political problems and those reflected or contemplated in literary works are hard to pin down, there are certainly genuine social concerns and political commitment in various forms which sprang from the former: because of the economic nature of the deteriorating conditions in Canada, many Canadian writers immediately flocked to the Marxist classics on capitalist economics, especially the concept of class struggle as the motive force of history; some were directly influenced by Bernard Shaw (Dorothy Livesay and Hugh Garner), or by John Steinbeck (Irene Baird), or by John Dos Passos (Earle Birney, Morley Callaghan and Hugh Garner), others did so of their own volition. Hugh MacLennan, for instance, wrote his doctoral thesis, 3For a detailed account of different warring political ideologies and of their general effects on Canadian writings from the last century to the 1970s, see F.W. Watt’s article, “Literature of Protest” (Literary History of Canada, Toronto: U of Toronto P, 1976), vol. 1, 473–489.
**Oxyrhynchus: an Economic and Social Study**, in light of the Marxist concept of class struggle and with a view to seeing a certain “pattern of decline in ancient Rome and the events that had resulted in economic crisis in his own time” (Hugh MacLennan: A Writer’s Life 90–92). Birney, too, took a Marxist approach to the study of Chaucer’s employment of irony in terms of class and castigated him for the ambiguous attitudes exhibited in his poetry (Davey 1971:13), attitudes that Larry McDonald wittily calls “bourgeois punch-pulling” (1987:434). It is surely intriguing that Birney, after critiquing his mentor, evolved his own version of ironic detachment partly from Chaucerian attitude in Down the Long Table.

This Marxist concept of class as absorbed by these Canadians differs greatly from the sense of class among North Americans, in that the latter is, as L.A. Johnson points out rightly in his “The Development of Class in Canada in the Twentieth Century”, a “subjective rank-recognition of an individual’s status held by his peers” (Capitalism and the National Question in Canada 142).

In the view of Marxists, the usual categories of upper, middle and lower class become almost useless if people are to analyse sociopolitical and economic phenomena (e.g. historical movements or revolution) in those terms. Rather, the Marxists divide class not according “to the attitudes of individuals, but to their external relationships centred on those created by the productive process” (Johnson 143). In the classical paradigm of The Communist Manifesto, Marx posits three major classes: the capitalist class or bourgeoisie, the petit bourgeoisie or independent commodity producer and the proletariat. There are, of course, some other adjunct or parasitic subclasses. But their class interest remains closely bound up with that of one or the other of the main classes. Furthermore, the Marxists hold that the inherent class conflicts existing between these major classes will inevitably lead to class struggle and culminate in a revolution that overthrows the ruling class, thus moving society forwards to another mode of production. Whether Canadian social classes fit Marx’s taxonomy in point of facts is not material, but it does matter if Canadian writers adopted a Marxist perspective on sociopolitical and historical dynamics. Quite a number did. As Elspeth Cameron has convincingly demonstrated, Hugh MacLennan, in his approach to Roman history, which is a “Spenglerian” type, “predictably endorsed Marx” (92). His knowledge of class and economy was to enhance, among other things, the sense of the complexity of social and political issues in his fictional world. Since his major works under the influence of Marxist socialism were mainly published in or after the mid-1950s, we will examine them in the sequel to this study.

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*We cite Johnson because he appears to be the first Canadian to adopt a Marxist approach in his analysis of class in modern Canadian industrial society. As this chapter deals with actual Canadian history, he is very informative, but the Canadian writers’ idiosyncratic absorption of the Marxist concept of class into their literary works needs to be discussed in our main chapters. Other major literary studies in terms of class include R.L. McDougall’s pioneering work, “The Dodo and the Cruising Auk: Class in Canadian Literature”, No. 18 (Summer, 1963), 6–20 and Robin Mathews’s “Waste Heritage: the Effect of Class on Literary Structure”, Studies in Canadian Literature, Vol. 6 (1981), 65–81 and his essays, respectively, in Canadian Literature: Surrender or Revolution and In Our Own House (especially pp. 143–145) edited by Paul Cappon.*
MacLennan’s prompt reactions were quite closely matched by others. Morley Callaghan, for one, regretted the fact that his Parisian literary mentors seldom talked about “economics or politics” and that they lacked “a social conscience”, as he remarks in his semi-autobiography, _That Summer in Paris_ (222). This factor may, in part, account for the persistent ambiguity or even ambivalence in Callaghan’s attitudes towards the capitalist or socialist system in many of his works.\(^5\) In contrast, Hugh Garner devoured one book after another by George Bernard Shaw, Karl Marx, Friedrich Engels and Proudhon ( _One Damn Thing After Another_ 26); it is no surprise, therefore, that his searing and serious sense of inequity in distribution and social injustice in capitalist society as seen from a Marxist point of view can be easily detected in his _Cabbagetown_; neither is it unnatural to find its persistence in his much later work, _The Intruders_ (1976). In a similar manner, F.P. Grove read either G.D.H. Cole’s _What Marx Really Meant_ or Sidney Hook’s _Towards the Understanding of Karl Marx_, as suggested by Desmond Pacey in his note ( _The Letters of F.P. Grove_ 307). But considering the time of Grove’s letter and the date of publication of these two books, we assume that Grove read the latter, on which Grove remarked that “I do believe this to be the clearest and most accurate definition of Marx’s position” ( _The Letters of F.P. Grove_ 307) (see John M. Chen 1995). Grove’s curiosity about the role which economy or the mode and means of production can play in history grew to such an extent that he visited the Wood Flour Mills in Ontario and started to write _The Master of the Mill_ the same year the Depression set in ( _The Letters of F.P. Grove_ 86).

As Canadian left-wing thinkers read Marxist writings, another notable phenomenon—feminism—occurred in the political and intellectual life. Feminism was by no means new or foreign to Canada, but here it was to be enriched and expanded considerably by Marxist analysis particularly of the bourgeois family and the inequality therein and of exploitation of women’s labour and their lack of political power in general under capitalist rule. Dorothy Livesay presents a typical case. She went to lectures delivered at the University of Toronto on Maxim Gorky, on Henrik Ibsen and George Bernard Shaw, then read avidly Ibsen’s _The Doll’s House_ and Shaw’s _The Intelligent Women’s Guide to Socialism and Communism_. Though her burgeoning feminist interest led her to such women writers as H.D., Emily Dickinson and especially Katherine Mansfield, it was Friedrich Engels’s _The Origin of the Family_ that “shocked us [Livesay and her socialist-feminist friends like “Jim”] to death”. No sooner had she finished Engels’s work than she became “anti-family” ( _Right Hand Left Hand_ 21–22). It was also with the Marxist sense of class that she realized deeply the problems of working-class sexual and moral attitudes as essentially different from those of the upper or middle class ( _Right Hand Left Hand_ 121–124). Furthermore, the Marxist emphasis on politics prompted her to exhort her friends and female companions to become “women in politics”, as can be verified

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\(^5\) We own this insight to Victor Ramraj; see also his _Mordecai Richler_ (Boston, 1983), for an excellent and sophisticated discussion of the same concept at work.
in the newspapers of the 1930s rife with reports on her feminist activism (*Right Hand Left Hand* 122).  

The Great Depression was as bad in itself as could be, but it had, paradoxically, the positive effect of setting many people thinking far beyond the area of economy; it played an additional role of forcing them into challenging its other part, which is, to use Marx’s terms, the superstructure of capitalist society—its legal, religious, political, educational, ideological and aesthetic systems. In some cases, Marxist socialism was, hastily and understandably, swallowed as economic determinism pure and simple by mistake. We may further suggest that for most, if not for all, Canadian writers, the precipitously deteriorating economic situation triggered off a new train of thought, a new mode of interpretation that considers capitalism no longer as merely an economic system but as an organic whole, as an episteme: all the evils and ills in Canadian society were considered systemic. It thus follows naturally that while some tried to reform the capitalist system, others would resort to much more radical means that no terms other than totalistic iconoclasm and revolution would adequately define.

More significant in a practical sense are concrete and radical sociopolitical actions to make real, material changes. Canadian writers, while seeking answers to the economic problems from Marxist writings, soon found themselves taking an active part in social activities or political movements of one form or another. The CCF, with its well-defined goals of getting rid of the social ills of capitalism mentioned above, attracted both Garner and Grove, though to a different extent. While Garner plunged almost head first into the social movement led by the CCF and became one of its members (*Hugh Garner* 4), Grove, thinking at first that he was more a writer than a social worker, preferred to remain somewhat detached when J.S. Woodsworth asked him to join the CCF (*The Letters of F.P. Grove* 296). Their different attitudes may well stem from their respective class positions. Garner, in his interview with Allen Anderson, expresses his views on the relationship of people’s class position and their attitudes to revolution thus: “I think along with Marx …that the middle class would never start a revolution”. Though it may be true that people from the middle class did take part in revolutionary activities, as was borne out by Grove’s joining the CCF later (*The Letters of F.P. Grove* 296), it is also true that the lower classes contributed the most to the sustained fight against capitalist rule in the 1930s. Originating from the lower class as he did, and suffering more than the middle class in the depression and its aftermath, Hugh Garner remained adamant in his commitment to the “cause” of the poor. Irene Baird, too, stayed equally devoted to the underprivileged, the unemployed, although by her self-admission in her article, “Sidown, Brothers, Sidown”, she was not a socialist. Though a member of the upper middle class, she was deeply moved by the misery of the dispossessed and partici-

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pated in much of the relief work organized by the communists: she even followed the unemployed youths in their march, an experience that was to result in her writing *Waste Heritage*. Her admirable ability not only to sympathize and empathize with the unemployed, the poor and the transient but also to write about them with all sincerity and honesty certainly borders on, if not converges with, socialist tenets and tendency.

