

The Critic in the Attic

Religious Doubt, Mind, and Heart in the the Fiction of Robert E. Knowles

Between 1905 and 1911, the Galt clergyman Robert E. Knowles (1868-1946) wrote seven novels that were very successful in their day, though they are virtually unread now. Their fame spread beyond Southwestern Ontario. According to the lists published monthly by *The Bookseller and Stationer*, Knowles' first novel, *St. Cuthbert's* (1905), was the leading seller in Canada in December 1905. Though subsequent novels never quite duplicated this feat, *The Undertow* was the third most purchased book across the country in January 1907, and *The Web of Time* fourth in January 1909, temporarily ahead of *Anne of Green Gables*.¹ The books also had an international readership: they were published initially in New York by the evangelical publisher Fleming H. Revell, who then arranged for publication in Britain by Oliphant, Anderson, and Ferrier, and for distribution in Canada by Henry Frowde. They received generally favourable reviews in prestigious journals such as the *Athenaeum*, the *Bookman*, the *Nation* of New York, and the *New York Times' Saturday Review of Books*. The *Bookman* of London went so far as to contend that a certain scene in *The Handicap* was "as fine and dramatic as anything Nathaniel Hawthorne ever wrote in *The Scarlet Letter*."²

These novels are not, however, neglected masterpieces shunted aside by a shift in sensibility. By any reasonable criterion, they are flawed and amateurish, and their defects—sententiousness, excessive rhetoric, creaking plots, naive messages of moral uplift—outweigh Knowles' humour and his sometimes shrewd observation of manners. But they are representative of a little-

known period in Canadian fiction, and they yield insight into the culture of the time. Knowles' handling of the question of religious doubt, for instance, reveals not only the intellectual climate of Canadian society, but also, self-reflexively, some of the attitudes to reading and fiction that accounted for the popularity of the novels.

Between the years 1880 and 1920 the religious novel was in great demand; Knowles' publisher Revell assured him that "the more real the religious note in a story, the bigger its sale and the longer its vogue."³ A flourishing sub-genre portrayed the struggles of ministers. Knowles' fellow-minister, the popular novelist Ralph Connor, encouraged Knowles to try the genre both by his example and by practical aid and encouragement.⁴ Knowles began by using a Presbyterian minister as narrator of *St. Cuthbert's*, the story of a Scottish-Canadian Presbyterian congregation much like his own. He subsequently wrote two other novels with minister-heroes: *The Undertow* (1906), and *The Attic Guest* (1909), on which I shall focus. In addition, *The Singer of the Kootenay* (1911) deals with a young man who at the end finds his vocation in the ministry.

The unsettling power of the "new theology" appears first in *The Undertow*. The story concerns a minister, Stephen Wishart, a clever lad, but somewhat selfish and sensual, and excessively ambitious. His study of advanced theology is partly a sign of an inquiring intellect, but partly an affectation—it will help him to obtain a fashionable urban congregation. The dialogue in which Stephen tries to explain to his pious Scottish father why he needs to study in Edinburgh begins as a humorous illustration of the generation gap, but ends on a sombre note:

"It's like this," Stephen went on, "...new theories come with new light; and it's our duty to welcome truth, come from what quarter it may.... You remember Copernicus?"

"Eh?" said the old man, suddenly. "Remember wha?"

"Copernicus," repeated Stephen, "Copernicus and the sun, you know."

"I canna mind on him," said the father, ransacking his memory in vain—"but I'm no' sae guid at mindin' names as I used to be. And of course I wadna ken the son; a man at my age isna sae ready at takin' up wi' the young folk. What like a man was he? Did they gang till oor kirk?" ...

"I don't mean those personal matters, father—not at all—I mean opinions about truths, doctrines, and matters of that kind. For instance these men have given us new theories of the creation, and of authorship—the book of Isaiah, for instance—and a more modern interpretation of the Atonement. It's only—"

But now Robert Wishart was on his feet, for vague rumours of this very feature

of the new theology had already reached him; "Did I understand ye richt? `the Atonement; the Atonement,' Stephen! Has it gone sae far ben as that? Wad they fumble wi' the heart o' God Himsel'? ...My God, laddie, keep yir hands aff the Cross; it's a' I hae; and I'm an auld man, near the grave and the Judgment Seat,—and a' the world has naethin' left forbye the Cross."⁵

Events overtake Stephen and the potential problems of modern theology are not pursued, though the general resolution suggests that the truths of the heart are more important than the truths of the intellect. But in *The Attic Guest*, the clash between the old faith and the new theology becomes the central theme.

