West Coast Literary-Political Clashes: 1960–1985

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Abstract
Canada’s West Coast was the focus of intense literary-political clashes and debates between 1960–1985. Dominating the conversation was the relationship between literature and politics, specifically the differences between Canadian nationalist literary politics and the American-influenced literary poetics that flourished in Vancouver. In their political dimension, such as it was, the flavour of these poetics could be seen as anarchist Whereas anarchist appetites could believe that Canadian literature needed the input of a new generation of American poetics, nationalists saw this as a form of neo-colonialism and cultural imperialism. The focus of this essay is the clash that took place between the anarchists and nationalists; however, ancillary literary and cultural issues will also be examined.

Among the dramatis personae of the West Coast’s literary-political feuding of the 1960s were a cluster of central figures. George Woodcock, the editor of Canadian Literature, which operated from UBC, lived on the West Coast for decades. One of the most published, active men of letters in Canada, he was also an articulate political and social anarchist. Jerry Zaslove, an English professor at SFU, was similarly committed to the European anarchist way and Warren Tallman — while not as astute a political theorist as Woodcock or Zaslove — through his writings, actions, and affinities leaned toward socially anarchist traditions. If Woodcock and Zaslove shared politically anarchist views — albeit of distinct British and Frankfurt-U S orientations — Tallman’s close association with the American Black Mountain and Beat poets indicated that although his literary leanings took precedence, they were inherently anarchist in nature also.1

Among Canadian literary nationalists, West Coast native Robin Mathews is recognized as an old warhorse who was in the thick of nationalist literary scrimmages from the 1960s

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1 The anarchist and nationalist political traditions begin from opposite premises in their understanding of the soul and society. Anarchists tend to elevate the role of the individual and liberty against most forms of order and authority. Politics begins with the rights of the individual, and from such a position, politics is best understood and lived at the local and regional levels. Most anarchists are suspicious and cynical of the state (and the power at the core of it) and formal political parties. Nationalists tend to hold high the common good, and they argue that the good of the individual is best realized, in an organic way, through the good of the whole. Nationalists argue that there are essential needs of the human condition, and it is the role of the state to ensure that such needs are met for one and all. Anarchists tend to see most forms of authority as repressing the longings of the free individual, whereas nationalists see order and legitimate authority as the means by which liberty can be best realized and personhood best actualized.
onward. East Coast native Milton Acorn, another long-time champion of the nationalist vision, headed west to Vancouver for a five-year residence during the 1960s and was a vocal opponent of creeping American cultural influence. A third prominent nationalist, veteran poet and UBC instructor Marya Fiamengo, has enjoyed a long and distinguished career marked by a more moderate, less confrontational style. All three nationalist writers were immersed in the Canadian literary tradition, but interpreted it and wrote in their own respective fashions.

In brief, during the period of 1960–1985, Woodcock, Zaslove, and Tallman emerged variously in their times to embody the “West Coast” literary-anarchist position, as Mathews, Acorn, and Fiamengo would serve as representatives of the country’s literary-nationalist stance. Irreconcilable by nature, these positions are led to intellectual clashes which took place at both literary and political levels. Their roles are considered in this essay.

1960–67

The publication of *The New American Poetry* by Donald Allen\(^2\) made it clear to the interested that a new form of poetry and poetics was in the making, and it was American poetry that was at the forefront of this new poetics. At this pivotal point in twentieth century history, England was rapidly waning as the star from which Canadians would take cultural bearings. This reflected similar shifts in the visual art world at the time, where New York, with its Abstract Expressionists, replaced Paris as the hub of innovation. In poetry, the American tradition in its newest form and guise would now serve as the guide. While other poetic sensibilities in the USA continued to flourish (particularly in academic environments) Allen’s path-breaking anthology captured the attention of many Canadians on the West Coast. When Allen teamed up with Tallman in 1973 to update Allen’s earlier book, their new *The Poetics of the New American Poetry* established Tallman’s reputation for aesthetic and political inspiration. His Vancouver affiliations stretched almost fifteen years by then and this was not lost upon nationalists.