It is not an exaggeration, from the information above, that Garner and Baird figured themselves as some sort of representatives for the marginalized, the working or unemployed poor, since this latter are robbed of an opportunity to speak for themselves. The problem of representation, as the Marxists call it, was here picked up (more on this in Chap. 4 on Douglas Durkin). Further, the experience of these writers provided them with raw, first-hand material for thinking and writing; coupled with imagination and pathos of writing, this material would touch the cord of the hearts of Canadians, not just for its human or humanitarian potential but also for its exigency and immediacy. Finally, through their involvement in the social and political movements, their sense of politics and of class struggle and its manifold implications was greatly heightened; it is to be expected that some would use literature as a political and ideological weapon.

While some Canadian writers were actively engaging in the domestic social movements, others looked anxiously abroad for answers. The former USSR, being the “land without capitalists”, to use the title of Dyson Carter’s book (1949), was legitimately an eyesore to those living under capitalism. F.P. Grove showed his interest by reading books on Russia (*The Letters of F.P. Grove* 307). It may be due to his nostalgia for the Russia he once visited before setting foot on North America, as Desmond Pacey claims, without real or solid evidence, in *Frederick Philip Grove* (8), and as Douglas Spettigue confirms in *FPG: The European Years* (25) beyond a reasonable doubt. Or, it may be owing to Grove’s irresistible eagerness to see what this Russia after the October Revolution would hold for the future of the whole world. Still, it could be the result of these two factors combined together. Likewise, Hugh MacLennan went to the former Soviet Union with great enthusiasm to see the first socialist country in the world with his own eyes, only to return disappointed and disillusioned completely (E. Cameron, *Hugh MacLennan* 177). In sharp contrast, Dyson Carter, after his 2 month journey in Russia, returned to write several pamphlets and books—to name but a few, *Russia’s Secret Weapon*, *We Saw Socialism*, and *Sin and Science*—extolling virtually everything in the socialist Russia while purportedly aspiring to objectivity. However, the above-mentioned and other different versions or impressions of the former USSR may be coloured by their specific points of view and measured against their expectations, and there is no doubt that these writers, and by extension, many more other people, shared one thing in common: the new social, political and ideological system of the former USSR was looked upon—rather looked up to—as something very much akin to another brave new world, in which an entirely different life from that in capitalist society could start anew. Further, the striking contrast between the social system and life in socialist Russia and in the Western world has existed ever since then, causing people to
brood over the meaning or significance of socialism and capitalism as two dominant political and ideological forces.

But then, unlike social activists or political agitators, writers or literary critics had their individual and probably more useful way of concerning themselves with social and political issues. Whereas social activists or theorists normally resort to concrete social actions and programmes or political theories, writers usually perform their social function, if at all, by appealing to the feelings, ethos, or imagination of people: they may or may not fuse social and political issues or ideological tendency with their artistic considerations. And yet, the sufferings, misery and even deaths resulting from the Depression hurt the Canadian writers’ conscience so that many would write at least obliquely about the social, economic and political problems of the here and now. It is true that before the Depression, the Canadian soil, with the seeds of European continental realism, had already spawned its own breed of realism—prairie or rural realism featuring North American flora and fauna—as well as distinctively Canadian mentality and responses, and that the chief concerns had been predominantly with nature, the harsh climate and the expansive space. But with the advent of the Depression, a multitude of problems resulting from modern capitalist society was thrust upon its creators—the human race—and a dramatic shift of subject matter resulted: nature exited and society entered. This process is further accelerated by literary critics or writers like Dorothy Livesay, John Sutherland, Leo Kennedy and Louis Dudek, who repeatedly and tirelessly advocated social realism (William Toye 153; Barry Cameron:115). Hence, during and immediately after the Depression, we have a spate of writings of social realism, “a depiction of everyday life that pointed to the problems of society, if not to solutions” (The Oxford Companion to Canadian Literature 152). This much must be said, however: the social realist writers under the influence of socialism did provide solutions however tentative to start with.

According to the degree of social and political commitment, the writers discussed in this book can be roughly divided into two major categories. The first group includes writers who are concerned with one or more social problems (e.g. unemployment and poverty) without strenuously challenging the status quo of the capitalist regime. They believe on the whole in the eternal validity of capitalism or do not link the causes of social and economic problems with the entire social and political system. Rather, the individual is held accountable for his or her own bad luck or ill fate; while sometimes directing their spearheads towards the social system—capitalism—they prefer reform or evolution to ameliorate the situation. Callaghan and Grove are cases in point. Rather philosophically, they cling to the notion that capitalism, or any social and political system at that, must necessarily

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7 See David Arnason’s unpublished Ph.D. thesis (1980) for detailed treatment of rural or prairie realism; see also E.L. Bobak’s “Seeking ‘Direct, Honest Realism’: the Canadian Novel of the 1920s” in Canadian Literature, No. 89 (Summer, 1981), 85–101, for a general and succinct survey. For the garrison mentality, see Northrop Frye’s The Bush Garden; for the survival instinct, see Margaret Atwood’s Survival: A Thematic Guide to Canadian Literature; for the mythical and moral structure of Canadian society, see D.G. Jones’ Butterfly on Rock.
have some imperfections. Social reforms or political reconstruction and such related activities may change all the undesirable aspects.

Although there may be vacillation in a writer’s political belief and sharp line of division is not always valid, we can identify a second group of writers: Durkin, Baird and Carter view all the problems and contradictions in capitalist society as insoluble by itself. They believe that revolution, or class struggle in all forms, instead of evolution or reform, is the means to topple the capitalist castle. Furthermore, they hold the capitalist system, instead of the individual and/or the process of urbanization and industrialization per se, culpable for the seamy side of society; they envisage a society that can be called near socialist or socialist which will be free of all the evils of capitalist society. Such a dual categorization of social realist writing at this juncture may seem somewhat arbitrary and unaesthetic, but it will prove justified as we substantiate the discussion with specific and concrete examples and relate social problems and ideology to a variety of artistic considerations in subsequent discussion. In a word, the Great Depression, as G. Gaskin et al. have perceptively and precisely pointed out in *Social Realism: A Resource Guide for the Teaching of Canadian Literature*, “precipitated more literature of social realism and criticism than any other Canadian social problem” (43).

2.2 Harsh Realities: The Spanish Civil War, Twentieth-Century Imperialism, Revolution and Marxist-Leninist Political and Historical Interpretations

Whereas the Great Depression brought Canadians not only face to face with a new and excruciating economic reality but also with Marxist social and economic theory, several wars to follow in quick succession further stimulated profound, sustained, unprecedented and revived interests in Marxist-Leninist political and historical discourses, particularly those on imperialism. Right in the wake of the almost 10 chaotic years of the Great Depression was another important event—the Spanish Civil War—which contributed, in part, to the outbreak of the Second World War. When the Spanish Civil War occurred in July, 1936, it drew many public-minded Canadians immediately into it. Liberal writers like Hugh MacLennan followed the events in the war closely, reading newspapers and taking notes; upon these he based his judgement and was able to predict, almost to the actual day, the start of the Second World War. Indeed, the Spanish Civil War occupied so much of his mind that in the 1950s he was to write *The Watch That Ends the Night* reflecting on the significance of it years after it had happened. On the other hand, social or socialist activists and critics such as Dorothy Livesay, Hugh Garner and Norman Bethune chose to “throw in [their] lot with the Republican loyalist forces” (*Right Hand Left Hand* 250) against the threat of fascism. While first campaigning for peace to save lives, they decided to fight the reactionary and fascist elements, when it became clear that General Franco and his rebels were in collusion with invading
German and Italian planes and ships bringing arms against the elected Republican government. Though the latter lost their battle, the experience for the Canadian left was a sobering lesson: the fascist government was spawned and supported by the capitalist and imperialist desire for global expansion, which was the main cause of the war to them. Their views coincided with V.I. Lenin’s and were ultimately polarized between imperialism and socialism.

On the subject of imperialism, Lenin’s *Imperialism: the Highest Stage of Capitalism* has exerted tremendous influence on many left-wing thinkers and writers alike in this century. By Lenin’s definition, imperialism is the eventual result of the export of capital for raw material, cheap labour and superprofits by larger capitalist countries. The export of capital frequently leads to the dog-eat-dog fight for “spheres of influence” in the weak and small nations (123–128). Further, in terms of politics, the originally economic activities will result ultimately in the “division of the world among the great powers” (76–87). In viewing capital as a living entity and analysing its powerful presence not just domestically but also internationally, Lenin expanded on Marx’s economic theory and established a more elaborate colonial/imperialist discourse; he also treats the political (wars, border claims, etc.) not as isolated phenomena but as linked intrinsically to the economic. It is worth mentioning that even before the end of the First World War, Lenin was able to draw this conclusion from his study of modern capitalist economy and politics in a global context, foreshadowing the three worlds theory now very much in currency.\(^8\) Lenin further proclaimed that the era of imperialism could be the eve of the proletarian revolution, domestically and internationally, if the proletariat were to seize the time and opportunity (e.g. when the imperialist government was fully occupied with its global war effort and had no time or preparation for sudden domestic revolutions).

