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Perception of Canada in Czech Literature

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Czech perception of Canada starts later and is less frequent than that of the U.S. and is mainly limited to features of nature. This account is based on four kinds of sources: 1) geography textbooks (since 1824) and an early encyclopaedia (1860); 2) a general magazine (starting in 1835) and a geographical journal (1934); 3) novels and stories by 35 Czech writers (from a total of some 300 explored); 4) the 1930s translations of wildlife stories by Ernest Thompson Seton. The perception of Australia is comparable in quantity but begins earlier, with Jan Neruda. The adventurous career of Jan Welzl, who spent most of his life in subarctic Canada and is buried there, is commemorated as well.

In the Czech perception of English-speaking countries, Canada naturally ranks far behind Britain and the USA. Its status is only comparable with that of Australia. This presentation is a by-product of two earlier projects, the result of which were three thick volumes, *England Through Czech Eyes from the Middle Ages to the year 2000* (Olomouc 2001) and *America Through Czech Eyes from the foundation of the USA to the year 2000* (Olomouc 2002). The corpus consists of about 650 Czech books by some 300 authors. Canada not only supplies a mere fragment of the total of the references to the English-speaking world, but they appear much later, and dry facts rather than thoughtful observations prevail in the quotations. Nothing can rival e.g. the prophetic words of Václav Budovec z Budova, who in 1614, six years before his execution in the Old Town Square, said that God in the end may transfer his gifts away from the ungrateful Europeans to America.

The first permanent settlement in Canada was established only one year later than the Jamestown settlement. Jamestown begins in May 1607, while Samuel de Champlain established a settlement on the site of the present Quebec in 1608. Information on Canada was scarce and of course reached much more often France or England than Central Europe. Nobody from Bohemia or Moravia joined the Hudson Bay's Company, which received a charter in 1670, although Prince Rupert, born in Prague in 1619 as the son of the King of Bohemia, was involved in this enterprise. He himself, of course, never entered Canada either.

And no Czech joined the French Jesuits on their Canadian mission, although Czech Jesuit missionaries (including one from Olomouc) were active in Mexico and what is now south-west USA.

Canada is mentioned in Václav Kramerius: *Historické vypsání, kterak čtvrtý díl světa, Amerika, od Kolumba vynalezen byl.* (Praha, 1802). The records of the perception of Canada come from three groups of literature: 1) geography textbooks and encyclopaedias, 2) newspapers, journals and magazines, 3) fiction and books of travel, 4) Canadian literature in translation.

Let's start with the first category. The title of a school textbook of geography, published in Hradec Králové in 1824, is *Všeobecný zeměpis neb Geografia ve třech dílech ... pro učitele v čekaně školní a mládež vlasteneckou.* Its 3rd volume (188pp) contains a surprising amount of information on the geography of Canada: number of the population (400,000), 25 geographical names (three bays, two rivers, nine lakes, seven cities and four provinces), details about land (fertile land, swamps, forests, Niagara Falls), the climate (severe winter, "after a short spring comes a summer, in May you sow and in July the rye is ripe"), the products (furs – the greatest wealth of the country, maple sugar, coal and iron ore).

Karel Vladislav Zap wrote a two-volume work, *Všeobecný zeměpis* (1846, 1850). In addition to this university textbook he brought out a school textbook of geography, *Základové všeobecného zeměpisu pro školy* (Praha 1849). This shorter work can be compared to the other school textbook, one generation older. Zap begins by subdividing North America into 5 regions: Greenland (in Czech Grony), English land in North America (i.e. Canada), Russian America (i.e. Alaska), and the United States (in Czech Severo americké svobodné Spojené Obce). Canada is subdivided into 7 regions, of which only the first three are described in some detail: "In Upper Canada, the capital Toronto is located, above Lake Ontario, while Kingston is important for trade, and Fort William by Lake Superior is the main storehouse of furs. The St Lawrence River near the small town of Niagara forms the world-famous amazing waterfall." – "Lower Canada is situated above the lower part of the St Lawrence River, on which the capital, Quebec, the seat of the Governor general, is located. Montreal, sited where the Ottawa joins the St Lawrence River, is one of the main storehouses for furs and other trade." – "New Brunswick, a peninsula with excellent harbours, and Nova Scotia with Halifax as the capital." The remaining regions are described as wasteland owned by the Hudson Bay Co., a cold, foggy peninsula, snowbound mountains and volcanos, inhospitable boggy coast, inhabited by Indians and Eskimos. The Native Americans were not mentioned in the earlier Czech textbook.