In the late 1950s, George Woodcock and Warren Tallman were both active in their working lives at UBC in Vancouver. Each, from different perspectives, personified the anarchist way — Woodcock again from the British model, Tallman from the American. In 1959, Woodcock was chosen to be the first editor of *Canadian Literature* and remained in the post until 1977. Tallman’s essay “Wolf in the Snow” was published in an early edition of *Canadian Literature*;\(^3\) it is striking that Allen’s *The New American Poetry* was published that same year. Tallman’s essay applied the American romantic approach to poetry and politics to Canadian literary work. Using five Canadian novels as guide-markers, he argued that Canadian literature was very much about the isolated, alienated, yet passionate artistic wolf, which is surrounded by a cold and unfeeling

\(^3\) Summer, 1960: No. 5/Autumn, 1960: No. 6, 7–48.
Canadian culture. The essay’s tone suggests that the position of the lone and misunderstood artist speaks truly about the Canadian experience, and this is consonant with the idea of a heroic individual who stands against the oppressive nature of authority and tradition which was at the core of Tallman’s thesis. His interpretive position spoke more about Tallman’s understanding of the artist than it did about a more comprehensive view of Canadian literature.

Such a reading fit neatly with the new ideology on the West Coast of the artist in Canadian literature. A new generation of young Canadians on the West Coast would be taken by Tallman’s reading of literature and by the new American models that embodied his approach.

The small but influential West Coast magazine that reflected more the American anarchist way than that of Woodcock’s more scholarly Canadian Literature, was Tish. It began in September 1961 and ended in the summer of 1969, forty-five issues later, going through four editorial periods. Tish was much more consciously indebted to American poetry and anarchist politics; in some of the earliest editions, lines were clearly drawn between the anarchists and the Canadian nationalist perspective.

In December 1961, George Bowering, a student of Tallman’s at UBC, wrote a critical review of Milton Acorn’s Against a League of Liars. By then, Acorn was an important Canadian poet “back east,” but Bowering dared to take him to task. Acorn was a good friend of Al Purdy, and Purdy decided to reply to Bowering. Purdy made it abundantly clear in his response that he thought Bowering misunderstood the reason for Acorn’s style and content, although he recognized that Acorn’s poetic form did need some polishing. To anyone who followed Canadian arts and letters, it was apparent that Bowering and his mentor Tallman were followers of the Black Mountain and American Beat tradition, whereas Acorn and Purdy stood firmly on the Canadian nationalist side of the debate. Thus, within its first year, Tish ignited a national debate in Canada about the nature and scope or poetry and politics, nationalism, and anarchism.

Acorn and Purdy had started a small literary broadsheet, Moment, in the early 1960s. Acorn and Gwendolyn MacEwen were married February 8, 1962, and within a few weeks of their marriage, they published Moment 6 in which they turned on the Tish tribe. Moment 7 followed, with an assault on the Black Mountain tradition. Frank Davey, one of the original Tish group, replied in forceful voice. At the centre of this debate was a fundamental regional difference of views and understandings concerning the forms and

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4 Moment was initially published by Acorn and Purdy in the late 1950s. Purdy had this to say about its early years: “In Montreal we published a little magazine, Moment, with a mimeograph machine which I suspect Acorn had purloined without permission from the Communist Party of Canada.” “Introduction,” Acorn’s Whisky Jack (Scarborough, ON: HMS Press, 1986), 8.

meaning of modern American poetry, appropriate Canadian responses to it, and the nationalist-anarchist political traditions that underlay such a clash.

The fact that the American Black Mountain and Beat traditions were taking literary front stage on the West Coast through the enthusiastic support of Warren Tallman and Tish meant a more direct clash was in the making. The historic, well-attended Vancouver Poetry Conference in 1963 made a significant international statement: Vancouver too was now at the cutting edge of avant-garde poetry.