Above all, several of Lenin’s views about the proletarian revolution differed considerably from Marx’s, in that Lenin was able to break away from his master’s prediction that proletarian revolution would occur all at once in every European capitalist country whose industries were advanced. Instead, Lenin predicted that such revolution would take place not simultaneously in many capitalist countries, but individually in one country; not in the most developed industrial countries, but in the weakest link of the capitalist chain. At that time, Russia, still in the throes of emerging into an industrial country, provided just such a case. And true to his word, Lenin, recognizing and organizing the force of the workers, put this very theory into practice and, by initiating a civil war that ended the Tsarist Regime which was primarily imperialist, won the Russian Revolution and therefore dramatically and drastically affected the outcome of the First World War in the very interest of the Russian workers and peasants. Thus, Lenin demonstrated, by a new and inspiring example, what the French people had merely dreamt of but only partially accomplished a

\(^8\)This is an insight that Fredric Jameson and Gayatri Spivak will employ and develop to an increasingly more sophisticated and contemporary version in their postmodern and postcolonial theories. See Jameson on Lenin’s new historical division and Ernest Mandel’s further refinements in *Late Capitalism*, as well as on “historical reconstruction” (1989:370–374), and see also Spivak on Eagleton and on “international division of labour” (1990:47–49).
century ago—that the workers, or the lower classes, could create a new state of their own, construct a new society and make history at will.9

Lenin’s establishment and consolidation of the power and state of the proletariat in Russia, as time has borne out, were irresistibly attractive, though surely belated, examples for many other socialists or socialist countries throughout the world. F.W. Watt has noted quite perceptively that to the Canadians, the Russian Revolution in 1917 “established itself as the centre of attraction or repulsion for all revolutionary theory and practice in modern times” (483). However, the revolution and the theory about it are not confined to the area of politics: they are reflected in many aspects of the Canadian intellectual and literary life, as in the seven Canadian novels under discussion. Douglas Durkin’s The Magpie is undoubtedly an early response to the call of Leninist revolution on the Canadian literary horizon; his own life is also revealing: according to Peter Rider, Durkin’s mother wanted him to be a missionary in China, and an evangelical spirit was cultivated in him. But he was fond of “the social activities”, early influenced by “socialistic” ideals, and “espoused progressive reforms regardless of popular opinion” (1974: xvi, xviii). In light of his upbringing and social programmes, one can make more out of his novel: his depiction of the struggle waged by a returned Canadian soldier from the First World War for a new social and political system constitutes, among other things, an obvious indication of the influence of the Bolshevik revolution, as much as it is a creation of a hero who casts himself in the role of a socialist prophet to proclaim a new Promised Land, this time, in the New Russia. Durkin’s vision thus verges on a kind of Christian socialism. His socialist ideal of equality to all, male and female, further assisted him to see another side: the beginning and continuation of the war ironically guaranteed women’s positions in the production line, while the end of the war ended them with the return of the soldiers. So it is that we also witness a first instance of verifiable and veritable socialist feminism in the English-Canadian novel.10

Our study shows that Durkin can confidently claim a line of politically more sophisticated followers with divergent Utopian visions. Garner’s Cabbagetown offers itself as yet another, though less focused, take on Lenin (280): his protagonist blames the imperialist powers (British, French and American) for the defeat of the democratic forces (368) and revolution. Down the Long Table by Earle Birney not only re-enacts the seething though confusing political life of the Stalinist-Trotskyist groups in the wake of classical Marxist-Leninist breakup, but also portrayed an

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9Assessments of Lenin to the contrary certainly exist; see “Lenin’s Last Years” in Leonard Schapiro’s 1917 the Russian Revolutions and the Origins of Present-day Communism (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1984) for second thoughts on Lenin’s theoretical and practical contributions to the proletarian revolution and state, as well as international socialism. Similarly, Marx’s imaginary dialogue with Proudhon cogitates on more or less the same issues. See Peter Singer’s Marx (Oxford, 1980), final chapter. The problems seem to boil down to the dichotomy of voluntarist or determinist, subjective or objective approaches to history making or nation-building, perhaps illuminating lessons only history or time can teach.

10While Peter Rider views Durkin’s mother as an important figure in informing his female characters (“Introduction” to The Magpie), we need to add that Marxist socialist Utopianism enables him to envisage a society that makes it possible for men and women to be equal.
intellectual turned political messiah to lead the proletariat into a socialist millennium. Carter’s *Fatherless Sons*, even though it was written and published long after the end of the First World War, and some years after the Spanish Civil War and Second World War, still rings resonantly with the tone of Lenin’s theory of imperialist war and proletarian revolution (111–115) which may usher in a new era.

This is not to suggest that Canada has not produced war novels before the 1930s, but to stress the multiple, traceable links between the Leninist theory about imperialist wars and colonization. From Peter Rider, one knows for a fact that nearly a dozen novels, respectively, by Ralph Connor, S.N. Nancy, Bertrand Sinclair, Nellie McClung, Basil King, J.M. Gibbon and Robert Stead on the cruelty, inhumanity, irrationality and atrocity of wars certainly preceded even Durkin’s *The Magpie* (1974: vii–viii), but it can be argued that none treated wars as political events fuelled by capitalist or imperialist economic expansionist needs and hegemony from a Marxist-Leninist perspective nor did they view wars as an opportunity for proletarian revolution and for a modern socialist era from a Leninist vantage point in the works of social realists to be examined later. It is probably safe to submit that some, if not all, of these Utopian echoes confirm what Fred Cogswell calls the mysterious driving power of “myth” (1972:65) or of what Frye names “closed mythology” (1967:112–113; 116–117): those ideals that give the populace new hopes of untried models of society. As the former USSR is the only socialist state in the entire world that might offer some alternative to the capitalist system under economic siege and to plundering and murderous imperialist wars, it is little wonder that writers with social conscience would concern themselves with the theory and practice of the founder of modern socialism. Suffice it to say that long before the current and ongoing postcolonial project came into being, there already existed the Marxist-Leninist discourse on imperialism and colonialism.

The Spanish Civil War served perfectly as an initial test of Canadian internationalism or cosmopolitanism, as much as it brought socialism, both in spirit and as a social system, closer to the North American soil. To savour the mood of international brotherhood of the times, one need only think of the title of Ernest Hemingway’s *For Whom the Bell Tolls* or of Morley Callaghan’s exhortation to a new social conscience as early as his Parisian days in *That Summer in Paris*. Likewise, Hugh Garner’s heroes follow the route of Hemingway’s Spanish fighters, but with a sharpened sense of socialist mission rather than the Hemingwayan-John Donnian Christian ideal. Moreover, Garner’s global mentality or humanism also prefigured Carter’s and Grove’s—indeed, independently of each other—respective keen personal concerns with China, another socialist country then to be; indeed, Garner’s socialist protagonists can also be viewed as the prototypes for Carter’s internationalist-oriented characters in *Fatherless Sons*. Most eloquent in terms of political messages is undeniably Dorothy Livesay, who would in her *Right Hand Left Hand* many years later sum up the perplexing twists and turns of political and ideological events and party lines, as well as the complexity and perplexity of issues involving internationalism, fascism, feminism and socialism. In these Canadians’ new interpretive scheme inspired by Lenin, war was no longer viewed as the outcome of the personality (e.g. ill temper, ambitions) or psychology (e.g. aggressiveness or violent ten-
dency) of those in power, but as a manifestation of the capital’s incredible capacity to penetrate national boundaries and result in its globalization. If the capital had created havoc and impinged upon every aspect of human life at home during the Depression, it now raised its ugly head abroad in international warfare and other countries. All these suggest that the Canadian sense of global affairs, economic, political or ideological, was tremendously and quickly heightened. But a fuller and refined grasp of the whole matter, both in terms of empirical facts and of theory, awaited the Second World War, with even greater confusion or disappointment in the Barthesian sense (see citation above): as we shall demonstrate in the events following the Spanish Civil War, many of Lenin’s ideas, particularly those on wars, on revolution and historical progress and on proletarian internationalism, were played with, discussed, picked up and practised by searching and thinking Canadians.  

2.3 The Second World War, Global Capitalism, Colonialism, Imperialism and International Socialism and (Neo-)Marxist Sociopolitical and Ideological Theories

Following the Great Depression and the Spanish Civil War, the third major event to affect profoundly the Canadian social realist writers was the Second World War from September 1939 to 1945, the rapid recovery of at first the military industry and then other parts of the economy, and finally, the Korean War. As a global political phenomenon, the war sucked in the blood and lives of hundreds of millions of people. Though its real and deep social and historical causes are beyond the scope of this book, the responses of Canadians, especially that of Canadians as writers and critics, warrant some detailed discussion in light of Marxism-Leninism.

Despite the fact that the thinking of Canadian intellectuals varied a great deal, the response can be roughly classified in two major categories. With some rare and reasonable exceptions, they either subscribed to Marxist economic and political determinism and/or to biological or genetic determinism. In their arguments, the believers in Marxist economic and political determinism mainly resorted to either Marx or his followers such as Lenin for theoretical inspiration or practical guidance. The Marxists hold that capitalist economic development will ultimately evolve to a stage where the concentration of production becomes monopoly capitalism. Domestically, “monopoly capitalists” (Peter Singer, Marx 56) find the economic control of mere industry insufficient. Their tentacles will reach the financial centre,

11 Dorothy Livesay’s documentary poem, “Day and Night”, is, among other things, the most resounding ironic replay of Lenin’s “two steps forward, one step back” satirizing capitalist industrial “progress”; see also David Arnason’s “Dorothy Livesay and the Rise of Modernism in Canada” in A Public and Private Voice edited by Lindsay Dorney et al. (Waterloo, 1986). A more recent example would be Mavis Gallant’s play, What Is to Be Done, its title an obvious parody of Leninist political tract that in turn borrows its title from another Russian writer, Nicolai Chernyshevsky’s 1836 work.
the banking system and the political power until their control of the state is so total as to become state monopoly. Still, they will not rest at that; Lenin’s observation and study of modern capitalism led him to some important finds. He stated that, for more profits, the monopoly capitalists enter the international market by exporting capital to other nations and setting up multinational corporations. This step is deemed inevitable and indispensable for the further growth of capitalism.

