

WESTERN MYTH

THE WORLD OF RALPH CONNOR

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“RALPH CONNOR” is a name which is virtually lost in the mists of time. Apart from librarians and specialists in Canadian literature, the few who remember it must do so with the nostalgic smile reserved for childhood things only valued because of their associations. I imagine few browsers in our libraries today let their eyes rest on the long shelf that contains his two dozen or more novels, and fewer still will have chanced upon *The Life of James Robertson, Missionary Superintendent in the Northwest Territories* (1908) and *Postscript to Adventure, The Autobiography of Ralph Connor* (1938) which carry his real name, the Rev. Charles W. Gordon. Half a century ago the situation was very different. For years the presses whirled frantically to keep up with the demand for *Black Rock* (1898), *The Sky Pilot* (1899), and *The Man from Glengarry* (1901), his first (and best) three novels. We are told that one publisher, George H. Doran, built his house on a foundation of Connor novels, and by 1937 when Connor died, his fame well on the decline, the total of copies sold was over five millions. Those books were read in Canada and abroad, by Scottish crofters and presidents of the United States, by businessmen, socialist thinkers, cabinet ministers, and ordinary people everywhere. When Connor travelled he was welcomed by high and low as a distinguished author. George Doran, in his lively autobiography, *Chronicles of Barabbas* (1935), records a typical incident: “The last time I saw him [Connor] was in London. I was to send

him a letter. 'Where shall I send it?' 'To Number 10 Downing Street. I am stopping with the Prime Minister,' was his quiet rejoinder."

How are we to account for Connor's extraordinary popularity, and his equally extraordinary fall from favour? By way of answer it is necessary to consider for a moment the literary and historical situation in which he appeared.

The history of the Canadian novel is a more dismal story than that of Canadian poetry, and where the nineteenth century novel is weakest — almost non-existent in fact — is in the mode which depicts contemporary reality. We can understand this best if we remember that the novel in the realistic tradition depends heavily on a social context, and Canadian life, even where it had risen beyond the struggle for physical survival, was a rapidly growing, changing, evolving flux for most of the nineteenth century. Naturally writers turned away from this confusing immediate scene to the more stable, clear-cut, traditional patterns of past communities for their matter, particularly to the colourful simplicities of early French-Canada. Moreover the prevailing conventions of piety, decorum, and gentility in fiction discouraged any robust approaches to the contemporary scene — Goldwin Smith's "Seven Lamps of Fiction" are a good summary of accepted critical criteria — and so the serious problematical approach was ruled out or made very difficult. Contemporary reality, then, entered if at all in its most trivial and innocuous forms.

In 1898 into the quiet sheepfold of genteel society novels and historical romances Ralph Connor burst with his portrait of the raw, turbulent, crude life of a Rocky mountain mining camp, *Black Rock, A Tale of the Selkirks*. Having in 1890 accepted a call to "the new Presbytery of Calgary, the largest presbytery in the world" (as Superintendent Robertson called it), Connor had seen that life at first hand, experienced its hardships and dangers, and had caught the fever of its excitements. Just as the physical horizons of Canada were suddenly pushed back to allow the flow of settlers and opportunists to pour into the plains and mountains of a new world, so the literary horizons were expanded by an outburst of what appeared at first glance to be a bold uncompromising realism, unafraid of hard truths, vulgarity, violence, sardonic humour, cruelty, immorality, and all the other things Canadian Victorianism preferred to turn its back upon.

Not everyone, of course, rejoiced in this pushing back of horizons at

the opening of "Canada's century." The crude, boisterous era of western expansion, which began abruptly in the 1890's and tapered off only after the disillusioning impact of the First World War and its domestic consequences, provoked the disgusted reaction of many intelligent Canadians. Understandably so, for few periods of Canadian history can have been less comfortable for the sensitive artist or the intellectual to live and work in. Unable or unwilling to share in the scramble for easy money which land speculation, mineral discoveries, industrial expansion and the swelling immigrant population promised, intellectuals fled to the artistic Bohemias of New York or Europe, men like Carman, Duncan, and Charles G. D. Roberts, the Father of Canadian poetry who chose to spend twenty-five years of his paternity abroad. Those who remained turned in revulsion from sordid materialism; "Beauty has taken refuge from our life, That grew too loud and wounding," opined the austere D. C. Scott. Or they sought out quiet corners of the land where nineteenth century peace and stability could be imagined still — Drummond's French-Canada, or the idyllic Prince Edward Island of Anne of Green Gables. A few bolder spirits were prepared to contend with the enemy. Stephen Leacock humorously drew attention to the plight of the "little man" drowning in a world of increasing "bigness"; shot his satiric darts at the folly of little towns that rushed eagerly to meet their fates as big cities; and laid the whip on the corrupt urban Arcadias of the new plutocracy. Peter McArthur returned to his paternal homestead to defend the dwindling agrarian paradise against the serpents of commercialism and urbanism with his eulogies of farming as a way of life and his war-cry, "Back to the Land."