By late 1963, Acorn could not remain in eastern Canada when the West Coast seemed to be redefining how poetry and politics should be done. In November of that year, escorted to the train station in Toronto by Robert Colombo, he headed to Vancouver. He would remain there until the autumn of 1968.

Acorn soon met some of the downtown poets of the Vancouver streets such as Red Lane and bill bissett. Acorn stayed active, gravitating toward left wing politics, and reading poetry at leftist book stores and at the Trotskyist Hall. He published poems in bissett’s *blew ointment*, and became a dominant political poet at the Advance Mattress coffeehouse, which had opened in the summer of 1966 at Alma and 10th in the Kitsilano district.

Robin Mathews was also emerging as a vocal Canadian nationalist during this period. A clash between him, Roy Daniells, and George Woodcock in the early 1960s pointed the way to a much larger confrontation on the poetry and politics wars from the 1960s–1980s. The initial tensions began with an article Roy Daniells published in Woodcock’s *Canadian Literature*. Daniells was on the committee that hired George Woodcock to be editor of *Canadian Literature*. Daniells had an article published in *Canadian Literature* called “The Long Enduring Spring.” The main thesis of the article was that Canadian

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6 Some of Acorn’s more important that appeared in *blew ointment* are “Poem,” “Poem for Sydney,” “In Victory Square” and his classic and well received poem, “The Natural History of the Elephants.”

7 Three useful works that recount the fuller tale of the literary political clashes of these times (and the reasons for them) are Warren Tallman’s *In the Midst* (Vancouver: Talonbooks, 1992); Chris Gudgeon’s biography of Acorn entitled *Out of This World: The Natural History of Milton Acorn* (Vancouver: Arsenal Pulp Press, 1996); and Richard Lemm’s biography, *Milton Acorn: In Love and Anger* (Ottawa: Carleton University Press, 1999), which is more thorough, scholarly, and better researched.

8 The core clash between Mathews and Woodcock/Daniells took place at literary and political levels. Mathews did not think, like Daniells, that Canadian literature was in a long enduring Spring. He was convinced that there was much maturity in Canadian literature before the 1960s, and only a colonial literary critic would think otherwise. Mathews also thought that Woodcock’s ideological anarchism shaped his read of the Canadian literary tradition in a way that distorted such a tradition.

9 *12* (Spring 1962), 6–14.
Literature was stalled in a perpetual spring season, and that no substantive summer fruit was being produced. Mathews sent Woodcock a letter in 1962 that raised serious questions about Daniells’ read of Canadian Literature. Woodcock refused to publish the article, and in his reply to Mathews, he had this to say:

I don’t agree with your article, any more than I agree with the findings of the Royal Commission, nor do I think that in general terms Canadian Literature is the place for the political-economic fringes of literary polemics.

(November 12, 1962)

There are three points to note here: 1) Woodcock and Mathews were obviously heading down literary-political different trails, and Woodcock was in a position of authority (as editor of Canadian Literature) that Mathews was not. 2) Woodcock’s antipathy to the Royal Commission spoke volumes about his understanding of the relationship between the state and the arts — Mathews was much more committed to the role of the state in supporting the arts, whereas Woodcock, being the anarchist he was, kept the state at bay. 3) Woodcock thought Mathews’ perspective was on “the political-economic fringes of literary polemics.”

It was more than obvious, therefore, that by the early 1960s on the West Coast a genuine clash was in the making. The publication by Woodcock of Tallman’s “Wolf in the Snow” and Daniells’ “The Long Enduring Spring” pointed in a certain direction that appealed to a new generation of American and Canadian poets — Tish was also a central part of this movement. Such a perspective tended to be suspicious of the historic authority of the literary and political establishment, of nationhood, and of previous poetic forms and their content. Acorn and Mathews were, on the other hand, drawing deeply from the distinctive Canadian poetic and political tradition, and, as a consequence, they were suspicious of both the importing of American models of poetry into Canada and anarchist politics that often walked hand and hand with such new poetry. Both thought that Canadian poets on the West Coast were becoming neo-colonials and poetic compradors. Obviously, Daniells, Woodcock, Tallman and Tish did not interpret things in quite the same way.