The earliest 19th-century Czech encyclopaedia was *Riegrův slovník naučný* (1860-74). The one-and-a-half-column-long article on Canada is only seven times longer than the next entry, Canary bird. However, it already ends with some basic historical analysis: "The unequal elements of the Canadian population and the injustice committed by England in politics and religion led to fighting not dissimilar from the English revolution of 1688. Finally, in 1841, the liberal principles won and since then Canada has increasingly flourished."

Journals and magazines carry more weight in the perception of a country than reference books because their readership is far wider than that of textbook and encyclopaedia users. The weekly *Květy. Národní zábavník pro Čechy, Moravany a Slezany*, started in 1835. Though mainly bringing tales and poems, nearly each issue had a column, called either *Varia* or *Daily chronicle*, with short news items about abroad. The reporting ranges from substantial data, such as the accession to the English throne of Queen Victoria in 1837, to entertaining gossip (the attribute "entertaining" is part of the magazine title). Perusal of three volumes of *Květy*, for 1835, 1837, and 1839, reveals that Britain has there 46 references plus 3 long articles, the United States 24 plus 1 long article, Australia 1 reference, Canada none. No

wonder, in the 19th century, Canada was a backwater and failed to attract Czech emigration. In the ill-fated expedition of Sir Humphrey Gilbert to the New World in 1583, was a Slovak man, Tomáš Štítický. His ship probably touched Newfoundland but his letter written on August 6 to an English friend is not very informative indeed. He only says he saw mountains, forests, plenty of fish and no human beings (see Miloslav Vitula, *Z historie českých a slovenských krajanů v Kanadě do r.1939*, ČMM 1999). No later “debriefing” was possible because he had drowned on the return journey.

The absence of references to Canada inspired surveying the first three volumes of a popular geographical fortnightly, *Širým světem*, issued since 1934, that is one hundred years after *Květy*. The ratio for Britain, USA, Australia and Canada has changed. Britain no longer leads. Formerly there were twice as many references to GB as to the USA, now it is exactly reversed: 11:27. Both Australia and Canada have entered the stage, with nearly the same frequency: Canada 6, Australia 5. The main interest, however, focuses on Canada’s nature: the winter in Labrador, the company of seal hunters in Newfoundland, Eskymo igloos, Canadian reindeer, climb of Mount Logan – the highest peak (5870m). There are only two historical references: the Gold Rush on the Yukon River, and a mass commemorating the casualties of the Titanic, on a passenger ship poised above the spot of the 1912 disaster, off the coast of Newfoundland. Each short article is a translation from English. Among the many stories published in the magazine is one by a Canadian writer (see below).

Now it is the turn of Czech fiction as a source of references to Canada. The country is quoted by 35 writers (out of the 300 in the survey) – by ten born before 1900 and by another 25 born since 1900. The Czech writers mention 14 provinces or cities (British Columbia, Calgary, Dawson City, Halifax, Montreal, Klondike, Newfoundland, Nova Scotia, Ottawa, Quebec, Saskatchewan, Toronto, Vancouver and Winnipeg) and five Great Lakes. The greatest number of writers refers to Montreal (7) and to Toronto (5); the rest of the places have one or two quotes only. The earliest references are, surprisingly, to Nova Scotia, Newfoundland and Halifax. They appear in a book of juvenile literature, set in that part of the world (more specific references are to the fur trade and the growing of apples for export). The writer František Herites never entered Canada, but he did visit the USA on the occasion of the 1892 Columbian Exhibition.

What do the 35 writers have to say about Canada? Quotations that do not say much prevail (arrival in Canada, life in a Canadian city, etc.). Real facts cover the Gold Rush, the extreme cold, the large forests, the Montreal Expo. One author observes that Prague is situated on the same parallel of latitude as Winnipeg, another noticed that Canadian farmers are progressive (they send their children to agricultural colleges). Cowboys can be seen in Saskatchewan, Montreal has a reputation of a cultured city, and the observance of Remembrance Day is declining among young people, which is a shame. Hašek points out that whisky is consumed from Canada to Mexico. A place in the postwar Bohemian borderland with a good deal of lawlessness is called by a young writer (Topol) “the Klondike of the Wild East”. Surprisingly, the four quotes from Škvorecký are all rather unrevealing – considering he spent years in exile there. Another surprising finding is hardly any mention of the bilingual character of modern Canada or of the historical struggles in the middle of the 18th century or that Canada was the first British colony to obtain the statute of the dominion (1867).

This is the chronological list of the 35 writers and their books with references to Canada.

Born before 1901: František Herites (*Bratři Hartisovi*), Jaromír John (*Šibalství svršků, Výbušný zlotvor*), Jan Havlasa (*Krajiny v oblacích*), Jaroslav Hašek (short story *Zrádce národa*). Eduard Bass (*Lidé z maringotek*), Jaroslav Langer (*Snílci a vrahové*), Antonín

Osička (*V zemi dolaru*), Vladimír Vančura (*Rozmarné léto*: “a coat lined with Canadian sable fur”), Zdeněk Němeček (*New York – zamlženo*).