Atypically, in *The Attic Guest* Knowles uses a woman narrator, a southern belle named Helen Randall. In the first and most vivid part of the novel she describes how she was courted by a visiting Scottish minister, Gordon Laird, who scandalized the southern white community by his liberal views on the Negro question. Gordon is forced to leave the South after he tries to save a Negro from a lynch mob. Eventually, Helen marries him and joins him in his new parish in Canada, where she faces a colder climate and a more austere theme, her husband's gradual loss of faith and the hardships it entails.

The novel of religious doubt, and particularly clerical doubt, has an honourable history in English literature, but Knowles' greatest debt is to Mrs. Humphry Ward's *Robert Elsmere* (1888), a novel that sold phenomenally in North America. Like *Elsmere*, Gordon Laird loses his faith in a supernatural Christ and feels constrained to resign his ministry; like *Elsmere* too, he takes up missionary work among the poor, practising a social Christianity though he has ceased to believe in its theology. And, as in Ward's novel, his wife is a pillar of orthodoxy.

Knowles' novel does not aspire to the intellectualism of *Robert Elsmere*, which debates the credentials of Christianity to the point of weariness. Since Gordon's struggle is seen almost entirely through the eyes of his wife, the attractiveness of the new theology remains unexplained and unrealized. Still, the novel hints at the outlines of Gordon's intellectual history. Early on, he is troubled by the conclusions of the "higher critics,"⁶ those mainly German theologians who applied secular textual criticism to the Bible, and were led to dispute the traditional authorship and dating of the Pentateuch and other Old Testament books.⁷ Gordon's first open breach with his orthodox father occurs when he applies their naturalistic canons to the Bible and refuses to "expound" a text in Isaiah as a prophecy of Christ (281).

Helen also overhears two clergymen discussing Gordon's "unsound views." Among the unorthodox positions enumerated are doubts about miracles, doubts in the power of prayer to influence events, and, most important, a drift towards the idea of "a merely ethical Christ" (257-8). The divinity of Christ is the central question in most novels of Christian doubt. The intellectual climax of *Robert Elsmere* occurs when Robert, after affirming his belief in God and in Christ as symbol, asks himself whether he believes in "a wonder-working Christ, in a risen and ascended Jesus," and has to conclude that he does not: "Every human soul in which the voice of God makes itself felt, enjoys, equally with Jesus of Nazareth, the divine sonship, and '*miracles do not happen!*'"⁸ What Robert concluded from the squire's history of human testimony, Gordon learned from the works of Adolf von Harnack, the liberal theologian who through his study of the history of dogma became convinced that much of Christian belief was an alien growth of post-Biblical times. We are not told the title of the book by Harnack that Gordon lends Helen (250), but his most widely-read work was *What Is Christianity?*, based on lectures delivered at Berlin in 1899-1900. Here Harnack argued that Jesus preached a simple gospel of love and the fatherhood of God. The notion that Christ was the divine logos incarnate, and the doctrines concerning his resurrection and his atoning function, were unnecessary accretions of a Hellenizing church: "the Gospel, as Jesus proclaimed it, has to do with the Father only and not with the Son."⁹ Gordon's increasing emphasis on helping rather than on saving people, as his wife describes it (283), is consistent with this late nineteenth-century interpretation of Christ as a merely human example.

The resolution of *The Attic Guest*, however, differs sharply from that of *Robert Elsmere* and, indeed, of most late Victorian novels of religious conversion, where the general pattern is for the hero to pass from orthodoxy through a period of doubt to some new unorthodox position, agnostic or religious.¹⁰ *Elsmere*, for instance, founds a New Brotherhood based on his changed understanding of Christ. In a Canadian example of the genre, Albert Carman's *The Preparation of Ryerson Embury* (1900), the young Embury loses his faith to the extent of joining the Free Thought Club, but is re-inspired by Henry George and embraces a "living Jesus of the gospels," whom he sees as a social activist.¹¹ But in *The Attic Guest*, Gordon's doubts evaporate as if they had never been, and he recaptures his old faith in all its particulars. His reconversion, as described by Helen, is an affair of the heart,

brought about by the suffering Gordon experiences when his beloved son steals money from a bank and flees from home:

It began, I think, with the crushing weight that fell upon our hearts in the loss of Harold and in all the shame and anguish connected with it. That was God's way, I have always thought, of teaching Gordon how much a father's heart can suffer—and the inevitable outcome of that is the Cross itself if God our Father be. How could His love escape love's inevitable pain, any more than ours? (336)

A chapter written by Gordon himself at Helen's request, describing how the majesty of Christ possessed him at a death-bed, reinforces the impression that (as, for instance, in *In Memoriam*) personal experience provides a more compelling proof of God's love than intellectual argument.

This non-intellectual resolution of the theme of doubt is reinforced by several images and motifs based on Luke:15, with its parables of the lost sheep found and the prodigal son returning.¹² As a lost sheep, Gordon is sought both by God and by his father, an actual shepherd from Scotland. After he regains his faith, he returns to the very pulpit and manse that he had left, and is reconciled with Helen's southern uncle. It only remains for his son Harold to return to the fold, which he does in a melodramatic and artlessly symbolic manner. The Lairds are in New York, watching a performance of *The Old Homestead*, a play which is itself a modern version of the story of the prodigal son.¹³ The son appears on stage at last, a tattered penitent—and the actor is the Lairds' son Harold! Their reconciliation is followed by a trip to Virginia, and a visit to the attic where the saga began. To reinforce the theme of Paradise Regained, the last chapter is entitled "Eden in the Attic."

The outline of these events suggests the stuff of the most conventional novel. From Victorian melodrama and the popular story weeklies, Knowles had inherited a circular plot in which lost surface, estranged sons return to be forgiven, illegitimate offspring reappear, and sins reach out from the past to exact retribution. In the comedic version of these plots, reconciliation and return form the invariable ending. Knowles' use of such stock devices seems at first sight regrettable in a novel that attempts to deal seriously with contemporary experience. But Knowles knew what he was doing, and *The Attic Guest* contains within itself a rationale for stories that are highly patterned rather than naturalistic, and which sacrifice probability to a parabolic shape.

In the world of the novel, texts and books are an integral part of daily life.

The Bible of course has primacy: it is “the Buik” itself (322). The Biblical text is marked, learned, and pored over, not just by Gordon as a minister, but also by the congregation, as an aid to living. The Psalms provide lessons and inspiration for every occasion (395), and the promises of scripture are a comfort at the novel’s three death-beds. But the Biblical text is not isolated. A whole continuum of literature, from hymns, sermons, and prayers to ordinary secular works, co-operates to the same end of embodying moral truths. Thus when Helen’s uncle recommends *The Homestead* he urges that “It’s the purest play I ever saw in my life...; it’s as good as a sermon” (385).¹⁴ With his whispered comment in the audience, “Isn’t that true to life, eh?” he refers not so much to the events themselves as to the emotions represented. For Helen and Gordon, “the great emotions of a parent’s love and loneliness were set forth in terrible reality” (387). The coincidence of real and fictional prodigal sons, at first sight so ridiculously unrealistic, allows Knowles to present emblematically the relation of fiction to life. While he emphasizes the make-believe of the theatrical representation—backstage the fictional father is thrust aside by the real, “the unreality swallowed up of Life” (391)—he also, more importantly, suggests the immediate applicability of fiction to life’s concerns. The drama literally acts out the truths in the hearts of its audience, and, by implication, of Knowles’ readers.

Simple parables true to the heart: such a literature naturally tends to the formulaic. Its validation comes from the generations of readers who have found it answering their emotional needs. A discussion of *Uncle Tom’s Cabin* early in the novel suggests the extent to which the readers of this kind of popular literature must share a culture. To Helen’s southern uncle, who belongs to a community with very different values from those of the author, the novel is unreadable: “It’s a pack of Yankee lies, sir” (157), he tells Gordon. But within a given community, formulas appealing to the heart gather meaning as they are repeated. Such is the case with a popular love-song which, artless in itself, gathers significance for Helen through frequent recollection, until at the end it has come to have great emotional resonance. Similarly, the prayers taught by parents to their children have more significance than their words would warrant because of the community of values they express.

