

Catherine Melvin

A BRIEF LOOK AT CANADA'S PREMIERE LITERARY
TRANSLATOR: SHEILA FISCHMAN



Before the 1970s, literary translation was close to non-existent in Canada. There was a lack of interest from both English-Canada and French-Canada in the literature of their respective counterparts. English-Canada was simply not very curious about Quebec's culture while Quebec perceived English Canada as having no culture whatsoever.

This began to change, however, with the political climate of Canada in the 1970s. The events of the Quiet Revolution sparked English-Canada's interest in Quebec. English Canadians were quite literally asking, "What does Quebec want?" This question was being addressed, if not answered, by the multitude of fiction writers in Quebec. Consequently, English Canadians were able to find some answers in the literature coming out of Quebec.¹ Many of the young writers arousing curiosity at that time, Roch Carrier, Anne Hébert, Marie-Claire Blais just to name a few, have since become the literary establishment in Quebec. The majority of their books were translated into English and those who are still writing are still being translated today. English Canada has now become interested in writers from Quebec as writers and their work as literary work. They are no longer looking for a key to Quebec's political and cultural struggle but more simply enjoying literature.

In addition, the Canada Council translation program was created in 1972. This program provides subsidies for literary translation in Canada.

¹ David Homel, "True Solitudes? Or, how English Canada got curious about Quebec, and vice versa," *Quill & Quire* 60, no. 3 (1994): 12.

The program is still a major force in literary translation today and many literary translators believe that the discipline simply would not exist without it. The Association of Literary Translators, whose mandate includes maintaining a high level of quality and advertising the importance of literary translation, was founded in 1975² and also helped to advance the field.

It took a little longer for translation of English Canadian literature to catch on. In the mid-80s English Canadian authors began to earn acclaim at home and abroad.³ It wasn't until Quebec saw English Canadian novels arrive on their book shelves in translation from Paris that Quebec publishing houses began to sit up and take notice. Since Quebec had already missed the Can-Lit boat and did not want to simply accept Paris' literary choices, they decided to actively seek out English-Canadian authors to publish in translation. This was "an extraordinary turnaround from past attitudes."⁴

This new interest in English-Canadian literature caused some people to believe that Quebec literature in translation was being neglected. However, records show that there is an almost even balance between the numbers of books translated in English and the number of books translated into French. In fact, since the program began in 1972, only seven more novels were translated into English than into French.⁵

The events of the Quiet Revolution, the rise of English Canadian literature and the creation of the Canada Council translation program created the discipline of literary translation. There is still, however, a lack of emphasis put on it in our country today. For example, out of 3, 500 books published in French in Quebec in 1997, only 40 received translation grants from the Canada Council, leaving 3, 460 books untranslated.⁶ Many Canadian publishers blame this lack of literary translation on the fact that few novels (fiction and non-fiction) translate well. More likely, however, is the low financial return when it comes to translated literature of any kind in Canada. For example, the biggest translation success in recent years for the publishing house McClelland & Stewart is Yves Beauchemin's *The Alleycat* (*Le Matou*) that sold approximately 5, 000 copies. The French original sold over a million copies in France.⁷ Jack Stoddart of Stoddart Publishing

² Jean Delisle, *Translation in Canada 1534-1984* (Ottawa: University of Ottawa Press, 1987), 140-141.

³ Homel, 12.

⁴ Homel, 12.

⁵ Homel, 14.

⁶ Ray Conlogue, "Much is lost in Canadian translation: stubborn solitudes," *Globe and Mail*, 15 October 1998.

⁷ Conlogue, *Globe and Mail*

blames the increasingly conservative climate of English Canada. “The right-wing point of view isn’t very accommodating to a French ideal,” he says. “One of the things that protects culture in Canada is the strong French insistence that culture be protected. Without that, our leaders wouldn’t have a strong desire to have cultural policies in the first place.”⁸ Obviously, many factors contribute to the current state of literary translation in Canada.

If a translator manages to cut through all the social and political problems tied up with literary translation and receives grants to translate literature all year, it is still difficult for him or her to make a living. Translation grants from the Canada Council pay only 12 cents per word, compared with a rate of about 22 cents a word for other translation work. At this rate, a literary translator working full time will translate about four novels a year and earn approximately \$20 000. Few translators can afford to do literary translation alone. They must find other work in order to supplement their income.

