COUREURS-DE-BOIS, VOYAGEURS, & TRAPPERS

The Fur Trade and the Emergence of an Ignored Canadian Literary Tradition

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Although the topic of the fur trade was the most popular stock-in-trade in earlier Canadian literature, literary criticism has largely ignored the numerous works peopled with the colourful figures of coureurs-de-bois, voyageurs, and trappers.[1] Contemporary critics are hardly to blame, for the sheer bulk of books on the subject, not to mention the aesthetic weakness of most of the texts involved, would have driven many to despair. Take, for instance, the following passage from *The Three Trappers* (1909), a juvenile novel by Achilles Daunt:

> The gloom and the mystery which brooded over the great wilderness made the youths pensive and silent . . . Away from the influence of an over-ripe civilization, nature speaks with her thousand tongues to those who love her: the roar of the waters; the gloom and solitude of the vast forests; the sighing of the wind, as if wearied with endless travel; . . . all act on the souls of nature's votaries and find therein something responsive to their appeal.
> With feelings alive to such influences, our young trappers floated onwards.[2]

Similar passages — which can be found in many other works — may tempt some to hail the critical neglect of the literature on the fur trade as a sure sign of the maturity of Canadian criticism. A. J. M. Smith and Co. were certainly right to rave at the mediocrity of Canadian literature. Their well-known diatribes against canoe and maple leaf, however, induced Canadian criticism to turn a blind eye to the vast field of popular literature[3] and to lose sight of an important Canadian tradition which (with the help of quite a few well-known artists) was established in the nineteenth century and which survived mainly within the realm of juvenile and mass literature. Dismissing this type of literature simply as aesthetically unassuming and therefore negligible would mean ignoring its immense iconographical value and neglecting its enormous appeal to many readers.

The idealized image of the coureurs and voyageurs emerged in the nineteenth century. The reputation of the coureur as a notorious bad man, created by the official sources of New France for political reasons, was forgotten when literature, and later historiography, discovered the romantic potential of the fur trade and helped to model characters of almost mythical dimensions.

It seems to be a general rule that the myth-making process of literature starts in most cases only after the event. Cooper's Leatherstocking appeared on the scene when the settlement of the territory east of the Mississippi had been nearly completed, and the American Western emerged after the last frontier had fallen in 1890. The myth of Leatherstocking and the Westerner originated in the U.S.A. and from there found its way to Europe, where it met with great admiration and where it was later imitated. In Canada, matters were different, for the myth of the coureur and voyageur was brought from Europe to Canada and it was shaped while the fur trade was still in full swing. Robert Ballantyne, one of the most popular writers of juvenile fiction in the Victorian Age, started his writing career with a book called *Hudson's Bay* (1847), in which he recalled his six-year stint in the employ of the venerable Hudson's Bay Company. Out of this grew an enormously successful novel, *The Young Fur-Traders* (1856), perhaps the first novel to deal with the fur trade.[4] Here Ballantyne presented the fur trade glowingly, thus contributing much to its romantic image. Yet he also exploited the exotic potential of life in the Canadian wilds in another, no less effective, manner. While his novel was in print, he went on a lecture tour through Scotland to aid a church charity. His topic was Hudson Bay and the fur trade, and he proved to be an extremely entertaining performer, appearing on stage in the dress of a Canadian trapper. While he told his stories of life in the posts and sang French-Canadian voyageur songs, he fired his unloaded gun at a stuffed eagle which he had just brought back from a trip to Norway. This eagle, perched high over the stage, was with "a jerk of a hidden string sent crashing down on the platform amid the horrified screams of the ladies. . . ."[5] It is impossible to estimate Ballantyne's success as a fund raiser, but there can be no doubt that his show must have whetted the appetites of his audiences for his forthcoming book, which was decorated on the spine by a figure of a romantic fur trader.

