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## Review of *The Literary History of Alberta: Volume Two* By George Melnyk

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*The Literary History of Alberta: Volume Two.* By George Melnyk. Edmonton: University of Alberta Press, 1999. Photographs, notes, bibliography, index. xxi + 302 pp. \$40.00 cloth, \$26.95 paper.

In 1988 the Alberta 2005 Centennial History Society started to commission a series of specialized studies on Alberta, called *Alberta Reflections*, to be ready for the 2005 Provincial Centennial. George Melnyk's *The Literary History of Alberta*, a survey of the publishing history of Alberta up to the end of the twentieth century, is part of that series; the author is himself a member of Alberta's literary community. The second volume of his literary history covers the last fifty years of Alberta literature, and Melnyk takes care to point out the hazards of his position. Writing from inside the community, after all, may cloud his judgement and blind him to his biases when his project calls for exceptional objectivity. It appears he has done about as good a job in being objective as could be expected of anyone in his shoes.

Structuring his compendium on *The Literary History of Canada*, Melnyk divides his history by genre rather than by decade or period. This decision has its benefits as well as its

peculiarities. The reader, while discovering encyclopedic details necessary for any introduction to Alberta literary history, also profits by getting a more theoretical sweep of the development of literary styles, types, and themes during an interesting epoch in the province's economic history. Melnyk argues that the shift in the latter half of the century to oil and gas production and the onset of prosperity led to a migration into Alberta of more varied population groups. This migration, in turn, has expanded the horizons and variety of the province's literature in style, form, structure, voice, and genre. It becomes apparent that literature in Alberta has flourished and blossomed in unexpected directions, incorporating ethnic diversity, multilingual nuances, and postmodernist inventiveness.

While landscape has played an extremely important role in early Alberta literature, as we move towards the end of the century it ceases to have the same significance. Writing that emphasizes linguistic play, ethnic memory, dislocative styles, and generic fusion begins to take over. Melnyk has created an excellent survey of writers and their titles—as well as of book production—in Alberta, which ought to prove invaluable for those desiring an introduction to the province's literature and for more advanced readers who wish to consolidate a sprawling field of facts and contradictions. A picture of Alberta as a literary seedbed emerges which is both celebrative and possibly disturbing. While affirming the achievements of Alberta's writers, Melnyk also quite cleverly produces a subtext of a province that in his words “knows and cares little” about writing that is not explicitly based in Alberta. Perhaps the most moving instance of this is the treatment of Trinidad-born writer Sam Selvon (1923-1994), who came to Calgary as a prominent writer from the UK, but remained an outsider and died in near obscurity sixteen years later.

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