Dan McLeod played a significant editorial role in the final issues of Tish. It was McLeod who, with others, founded Georgia Straight in May 1967. There was an irony to this. 1967 was the one hundredth anniversary of Canada as a nation, and Canadians were celebrating a century of national statehood (and all that meant in terms of independence from England), but a magazine that flaunted the Canadian tradition had left the publishing tarmac. Georgia Straight was viewed as a form of cultural imperialism from one angle and an assault on a thoughtless and puritan traditionalism from another angle. The nationalists and anarchists were raising different questions about the Canadian soul and society, poetry and politics, and this took them down different paths and trails.

It did not take McLeod long to fold Tish into Georgia Straight. The final few issues of Tish were published as a “Writing Supplement” in Georgia Straight. Milton Acorn was a founding member of Georgia Straight, but it did not take him long to read the writing on the wall. Tish-G Georgia Straight was an anarchist publication, and Acorn was a nationalist
and socialist. It is impossible to unite such ideological commitments in either thought or action. There is no doubt that Acorn had an explosive temperament, and part of his break from *Georgia Straight* had something to do with this, but Acorn also realized, after writing an article for the *Straight*, and being an insider of sorts at its beginning, that his vision for Canada, poetry and politics was not that of the protest and anarchist way of McLeod and clan.

Milton Acorn knew the time had come for him to return to Central Canada — his affinities were few on the West Coast. *Georgia Straight* had entered a productive season by 1967–1968, and it would outlive all the other protest and anarchist magazines of the time. *Poetry and the Colonized Mind: Tish* by Keith Richardson, with a “Preface” by Robin Mathews, is probably the best book in publication that offers a solid and sustained critique of the *Tish* tradition from a Canadian nationalist perspective. By contrast, “Romantic Offensive: *Tish*” by Peter Quartermain is a spirited and animated defence of the Tish tradition just as Tallman’s “A Brief Retro-Introduction to *Tish*” in his *In The Midst* is a must-read from the perspective of a thoughtful and committed insider. It should be noted that Warren Tallman had no patience for Mathews’ form of poetry and politics. He called Mathews “an enemy of mine,” and he also lampooned Mathews in “September: A Necessary Politics for Stan Persky in forms of Notes on Robin Mathews Theatre of the New Psychodrama” in the same book. There can be no doubt that there were serious poetry and political disputes on the West Coast from 1960–1967, and Woodcock-Tallman took one direction, and Acorn-Mathews took another direction. It was simply a matter of time before the simmering clashes took on a national focus.

1967–70

The defeat of the Canadian Tory nationalist tradition of Prime Minister John Diefenbaker in 1963 by Lester Pearson and Tommy Douglas moved Canada in a political, economic and military manner more toward the American orbit and gravitational field. US President John F Kennedy detested Diefenbaker and welcomed Pearson. George Grant’s important publication *Lament for a Nation: The Defeat of Canadian Nationalism* (1965) pondered the 1963 election, lamented the passing away of an older High Tory nationalism, but ignited a new generation of Canadian left of centre nationalists. Such a growing nationalism would trigger yet another clash between the anarchist and nationalist vision of Canada.

By 1967 many Canadians were pondering just what it, in fact, meant to be Canadian. Mel Hurtig and Al Purdy worked tirelessly that year to produce a book by Canadians, for Canadians about Canadian relations with the USA. *The New Romans: Candid Opinions*