Ballantyne, however, was not the first writer to bring the romance of the Canadian North and the voyageurs to British readers. An Irishman from Dublin, Thomas Moore, had already paved the way. Moore's connection with Canada was slight. Unlike Ballantyne, he had no first-hand experience with the fur trade and he knew Canada only from an excursion during a North American tour in 1804. A year later he published his famous "Canadian Boat Song," which became so popular that it is safe to say it started a spate of nineteenth-century works on the voyageurs and determined some of the most persistent literary conventions in which the voyageurs were enshrined. The "Canadian Boat Song" was patterned after a real

voyageur song, and Moore did everything to give the song an authentic ring. He assumed the collective persona of the voyageurs and he took as a subject the voyageurs' custom of singing a parting hymn to their patron saint Anne before their departure from Montreal. For the Catholic voyageurs in the service of the North West Company, the church of Sainte-Anne-de-Bellevue, situated at the western tip of Montreal, was the last visible link with the familiar world. It was Saint Anne whom they asked for protection before they set out from their homes on their arduous and long journey into the interior.

Moore had listened to songs sung by a group of voyageurs who had rowed him from Kingston to Montreal. His "Canadian Boat Song," a religious chant, was, however, not a song that he had heard, but one he composed. In a footnote to the published text he confessed that he had understood only parts of the song on which his own text was modelled. Unwilling to blame his poor French for this, he put the blame on the "barbarous pronunciation of the Canadians."[6] What he had actually heard was an old French-Canadian folk song which had come to Canada with the early settlers from France and which was entitled "J'ai trop grand' peur des loups."[7] Moore had taken the idea for his song not from real life, but from Alexander Mackenzie's famous account of the fur trade (1801) which he had read before his North American tour.[8] Whereas Mackenzie had given a rather factual report on the fur trade and drawn a rather mixed picture of the voyageurs, Moore created a mythical image. He singled out something that suited his conservative sensibility. The result was a simplification of a very complex character, the image of the pious, devout, and singing voyageur. Mythmaking is generally a simplifying process, shutting out the more disturbing features of reality in favour of stressing its pleasing aspects. Although the selected traits may be based on reality, as in Moore's case, the image becomes false and distorted because of its reductiveness. Ideologically, Moore's image of the pious voyageur may be rooted in his Catholic upbringing. It may also be linked to the anti-republican sentiment which he had voiced repeatedly during his North American tour.[9]

The image would, however, not have been so powerful if the author had not possessed another talent on which his later reputation rested. Although he did not have an ear for the French pronunciation of the *Canadiens*, he had an excellent ear for music. When he listened to the singing voyageurs, he immediately took down the notes of the air and wrote words to accompany it. With his "Canadian Boat Song," Moore was practising a form that would bring him fame a few years later when he published the first part of his famous *Irish Melodies* (1808). These later tunes were to earn him recognition as *the* Irish national bard; in them, Moore took the original Celtic tunes and changed them a little to suit the tastes of the English dinner parties at which he sang his songs.

The "Canadian Boat Song" was the product of the Romantic Age with its predilection for folk traditions and the beneficial effects of a life close to nature.

Hence, Moore's text was a far cry from what the real voyageur songs were about. It may suffice to contrast it with a song called "Le Voyage, c'est un marriage." This song speaks of the voyageur's existence as a life-long marriage contract with a job, the dreariness of which compares unfavourably with the life of the *habitant* who, in the words of the singer, spends the night in a snug bed and is well looked after by a loving wife.[10] Other songs complain about the solitude, boredom, homesickness, hunger, frustrated love, disease, and premature death as the inevitable lot of a voyageur's life. All these ingredients of the voyageur's existence were toned down or wholly sacrificed to an idealized image for which Moore's "Canadian Boat Song" was responsible.

MOORE'S SONG WAS SO POPULAR that it became a frequent source of reference. In 1863 the newly founded *British American Magazine* ran an article on "The Voyageurs of Canada." This essay not only commenced with a colourful description of singing voyageurs; it also quoted two lines from the boat song and praised Moore for his faithful rendering of the music.[11] In Daunt's novel *The Three Trappers*, written nearly half a century later, Moore's text was even passed off as an authentic voyageur song.[12] Moore's literary image had proved to be so powerful that it was taken for real. But the story of Moore's influence does not stop here. With Moore the myth of the voyageur was launched, and the mythmaker himself was even later turned into a myth. In Alan Sullivan's novel *The Fur Masters* (1938), Moore makes a brief appearance in a chapter which has no bearing on the plot, but which heightens the romantic colouring of the story. Here he is shown on arrival in Lachine at the end of his boat-trip on the St. Lawrence, when he runs quite accidentally into Simon Fraser and William McGillivray from the North West Company, who invite him to the company's exclusive Beaver Club in Montreal. At the club, Moore meets also other well-known figures from the fur trade: Simon McTavish, John Frobisher, John Jacob Astor, and Alexander Mackenzie. Moore is asked by his distinguished hosts to sing a song, and it is easy to guess what Moore will sing: his "Canadian Boat Song." Sullivan shows no great interest in historical accuracy. Simon McTavish was already dead when Moore stepped on Canadian soil, and the poet is presented in this scene as the creator of both the words and the music of the song. Sullivan makes myth and reality merge, for the reaction of the audience to the performance is evidence that Moore has grasped the truth of the voyageurs' lives and that his pathos is not false:

> At his first words the room became silent: as he sang on the Norwesters — the childhood of most had been spent in the wilderness of Scottish Highlands and poetry was in their nature — turned to each other with understanding eyes and nodded. They knew what this stranger sang of; all the beauty and the mystery of the story

of the voyageur were there as in their dreams they themselves had visioned it, but now it came from the lips of a stranger, a young interpreter who had captured and given it life and form.[13]

This passage declares the romantic ideal of the poet as the inspired seer whose interpretation of life is eagerly embraced by his spell-bound audience. Sullivan's notion of the poet fuses myth with reality by assigning a greater truthfulness (in the Romantic sense) to Moore's text than to authentic voyageur songs. Simon McTavish in the end assures the singer that his song will be adopted by the voyageurs as one of their own:

> We will remember it, . . . our voyageurs and their children will sing it; by many a camp-fire it will be heard when the flame burns low and the waters lie quiet.[14]

Sullivan's main concern is the mythmaking capacity of literature in general, and it is to this end that he transforms Moore, the mythmaker, into a myth. (That Moore's influence does not stop short even of the historian's territory can be seen in Marjorie Wilkins Campbell's fairly recent study *The North West Company* (1957), where a few lines from Moore's boat song are quoted in a brief paragraph, further idealizing Campbell's portrait of the voyageurs.[15])

Though it is doubtful whether the "Canadian Boat Song" was ever accepted by the voyageurs, Moore's song was taken up in French Canada, where a French translation ("La Chanson du Voyageur") appeared in 1826, from the pen of Dominique Mondelet, a judge in Trois-Rivières and a minor French-Canadian writer of occasional verse.[16] Moore's example of remodelling voyageurs' songs, moreover, was imitated in French Canada as well as in English Canada. The best French-Canadian example is "Le Chant des Voyageurs" (1862) by Octave Crémazie. Crémazie's attempts to preserve a French-Canadian identity against the pressures of English-Canadian society resulted in the patriotic and nostalgic poems for which he became known as the national bard of Quebec. It does not matter in this context that Crémazie, in his French-Canadian boat song, does not praise the voyageurs of the fur trade but the voyageurs working in the lumber camps and on the rafts on their way downriver. The stereotypes are the same. Like Moore's text, Crémazie's was set to music, but as Crémazie's musical talent was less than Moore's, the air was composed by a French-Canadian compatriot and publicly performed on St. Jean Baptiste Day (June 24, 1862), Quebec's community holiday.[17]

In English Canada the writing of voyageur songs became a mania which lasted right through to World War I. A host of minor Canadian poets, now mostly forgotten, produced endless variations of these songs. One of them, Arthur Weir, praises the strength of the voyageur who fears none but God in his poem "Voyageur Song."[18] The voyageur's fearlessness could best be illustrated in dangerous situations, of which the shooting of the rapids became the most popular. A variant of the

voyageur song is the canoe song, which was also of French-Canadian origin; but in the hands of nineteenth-century English-Canadian poets, it underwent an interesting transformation, in the course of which the voyageur and his life were lost sight of. In one of the surviving French-Canadian songs, called "Mon Canot,"[19] most of the ingredients of the later English adaptations are apparent: the fearless voyageur, whose only wealth is his canoe, shooting the rapids. Yet this is where the parallel ends. Whereas the French-Canadian song talks about the canoe as a useful tool that is loved because, for example, it gives the voyageur shelter in the night, English-Canadian canoe poems frequently turn the canoe into a human. Pauline Johnson's "The Song My Paddle Sings" (1894) anthropomorphises the canoe, which assumes the strength and fearlessness of the voyageur himself:

> Be strong, O paddle! be brave, canoe!
> The reckless waves you must plunge into.
> Reel, reel,
> on your trembling keel,
> But never a fear my craft will feel.[20]

In poems by other writers the canoe even becomes independent of the voyageur, who is no longer mentioned. Alan Sullivan's poem "The White Canoe" is of this type. The canoe here is apostrophized as "the wandering phantom bride of the river she rests upon."[21] The canoe has become a romantic symbol, certainly not as deep and charged with meaning as Shelley's *West Wind* or Keats' *Grecian Urn*, but a symbolic object nevertheless. Sullivan's white canoe stands for peace and quiet as opposed to the "trouble on shore"; the voyageur's existence has faded; the figure of the real voyageur has given way to a universal comment on life, reminiscent of Moore's pious generalization. Even Charles G. D. Roberts, the best known of the Confederation Poets, could not refrain from writing a canoe poem, "Birch and Paddle" (1886). Here the voyageur's task of paddling and rowing has been turned into a romantic pastime: a weary soul escapes from the harsh world, "on care-unsullied streams," to an idyllic nature which nurses the troubled human spirit back to harmony and peace.[22] This sampling should be sufficient, although there are many more poems of this kind.

Voices finding Moore's song sentimentalized are extremely rare. One such voice is that of William Kirby, whose novel *The Golden Dog* (1877) contains a chapter entitled "The Canadian Boat Song." Unfortunately, the abridged version of this chapter in the NCL edition makes the reader miss Kirby's point. The editor has omitted a few pages with pieces of actual information about the origin and form of voyageur songs. Apparently Kirby wants to correct the mistaken impression created by the authors of songs in the wake of Moore,

for he denounces "the sweet little lyrics sung in soft falsettos to the tinkling of a pianoforte in fashionable drawing rooms, ... called 'Canadian Boat songs.'"[23] Furthermore, he quotes two original songs in French as examples. One song is an old French ballad, which, like most other paddling songs, was transplanted from medieval France to French North America with an added refrain imitating the rhythmic dipping of the paddles as the only alteration of the original.[24] The reader who has no command of French learns from Kirby that this is a "famous old ballad of the King's son, who with his silver gun aimed at the beautiful black duck, and shot the white one, out of whose eyes came gold and diamonds, and out of whose mouth rained silver," and so forth.[25] All this information adds to a certain realism, but Kirby's Toryism quickly undermines this effect, instilling the chapter instead with a type of idealization that approximates Moore's image of the pious voyageur. In contrast to Moore, however, Kirby places his voyageurs in a political context which is determined by his anti-democratic, pro-monarchical leanings. The voyageur, together with the *habitant*, becomes the representative of the French-Canadian people, who are presented as virtuous, simple, submissive, and obedient, and who acknowledge the social hierarchy as God-given. This wishful dream of a staunch conservative is heightened when Kirby explains the quality of the transformation of the Old World ballad to the New World boat song in the following terms:

> The Canadian boat song is always some old ballad of Norman or Breton origin, pure in thought and chaste in expression, washed clean of all French looseness and its adaptation to the primitive manners of the colony ...[26]

Thus, the boat song and the voyageur bear witness to the wholesome effects of life led close to nature. Moreover, Kirby's voyageurs as the singers of the ballad about the King's son are acknowledged as the guardians of a monarchical tradition that is threatened by a group of upstarts in the government whom the novelist blames for the ruin of New France and the British conquest of Quebec. Kirby, who in his own time saw the old monarchic spirit crumbling around him, made his voyageurs part of a social idyll comprising an idealized union between monarch and people. The chapter on the Canadian boat song does nothing to advance the plot of the novel, for the voyageurs fade quickly from the action never to re-appear again. Yet viewed from within the ideological matrix of *The Golden Dog*, the voyageurs remain an integral part of the story.