In short, Lenin’s perception of early twentieth-century capitalist social reality is, like Marx’s before him, totalistic and organic; capital is not static nor lifeless: it gains its life through circulation and through infiltration into every realm; it links up the economic, the commercial, the financial, the political and the cultural, in an interlocking network, a network that ultimately makes the change of one part inevitably affect any other parts or the whole. In the same vein, the ruthless drive of capital respects no national borderlines; it is in the process of turning the global market into a domestic one. In some sense, Lenin’s geopolitical and economic mapping highly anticipated Marshall McLuhan’s “global village”, though the latter focuses on technology, mass media and communication: the world has been immeasurably dwindled. It is here that the old saying—it’s a small world—gains its full and literally shocking significance, but in Lenin the human subject is changed: it is too small for capital. We should not be surprised then, to confront in Canadian novels the massive and extensive commercial control of the wheat pool in Canada and even the international trade market, in Durkin as well as in Grove; or the recurrent discourse about imperialism, the powerful presence of Canadian politics linked to Britain and the United States in Durkin, Baird, Grove and Carter, or the heroic fight against total American colonization of Canada and invasion into Korea in Carter.12

Another of Lenin’s insight is also germane. Lenin noted the downside of capital in the age of imperialism, with a similar comic trait that characterizes Marx’s discourse on the proletariat’s being the gravediggers of the bourgeoisie. As a result of capital’s boundless expansion, the three basic contradictions, namely, the contradictions between labour and capital, between capitalists or capitalist countries and between capitalist (in modern age, imperialist) countries and their colonies, become increasingly irreconcilable. While at home within any capitalist country, the first two contradictions normally find their expressions in strikes, sit-ins or walkouts or similar mass, collective actions, on the international scene, the third contradiction frequently results in wars among nations. With the partition and repartition of the globe among capitalist countries, history will inevitably witness repeated wars, wars that may, in Lenin’s revolutionary scheme, toll the knell of imperialism (V.I. Lenin 123–128).

12There exists, of course, other Canadian works about imperialism. See, for example, Sara Jeannette Duncan’s The Imperialist for her spontaneous (i.e. her own without Marxist or Leninist theoretical underpinnings) responses to the idea of Canadian Empire building. See also Carl Berger’s The Sense of Power: Studies in the Ideas of Canadian Imperialism: 1867–1914 (Toronto: U. of Toronto P, 1970). A distinction should be made here: non-Marxist treatment of imperialism is concerned mainly with overflowing nationalism and national power, rather than with capital and its relentless historical and worldwide manifestations.
From this Marxist-Leninist line of argument, we can come to another conclusion: while Marx saw a cyclic pattern of economic depressions under capitalism in his time, Lenin discovered a recurrence of wars—a political and more violent solution to economic problems—in the modern, imperialist age. And yet, Lenin observed, the imperialist war time is also a hard-to-come-by time for the proletariat to stage a revolution, since the capitalist politicians turned imperialists will be fully occupied by the war. Lenin described the strategy of his 1917 Revolution as that of turning the imperialist war into a civil war against the capitalist warmongers and for the liberation of the Russian proletariat. He further pointed out that the age of imperialist capitalism is also the eve of the proletarian revolution. And, echoing Marx’s slogan—“Workingmen of all countries, unite!” (L.S. Feuer 41)—Lenin called upon the workers in other capitalist countries to follow suit so that the imperialist war would have to be brought to an abrupt stop.

Why Lenin’s call was answered by the proletariat and its party in some countries which turned socialist after the two World Wars but not in others cannot be discussed at length here. But there exists sufficient evidence that the Canadian left-wing writers and critics mostly subscribed to this Marxist-Leninist economic and political determinism. Leaving aside the many echoes of the famous line quoted above for later intertextual discourse analysis, we can examine multiple personal responses. On the whole, Canadian social realist views were not always consistent: Hugh Garner, for instance, had his ups and downs. Basing his judgement on his past reading of Marxist writings and on his own experience in Spain, predicted in spring, 1939, that “the war is going to break out in September” (One Damn Thing After Another 35, hereafter abbreviated to ODTAA). Later, with the memory of his participation in the Spanish Civil War still ranking in his mind, he immediately threw himself into the “anti-imperialist” war. Despite his discharge in September 1939 from the Royal Canadian Artillery “as a Communist suspect for having fought in Spain” (ODTAA 36), he was able to get around this problem and join the Canadian navy in May 1940 (37). Earle Birney confronted even more confusion. In his autobiographical Spreading Time, he mentions that, after his long struggle with the nature of the Second World War—the “war of capitalist powers”—he still decided to join the “war effort” to “prevent the world becoming totally fascist” (47). It seemed that the motives of these wars were not so clear cut: even among capitalist wars, there might be some which were, owing to more complicated reasons than just the economic, worth fighting. With some hindsight, later socialists described the nature of the Second World War as antifascist rather than anti-imperialist. Dorothy Livesay, like most of the Canadian socialists or communists, underwent similar changes in her decisions. A vividly rendered passage from her Right Hand Left Hand points out the bewildering complexity and erratic changeability of the politico-economic situation:

At the first world peace congress in Paris in 1937 Maxim Gorki had warned: “the enemies of humanity are preparing for a second world massacre.” Well, it happened. Confusion reigned on the left. The Party went underground.... All our perspectives had changed since that Sunday morning when Churchill’s voice came over the radio saying that he was giving his support to Stalin. They were joining together to defeat Hitler! This was a moment of intense emotions for us. Soon all the comrades who had been in jail were released.... (278–9)
Though Livesay later was less involved in social activities for the Communist Party due both to her marriage and to the almost constant shifts of party political lines, she has never regretted her past devotion to and service for the working people organized by the same party.

However, not everyone believes unwaveringly in, let alone applies, socialist ideology. Rather than economic and political determinism, the next group holds that biological, psychological or genetic factors in human beings, especially in those with great power, account for the outbreak of wars. G.M.A. Grube, for instance, in an article entitled “Freedom and War”, attributes the causes of the Second World War to the emergence of Nazism and fascism, which are, according to the writer, “an extreme and pathological disease” (*Canadian Forum: Canadian Life and Letters 1920–1970* 178). On the other hand, Hugh MacLennan was at first by his own admission an adherent to Marxist economic and political determinism. To solve the problem of German invasion, he proffered his scheme: “The settlement of middle Europe on a workable economic basis, however, is essential to that improvement [of the European warring situation], and Germany is manifestly the only nation capable of making the settlement” (E. Cameron, *Hugh MacLennan* 122). Some years later, in 1955, he still clung to the Marxist concept of war in terms of class: “The agonizing transition which followed the end of the Victorian epoch has at last ended. What resulted from the recent class war in the west and the struggle for power we can now see pretty clearly” (E. Cameron 256). But within a couple of years after he had made this comment, MacLennan, under the influence of psychology, took up another position. In a letter to his publisher, John Gray, he explained his idea of the motive of war:

> It is now an axiom of psychology that every man is a potential murderer…. Wars don’t just come, as well you know. Not one in a hundred is caused by economic circumstances. Wars are the direct results of pent-up aggressions and guilts, …There never yet was a case in which any but a fanatic like Lenin engaged in a revolution without there being some sexual deviation of some sort on the side…. (E. Cameron 291)

At this point, MacLennan was trying to interpret everything in light of a new psychological theory. His change of perspective on the war was, of course, symptomatic of the general shift of interest, especially among the left wing after the war, from the social, economic and political to the personal, the biological and the psychological. As the global situation as a whole became increasingly stable and peaceful, people started to extricate themselves from the hectic, turbulent social movements and/or political causes which sometimes required self-sacrifice. The result was that theories about psychology and about individual motivations gradually superseded those formerly popular social and political theories.\(^{13}\)

However, whatever the theoreticians expounded about the causes of the war, the social response to, the personal feelings of and the psychic trauma resulting from the Second World War were most vividly and painfully represented in the works of

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\(^{13}\) MacLennan’s later works keep steadfastly to the same vein of thinking, as confirmed most articulately by Larry McDonald in “Psychologism and the Philosophy of Progress”, *Studies in Canadian Literature*, Vol. 9, No. [2], 121–143.
many Canadian social realist writers and critics. Some writers like Gabrielle Roy and Dyson Carter discerned the irony that war, which was the most destructive of destructive forces, rescued the Canadian economy from its 10 year stagnation. Others compared the war to a voracious monster, gulping down millions of tons of ammunition and the blood and lives of as many people (e.g. Garner). But all writers, whether they wrote from a socialist or from a liberal humanist or humanitarian point of view, indicted the warmongers, mostly capitalist or imperialist leaders, for the woeful and enormous loss of lives of people and their potential.