Born since 1901: Eduard Valenta (*Starou cestou*), Josef Kainar (*Moje blues*), Josef Škvorecký (*Příběh inženýra lidských duší*), Josef Nesvadba (*Einsteinův mozek*), Ludvík Vaculík (*Český snář*: “What are you going to do in Canada?” – “Not a lumberjack, there are better than me there”; *Sekyra*), Pavel Kohout (*Sněžím; Kde je zakopán pes*), Eva Kantůrková (*Památník*), Ivan Klíma (*Láska a smetí*), Jiří Stránský (*Zdivočelá země*), Karel Misař (*Plavba na stéble trávy*), Jan Dvořák (*Muž mezi ženami*), Vladimír Koerner (*Zrození horského pramene; Slepé rameno*), Jaroslav Koudelka (*Peříčka, peříčka*), Blanka Kubešová (*Horror Hill*), Petr Prouza (*Radovánky*), Josef Frajs (*Penzión pro svobodné dámy*), Jaroslav Kratěna (*Americká snídaně*), Alžběta Šerberová (*Ptáci na zemi*), Zdeněk Zapletal (*Půlnoční běžci*), Jan Novák (*Samet a pára*), Radek John (*Memento*), Jáchym Tool (*Sestra*), Martin Dejdar (*Jak jsem potkal Ameriku*).

A comparison with Australia shows that the fifth continent appears earlier in Czech literature than Canada: Jan Neruda refers to the Australian diggers and golden nuggets in *Menší cesty* and in *Žerty hravé i dravé*. There is no Langer, Vančura, Škvorecký or Vaculík mentioning Australia, on the other hand, Čapek-Chod, Tilschová, Pujmanová, Neff, Mucha, Klíma, etc. have something to say about Australia. The rate of ignorance about Canada can be illustrated by the fact that among Vladimír Páral's 15 references to English-speaking countries, in four novels, there is no mention of Canada. An even more telling example of the neglect of Canada is Radoslav Nenadál, a man who combined a career of a university professor of English literature with that of a professional writer. His eight books contain a total of 338 references to Britain and the USA but none to Canada or Australia.

The Czech books of travel started with a series of autobiographical volumes written, with the assistance of three journalists (Rudolf Těsnohlídek, Eduard Valenta, Bedřich Golombek), by Jan Welzl (1968-1948), a self-styled polar explorer. He spent thirty years of his life in the sub-Arctic regions of Canada and Alaska, hunting fur animals and often prospecting for gold. He died at the age of 80 and is buried in Dawson City. The stories of his adventures and his encounters with Eskimos were extremely popular in the 1930s. They are *Eskymo Welzl* (1928), *Třicet let na zlatém severu* (1930), *Po stopách polárních pokladů* (1932), *Trampoty eskymáckého náčelníka v Evropě* (1932), and the postwar *Ledové povídky*. Welzl was an inspiration for Captain van Toch, a picturesque character in the *War with the Newts* by Karel Čapek.

In the late 20th century, only accounts of short trips appeared, though Kantůrková's *Památník* contains a fairly detailed description of Montreal. Since the 1990s, several visitors to Canada have published book accounts of their travel experience, in spite of having spent only a couple of weeks there, alternately camping outdoors and making brief stops in cities. An example of this category is Břetislav Dadák: *Kanadský deník: 5000 kilometrů podzimním Ontariem* (1997). Meeting Czech emigrés on the way leads to his observation that now they have a higher living standard than Canadians but that it is due to their working harder, after having overcome the first difficulties of settlement.

A more thoughtful author is Eva Klobouková in her *Kanada intimní* (1998). No wonder she knows more about Canada when she has been living there since 1968. The only personal account of the life in Canada, which was published in the Husák era, was *Rok na kanadské vsi* by Jan Novotný, a teacher who legally obtained a teaching job in that country. His observations mostly centre round the Canadian school system, with only a few more general observations, such as the car being a status symbol. The year 1969 brought a couple of slim volumes about an experience in Canada.

The last source of the knowledge of Canada is Canadian literature. In the first third of the 20th century, Czechs mainly saw Canada through the eyes of Ernest Thompson Seton. The first translations of his stories about wildlife appeared in 1910 and by 1926 fifteen more volumes were published, republished in the 1930s, and read and enjoyed, especially by boys (including the present author).

In the 1930s, ice hockey matches of the Canadian national team in world championships become another source of interest in that country and the popularity of a Czech-Canadian player, Matěj Buckna, in the national team of Czechoslovakia raised even more the prestige of Canada among Czechs.