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11 *Canadian Literature* 75 (Winter 1977), 77–84.
13 Ibid., 295.
of the U S, a collection of fifty essays and poems including Mathews’ poem “Centennial Song,” was published in 1968. Most of the West Coast Canadian anarchist activists who were included agreed that the American military-industrial complex and its power elite had to be opposed. But what was on the far side of protest and opposition? Most knew what they wanted to be free from, but what did most want to be free for, and how would such a goal be politically achieved? This is where the nationalists and anarchists parted company. Mathews would agree with Bowering, for example, that the cost of winning in Vietnam was too costly at a variety of levels. But under the surface of the anarchist protests against Vietnam was cynicism about the state in bringing about the Imperfect Good. In illustration, many American conscientious objectors fled to Canada because of the war and the role of the American state in continuing it. Often Canadians were sympathetic to their concerns, but frequently these American dissenters brought with them a distrust of the state. This is where the nationalist Mathews and the anarchists parted political and poetic paths. “Centennial Song” probes how Canadians, like a woman of too easy virtue, will recline for the U S. Mathews’ argument was that Canadians needed a stronger state to oppose the “New Romans” to the south, and to create a more just and peaceable kingdom in the True North. It is fitting that Purdy, as editor, set Mathews’ “Centennial Song” beside Woodcock’s “Various Americas” in The New Romans.

Mathews was back from England and France by 1968. Robin Mathews and James Steele were teaching in the English department at Carleton University at the time. They became aware, after much careful research, that Canadians were often not being hired in Canadian universities. Canadians were being bypassed for teaching positions, and Americans or those from the United Kingdom were offered jobs. This disparity could not be ignored. Their publication of The Struggle for Canadian Universities (1969) was to catapult Mathews and Steele to the very centre of the Canadianization movement in the 1970s. The West Coast impact of the Mathews and Steele activism was duly noted in Hugh Johnston’s Radical Campus: Making Simon Fraser University (2005). The clashes at SFU in the 1960s–1970s–1980s between the Canadian nationalists and the American-Canadian anarchists had much to do with Mathews’ nationalism, and such a position was further enflamed in 1985 when the English department at SFU refused to hire Mathews. This decision created a national debate on the West Coast, but more of this later.

It was in 1970, though, that these issues reached a new intensity at a national level. The annual Governor General Award in Canada inevitably has its boosters and critics, but in 1970 the tensions reached a heightened pitch. Most in the literary community assumed that Milton Acorn was going to be crowned for his book of poetry I’ve Tasted My Blood (1969). Al Purdy had selected the poems and wrote a convincing “Introduction.” George Bowering had written a mildly critical review of I’ve Tasted My Blood in Canadian

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15 Mathews’ poem in is a shocker that is not easily forgotten, just as Bowering’s “Winning” is a frontal assault on the planners and horrors of the Vietnam War.
Literature. Acorn was portrayed, partially, as part fine poet and part bumbling buffoon who needed Purdy’s steady and sure editorial guidance to bring more mature order to the poetic missive. There are kind comments made in the review, but there are also digs. It is significant that the review was published in the autumn of 1969. The storm clouds were gathering, and Tallman-Bowering and Acorn-Mathews would be in the eye of the storm.

The literary community in Canada was shocked when George Bowering and Acorn’s former wife, Gwendolyn MacEwen, won the Governor General’s Award in 1969. The fact that Warren Tallman, an American and mentor to Bowering, was on the selection committee raised eyebrows and conflict of interest questions among nationalists.

Some inaccuracies exist in who exposed, initially, the Tallman-Bowering twosome, and the work that led to the “People’s Poet Award” being given to Acorn. Gudgeon says this: “After the awards were announced in 1970, a group of poets led by Joe Rosenblatt and Eli Mandel launched a concentrated attack on the Governor General’s committee” The fact is that it was Robin Mathews who was first out of the gate in opposing the GG Award and the Tallman-Bowering connection. This fact (with a fine cartoon) is amply illustrated in Nathan Cohen’s article, “The Canadian Council: Even its best friends are complaining now.” Mathews and friends had staged a demonstration outside the Canada Council office in Ottawa, and it was their work that led to the organized opposition, which included Irving Layton. Acorn was given the “People’s Poet Award” in Toronto at Grossman’s Tavern on Spadina on May 16, 1970. Canadian poetic worthies such as Layton, Al Purdy, Joe Rosenblatt, Eli Mandel and Margaret Atwood were in attendance.