Thus, it is only natural that the reactions of the writers were mixed regarding the recovery of the Canadian economy as a whole during and after the Second World War owing to the massive production of ammunition and arms and other supplies for the war. The more socialist conscious of them objected to the production of arms for killing people, perhaps including many of our “Canadian boys”, as Carter would have it in his *Fatherless Sons*. They also lamented in this wholesale economic recovery the loss of an opportunity to attack or even overthrow the capitalist system. Others saw with an elated heart a new hope in the continuous growth not only of the military industry but also of the other parts of the economy, which meant a better life for millions of Canadians. Still others would celebrate with undue complacency the triumph of the capitalist system which survived both the Great Depression and the Second World War and rose like a phoenix from their ashes. A full gamut of these feelings and reactions crept into the works of the social realist writers at issue, as we shall demonstrate in subsequent chapters.

To sum up, the Spanish Civil War, the Second World War and the latter’s ironic rescuing and rapid development of the whole economy of the Western world, coupled with various Marxist and Leninist discourses on these phenomena, not only changed substantially Canadian writers’ consciousness of and views on the nature and consequences of war, the course of history and the human nature, but also provided plenty of materials and theoretical inspirations for their writing. Consequently, several new features of social realism distinguish these literary works from earlier works of the Depression period in subject matter, in thematic concerns, in language, in imagery and symbolism and in political and ideological intents. In subject matter, the theme of war, of class struggle and of revolution became increasingly predominant, replacing the Depression theme. And the concerns about economic life and theories shifted to the deep worry about political power or profound and abiding fear of war. This change included at once a recognition of the many aspects of war itself (the massive killing and the psychic trauma from it, the description of the battle field and the heroism or patriotism of the fighting Canadians and their home supporters) and mounting interest in the theories (socialist, capitalist or eclectic views of the writers) about the war. Marxism and Leninism became the “new sciences of man” (Larry McDonald 1980:78), which assisted enormously these writers in forming new concepts and new frame of reference and in establishing a new comprehensive paradigm to interpret and make sense of a whole complex range of modern social economic and political life; out of an exquisite timing between social and political events and theory applications, Marxist socialism became current and even prevalent.
A second major theme—industrialization and urbanization and their powerful effects upon modern life—also remained the preoccupation of many social realists after the war, as of the 1930s, but now the emphasis was placed in general on the military industry and the war’s shocking and devastating impact on city life. Rising cities such as Vancouver, Montreal, Toronto and Winnipeg were seen as having assumed distinctive characters, either actual or fictionalized, to shape the personality and fate of city dwellers. Likewise, industrialization played no small part in people’s lives: it had not been a major issue for the social realist writers before, but it now claimed more and more of their artistic attention. Such industrial organizations as the milling, manufacturing and mining companies on a national or international scale began to employ, and thus control the life of, millions of workers. Though social realist writers such as Garner, Grove, MacLennan and Carter may have quite different ways of treating this theme, they all felt that industrialization and urbanization were here to stay and an undeniable fact of life to be reckoned with.

In terms of language, political vocabulary, jargon and slogans of war used by the politicians or social activists also made their intrusion into literary works. Consequently, a new vocabulary started to appear. In contrast to the vocabulary of the Depression decade which was applied, concrete and mainly concerned with how to make a living and save the economic situation, this new language became more abstract, formal and theoretical about wars, imperialism and colonialism and about state and revolution; it sometimes even waxed philosophical. The new language could be the result of thorough assimilation, or simply direct borrowing or parroting, of social, economic and political theories or discourses by the authors. Nonetheless, it not only contributed enormously to the Bakhtinian effect of polyglot but also lent a rich intertextuality to their works. Hence, we may suggest that all of these factors added to, rather than detracted from, the vitality and diversity of the language of the social realist writings by Callaghan, Garner, MacLennan and Carter. Of the latter point, we may further submit that many writers indeed learn a different language or discourse from the Marxist-Leninist economic, sociopolitical and philosophical discourse that was to be merged with literary or artistic discourse, whereas the older, perhaps more “humanist” phraseology with such terms as “hatred” and “aggressiveness” to describe and theorize about war, sounded hopelessly sentimental, outmoded and inadequate.

Thirdly, the literary or political imagery and symbolism also changed in general from that of the grim, dirty, hungry and therefore angry faces of the economic Depression to that of the cruel and bloodthirsty war demon, as well as to the dehumanizing, alienating and fragmenting technological or overgrown city monster. Battles with heavy casualties such as the Dieppe landing, the Dresden bombing or the Hiroshima holocaust were often personified as an indiscriminate killing cannibal, while young and hopeful people slaughtered during battles were likened to dead flies or cannon fodder, their deaths presented as senseless and beyond the control of the victims, as microscopically and grippingly represented in Garner’s and Carter’s works. Industrial products and equipment like trains, assembly lines, huge melting pots and milling machines also entered literary works with different and differing
literary connotations, depending on the writers’ attitudes to the onset of industrialization, with the most striking and memorable symbols appearing in Grove and Carter. The city as experienced in the direst slums and in impersonal and slimy boarding houses or hotels was often compared to an alienating and imposing agent, whereas the police became invariably a symbol of an authoritarian and brutal force, a part of the state apparatuses. The works by MacLennan, Grove, Garner and Carter all abound in such images and symbols.

2.4 The Cold War, the Korean War, Mass Production, Urbanization, Anti-American Imperialism and (Neo-)Marxist Analysis

After the Second World War, another significant event that formed and informed social realist writers’ consciousness and artistic considerations was the Cold War hanging over and between the socialist and capitalist camps, which, in part, resulted eventually in the overt expression of hostility, the Korean War, and which may yet lead to a nuclear war. At first sight it seemed that the end of the Second World War merely split the world into two main camps of diametrically opposed economic, social, political and ideological systems: the socialist and the capitalist. However, a further look will reveal that, as Canada’s Party of Socialism notes, “a number of countries of Europe and Asia broke away from the capitalist system”, while “an upsurge of the national movement in the colonial countries culminated in the achievement of political independence of several states” (152; henceforth CPOS). Issues of colonization, imperialism and anti- or decolonization became prominent. If the Great Depression can be viewed as the first devastating shake-up of the capitalist economic world, these third-world decolonizing victories “signaled a new, second stage of the general crisis of capitalism” (CPOS 152). It could also be said that since the 1930s, within less than two decades, the capitalist world was losing ground rapidly to the socialist, both in terms of economic stability and of political control. In sum, there is no gainsaying that Marxist socialism has earned tremendous popularity on the international scale. It was at this time that W.B. Yeat’s line—“things fall apart, the center cannot hold”—found its loudest global ideological resonance, for we had two centres now thrust upon us.

What is more, with the polarization of the socialist and capitalist worlds, capitalist countries now found it increasingly difficult to make entry into either the socialist bloc or developing countries to exploit, colonize and control them by economic means, which once had been easier and more effective to use and less noticeably exploitative. Indeed, the growing strength and influence of worldwide socialism became so threatening to the imperialist powers than the most bellicose of them, relying on the American monopoly of the atomic bomb, “even put forward the idea of launching a nuclear war against the [former] USSR” (CPOS 153) not long after
the war\textsuperscript{14} first and then against socialist China twice, over the Taiwan and North Korea contentions, respectively. To add fuel to the flames, the British Prime Minister, Winston Churchill, made a speech in the spring of 1946 “calling for war preparation against the USSR” (\textit{CPOS} 153). However, all these attempts were frustrated due both to the public notion of the former USSR as a friend and, more crucially, to the Soviet development of an atomic bomb in 1947. Hence, a competition in nuclear stockpiles ensued. Here, it is scarcely the business of this study to evaluate these events in full on ideological grounds, but the Canadian social realists’ moral reactions were pertinent. At the start of the Second World War when the former USSR and America and Britain were joining forces, Dorothy Livesay remarked: “We were all in high hopes again that this time it truly would be a war that would change the world. Instead, we received Hiroshima” (\textit{Right Hand Left Hand} 279). That humanity was building an increasingly massive self-destructive weapon dawned early upon Livesay: her sense of the danger of a possible nuclear war was so acute that her words were not only representative of most social realists but also prophetic in view of subsequent events. As is known to all, the world since then has been constantly under the sinister shadow of a large-scale nuclear war which could at the least massacre millions of people instantly and the Earth 40 times over. Indeed, if we may jump ahead slightly, in the mid-1980s, Margaret Atwood was to write an essay echoing the same sentiments and a dystopian novel, \textit{The Handmaid’s Tale}, about the aftermath of a nuclear and chemical war. The United States remained the only country in human history to have used a nuclear bomb on half a million of innocent civilians, and Atwood’s intention could not have been clearer. In spite of the reduction of nuclear arsenals by the then two superpowers, they yielded tremendous military leverage over many other countries not equipped likewise.