These were the "inner-directed" men, aristocratic, austere, puritanical, cynically witty, romantic, incorrigibly nostalgic (or whatever form their independence took), but they were the minority. Far more numerous, setting the temper of the era, were the Services and the Steads, who did not flinch from coarseness, vulgarity and materialism. They might prefer the pen to the shovel or the placer pan, or to the glib tongue of the speculator, but they could find thereby their own way to share in the profits. These were primarily writers who welcomed and exploited the opening of the West. Ralph Connor took his stand, though as we shall see a rather different one, with them.

In Eastern Canada the boom era showed itself in rapid industrial de-

velopment, in the growth of urbanism, and, consequently, in that vast increase in social interdependency which brought an end to the nineteenth century era of economic individualism, in fact and in myth. A social revolution was carried out which was not immediately grasped. The units in economic relations were no longer individuals, the employer and his employee, but combinations — corporations, trusts, mergers, unions, associations. “Bigness” had inescapably arrived. How to conciliate the large, powerful forces contending within the body politic became the main problem of astute politicians like W. L. Mackenzie King, whose recognition of the corporate nature of social life constituted a major change in the philosophy of Liberalism. Late nineteenth century Canadian liberals, by clinging to simpler theories of individual liberty, had remained out of touch with the contemporary trend to collectivism. Ralph Connor was committed temperamentally and by religious faith to an individualistic view of human experience. He had first-hand knowledge of the social changes in progress, for he was for years in the thick of Winnipeg’s labour unrest, and he acted as arbitrator (of the Mackenzie King school) in innumerable disputes. But the two later novels which deal with such subject-matter, *To Him that Hath* (1921) and *The Arm of Gold* (1932), treat social issues mainly in terms of personalities and individual sins and folly. It was only the West that provided him with matter his individualistic approach could handle to advantage. Western life was still too fluid in the early 1900’s to crystallise into an urban civilisation of any complexity, and the ideal of individual initiative could with some justice hold sway.

THE WORLD OF Ralph Connor, in so far as it existed at all, lasted for only a short period. It was already passing as he wrote about it. And indeed, he was well aware of this, for he set himself in part the task of recording it before it was entirely lost. Why, it might be asked, did he choose for his subject what nineteenth century Canadian novelists preferred to ignore for that very reason, the changing immediate scene? The answer is, I believe, that he saw what other novelists failed to realise: that the present moment, with all its novelty and its

fluidity, is significant only in so far as it reveals an old, stable, enduring subject, man's essential nature and condition, and he felt the transient life of the West to be especially illuminating in this respect. Like James Joyce, Connor saw himself as writing a chapter in the moral history of his country, and the fact that his best novels can still catch at our attention despite their radical faults suggests to me that he sometimes came close to succeeding.

In the opening pages of that first novel *Black Rock*, the narrator Ralph Connor is led far away from the familiar East, from the "cosmopolitan and kindly city" of Toronto, into a primitive lumber camp six miles from the mining village of Black Rock in the heart of the Selkirks. Connor is a photographic observer, and we get details of the camp which make the then original setting vivid. The loggers are a tough, colourful, uncouth bunch — Connor nicely catches their mixture of dialects and accents — but they meet their match on Christmas Eve when the hero of the tale appears, the Presbyterian minister Mr. Craig, and proceeds to Christianize, willy-nilly, their rollicking pagan festival. The key-note of the book, and indeed of much of the later Connor, is struck when Craig, by telling the meaning of the Christmas story in the most informal of sermons, captures his reluctant audience, and especially the oldest, hardest, fiercest sinner of them all: "Old man Nelson held his eye steadily on the minister," Connor says. "Only once before had I seen that look on a human face. A young fellow had broken through the ice on the river at home, and as the black water was dragging his fingers one by one from the slippery edges, there came over his face that same look. I used to wake up for many a night after in a sweat of horror, seeing the white face with its parting lips and its piteous, dumb appeal, and the black water slowly sucking it down." Connor narrates as at first hand the long, violent, brutal and not entirely successful struggle of the powers for good, lined up with Craig, to save souls like Nelson's from their black waters of damnation, against the powers for evil, the bootlegger and gambler Slavin and his gang of rough-necks. The tale is full of action, from the vivid knock-down-drag-out fight between the Drys and the Wets, to the colourful race of four-horse combinations, in which the loggers' team edges out the citizens' and the miners' in a wild finish; but the theme of conversion and re-birth underlies it all.