From the point of view of the reading and interpreting community in the novel, the activities of the Biblical critics are irrelevant. The higher critics’

investigations into strands of authorship, and Harnack's seeking to find how the gospel message was read originally, strip away what these texts have come to mean to the community they sustain. "Higher critics," Helen proclaims, "are the highway robbers of the soul" (311). They may be valid in the domain of scholarship, but for Helen a minister's business is not with scholarship but with the human heart:

I verily believe as many preachers are spoiled by books as are helped by them, for they often grow less human while they're growing more profound. The Bible and the daily paper—truth and human life—some great preacher pronounced his two main books, and I'm inclined to agree with him. (250)

Thus the suffering servant of Isaiah stands as a type of Christ regardless of speculations as to whether the author (or authors) of Isaiah could have had miraculous foresight; for Helen such speculations are inappropriate. By extension one could argue that the popular literature being read throughout the novel should not be judged by inappropriate standards—certainly Knowles does not so judge it—but by its appeal to the heart and its usefulness in daily life.

Knowles' choice of a female narrator becomes more comprehensible in the light of these concerns. In the narrative voice there is much to interest the student of women's life and its fictional representation—though also, at first glance, much to irritate her. Helen's character is determined largely by her sex; she paints herself as the eternal feminine in such phrases as "simple womanly pride" (303) and "the cross-currents that trouble a woman's heart" (307). Repeatedly she defers to the male world. The narrative conceit of the novel is that Helen wrote her story and handed the manuscript over to the worldly-wise Knowles to publish. "I urged her to send the book forth with her own name on it," says Knowles in the Foreword, "but this she firmly refused. She shrank from the publicity it would involve, she said, as must any Southern lady." (10) At the moment when Gordon proposes to her, Helen declares, in what rhetoricians will recognize as a cunning *occupatio*,

I forgot that he was stronger than I, and greater, and nobler; forgot all about the strength of intellect that I had felt as a gulf between us; all the difference, too, of life's aim and purpose was sunk and forgotten now. (139)

But the novel partly overturns this ostensible hierarchy. For all her self-proclaimed limitations Helen is obviously a better writer and reader than her husband. She is at home with emblems and types and uses them liber-

ally; thus two birds in a magnolia tree form a vignette of married love (41). Life for her is a re-enactment of Biblical prototypes, so that she describes Gordon as going through his “Gethsemane” (387), and uses Biblical phrases such as “the Voice of Rachel” to title her chapters. Her reading of life is reflected in her writing of literature, for the book she has longed to write since childhood turns out to be the story of her own life. She writes it because it is both typical and useful—typical, as the story of a woman’s love for husband and children (10), and useful in that it shows hardships overcome: “I write it gladly for the comfort of some like stricken soul” (338). In accordance with Knowles’ conception of the womanly, Helen naturally emphasizes the emotional and the dramatic over the discursive, the anguish of doubt over its intellectual content. Her “woman’s heart” seizes the truth when superior masculine intellect passes it by.

There is nothing arcane about this reversal, based as it is on the familiar Biblical notion that the last shall be first and the first last. The title of the novel plays upon the notion of a hierarchy overturned, for the minister is lodged in a humble servant’s room in the attic, yet he proves himself to be the spiritual superior of his hosts, and his lodging is “nearest heaven” (402). Conversely, the wealthiest parishioner of St. Andrews is the least worthy: Mr. Ashton the factory-owner and pillar of the church grinds the faces of the poor. The higher critics fall into this pattern, thanks partly to the fortuitous associations of their name. Originally the word “higher” in “higher critics” was used neutrally, to distinguish those who considered questions of the historical origins of texts from the “lower critics” who established the text itself.¹⁵ But one can hardly escape the connotations of “higher,” by which it appears that these critics are lofty souls, more exalted than their brethren, or, to extend the metaphor, capable of taking a longer and more inclusive view. They, too, are implicated in the condemnation of the mighty, “robbers” no less than Mr. Ashton of the poor and simple. And in so far as the attic is equated with Gordon’s head, as it is jokingly (74), they need to be dislodged from that citadel.