The chasm that opened between the Governor General’s Award and the People’s Poet Award in 1970 can be explained significantly in terms of confrontation between an American-styled approach to new poetry and anarchist politics as embodied in the West Coast tradition of the Black Mountain-Beat-Tish-Georgia Straight and an emerging and committed Canadianization movement as embodied in those like Acorn-Mathews and those who offered Acorn the People’s Poet Award in the Great Canadian Poetry Wars.

James Deahl lived with Milton Acorn in Toronto from 1979–1981. In an e-mail to me Deahl had this to say about Acorn and the Tish tradition:

Acorn always had a grudge against the Tish poets. Even in the 1980s he would denounce them. The real target that Acorn, MacEwen, Purdy, Fiamengo took aim at was the notion that literature and the arts should have nothing to do with politics. That is, that the arts were somehow above politics. (That, of course, is itself a political idea).

(January 8, 2009)

16 42 (Autumn, 1969), 84–86.
17 Toronto Star (April 25, 1970).
It might not be totally fair to argue that the Tish group were opposed to politics or thought art was above politics. It is true to argue that their notion of politics lacked a certain understanding and commitment to the formal political process and the good that can come from such a process. There are limits, in short, in reducing politics to protest and advocacy activism or merely local and regional concerns. It is at national and provincial levels that policy is thought through, made and enacted on a variety of issues at the domestic and foreign policy level which cannot be ignored. Anarchist politics, with its excessive cynicism regarding authority, tends to retreat into ever smaller cells and groups as a way and means of doing politics. The nationalist vision thinks much larger about how the common good can be brought into being for one and all.

The bitter clash that took place in Toronto in 1970 had much to do with the Canadian Poetry Wars that emerged on the West Coast in the 1960s between Woodcock-Mathews and Acorn-Tish/Georgia Straight. The volcano had been smouldering for a decade.

**1970–85**

Marya Fiamengo had established herself as a fine and maturing poet throughout the 1960s and into the 1970s. She completed her MA with Earle Birney in the Creative Writing department at UBC in 1965, and taught as a Senior Instructor at UBC from the 1960s–1990s. Fiamengo formed a solid and lasting relationship with Seymour Mayne and Pat Lane when she was at UBC, and it was Mayne who assisted in the publication of Fiamengo’s second book of poetry, *Silt of Iron*.18 The evocative drawings by Jack Shadbolt in *Silt of Iron* and Fiamengo’s poems make this collection worth careful reading, but much more was yet to come from Fiamengo’s pen.

In the 1970s the dam broke in Fiamengo’s poetry. The themes of poetry and politics and the politics of the Canadianization movement began to take front stage. *In Praise of Old Women*19 was dedicated “To Robin and all those who struggle against the Americanization of Canada.” Many of the poems are grounded and rooted in the Canadian local, cultural and political experience and ethos. But it is in *North of the Cold Star*20 that the Canadian female equivalent of Mathews and Acorn comes to the poetic and political forefront. *North of the Cold Star* is political poetry committed to the personal, public, and national levels of the human journey. There is no slipping away to other times and places. What emerges is the demanding now, and there is the future of Canada to be faced. The Canadianization movement is given poetic expression in *North of the Cold Star* in a way that few poets in Canada have attempted.

Fiamengo in her unpublished “Memoir” asked and answered this poignant question:

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20 Oakville, ON; Mosaic Press, 1978.
Now, where in all this was the Canadian, in particular British Columbian intelligentsia? Where were the native poets, writers, scholars? Earle Birney, like great Achilles, sulked in his tent. Dorothy Livesay, a respected senior poet, fell in love with U S poet Jack Spicer. When I expressed my feelings of perplexity and alienation, she replied, “we have much to learn technically from Jack Spicer.” The incomparably brilliant lyric poet, Phyllis Webb, succumbed to the allure of the Black Mountain versifier Robert Duncan. It must be admitted that Phyllis Webb had a strong inclination toward political and philosophical anarchism before she met Duncan.