The novels that followed in the next decade largely develop and vary

the *Black Rock* formula. It had proved a sudden and unexpected success. There were, aside from the large official issue, eleven pirated editions of that first book. The Rev. Charles W. Gordon had become the famous novelist Ralph Connor overnight, and he worked his vein thoroughly. Take a wild, barbaric setting away from the civilized gentility of the East; fill it with a crowd of virile, bold, lusty, profane, hard-fighting and hard-living men, often with pasts to live down, who are exploiting the unrestrained individuality of frontier life to the full; introduce morality and religion, usually in the form of a Presbyterian minister who fights bravely against great odds to save the souls of the indifferent and hostile sinners; add a touch of romance, a virtuous maiden, wife or mother to soften and uplift the harder hearts; mix up the moral and physical battles, letting the blood flow freely, and bring off victory for the forces of good; cap it with conversion and salvation for the evil as well. All this Connor did with considerable technical fluency, and a clever manipulation of tensions and contrasts and the simpler dramatic devices that appeal immediately to our feelings. The mild, gentle, boyish Sky Pilot, humble, aware of his own inadequacies as a man of God, shatters the cynical, callous indifference of the Albertan cowboys by his enthusiasm and his innocence. The Glengarry war-horse Macdonald, recently converted, endures the cruellest goadings of his enemies rather than forget the Lord's message, "Vengeance is *Mine*."

Individual scenes of dramatic power and photographic vividness stand out in each novel, as for example the funeral procession in *The Man from Glengarry*: at night by the light of cedar bark torches the body of young Cameron is carried home to his waiting parents, and when the bearers arrive the father silences the mother's terrible scream of grief, recalling her to her duty — "Whisht, Janet, woman! . . . Your son is at the door." Every novel has its special locality to exploit (the Selkirks, the foothill country, the Ottawa river, the Crow's Nest Pass, and that boyhood home described so lovingly in *Glengarry Schooldays*); there are many special customs or colourful local activities to describe: maple-sugaring, a stump-pulling bee, a house-raising, a wake, a harvesting contest, and so on. The informative scope is panoramic (Connor's regions include almost the entire breadth of Canada), and sometimes we are shown striking scenes and experiences once common enough in this country but long since forgotten. *The Foreigner* (1909), for example, describes the

sordid shack-life of Russian immigrants in Winnipeg in the early 1900's; to find any other writer who dares deal with such material we have to turn to the sociologists, or rather to their only equivalent at that time, men like J. S. Woodsworth whose *My Neighbour* and other books angrily drew attention to the same situation. Throughout Connor's novels we get a sense of teeming vitality and an endless reservoir of varied experiences and exciting adventure. It is not surprising that the rough-riding Teddy Roosevelt and Ralph Connor were mutual admirers.

Through all the novels too runs a rich vein of humour. The vivid McGill-Toronto rugby match which is described at the beginning of *The Prospector* (1904) gains a dimension by the presence there of the pious little old Scots widow, Mrs. Macgregor, for whom the players' violence is nothing compared to the clan-wars she has known in the Old Country; who turns out to be an expert in the subtleties of the game; and who sends her giant of a son "Shock" into the scrimmage with the admonition, "Run away Hamish, and be careful of the laddies." The sentimentality of the Sky Pilot's funeral is cut astringently by the description of another funeral procession which ends in an unseemly race between the sleigh bearing the corpse and the two carrying the mourners and the pall-bearers respectively. Afterwards, the corpse-driver, having won the race to the burial-ground, "fairly distributed the blame," as Connor tells us: "'For his part,' he said, 'he knew he hadn't ought to make no corp get any such move on, but he wasn't goin' to see that there corp take second place at his own funeral. Not if he could help it. And as for the others, he thought that the pall-bearers had a blanked sight more to do with the plantin' than them giddy mourners'."