Although the actual nuclear war has never broken out, the Korean War from June 1950 to 1953 was in some sense a miniature all-out war between the forces of the socialist and capitalist countries (the former now including socialist China); it touched the nerve centres of writers like MacLennan (as in \textit{The Watch That Ends the Night} with the main character as a replica of Dr. Norman Bethune in China) and Carter (e.g. \textit{Whatever Happened in China}). Though there have been conflicting opinions as to whether North or South Korea launched the first offensive, this book does not intend to pursue the “truth” or “facts” of the war in itself.\textsuperscript{15} Nevertheless, it is fairly certain that the direct confrontation of military powers between the two main ideological camps at that time would result mostly definitely in a military conflict. On one side, the former Soviet Union offered substantial military aids and supplies (e.g. weapons and ammunition) and military advice both to the North Korean People’s Army and to the Chinese Volunteer Army. It can be recalled that

\begin{itemize}
\item \textsuperscript{14}Now that the former USSR has disintegrated, all subsequent references to it, including those in quotation, should be interpreted as the now defunct country—the Soviet Union.
\item \textsuperscript{15}There can be no wider and unbridgeable gap in the interpretation of ideology-laden events than that existing in the socialist-versus-capitalist recounting or remaking of history or motivations. See, for example, E. Said’s \textit{Orientalism} on Noam Chomsky’s insight into the so-called objective scholarship, in the United States, p. 11
\end{itemize}
many of the Chinese volunteers were fresh from the Chinese Liberation Army, which had just wiped out the US-supported Guomindang Army (the Nationalist Army) in China no more than 4 years after the Anti-Japanese War. The Korean War produced enormous and everlasting repercussions: to some social realist writers like Carter and Livesay, whose “China’s Co-operatives” epitomized her new interest, China now assumed major importance as an experimental case of socialist system and ideology after the initial success of the former Soviet Union.

On the other hand, the United States can be seen as antisocialist and its imperialist policy was highlighted glaringly even more now by its supporters in other capitalist countries, including Canada. In the considered opinions of the socialists or socialist countries, the US-instigated United Nations Army stormed into Korea, dragging Canada into the war. Here we are concerned not with the military or political aspects of the war, but with the reactions and feelings of the wide international public and especially of the Canadian people. Suffice it to say that, by 1951, the tremendous response to the Stockholm Appeal with 500 million signatures and endorsements internationally (of which 30,000 were Canadian) “played a significant role in preventing the United States from using the atomic bomb against Korea” (CPOS, 179). And yet, even without the nuclear war, the heavy casualties incurred on both sides proved enough to remind people of the cruelty and inhumanity of modern conventional warfare. Each war must entail the loss of great amounts of ammunition and many other kinds of renewable or reproducible material, but the waste of human life and potential in the Korean War left in the Canadian mind an indelible and painful memory, as touchingly registered and even monumentalized in MacLennan’s and Carter’s works.

Not even the thought of the ironically rapid development of many Canadian industries under the war effort could assuage such mental and emotional pains. As Desmond Pacey has effectively commented: “The outbreaks of local wars, especially that of Korea, … made the hopes of a peaceful world seem remote and futile” (Creative Writing in Canada 230–31). Indeed, MacLennan was so shocked by the Korean War that he ceased temporarily the writing of a “novel of Montreal” (Cameron 252), The Watch That Ends the Night. Significantly, he later resumed it with the Korean War both as the present time of the novel and as a device to contrast with similar soul-searing social and political events of the 1930s. In an even more straightforward manner, Dyson Carter attacks vehemently the US-controlled Canadian preparation for the Korean War in his Fatherless Sons. It is perfectly understandable that Canadian writers would react in this immediate way; equally understandable is the fact that social realist writers were most likely to deal with such topical subjects of the day as the Korean War and a possible nuclear war: their concern with the fate of all humanity was genuine and boundless; it even transcended national or ideological contentions. Like many millions of other people, they fully realized how close the Korean War had brought the United States, to the use of atomic bombs (CPOS 177). It needs to be reiterated that the United States was the only country to have used such a weapon, in spite of all its self-declared

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advocacy of freedom and democracy and justice. All sound-minded Canadians had indeed every reason to worry and fight against the American nuclear intentions. As many would know, some decades later in the early 1980s, the Japanese Canadian writer, Joy Kogawa, was to make her debut as a full-length novelist precisely on this heart-wrenching issue with *Obasan*.

Consequently, since the end of Second World War, the possibility of this entirely new form of warfare haunted the minds of many Canadian social realist writers, whether they tended to sympathize with socialism or with capitalism; it forcefully compelled them to consider the possibility of nuclear war with its manifold implications for human beings as a whole. Though there were few literary works concerned entirely with the issue of atomic bombs, or with the confrontation between socialist and capitalist systems in ideological debates, economic competition or military takeover, the spirit or mood of the time permeated much of the social realist writings and, in some cases, formed and/or informed the realist writers’ ideology and psyche, as well as the literary expressions in their writings.

An important aspect of the ideological change in these works is the increasingly overt anti-American sentiments in Canada, embittered at once by the emergence of the United States as a superpower after the Second World War and by the ascendant threat it poses to the Canadian North and Canadian natural resources there and elsewhere. As history has shown, the flare-up of the Canadian-American controversies over the Arctic during the summer of 2007 was just a continuation of these complex territorial claims. Of course, anti-Americanism did not just start in the 1950s. Such writers as Grove and MacLennan in their earlier writings had decried the selfish individualism and rampant materialism prevalent in the United States. Grove, in his quasi-autobiography, *A Search for America* (1927), discusses at great length what kind of a country would constitute “that spot of humus where I could take root in order that I might grow” (115). It should be noted that the “America” he is in quest of is the continent, as Grove himself has indicated clearly in the book. Through his alter ego, Phil Branden, Grove expresses his concept of an ideal country after Phil’s extensive itinerary for 2 years on the North American continent. Utterly disgusted with the greed, graft and manipulation in the New York business world, Phil also observes how people are running after material gains at the expense of others. Contrary to popular belief in the American Dream which has seduced many, it is exactly the American version of capitalism that he wants to get rid of. Near the end of the book, Phil is virtually preaching to a young capitalist farm owner some of his socialistic ways of management and distribution of products. In contrast with the United States, Canada in Phil’s eyes is less materialistic, more humane; it has more sense of community; it offers better social welfare and believes in public interest. All of these convince Phil that Canada is that humus he has been searching for. And Phil’s ultimate job is to be a community teacher to help others. More meaningfully, in his note to the book, Grove himself further enunciates his view of Canada and the United States: “I have since come to the conclusion that the ideal as I saw and still see it has been abandoned by the U.S.A. That is one reason why I became and remained a Canadian” (382).
MacLennan’s Canadian nationalism versus Americanism rings equally powerful. MacLennan was influenced early in his life by the views of his father, Dr. Sam, regarding American society as a prime example of the “excessive individualism and self-seeking” even before he set foot on American soil. In his Oxford (England) days, MacLennan continued to contemplate this selfish individualism and the materialistic interest of the American business community. His stay in Princeton and New York during the Depression further prepared him for the acceptance of “one of the main intellectual movements of the Thirties, Marxism” (Elspeth Cameron 93, 78). Like Grove, MacLennan noticed the lack of spiritual pursuit in American life. But neither of them seemed to make the connection between the paucity of spirituality and capitalism as a system which sets great store by profits and material gains. A Marxist view would see as the crux of this matter that capitalism has developed itself to the point of substituting money for God in its value system and that the United States serves as an outstanding example of twentieth-century capitalism. This is not to mean that the Marxists deplore the decline of Christianity, or any other religions, in American society. Marxists are atheists; and Marx’s own saying—“Religion is the opium of the people”—shows manifestly the Marxist attitude to religion. Rather, the Marxists see the paradox or hypocrisy in the spiritual and material life in the United States: the Americans claim to be the elect on the Promised Land, or sons of God, while they in fact frantically pursue material gains at the cost of religious or spiritual life. Both Grove and McLennan, independently of each other, came to similar, if not identical, conclusions.

The anti-Americanism of the 1950s became more obvious in the economic sphere and political arena than in literary and personal aspects. The slow but sure decline of British influence on Canadian policy and the quick and qualitative rise of American imperialism after the Second World War placed Canada in a tight dilemma, caught between these two imperial(ist) centres for a while. But the balance tipped towards the influence of America as time wore on. An acute Marxist critic, Robin Mathews, has demonstrated several features of the “New colonialism”, that is, colonialism under the impact of American imperialism in many areas, especially in the cultural sphere: the control of publishing, reading and forms of thought by the imperialist United States (Canadian Literature: Surrender or Revolution 8). Quite obviously, American presence was seen and felt first of all in terms of economic and political control, whereas realization of its cultural domination took shape much later. For American cultural hegemony in Canada was at least half offset by British culture. It will suffice to mention that American culture itself had once suffered from a slight by the British literati. Further, the Canadian population was largely British in origins. It is therefore natural that the cultural sphere remained less America dominated than other areas. (Another example would be the Free Trade Deal between the United States and Canada that excludes the cultural area.) However, would a country be able to remain completely independent in one area while others are controlled by a foreign country? It is to this danger that Mathews, with some foresight, alerts us, in this work on literature as well as in another one on Canadian society at large, Canadian Identity (117–121).
Though he hastens to observe that the struggle to achieve a Canadian voice persists in a few writers’ works, Mathews unfortunately neglects some writers whose literary works are obviously imbued with a strong sense of anti-Americanism. Dyson Carter is a case in point. Apart from a dozen of articles and pamphlets Carter wrote on the fallacy of the American Dream, especially regarding the ordinary people’s endeavour to make it come true, he has written at least one full-length novel, *Fatherless Sons*, about Canadians’ long-term struggle to fight at all points the United States’ attempt to control Canada. Besides literarily comparing the influence of the United States to the tentacles of an octopus reaching Canada,\(^\text{17}\) Carter’s novel draws the reader’s attention to the necessity of fighting politically not only the American domination but also capitalist system which had made the former possible. Thus, the anti-American feeling and thrust is wedded to the anti-capitalist mainstream of worldwide socialism. Here, Carter has done precisely what MacLennan fails, according to Mathews, to accomplish in many or all of his writings (“The Nationalist Dilemma”, *Surrender or Revolution* 75–90). Noteworthy is this: Margaret Atwood also became an anti-American writer soon in the 1970s, with her first novel, *Survival*. Both McLennan’s and Atwood’s novels will be examined in our next volume.