The fact that Fiamengo was good friends with Pat Lane, and Lane was one of Acorn’s better West Coast friends when he was in Vancouver meant that Fiamengo and Acorn met on a variety of occasions. The fact that Acorn had won the People’s Poet Award in 1970 and the Governor General’s Award in 1975 could not have helped but encourage Fiamengo’s commitment to the Canadianization movement in political poetry. Fiamengo had in the 1960s published a variety of articles and book reviews in *Canadian Literature*, but the more she was drawn to the Canadianization tradition, the fewer the articles/book reviews published in the leading West Coast literary magazine.

The main theme of *Canadian Literature* 40 (Spring 1969) was “Colonialism and Post-Colonialism.” Acorn and Mathews would have been a perfect fit for the publication, but Woodcock chose Roy Daniells to write the lead article, and Purdy-Acorn-Mathews are far from view. In the Winter 1977 edition the main motif was “Nationalism.” William New was the new editor, and he, like Woodcock, ignored some of the leading nationalists in the Canadianization movement. Serious questions need to be asked about this, and the answers will, in some way, tell us something about the West Coast poetry wars.

1985

The initial confrontation in 1962 between Woodcock-Mathews was but the beginning of an intense disagreement between two Canadian intellectuals who interpreted the relationship between culture, literature and politics in opposing ways. The publication of Woodcock’s *Strange Bedfellows: The State and the Arts in Canada* would not go without comment. Woodcock, being the anarchist he was, raised serious questions about the State supporting the arts in Canada even though he had received largesse from the Canadian government for many years. Mathews responded. His article “Someone Pays the Piper: Robin Mathews replies to John Metcalf and George Woodcock on Patronage and the Canadian Arts” took both Metcalf and Woodcock to task for their reactionary, anti-Statist and laissez-faire approach to patronage and the arts. The article did not please woodcock and Metcalf. The core issue was, of course, funding for the arts. Who was responsible for funding the arts and why? Mathews argued that citizens, via the state,

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21 *Vancouver: Douglas & McIntyre, 1985.*
should support the arts. Woodcock took the position that society rather than the state should be the primary supporter of the arts. Such positions lead to quite different places regarding who supports the arts and why. The political commitments have substantive practical implications.

The final phase, however, in the drawn-out battle between the nationalist and anarchist tradition began in a rather innocent way, but the law of unintended consequences led to a historic West Coast showdown at Simon Fraser University.

Robin Mathews was teaching in the English department at Carleton University in 1985, and Bruce Nesbitt was teaching in the English department at SFU. Both men decided it might be interesting to switch universities for a year. This happens often, and it is rarely a problem. But, such was not to be the case at SFU. Jerry Zaslove was the chair of the English department there at the time. Additionally, many in the department were aware of Mathews’ literary-political nationalism and few wanted him in their midst. Zaslove called a vote, and the department ruled against inviting Mathews. This came as a surprise to Mathews who had played a leadership role in the Canadianization movement from the late-1960s onward. Mathews was in the habit of facing opposition, but as a Canadian to be frozen out of a Canadian university was a shock for him. It did not take long for the media to wade into the fray. The Globe and Mail took up the issue.

Zaslove has been an articulate, thoughtful and compassionate anarchist for decades on the West Coast. His probes of the anarchist tradition went much deeper than Woodcock, and his contribution to anarchist political theory has been important. But, in the Mathews-Zaslove confrontation, two different ideologies clashed.

The Globe editorial makes it obvious that some problems were afoot at SFU between Mathews and the English department. Zaslove is quoted in the article as saying, “We just don’t think he would fit into the department. . . .He has attacked members of this university before for being pro-American.” By 1985, Mathews was one of Canada’s best-known literary-political nationalists, and his reputation could not properly be ignored. There were many Americans in the English department at SFU that knew who Mathews was, and were not keen on having him in their midst. It did not take Mathews long to reply to Zaslove. “Nasty Inside the Wry” (May 28, 1985) took Zaslove to task for the letter he wrote to Carleton that nixed the exchange. Mathews made clear his view that he was not welcomed at SFU because he did not strut the party line. He quoted amply from Zaslove. The latter did not remain silent. “Complex Questions” was published in letters to the editor. Zaslove suggested that Mathews was ‘fanatical, narrow, fundamentalist and even anti-democratic’. Mathews had butted horns with two of the leading anarchists on the West Coast: Woodcock and Tallman. Now he faced Zaslove and clan at SFU.