But humour is after all not an added feature, an occasional ornament or the sugar-coating to Connor's writing; it is an aspect of his essential good-will, high-spirits, tolerance, or to choose the best word — charity. There is a love of action, of experience, and of people of all kinds and classes running through much that Connor has written that makes far better Canadian writers seem by comparison a little cold, narrow, priggish, snobbish, or dessicated in their orientation to their own lives and towards their fellows.

THE CHIEF REASON for the large sale of Connor's earlier books was no doubt their timeliness. By the late 1890's all eyes were on the West. The flood of immigrants from the East and from abroad so long expected was at last flowing strongly. What was the new land they were going to really like? Was it as thrilling as the reports claimed? Connor provided answers, and exciting ones at that. The country west of the Great Lakes was vast, infinitely rich in potential. If at times the latter part of *The Man from Glengarry* now reads to us like propaganda for the Canadian Pacific Railway, it is more likely that many of its first readers were deeply stirred by the vision of the "empire of the Canadian West" that it tries to project before our eyes. And it was the existence of real opportunities, not merely enthusiasm, that peopled Connor's novels with men on the make, young Scots from Glengarry or immigrant Slavs, rising in spectacular fashion from ignorance or poverty to power, importance and the life of wealth and refinement. The West, indeed, was a world on the make.

Naturally there was less time for some of the subtleties, even religious subtleties, of more settled communities, and human beings were likely to appear in their simplest, clearest outlines. The God of Connor's West is of an appropriate nature, generous minded, not too concerned with the letter (too little the theologian to satisfy Calvin, surely), sympathetic to the spirit in unlikely places, ready to have His work done by whoever will put a hand to it. Presbyterian ministers, saintly widows, Catholic priests, rough-mannered miners or lumbermen may equally enter into and even (at a pinch) conduct religious services. The people tend to be a little larger than life as the Easterner knows it. The men are tall, broad-shouldered, immensely strong, hardy, brave and tender-hearted. There are of course cads as well as Christian gentlemen (a distinction in nature, not social class), but the most vicious of villains are redeemable despite their terrible cruelty and wickedness; they repent movingly. The women are pure and modest and maidenly and beautiful. Nothing quite equals in the power for good "the sweet uplift of a good woman's face" (in those days no other uplift would have crossed a gentleman's mind). Their voices have such a sweet, thrilling tone that the savage breast is soothed with a single song; their eyes plumb the depths of a man's heart and see what really lies there, or glow luminously with a warmth of simple love,

or fill with tender tears, or disappear modestly from the too frank gaze of admirers. What mothers they make, and what wives! Timid and gentle, but brave as lions in the cause of virtue.

As the novels proceed we become aware that we are in the presence of a full-blown myth of the West, not merely a feeling of jingoistic patriotism or a sense of vast resources just being realized. When one of the characters in *The Foreigner* exclaims, "It is a wonderful country, Canada," she has something else in mind, for she says: "How wonderful the power of this country of yours *to transform men!*" In *The Prospector* (1904) Connor may be giving us an account of his own evolving experience when he describes the impact of the West on Shock, the book's hero:

He was making the discovery that climate changes the complexion, not only of men, but of habits of thoughts and action. As Shock was finding his way to new adjustments and new standards he was incidentally finding his way into a new feeling of brotherhood as well. The lines of cleavage which had hitherto determined his interests and affinities were being obliterated. The fictitious and accidental were fading out under this new atmosphere, and the great lines of sheer humanity were coming to stand out with startling clearness. Up to this time creed and class had largely determined both his interest and his responsibility, but now, apart from class and creed, men became interesting, and for men he began to feel responsibility. He realized as never before that a man was the great asset of the universe — not his clothes, material, social or religious.

