

The Rise of English, eh?

Matt Kavanagh
Okanagan College

THANK NORTHROP FRYE. No, really, thank him, light a candle, make a toast, whatever. For all of his astonishing professional accomplishments—his landmark texts, his founding role in our organization, his mentorship of generations of students, etc.—the one that we should all appreciate is a timely intervention whereby the wise old sage urged his colleagues to avoid the folly of the inane acronym. At the time, they were trying to figure out what to call our then-fledgling association and the choices were between CAUTE (to my ears falling somewhere between “cough” and “gout”) and CUTE (cue derisive laughter). Frye, though, cleared his throat and wondered if there might be an improvement ... That’s how we ended up with ACUTE (no second C for colleges at the time, though). Sharp, perceptive—what’s not to like about that?

Details, details, I know, but it is the details that give history if not its shape then certainly its texture. In between the official history of conference-going and the commissioning of reports on the state of the discipline, Marjorie Garson’s review of the first twenty-five years of our collective venture (1957–1982) is rife with such *seemingly* inconsequential details. Given our mandate in this Readers’ Forum of using Garson’s piece to consider the future and direction of ACCUTE, I first toyed with the idea of

MATT KAVANAGH is
Chair of the Department
of English at Okanagan
College. His research
takes place at the
intersection of Lacanian
psychoanalysis,
the discourse of
financialization, and
contemporary American
fiction.

using her work to imagine what ACCUTE might look like at its centenary in 2057. Beyond witticisms about rigidly adhering to the 140 character limit for conference tweets and marveling at how our membership dues fell to 1958 levels—one dollar!—thanks to the depreciated North American currency, I felt ill-equipped to forecast the state of discipline. Better instead to look forward by going back.

Garson's history is an invaluable document to assess the state of the discipline in our state, which is to say the particularly Canadian preoccupation with professing literature. Like many Canadian literary scholars, I was first introduced to institutional histories of our profession via Terry Eagleton and Gerald Graff, which admittedly focus on the British and American experience. As an Americanist, though, I had never thought particularly deeply about the Canada-sized gap in my understanding. What Garson makes quite clear is the unique challenge posed to the Canadian experience, perhaps most evident in the false starts that preceded the founding of ACUTE as a Learned Society.

As a recently transplanted Westerner, I was intrigued to discover that the first attempt at a national gathering of Canadian literary scholars took place in the West during the early 1920s, while Edmonton was the site of ACUTE's first annual meeting in 1958. In between, efforts to found a national organization that would meet regularly waxed and waned, in no small part due to unstable funding sources (sound familiar?). During the early 1950s, for example, a precursor to ACUTE secured funding from American sources. Even though there were Canadian cut-outs (the University of Toronto and the Humanities Research Council—a precursor to SSHRC), we have the Carnegie Foundation and Rockefeller Foundation to thank for footing that initial bill ... and for refusing to do so on more than a one-time basis, forcing ACUTE to adopt self-sustaining practices (those aforementioned dues), thus hastening its entry into the roll of learned societies.

Here, I thought, we have the Canadian experience nicely encapsulated. On the one hand, we have the perennially vexed relationship with America, where fears of cultural hegemony are exacerbated by the fact that any given province tends to have more in common with their southern neighbours than they do with each other. On the other, we have the insistence on east-west national ties stretching from Dalhousie to UBC. It goes without saying that the fate of Canada itself depends on such lateral connections (the most obvious example being, of course, the famous "last spike" of the CPR to which our national future was pegged). From the very beginning, then, ACCUTE embodied the tensions that shaped the nation.

As luck would have it, I read Marjorie Garson's history of our association alongside Kingsley Amis's acerbic love letter to academic failure, self-sabotage, and bad behaviour, *Lucky Jim* (1953). The conjunction may seem perverse—precisely because in reading and responding to Garson's piece I am engaging in the sort of professionalization that the eponymous Jim Dixon views with a great deal of suspicion, if not to say fear and loathing. But Amis's novel is well worth returning to, particularly when one considers that it belongs to the very historical moment when what is now ACCUTE began to take shape. What's more, Jim is a figure who speaks directly to today's academics (failed and otherwise).

For one thing, consider Jim's tenuous position as a probationary lecturer. In scrabbling for steady employment, Jim must navigate publication pressures, fend off overly keen students, mask his detest of the department chair with an artless and unconvincing veil of cordiality all the while scheming to line up his next gig in the increasingly likely event that he will be sacked. With apologies to David Lodge, it isn't always nice work. Jim's concerns can be translated into contemporary anxieties about sessional itinerancy and the downside of networking, not to mention the unfunny office comedy that today's workplace so often resembles. Of course, Jim is an underwhelming specimen. He's not a particularly committed or motivated academic, although apparently bright enough to have his work plagiarized by a colleague. He's a prodigious painter. He's also a historian. All strikes against.

I jest, of course, but there is something in Jim himself and not simply his situation that is instantly recognizable. The cynical detachment that provides *Lucky Jim* with its anarchic sense of humour is the truth of the professionalization of literature and the humanities in general. The irony is that after providing a finely detailed sketch of the inner life of the professionalized academic, Amis contrives to rescue his hero from the ivory tower, whisking him away from his tattered scholarly career to serve as a rich man's private secretary. It's a fantasy, of course, because it holds out the possibility that Jim's sense of inner distance can either be transcended or traversed. What I never quite realized, though, is the degree to which Jim is well and truly *isolated*. It wasn't until I read Garson's history of ACUTE and found myself thinking about the idea of academia as a collective endeavour that *Lucky Jim*, a novel I've read several times, began to appear strange to me. Its narrative logic breaks down precisely on the point of community. What seems to Jim an unbearable and inauthentic way of life looks that way because it is largely devoid of what Garson describes as a "degree of connection and fellow feeling." Since research and writing are

often solitary pursuits, as is teaching (to the extent that one's colleagues are more likely to see you at a conference than in a classroom), it is easy to forget that they are made meaningful by a shared context. The history of our association set out in these pages is a timely reminder that to profess literature in Canada is to make common purpose, common cause with one another.

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