Another new ideological or political phenomenon occurred in some social realists’ psyche or perspective, that is, the voluntary adoption of the point of view of the working class or the broad masses. Carter is one of such cases in point. He evinced greater courage than others in that he praises the virtues of working people and despising, in a more devastatingly satirical manner than that of the Stephen Leacock of *Sunshine Sketches of the Little Town*, the greed and idleness of the upper class that lives on the labour and sweat of others. What is more, in the case of modern war, both Gabrielle Roy and Carter were perceptive enough to make the separation of interest between the victimizers, politicians or capitalist war profiteers, on the one hand, and, on the other, the victims, ordinary people. Following current global events, they warned that the possibility of a nuclear war further underscores the danger of an indiscriminate massacre of millions of innocent civilians. Not only did their hearts turn against the nuclear war, they also felt more keenly than ever before the possible suffering and ill fate of common people as a whole and consciously used their pens as sword to raise class awareness.

Related to this psychic or perspective shift is the willingness on the writers’ part to listen, literally and literarily, to the voices and speeches of the rank and file, to

\(^{17}\)A more recent example of this sentiment would be the Atwoodian literary image of disease from the South, as in *Surfacing*; for a postcolonial analysis, see Robin Mathews’s *Canadian Literature: Surrender or Revolution* (Toronto, 1978) and his “Possession and Dispossession in Canadian Literature” in *Crisis and Creativity in the New Literatures in English* (Amsterdam, 1990) edited by Geoffrey Davis, pp. 57–70 and Jaidev’s “How Did We Get Bad?”: “The Lessons of *Surfacing*” in *Ambivalence: Studies in Canadian Literature* (New Delhi, 1990). Cultural and sociopolitical anti-American equivalents are to be found in James Steele’s and Robin Mathews’s *The Struggle for Canadian Universities* and, more recently, Mathews’s *Canadian Identity* (1988), where there is also a hint of Canada’s colonizing its own native peoples, an aspect that comes to the fore in Joy Kogawa’s *Obasan* (1981).
imitate their dialects or unique expressions and to identify with them in feelings and emotions. Carter’s and MacLennan’s works are obvious exemplars of such concern. Further, social realist writers adapted more than others sociological and technological terms which were turning into part of the living language of modern industrial society, with the result that we have a refreshingly newer, richer linguistic hybridity which borders on the encyclopaedic, varying greatly from the streetwise, colloquial to the technical, formal and theoretical.

Last but not least, the writings of social realist writers started to absorb the vocabulary and discourse of psychology however paradoxical this may sound. Social realism has often been accused of indulging in shallow and superficial details, heavy description of social and political environment and issues, group action and mere illustration of certain sets of abstract principles. It may be true that the social realists’ attention to, or concentration on, these matters more often than not excludes certain dimensions of the personal, the emotional and the individual. But it is also true that there was always an undercurrent but detectable effort to combine the public and the social with the individual and the personal even in the writings of the 1930s and 1940s. Baird’s *Waste Heritage*, published in the late 1930s, is a book which, as Catherine McLay has suggested in *Dictionary of Literary Biography* (15), deals successfully at once with individual struggle and emotions and with the larger social background and political issues, much like John Steinbeck’s masterpiece, *The Grapes of Wrath*. A difficult and delicate but nice balance is kept throughout the book between the individual and collective affairs; Baird’s novel also offers, among other things, an inceptive interpretation of mob or group psychology (though she would not use the term; see Robert Bocock, *Sigmund Freud* 17–19), as expressed in the Communist organization and the ordering of the long trek as a protest. If individual psychology does not get full treatment, social psychology surely does.¹⁸

The 1950s saw the publication of some social realist works which are exempt from the accusation that they employ shallow social movements or political causes. Hugh MacLennan’s *The Watch That Ends the Night*, for instance, is a complex novel as much about the central characters’ emotional and psychological problems as about the social and political disturbances of the time. Likewise, Dyson Carter’s *Fatherless Sons* treats with equal strength the love and struggle of individuals and of the collective group in the form of a well-organized union. This new individual and psychological dimension can be considered a result of the social realists’ con-

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¹⁸Ross’s *As for Me and My House* of 1941 is worth mentioning in this connection: it renders subtly the inner conflicts of the main characters and the intense personal and social relationships which result from each individual’s own frustrations as well as from the global economic Depression, made worse by the drought on the prairies. Its emphasis is clearly on the individual’s psyche, but the individual’s problems are closely tied up with the current social and economic situation. Thus, the solving of individual psychological problems depends largely on the recovery of the economy as a whole. Furthermore, it is ironic that it is not God, nor the ministry, that would be Mr. Bentley’s saviour. Rather, an improvement in the secular area—of their finances and social relationships—is both essential and necessary to their existence. In his own way, Ross has presented vividly and distinctively both the individual and psychological as well as the social and economic, relationships and situations inside and outside the “house” in the novel.
conscious efforts to make up for what was lacking in their past works; it may also be the product of the increasing interest in psychology and biology rather than in economics and politics. Here, any pretence that society had not changed in this new direction is condemned to conservatism, and the composite effect of all of these factors is that social realists’ works were becoming not only more mellow in their handling of psychological and emotional difficulties but also more comprehensive in their subject matter.

It is worth pointing out, however, that this concern with psychology in literary works, so to speak, is not yet in the full bloom of Freudian depth psychology as later expressed in literature, especially not the element that interprets human motives and/or human history in terms of sexual drive (possible exceptions are Hugh MacLennan’s Return of the Sphinx or Robertson Davies’s The Manticore; but they appeared much later). Rather, it was the social realists’ own ways of interpreting certain personal and social phenomena which were increasingly assuming importance to them as writers, instead of their initial attempt to apply Freudian concepts the way they applied Marxist ideas earlier. Some writers like Grove and Carter connected promiscuous and open sex with the decadence and depravity of the bourgeoisie and their family life, as Marx and Engels have analysed perceptively and ruthlessly in The Communist Manifesto. Others like Garner and Birney considered sex to be an integral and universal part of everyone’s life, be he or she a Communist, socialist or capitalist. In short, all of them adopted an open and realistic attitude towards this subject matter which had been forbidden because of a puritanical public and strict censorship; they wrote, not for their own sexual indulgence, but for the sake of artistic integrity, to create a faithful picture of society and to attune the public mind to a new social reality.

Imagery in the social realists’ writings also took on an entirely new look. Though sexual images had not yet become central and controlling, they were appearing more explicitly and frequently. This may be a reflection of people’s turning away from social and political to individual and personal matters, coupled with the steadily growing influence of Freudian or Jungian depth psychology. Perhaps paradoxically, for the social realist, personal concerns and a new perspective on inter-

preparing human nature were now becoming so socially important that they could not afford to dismiss them. Similarly, commercial or industrial images began to fill many pages of literary works. Sometimes following the socialist’s cue and sometimes resorting to their own resources, social realists watched critically myriad changes that advanced industrialization, high technology and commercialization had brought about (New 1989:221–222). With observant eyes and sharp minds, social realists picked up from life about them such typical images as those of vulgar advertisements or of automation and robotism; the last of this can surely be best construed with Fredric Jameson’s insight into the most “inverted reality” we have witnessed—the total subjection of our faculty to “scientific management”.20 Above all, underlying all these images was the recurrent theme or pervasive mood of abject and absolute alienation in urban and industrial life under capitalism, as has been pointed out with remarkable discernment by Marx and Georg Lukacs, respectively. These images were used almost invariably to show the writers’ concerns for the downgrading of human values in capitalist society of a Leninist state-monopoly stage, a stage where state capitalists control, by economic means, the state machinery for their own corporate or transnational corporate interest or profits.

The image of women in particular also shifted from the docile, inarticulate, muted and powerless to the rebellious, vocal, expressive and militant. W.H. New has registered the actual changes in sociopolitical attitudes towards women in this period (1989:214; 1990:289–290, 327–328), but their literary representations appeared to be far more colourful, varied and even apocalyptic. The relatively spontaneous, individualistic revolt and challenge female protagonists posed to the patriarchal capitalist system and all its attendant values in Durkin, for example, became increasingly class conscious, socially organized and politically effective, in Birney’s *Down the Long Table* and in Carter’s *Fatherless Sons*. What used to be private and personal now metamorphosed into the public and the political to such an extent that no boundaries could be set up; battlefields are everywhere. More intriguing might be this dichotomy: women armed with Marxist socialist ideas fought with doubled theoretical force and energy for new standards, for emancipation and changes, for repossession of the means of production and for the construction of a new subjectivity. In contrast, women without this critical weapon lingered in lethargy and agony within the confines of the household; their minds remained colonized by bourgeois male chauvinism. The inevitable result is that they not only reproduced capitalist subjectivity but also reduplicate patriarchal values.