The notion of the pious voyageur was a popular image in nineteenth-century Canadian literature. It was taken up by many authors, both English and French, and even by an American writer, John Greenleaf Whittier, whose poem "The Red River Voyageur" (1859) transformed the voyageur and his life into a Christian allegory. As an American, Whittier could not translate this figure into a national symbol, even though it suited his religious perception of nature and rural life. Thus

in his poem the Red River becomes an allegory of life: the voyageur, who stands for man in general, paddles toward his Christian destination, heaven.[27]

Although the image of the pious voyageur was powerful, it was frequently mixed with other, conflicting images. This is particularly true in Ballantyne's novel *The Young Fur-Traders* which, despite its violence and its active accounts of adventure, still cherishes the image of the pious voyageur. It is hard to believe that Ballantyne had a first-hand knowledge of the fur trade and the voyageurs. For he banned every notion of realism from his novel and infused his portrait of the fur trade with a strong tinge of romanticism.[28] The book concerns two young boys who are initiated into the life of the voyageurs. The main character, Charley, the son of a retired fur trader, is an unruly boy with a fierce dislike for his boring office job in the counting room of Fort Garry; after he manages to blackmail his father and the chief trader into sending him with a group of voyageurs into the interior, there begins a series of exciting events which take Charley into the Saskatchewan and Athabasca regions. There he helps to open up the fur trade, learns to paddle and hunt, fights with wild Indians, and lives the life of a voyageur. For Charley, a dream has come true, as his life is just like a great holiday, a kind of eternal boy scout experience to which Ballantyne reduces the voyageur's life. Though the real hardships of the daily routine are excluded and the hardships of the voyageur's life completely ignored, Ballantyne makes the reader believe that Charley has become a voyageur. In a letter to his best friend, Harry, who is doomed to spend his time in the counting room of York Fort, Charley depicts his life fervently: "Ah! There's nothing like roughing it, Harry, my boy. Why, I am thriving on it — growing like a young walrus, eating like a Canadian voyageur, and sleeping like a top."[29] Fortunately, Harry is not left long to smoulder in jealousy, for soon he is allowed to join his friend and to become a voyageur, too. With the help of a French-Canadian trapper, the two boys effect their transformation with great success and apparently without complications, for the reader is quickly confronted with a Harry who is able to spice his conversation with scraps of French words, while Charley in the garb of a voyageur and with traces of outdoor life on his face is not recognized by his father on his return to Fort Garry.

In the last analysis, the transformation is not convincing and is restricted to externals: The life of unrestricted freedoms and the encounters with violence and savagery do not tell on the characters of the two friends; they remain remarkably innocent throughout a book which never allows them to lapse morally. There is none of the moral ambiguity of Cooper's Leatherstocking whom the reader often catches musing on the potentially pernicious effects of life in the wilderness. In contrast, *The Young Fur-Traders* is no more than a survival guide, in which the chief characters not only are rather resistant to the savagery around them, but also become the agents of civilization and British imperialism by forging an alliance

with an Indian Chief whose keen interest in the Bible will bring his tribe under the sway of Christianity and British commerce.

There is in many adventure novels a curious mixture of conservatism and progressive utopian thinking. The escapist qualities of adventure stories frequently serve to reconcile the reader with an unsatisfactory present, thus affirming traditional social values and norms. At the same time adventure fiction possesses a strong utopian element in its more or less latent opposition to the bourgeois commandment to pray and to work.[30] In Cooper's *The Prairie* this basic dichotomy is obvious, for Leatherstocking (because he is a misfit) stays in the wilderness, but he sends his younger friends back to the settlements where they accept responsible roles in society. In *The Young Fur-Traders* the utopian element is virtually nonexistent, for the freedoms of a voyageur's life are never meant to discredit accepted social values. Charley and Harry return to the Red River colony where the former is appointed chief factor and the latter marries Charley's sister. The unruly boys are tamed and will spend "their days in peaceful felicity from the cares of a residence among wild beasts and wild men."[31] The novel has, of course, the potential of focusing on the contrast between savagery and morality, but this is never fully exploited. In order not to manoeuvre himself into a scrape, the author resorts to racist explanations. The voyageurs, as descendants "from French-Canadian sires and Indian mothers," are prone to lapsing into savagism because

> they united some of the good and not a few of the bad qualities of both, mentally as well as physically — combining the light gay-hearted spirit and full muscular frame of the Canadian with the fierce passions and active habits of the Indian. And this wildness of disposition was not a little fostered by the nature of their unusual occupation.[32]

Thanks to their genetic code and the reading of the Bible the boys' souls are hardened to the temptations of the wilds.