Despite all these difficulties, some literature *is* being translated in Canada. While new writing talent from Quebec is translated only sporadically, the young Quebec authors that began the translation wave in the 70s are still writing and still being translated. English Canada now awaits the English translation of Roch Carrier’s latest novel just as eagerly as they await Carol Shields’ or Margaret Atwood’s latest novel. Canada’s premiere literary translator, Sheila Fischman, is among those responsible for helping Canadian literature cross linguistic and cultural borders.

Sheila Fischman was born in Moosejaw, Saskatchewan but grew up in the small town of Elgin, Ontario—between Kingston and Ottawa. She studied French in high school but it was not until university that she really began to connect with the language. During her first year at the University of Toronto, a professor named David Hayne put the first Quebecois novel she had ever read on his curriculum. The novel had a profound impact on Fischman and she began to connect with the language and culture of Quebec. Although she studied French throughout university years, she did not make it her main area of study. She earned a Bachelor’s degree in Chemistry and a Master’s degree in Anthropology. She has no formal education in the translation field.

Fischman moved to Montréal in the 70s when she married a French Canadian, (who she has since divorced). Montréal has become her home and she cannot imagine living anywhere else. Her first translation was an

⁸ Conlogue, *Globe and Mail*

attempt to get a better feel and connect more intimately with the language and culture of Quebec. A neighbour suggested that she try the latest novel by Quebec novelist, Roch Carrier, *La Guerre, Yes Sir!* She has since gone on to translate all of Carrier's novels and dozens more. She has, in fact, translated close to 100 books from French into English. All but one were written by French-Canadian authors. Her love of and close emotional connection to the language and culture of Quebec guide her in her work. "I love the writer's work I translate." She feels that this connection is indispensable to her translation and perhaps that it is even what makes it possible. For her translation from another language would be, in her own words, "of a different order."

Generally, Ms. Fischman proceeds by reading a work—which is sometimes just a book she is reading for pleasure and decides to translate, or it is the latest work of an author that she usually translates. She makes notes on areas that will potentially cause problems and then proceeds with a very literal translation. Afterwards, it is simply a long process of revision that ends only when she has no choice and a publisher can wait no longer. For her, "no written text is ever finished." Translations are a product of a political, social and linguistic reality that is always evolving. Because she is aware of this, Fischman knows that translations, including her own, can date quickly and have a shorter life than original works.

When translating an author she is very familiar with, Ms. Fischman is more confident as she has already developed strategies to deal with the challenges presented by the author's style of writing. Specific uses of language can be characteristic of an author and, having already confronted some of these challenges already, she is better prepared to face them again. But, even a seasoned veteran like Sheila Fischman gets "the jitters and stage fright" when she sits down to translate a new novel.

Fischman feels the translator should be invisible, portraying the style (when possible) and the ideas of the author and not her own. Her translations, then, are not politically motivated. She attempts to recreate the style, mood, opinions, and feeling of the original work in her translation. For her, this, precisely, is what separates writing from translating. The writer has something to say and feels urged to say it. The translator simply transposes an author's message into another language. Fischman, herself, does not feel this urge. She is totally satisfied with translation. Her goal is to bring the writing and culture of Quebec to a wider audience. She does not translate with one audience in mind. She simply tries to recreate the original work in a style that respects the norms of the English language. Fischman has certainly succeeded in bringing the literature of Quebec to a wider

audience. She has seen her own work in bookstores all over Canada, the US, the UK and even in the Netherlands.

Fischman's translations are known and respected for their sensitivity and faithfulness to the original work. It is partly due to her that many of Quebec's contemporary writers are so well known. Ms. Fischman has received several awards over the past 30 years for her work in literary translation including the following:

- winner of the Canada Council Translation Prize (1974, 1984);
- finalist for the Governor General's Translation Prize (1990, 1991, 1992, 1993, 1994, 1995, 1996);
- winner of the Governor General's Translation Prize (1998);
- winner of Columbia University's Félix-Antoine Savard Translation Prize (1989, 1990);
- winner of the IBBY award for translation (1998).⁹

Most recently, Fischman has been named a member of the Order of Canada: our country's highest honour for lifetime achievement. On November 16, 2000, she was named at an investiture ceremony at Rideau Hall. Coincidentally, a professor that introduced her to Quebec's culture and had a profound influence on her life was honoured during that same ceremony. Dr. David Hayne was also inducted as a member to the Order of Canada on November 16, 2000.