Above all, the image of the atomic bomb or H-bomb loomed large and ominous. “The sense of impending doom caused by the possession of the atomic bomb by several of the great powers”, Desmond Pacey has commented, “made everyone uneasy and afraid” (*Creative Writing in Canada* 231). Consequently, this nuclear image was by far more powerful and ominous than any other images. Whereas in pre-atomic bomb time there would be some possibility of controlling or escaping from any disasters, natural or man made, the bomb seems to be omnipresent and can be set off anytime by a technocrat, an autocrat or a political lunatic, whether in the

socialist or capitalist camp, with the unbearable result of millions of people or even the whole human race being annihilated from the Earth. Terry Eagleton in the 1980s was so upset by the consequence of this nuclear possibility that he felt called upon to “drag” into his discussion of literary theory this nuclear issue, which he emphatically declared to be “more weighty than codes, signifiers, and reading subjects” (Literary Theory: An Introduction 195). It is only natural that to date, this overriding topic of nuclear war continues to attract as many writers as, if not more than, in the 1950s: Margaret Atwood’s near obsession is most loudly and repeatedly demonstrated in The Handmaid’s Tale (Margaret Atwood 1985) and “The Writer’s Responsibility” (1987:332–333).

In terms of commitment or engagement in general, many writers in this period gave some reconsideration to their past avidity or enthusiasm for social and political activities or theories. Pacey has commented that the decade of the 1950s was “one of vacillation and disillusionment” (Creative Writing in Canada 230). Both the past lessons in the 1930s and 1940s and the present difficult, complex social and political problems taught them that it was extremely hard, if not impossible, to change society tangibly and directly by writing. The word used to have its power, but now it has its limits. Either in resignation or disappointment, at least some of them gradually developed another view—that literature had its own autonomy and that it should not be subordinated to nor controlled totally by politics.

Finally, it was the change in the zeitgeist, or general climate of the time, that decided the writers’ attitude. People everywhere longed for peaceful settlement of social and political issues or conflicts; both the capitalist and the socialist countries had taken quite a long time to learn to live in coexistence and peace. It is quite apt to use Karl Marx’s own words here: “It is not the consciousness of men that determines their existence, but, on the contrary, their social existence determines their consciousness” (A Contribution to the Critique of Political Economy 43). Under these new social circumstances, it is easily understandable that some social realist writers refrained from direct involvement in actual social or political movements. Instead, they fulfilled their social function by engaging in more literary or cultural activities and did so of their own volition. With very few exceptions, they did not and would not follow blindly or with servility any social, political or ideological theories. Rather, with a chastened sense of social mission, they were in search of some new ways to sublimate their life experience, to blend it with artistic inspiration and to produce literary works which were as aesthetically fine and as ideologically sound and independent as they can devise.

While social realist novels may be limited by social and political events in a certain time and place, they can also transcend them in their concerns about the human situation as a whole. Indeed, cultural phenomena—literary forms or a new

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21 English-Canadian realism still has its vogue with many people in the 1990s when postmodernism is in rage. The following will be of help to anyone interested in realism’s evolvement. For a focused study of English-Canadian realism in its modern and urban inception, see E.L. Bobak’s “Seeking ‘Direct, Honest Realism’”, Canadian Literature, No. 89 (Summer, 1981), 85–101; see also Desmond Pacey’s “Realistic Fiction” in “Fiction (1920–40)” for its further developments in the
consciousness that grow out of specific temporality and spatiality—do tend to linger longer, sometimes much longer, than their immediate material basis, as Mikhail Bakhtin has convincingly argued from his own neo-Marxist perspective on ideological or cultural time lag (1984:35–36). A list of important dates is attached to this study to facilitate our understanding of the meaning or significance of this genre and, to an appreciable extent, the complex, intriguing and ever-changing correlation between society and literature.

2.5 Conclusion

Taken as a whole, the 40 years or so covered in this chapter marked a significant stage in English-Canadian sociopolitical, intellectual and literary history. On one level, social realists lived through and confronted unflinchingly not only the growingly more complex, drastically changing, ideologically confusing economic and sociopolitical realities, both domestic and global—the Depression, the Spanish Civil War, the Second World War, the Korean War, the Cold War, the looming nuclear warfare, industrialization, and urbanization—all in far too quick succession, but also the emotionally painful and traumatic and intellectually challenging repercussions these larger events inflicted on their private or personal lives (starvation, destitution, large-scale unemployment and massive human slaughter); these were coupled with the deepening sense of loss, confusion and despair or the scepticism about or angst about the absence of meaning in life. These mega events and their overwhelming impact on human life have captured the imagination of many a social

urban setting: Hugo McPherson’s “Fiction (1940–60)”, Parts II–V deal with realism—no longer perceived as a “school” at its later stage in the neighbourhood of modernism in Literary History of Canada, second edition; some scepticism about conventional realism is apparent in Frank Davey’s “Impressionable Realism” in Surviving the Paraphrase and in John Moss’s comments on Alice Munro’s “perceptual realism” in the “Introduction” to Here and Now, while George Bowering’s challenging or debunking of the realist or even modernist project can be found in “The Three-sided Room: Notes on the Limitations of Modern Realism”, in “The Painted Window: Notes on Post-Realist Fiction” and in “Modernism Could Not Last Forever” (The Mask in Place: Essays on Fiction in North America). Similarly, W.H. New’s A History of Canadian Literature (1989; rev. 2003) quite consistently puts in doubt the term realist or realism under inverted commas (e.g. “social realism”, p. 179; “realism”, p. 198). For realism in relation to modernism or postmodernism, Robert Wilson in Ambivalence also points out other critics’ attempt to recuperate magic realism—a feature perhaps more postmodern than modern by critical consensus—back into the stream of prairie realism or to folk tale tradition in Robert Kroetsch; finally, see W.H. New’s A History of Canadian Literature (London: 1989; 2003) for Canadian predilection for realistic writing (156, 175, 198) and Linda Hutcheon’s “Conclusion” to the most updated edition of Literary History of Canada (1989) in her The Canadian Postmodern for the verifiable tenacity and popularity of realistic writing in this postmodern era. For the writers’ refreshing revamping or reappropriation of conventional realist project, see the two interviews, “David Adams Richards: ‘He Must Be a Social Realist Regionalist’” in Studies in Canadian Literature, Vol. 15, No. 1 (1990), pp. 154–170 and in “Sharon Riis: ‘The Reality Is the Present Tense,’” in Studies in Canadian Literature, Vol. 16, No. 1 (1991), pp. 129–141.
realist. In a word, social realists had no lack of material for their writing; the problem was how to reduce it to manageable and representable dozes in art form.

On another level, social realists contemplated, interpreted and explained the myriad phenomena with the remarkably timely guidance of first the Marxist and then the Leninist (there is, of course, the black sheep of Stalinism for some) economic, sociopolitical and philosophical theories; out of these and their own personal visions, they constructed entirely new interpretive paradigms, which in turn enabled them not only to penetrate the veneers of life under capitalism and identify the hidden force or underlying factor—the ubiquity and omnipotence of capital—but also to drop their ideological innocence that capitalism was the sole correct universal and eternal model and locate another possible “reality”: socialism. Further, the dialogical contention between socialist and capitalist discourses gave them both a new angle on everything and one more side to what used to be a single and single-mindedly liberal fairy tale. Many of them turned doubtful, sceptical or even critical of capitalism as a whole; assumed the Marxist consciousness of the human being as the sum total of social relations, as a political being, rather than as an individual in the traditional sense, and took up the concern for the multiplicity and diversity of contemporary life; formed a truly global mentality somehow in the fashion of the Joycean Dubliner hero attempting to relate to, indeed, to become part of, the larger universe; and finally, arrived at a historical vision of an enlarged reality beyond the narrow Aristotelian social definition.

On still another level, with a newly acquired awareness, social realists transformed the raw source materials into their artistic works invariably with partial or total socialist vision. Northrop Frye, for one, has somehow cavalierly equated socialism with religion\(^{22}\) for its teleology: and so it breathed some meaning into what seemed to be the meaninglessness or lack of direction in life in the thick of the Depression or in the despair in the immediate aftermath of the wars that gave rise to Husserlian phenomenology or Sartrean existentialism; indeed, in generic terms, socialism offered an alternative, a new Utopia, to relieve the more deterministic gloom of the merely documentary or “scientific” realism or even naturalism characteristic of a Zola or a Frank Norris criticized particularly by Georg Lukacs. Furthermore, socialism as a body of theory or discourse constituted an immeasurably rich source of intertextuality, at once sociopolitical, economic, philosophic, literary and ideological: the master narratives of Marx, Engels, Lenin and Trotsky and of socialist writers such as George Bernard Shaw were to have their direct or distant echoes, reworked meanings, references and allusions or outright new shapes in Canadian social realists’ artistic and critical theories and literary executions, replacing what used to be another seemingly and seamlessly inexhaustible intertextual sources—the Bible, the English classics or other canonized modern literary masterpieces. The fruitful result was this: social realist texts replete with various new languages and discourses can only be comfortably accommodated in the novelistic form (Bakhtin 1981:xxxii, 3–40). Finally, Marxist theories gave social

\(^{22}\text{See The Modern Century, p. 32, for Frye’s neglect or ignorance of the materialist essence of Marxism; he treats Sartre’s “philosophy of life” in much the same manner, pp. 119–120.}\)
realists a novel vocabulary to articulate a new reality, as much as an irrepressible urge to, like Marx and Engels in *The Manifesto of the Communist Party*, narrate and even theorize about significant social and political events and their local as well as global implications, about history and its developments and about literature and art. Hence, after the biographical, sociopolitical and historical facts and data, as well as general emotional and intellectual responses presented here, we will cover the Canadian social realist theory of realism in depth in the following chapter.
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