THE NOTION OF THE WILD VOYAGEURS — together with the image of the pious voyageur the most powerful picture in nineteenth-century literature — was, of course, not invented by Ballantyne. It occurs already in the historical documents of New France which regard the roving existence of the coureurs-de-bois as a constant threat to the survival of the sparsely settled colony and which generally present them as an unruly and loose lot. It crops up again in Alexander Mackenzie's account of the fur trade, where the explorer mentions the coureurs' disregard of wealth, "the pleasure of living free from all restraint," and "a licentiousness of manners" which he also traces among their successors, the voyageurs.[33]

Mackenzie is, however, far from condemning coureurs and voyageurs, for he is not only aware of their usefulness within the fur trade, but also able, without resort-

ing to Ballantyne's racist argument, to link these traits to their mode of life. He starts his characterization with a sentence to which Ballantyne would hardly have subscribed: "experience proves that it requires much less time for a civilized people to deviate into the manners and customs of savage life, than for savages to rise into a state of civilization."[34] Mackenzie was still a belated offspring of the Age of Enlightenment. As such he believed in the role of environment and circumstance as powerful forces affecting the development of man. Yet though many of the traits listed by Mackenzie were taken up by later writers, their factual content was either played down or completely ignored. George Beers, in his essay "The 'Voyageurs' of Canada," was still willing to assign many of the voyageurs' traits to their mode of life, but he also expanded Mackenzie's list, placing greatest emphasis on the exotic and picturesque. "The voyageurs of Canada," he wrote,

> are a fraternity of peculiar interest, to be found only in our country — a class of men strangely incompatible with the rest of humanity, as brave as they are strong, as wild as they are happy, as careless of life as they are capable of enduring hardship; always ready to give their heart and hand to a friend, or put their knives through a foe. Born, reared, and living among the thistles of life, instead of its clover, accustomed to nothing but the extremes of hardship or indolence, "roughing it" in the wilds of our mighty forests, risking their lives . . . crashing down the rapids — verily, the refinement of city life is far from being congenial to their wild nature. Nature in all her freedom, unrestrained by the customs of civilization, has made the *voyageurs* a peculiarly intrepid, romantic race — with rather a tendency to the savage. The voyageurs are a proof that when man is placed in circumstances at all favourable, he soon learns to assume the savage. There is an actual romance about their lives. . . .[35]

For Beers, the voyageurs are brave, enduring, generous, hospitable, happy, but also careless, passionate, irascible, anarchic, dirty, unrefined, vain, cursing, rough, noisy, uneducated, and slightly amoral.

The wildness of voyageurs and coureurs became the literary stock-in-trade during the second half of the nineteenth century. Most writers felt that the time of the voyageurs was nearing its end. The fur trade lost in importance when in the 1830s silk hats began to replace the once fashionable beaver hats, in the 1840s the missionaries reached the West, in the 1850s the government sent out expeditions, and when, in 1869, the Hudson's Bay Company had to sell its territories, which were then opened up for settlement. These developments, together with the rise of Canadian nationalism in the Confederation period and the strong persistence of literary Romanticism, helped to keep the voyageur in focus and to cement all those aspects which would lend themselves to the mythmaking process. Charles Sangster, in *The St. Lawrence and the Saguenay* (1856), lamented the disappearance of the singing voyageurs:

> Long years ago the Voyageurs
> Gladdened these wilds with some romantic air.[36]

In his poem "The Rapid" (1860) he makes the reader feel that a whole way of life has gone. The speaker observes a group of voyageurs approaching the rapids with a merry song on their lips and without fear of death. They have to pay for their recklessness and carelessness, for they drown, and the poet concludes the poem:

> No voice cheers the rapid, that angrily, angrily
> Shivers their bark in its maddening play;
> Gaily they entered it — heedlessly, recklessly,
> Mingling their lives with its treacherous spray![37]

The poem is a tribute to the heroism of the voyageurs and the accident is meant to stand for the destruction of a light-hearted, happy-go-lucky way of life — which makes an excellent topic for a Romantic poem, but which is doomed.