This account of the novel as a defence both of simple faith and of simple, helpful didactic fiction perhaps suggests that Knowles himself was excessively conservative and anti-intellectual. The reality is more complicated. Little is known about Knowles’ inner life during the period, though it is known that he suffered a nervous breakdown (generally attributed to the results of a train crash), that he stopped writing novels after 1911, and that he

left the ministry in 1915. *The Attic Guest* draws on autobiography (Knowles' courtship of his southern wife), and conceivably the doubts expressed in the novel are also autobiographical. At any rate, when he resumed active life as a journalist in the 1920s, it was as a religious liberal who argued consistently for a new interpretation of old truths. His articles and interviews for the *Toronto Star*, while not denying supernaturalism, condemn fundamentalism and narrow orthodoxy, and welcome all earnest seekers after God in a changing world.¹⁶ But the novels he wrote when he was a minister show less of this flexibility. He saw them as extensions of his ministry, and he chose a form which would speak immediately to his readers in patterns they could recognize. Here lies one of the reasons, perhaps, why today Knowles's novels are themselves likely to be found in the attic. They have only a historical and scholarly appeal now that the believing community they so particularly addressed has passed away.

NOTES

- ¹ *Bookseller and Stationer* 22:1 (Jan. 1906): 41; 23:2 (Feb. 1907):23; *Canadian Bookman* 1:1 (Jan. 1909):13.
- ² Review of *The Handicap*, *Bookman* 39 (Jan. 1911): 204. See also the *Athenaeum's* review of *St. Cuthbert's of the West* (the British edition of *St. Cuthbert's*) Jan. 6, 1906: 12; the *Nation's* review of *The Handicap* 92 (Feb. 16, 1911): 168; and the review of *The Singer of the Kootenay* in the *New York Times Review of Books* Dec. 17, 1911: 840.
- ³ Knowles, interview with Nellie McClung, *Toronto Daily Star* Mar. 12, 1937: 3.
- ⁴ Ralph Connor took the ms of Knowles' first novel to George H. Doran: "My First-Born of the Pen," *Star* Apr. 18, 1933: 6.
- ⁵ *The Undertow* (New York: Fleming H. Revell, 1906): 59-62.
- ⁶ *The Attic Guest* (New York: Fleming H. Revell, 1909): 80. Subsequent references to this edition appear in parentheses in the text.
- ⁷ Robertson Smith was a Scottish representative of this school (194).
- ⁸ *Robert Elsmere*, ed. Rosemary Ashton (Oxford: Oxford UP, 1987): 332.
- ⁹ Harnack, *What Is Christianity?*, trans. Thomas Bailey Saunders [first English ed. 1901], 4th ed. (London: Williams and Norgate; New York: Putnam's Sons, 1923): 125.
- ¹⁰ Rupert Scheider, "Loss and Gain? The Theme of Conversion in Late Victorian Fiction," *Victorian Studies* 9:1 (Sept. 1965): 33.
- ¹¹ *The Preparation of Ryerson Embury* (London: Fisher Unwin, 1900): 229.
- ¹² Ironically, the latter was the very parable that Harnack used to illustrate the fact that an

incarnation and atonement were superfluous: “Does the God who forgives sins, the God of mercy, require an indemnity? Did the Father in the parable of the lost son demand expiation before he forgave his son?” (Harnack, untitled contribution to *The Atonement in Modern Religious Thought*, 3rd. ed. [London: James Clarke, 1907]: 17).

- ¹³ The typescript of this play, by Denman Thompson, is reproduced in the Readex Corporation microprint edition of *English and American Drama of the Nineteenth Century*, under “American Plays, 1831-1900.”
- ¹⁴ A similar point is made in *The Undertow*, when Stephen and his friend see *The Bells*, Erckmann and Chatrian’s story of retribution for a murder. The play is seen as an illustration of the Biblical text, “Be sure your sin will find you out” (92-4).
- ¹⁵ Robert Sinker, *Higher Criticism* (London: James Nisbet, 1899): 1-2.
- ¹⁶ See, e.g., “Dr. Alington’s Opinion,” *Star* Nov. 10, 1933: 6. In the *Star* of June 24, 1930: 6, Knowles argues that God values the kindly heart no matter what the theological beliefs—an opinion that causes Gordon Laird to be branded a heretic (251-52).