Obviously, Sheila Fischman has had a profound and long-lasting influence on literary translation in Canada. In quantity alone, her translations have helped to bridge a gap between French and English Canada that has existed since the formation of our country. Her deep connection to the language, culture and people of Quebec give her translations a sensitivity that is appreciated and respected by French and English Canadians alike. The quality of her translations has secured her place in history as a literary translator par excellence.

Bibliography

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⁹ "InTranslation: Fischman Profile" online, www.vehiculepress.com

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INTERVIEW WITH SHEILA FISCHMAN:
MONTRÉAL, FEBRUARY 17, 2001



Catherine Melvin: I'd like to start with some really basic questions. So, how many works have you translated?

Sheila Fischman: I don't really know. I haven't counted for a long time but I know it is getting up somewhere around 100.

CM: Have they all been Quebecois novels?

SF: They all have been, with one exception. I translated one novel by a French author.

CM: So, do you have a personal affinity for Quebecois writing?

SF: Absolutely, I love the writer's work that I translate. I love reading contemporary Quebec writers. Yes I do. I think it's because it was through contemporary Quebec writers that I came to whatever understanding that I have of Quebec society—the political, the literary the social, you know, society in general. I first started reading Quebec books when I started translating them really, when I first started living in Quebec. There was an affinity and I just kept reading more and translating more.

CM: So, when you finish your translations, do you think they relay the political climate, the cultural atmosphere of Quebec to English Canada?

SF: Yes, in a sort of macro sense in that any work of the imagination reflects the broader society that it comes out of. There is not intentionally, on my part, a political component to what I do.

CM: For example, is the audience for your translations mostly in Canada that you know of?

SF: It's primarily in Canada. I have seen several of my translations in bookstores in the states and I know that some of them are published in the UK. Even in Holland, in Amsterdam I think, I saw some of my translations. I think that's mostly a function of Canadian literature courses that are given all over the world. But, the main readership is in English-speaking Canada and then in the US I guess.

CM: When you're translating do you keep this audience in mind, thinking that English Canada would have some sort of a background to draw on already?

SF: No, when I'm translating the only thing that I have in mind is the original text and my responsibility to it and my own language, the target language into which I try to fit it.

CM: And what is it that you think your responsibility to the original text is?

SF: I think my responsibility is to be as faithful to it, be as honest in presenting it as I am capable of being because they can't be separated. But at the same time being accountable to the English language—not trying to do headstands and calisthenics that can't work in the English language. That's the ideal, that's the goal. I am not saying that I achieve it every time but that's what I am aiming for.

CM: So, do you have a method that you adopt when you are translating a book?

SF: I'll tell you how I translate a book, OK? I read it first quite quickly. Sometimes this will be a book that I am just reading for pleasure, other times this will be a book by somebody I already translate or it may be something a French publisher has asked me to read. I read it rather quickly and as things occur to me—unusual phrasing or something like that, I tend to jot it down in the margin. That's my first reading. Then, I sit down with the book and I

translate, maybe word for word, maybe a little freer, it depends. And then, I revise and revise and revise until a publisher says, 'I want this last month' or until I say, 'I've gone as far as I can go.' I have to say though, in the case of writers whose work I've been translating for some time, I feel confident now that I know that I can judge and that I can trust my judgment when I say that something is ready to go out in the world.

CM: So, do you feel, or does it depend, that a translation is ever finished?

SF: Oh, no written text is ever finished, I don't think. Particularly not a translation maybe because they are a reflection of a contemporary social and political and linguistic reality. This may be why translations age in a way that original texts don't. I don't know what the life span of a literary translation would be but it certainly isn't infinite. Well, I suppose it is in one sense because of what it can teach but there is always room for new interpretation.

CM: So, you were saying that when you translate an author that you are familiar with and you have seen a lot of their work before, you feel more confident to say, "OK, this is what I'm aiming for." ?