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23 “Delicate Balance” (May 18, 1985).
The incident escalated. The idea that a well-known Canadian nationalist could be rejected from a position in a Canadian university was an affront to many Canadians. The Canadian Association of University Teachers (CAUT) had censured SFU twice before for unwise decisions (May 1968–November 1968 and May 1971–May 1977). SFU did not need another censure from CAUT. Margaret Atwood was the Canadian chair of PEN at the time, and she threatened to bring the full weight PEN against SFU if they rejected Mathews. Atwood’s letters to both Zaslove and President Saywell at SFU are quite poignant, telling documents of this imbroglio. Pauline Jewett, former President of SFU, and Margaret Fulton (President of Mount Saint Vincent) were also active in supporting Mathews — it seemed to be yet another obvious case of the marginalization of a Canadian writer, scholar, and political activist within his country and province. The many letters that are now available from SFU on the Mathews incident make it clear that the situation was more complex than the way it was often framed, but there is no doubt that the clash of literary-political ideologies was a contributing cause.

In the end, a decision was made to welcome Mathews into the Canadian Studies program at SFU rather than the English department. The battle was finally over and Mathews finished his teaching days at the university that had attempted to bar him.

**Conclusion**

Milton Acorn (1923–1986) is no more with us. Marya Fiamengo continues to publish fine poetry: *Patience After Compline* and *White Linen Remembered* are mature poetic works that evoke much within the reader. The back cover of *White Linen Remembered* features a photograph of Fiamengo and painter Joe Plaskett together in a reunion of sorts of these West Coast cultural elders. In 2006 Fiamengo was honoured by the publication of *Visible Living: Poems Selected and New*. Seymour Mayne, Russell Thornton, and Janice Fiamengo wrote the “Preface” to the poetic festschrift. In a letter to me, Fiamengo had this to say: “Robin brought to my attention that the forward made little mention of my entrenched nationalism. I am somewhat disappointed at this.” Mathews wrote a blistering, hard-hitting letter to Mayne, Thornton and Janice Fiamengo that noted this glaring omission.

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29 October 18, 2006.
Mathews has continued to write and publish. Both Fiamengo and Mathews also appear in the important, recent anthology *Rocksalt*, the first major collection of B.C. poetry in 30 years.

George Woodcock (1912–1995) has been called “Canada’s foremost man of letters.” In 1994, The City of Vancouver proclaimed Saturday May 7 “George Woodcock Day.” Warren Tallman (1921–1994) was not honoured nor feted with quite the same public acclaim offered Woodcock. Unaccountably perhaps, Tallman is not even included in William New’s *Encyclopedia of Literature in Canada* (2002), even though Woodcock is offered ample space — remembering that it was New who replaced Woodcock as editor of *Canadian Literature*. Mathews and Fiamengo are barely mentioned. Nor is Jerry Zaslove mentioned in the *Encyclopedia*, although many of his faithful students and peers did honour him with a festschrift volume entitled *Anarcho-Modernism: Towards a New Critical Theory*.

The poetry wars on the West Coast between 1960–1985 were fought at many levels. There is little doubt that both political theory (nationalism and anarchism) and contending theories of literature and the relationship between literature and politics were central to the clashes. Woodcock, Tallman, and Zaslove, for various reasons, took one position just as Acorn, Fiamengo, and Mathews took an opposite view. The history of Canada’s literary-politics would have been much duller without the animated confrontations that took place on the West Coast and, arguably, the positions of those times are in some ways still at play.

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