This is a somewhat startling position for a budding young Presbyterian minister to have reached (such is Shock) and for Connor it is an expression of a genuine break-through from the excessive refinement and gentility which swaddled many Victorian Canadians. The West had become a mythical land, a place where such revelations were forced upon one. Men went there to escape the old life and in search of a new life, and there the faith in conversion and re-birth took on a new meaning. It was a place where biblical parables easily merged with actuality. The Rev. Craig telling the story of the Prodigal Son's home-coming to his congregation of western fugitives and exiles (who listen like so many distraught Dean Moriaritys) concludes: "There you are, men, every man of you, somewhere *on the road*. Some of you are too lazy, and some of you haven't enough yet of the far country to come back . . . Men, you all want to go back home." This is a world seen through Christian eyes, where all

endeavour, temptation, success, failure and hope is translatable into terms of heroic Christian struggle.

NO ONE WOULD THINK of Connor's portrayal of the West as realistic any longer. Far from it. Too often he stepped from actuality into far-fetched success stories or melodramatic love fantasies. But many of his distortions are of another kind, the result of his endeavour to see religious meaning in the drama of western life. It is for this reason that Connor stands above his contemporary Canadian novelists, and because he dared to write about things that really mattered — the state of his characters' morals and of their souls, not merely the historical past or the surfaces of contemporary life. In this way he often escaped the incredible triviality of so many of the other western writers, Nellie McClung, Stringer and Stead for example, and there is often a touch of grandeur in what he was trying to do. Moreover it is not because Connor was a preacher first and an artist second that he failed. Distinctions of this sort are based on a modern notion with which many great writers would have little patience. In fact one could argue that Connor failed because he did not take his role of preacher earnestly and profoundly enough, but gave it up at times for a feeble and debased notion of "novelist". For not being a good or a passionate enough preacher we must blame him; for his conception of the novelist we must blame his readers, his critics, his society as well. They wanted and expected romantic nonsense, and too often he willingly provided it. It is interesting to notice in this respect that the later novels, in which Connor is very rarely the preacher, are his most unconvincing and trivial.

For the writer of realistic fiction the chief challenge is to project an image of life which is both consistent and deeply problematical. Connor came within a hairsbreadth of a solution in his conception of the West. Here was an arena where the ancient battle was actually being fought out daily (or so it seemed to him) between good and evil, Christian and Hopeful and Mr. Valiant-for-truth against the forces of Appolyon and the temptations of Vanity Fair. Connor only regretted that his palette did not contain sharp enough whites and blacks to show the intensity of that conflict, in which the costs at stake were (to him the only ones that

really mattered) the salvation or damnation of human souls. He tried to see life everywhere in the same thrilling terms. But, as I have said, Connor could never sustain a level of consistency for long. His realism had a disconcerting way of shifting abruptly into romantic fantasy and back again, like those incongruous mixtures of photography and cartooning perpetrated by Walt Disney. No doubt the life of the West failed Connor as much as Connor failed the West: it could scarcely avoid the descent to the ordinary and humdrum, losing its angels and its devils.

The Canadian novel since Connor has been tamed and trained. Flamboyance and grand (or grandiose) ambition has faded away. There is more artistic integrity, and the iron laws of probability are not so casually flouted. Though one cannot honestly lament the passing of Connor's world, there has truly been a loss of *élan* and an increased danger of that desert of exact likeness to ordinary reality in which Eliot feared realism would perish. However, the best recent writers have continued, mainly in the realistic tradition, to try to project deeply problematical patterns of experience, and with increasing success. F. P. Grove's flawed works are nearly redeemed by the greatness of his theme, the tragedy of the pioneer whose heroic conquest of nature brings to birth a new generation and a civilisation in which he finds himself superfluous. Hugh MacLennan's earlier secular gropings for significance in the issues of Canadian nationality (Connor would have appreciated that vision of Canada as the future arch of the civilised world!) have happily given way to artistic exploration of more fundamental moral and religious issues. Morley Callaghan's whole *oeuvre* now takes on its full force when seen as a developing dialectic in which all the contemporary appeals to man's faith — naturalistic atheism or agnosticism, Marxism, and traditional Catholicism — compete for the souls of his characters. And to come closer to home, that latest addition to the novels of the West, Sheila Watson's *The Double Hook*, achieves what Connor might have valued most — a radically simplified but powerful image of human life freeing itself from the chains of its own sinfulness, a parable of re-birth. None of these earnest artists could ever share in the popularity and other rewards of this world that Connor enjoyed, though any one of them is a far more faithful servant of the Muses. But then art which is both fine and immediately or ever popular is too rare a thing for any writer to expect, least of all in Canada.