SF: I feel more confident in my ability to do the job properly. But I have to tell you at the same time that when I start a new book, whether it's by a writer who is new to me or by someone I've been translating for years, I still get the jitters, stage fright, when I first sit down. Which is good. I don't think it's a neurotic kind of uncertainty. It's just a kind of adrenaline rush that keeps me on my toes.

CM: So, for example, I know that you have translated most or all of Roch Carrier's novels. So, once you got to the third or fourth novel, did you find recurrent themes that you had to deal with?

SF: Well, of course there are recurrent themes. But even more important for my own work, the writer uses the French language in ways that become familiar to me and I will have already developed strategies for dealing with them. But, you know as I learn and I hope mature and I hope, develop my skill. The same thing is happening to the writer, so I have to keep myself in shape to keep up with them too-which is part of the fun.

CM: When I was doing my research I actually watched an NFB film called *Talking Translation*. In that film, the interviewer asked you why you didn't write and you answered, "Writing hurts and translation is fun."

SF: Yes, well, I am not a writer. I believe that I am not a writer. Not only do I not like to write, I don't want to write. There is nothing that I really want to say. There are a few things that I have wanted to say that I have written about in various small ways, whether its in an essay or a speech that I've given or something of the sort. But, I have no urge, no yearning to write. I am *totally* satisfied by the translation that I do. What I want to do when I finish my translation for the day is to read not write.

CM: Basically, the distinction between writing and translating for you, correct me if I'm wrong, is the original idea or the urge to say something?

SF: Yes, exactly. I don't have that. I have urges to send into the rest of the country the writing done by people whose work I like or admire or think is important. They're the ones who have the ideas, who tell the stories, who create the characters. I don't do any of that. I couldn't make up a story to save my soul and I certainly couldn't create a character.

CM: Would it follow that to translate poetry, one would have to be a poet?

SF: I don't write poetry so I don't translate it. You have to be able to I think.

CM: Would you say that in that instance, then, that a translator would be a writer, a creator?

SF: The good translators of poetry whom I am familiar with, and I don't read a lot of poetry, are poets themselves.

CM: I am curious to know if the field of literary translation in Canada is very active? Earlier we were talking about how Canada has reached a sort of critical mass of literary translators, so, would this be something that is in demand and happening? I had read that years ago, you really had to lobby publishers to get things translated. Do you find that the demand is increasing in either direction?

SF: I wouldn't say that demand is increasing. The interest level is being maintained. It is no longer difficult, or even necessary, to convince publishers that the newest book by Roch Carrier deserves to be translated. There are more writers like that than ever. I can just take it for granted that the newest novel by Francois Gravel, who is an author I have been translating for some time now, will find a home. On the other hand, there are new writers coming up all the time. I am not so familiar with the situation as far as the newer, younger writers are concerned simply because I seem to be in the amazingly wonderful position of having as many books to translate as I can, which is astonishing. I don't even have the time to read everything that is being published anymore. Fifteen or so years ago I almost could but there's so much being written and published now that it is impossible to keep up with it.

CM: So, do you know if the younger writers are being translated?

SF: Spottily, here and there. There might be a few poems, a couple of short stories, even a dramatic text here and there. Earlier, we talked about the perilous state of Canadian book publishing. I don't know of any new literary houses springing up. Although, there may simply be developments that I am not aware of because here and living largely in French, I am not really in contact with the English Canadian writing and publishing scene. There are writers who I know but it is not my primary field of reference.

CM: So, interest is, at least, maintained?

SF: I would say so, yes.

CM: Do you think it was climbing for a period in the 80s?

SF: Yes, in the 70s and 80s, I think it was climbing. When I started translating, when I first started reading these people, there was a whole generation of Quebec writers that was just coming into existence. There was a critical work entitled *Une littérature en évolution* and that was really beginning to happen when I first arrived in Quebec and started reading these people. And that generation of writers which is by and large the generation that I have been translating, is the dominant one I guess—they're the oldest. So there's Marie-Claire Blais, Roch Carrier, and many more who are very productive and who have become the establishment in fact.

CM: And what role do you give to the Canada Council translation program?

SF: Well, quite honestly, without it, the practice of literary translation would not exist in this country. There might be the odd thing translated now and then but that was really crucial. They created the discipline as far as I'm concerned. It was politically motivated at the time I think. But I think it's had excellent fall out as far as I'm concerned personally and as far as readers across the country are concerned.

CM: I had also read that there was more translation into English of francophone literature in Canada. After the Révolution Tranquille there was this spark of interest in a culture that was somewhat foreign from their own. Do you think this is still the case or do you think it is now going a little more in both directions?

SF: I think it has loosened up, lightened up considerably. But certainly, at the beginning of my work in *le métier*, people were very interested in knowing what Quebec wanted. It was found that some of the fiction writers were directly giving answers to that question. There is a corollary situation that is not such a happy one but one that I always feel compelled to talk about. In the opposite direction there are now more and more writers from English Canada whose work is being translated into French but very seldom is it done here in Quebec. It is done mostly in France. I have heard from francophone readers that it is less successful shall we say. They tend to be done very fast, the translators are paid even less than we are and it is just a question of getting it out. Unfortunately, this includes writers like Alice Monroe, Michael Ondaatje, Margaret Atwood and so forth. This is partly a result of the well-merited national success of these writers in English that has led them to have agents in New York who don't know anything about Quebec and assume that it has to be done in Paris. It is a situation that I find really, really unfortunate. Especially...this is a little bit of special pleading I guess but...way back when I was first starting, one of the things that I was trying to do was to interest francophone publishers in Quebec in some of the anglophone Canadian writers. With two or three small exceptions, they just weren't biting. So there is a colonial mentality at work here for sure, that something has to have proven itself in the US or in France before it is accepted here.

CM: I know that you have received the Governor General's award for translation along with many other awards and I am curious to know how these prizes affected your career?

SF: It always helps. It always gives you a little boost. It means that people's memory might be tweaked you know. Many, many benefits come from winning prizes.

CM: If anything, I guess, they keep your name in the public.

SF: Well last year for example, I was nominated for a novel that had won the Governor General's award actually in French a couple of years before. It's a beautiful novel, very quiet little novel that is never going to make a big splash. In English particularly because the author really doesn't speak English and couldn't do the interview circuit and so on and so forth. But there was this little blip of added interest in it when the nominations came out so nominations and of course, winning are good things.

CM: I know that you were named a member to the Order of Canada last year; would you say that this honour was the highlight of your career?

SF: Actually, there is an interesting story about the Order of Canada. During my very first year at the University of Toronto, I took a course and the Professor was a man named David Hayne. This was really the dark ages in Canadian universities I guess because at the University of Toronto no Canadian Literature was taught. I mean, they didn't believe in it. Dr. Hayne put a Quebec novel on the first year curriculum. It made quite an impact on me at the time even though I was kid and I had to look up every word in the dictionary, it was talking about a reality that wasn't familiar to me but it was next door, so to speak and it was accessible. And I still have my much marked-up copy of that book. So anyway, last November when I was honoured with the Order of Canada, we were hanging around in the little anti-room before the ceremony and I saw David Hayne there and I looked on the program and I saw that we were both being inducted into the Order of Canada at the same time. So I had the huge pleasure of being able to go up, introduce myself to him, and tell him how important he had been to me. The funny thing was that when I was a student I didn't open my mouth, I was shy, I was present but that was all. There would be absolutely no reason on earth that he would have even been aware of my existence except he put numbers on paper at exam time. But, ironically since then, my work is

something that he's familiar with. I was very pleased to see this influential professor again after all these years and he was quite pleased to be meeting me. It was so strange. But I was just so thrilled.

CM: We had talked about being connected to the things you chose to translate and being connected to your work. I was wondering if you feel especially connected to the language and culture besides your work in translation. Do you think you could do the same in another language?

SF: I don't know. It's partly the fact that this language and this culture are ones that I live in or live close to or brush up against. If I had been exposed to the Spanish language and hispanophone cultures early on, I imagine that this could happen, yes. But if I were to, by some miracle, acquire the Spanish language now at this stage and then to go out and translate books, it would be of a different order because I can't imagine ever having the same emotional connection with another language that I have to French.

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