IN THE LAST QUARTER OF THE NINETEENTH CENTURY, the image of the wild and reckless coureur became the predominant stereotype. This shift from the pious to the wild figure was due to the overpowering influence of the historical writings of Francis Parkman, who in *The Old Régime in Canada* (1874) sensed the literary potential of the figure of the coureur:

> Though not a very valuable member of society, . . . the *coureur de bois* had his uses, at least from an artistic point of view; and his strange figure, sometimes brutally savage, but oftener marked with the lines of a dare-devil courage, and a reckless thoughtless gayety, will always be joined to the memories of that grand world of woods which the nineteenth century is fast civilizing out of existence. At least, he is picturesque, and with his red-skin companion serves to animate forest scenery. Perhaps he could sometimes feel, without knowing that he felt them, the charms of the savage nature that had adopted him.[38]

Parkman's influence can be traced in a host of works from the end of the century, for example in the poem "The Coureur-de-Bois" (1897) by Samuel Matthewson Baylis, a minor Montreal poet. Here the coureur is seen as an exotic, wild character, a "rattling, roving, rollicking rake"[39] whose loose morals can become acceptable to the English-Canadian reader only because he is placed in the historical context of the Old Régime and because he is viewed as an Empire-builder. By this time, the coureur had fulfilled the mission for which he was necessary, and with the march of civilization he had a right to disappear from the historical stage.

Parkman's influence can also be discovered in two stories by William McLennan, a Montreal writer with a keen interest in the history of New France. "The Coureur-de-Bois," the first story, deals with the conflict between the French-Canadian authorities and an historical coureur. The second story, "The Coureur-de-Neiges," shows the transformation of a dissatisfied younger son of a

French-Canadian seigneur into a coureur. Although McLennan had taken the idea for both stories from historical sources, he soon stripped his coureur characters of all historical traces, converting them into compound figures with all the well-known stereotypes of carelessness, cruelty, anarchy, immorality, and passion.[40] "The Coureur-de-Neiges" is a particularly revealing example of how history is sacrificed to the sensational. The seigneur's son is transformed not only into a coureur-de-bois, but also into an Indian whose savagery soon excels to such a degree that he is finally forced to roam the vast wilderness alone, accompanied only by his terrified Indian wife. He dies in desolation, degraded to the state of an animal and haunted by the curses of his dying wife. Perhaps McLennan took Parkman's advice too literally when he subjected history to the picturesque. In addition, like many other contemporary Canadian writers, he had to cater to a mass reading public with a limited sense of history, whose tastes were accustomed to the undemanding fare offered by popular magazines in Canada and the United States.

In quite a few stories by other authors history dissolves completely and is re-placed by the timelessness of the Canadian North, which becomes a myth, lending its colouring to the trappers in it. It may suffice to mention two stories which ap-peared in one of Canada's popular magazines, the *Canadian Magazine of Politics, Science, Art and Literature*: Arthur Stringer's "A Woman of the North" (1897) and Herman Whitaker's "The Devil's Muskeg" (1906).[41] Here the traits of the trapper figures are attributed simply to race and breed. History and the Northern Environment, as forces shaping human nature, have both faded away. The two stories each deal with the lax sexual mores of French-Canadian trappers who are brought to their right senses by their jealous wives, the one an Indian, the other a French-Canadian woman. It does not matter that the women, not their trapper husbands, are in the centre of the stories. Both men and women share the same characteristics; only the intensity of the stereotypes is heightened, because in these stories the racial features of half-breed (or Indian) and French-Canadians find their most unadulterated expression in women. Here the two women are passionate in their loves and hates and fierce and cruel in their jealousy and revenge. Their outbursts of passion are always accompanied by the violent outbursts of a hostile and destructive nature. The image of the cold Canadian North as a powerful, purifying force is reversed; the mythical North has become a playground of primi-tivist passions.

It goes without saying that the North is only vaguely localized. As a mythical construct it does not require specific geographical details, since its northern features rest on the characters who people the stories. It does not matter here that Whitaker, unlike Stringer, had actually been to the Canadian North where he had tried his luck at pioneering for some years.[42] For the failure of both authors to give a more realistic rendering of northern life was due to the dictates of the powerful American magazines and book market. This market tempted quite a few Canadian writers,

among them Stringer and Whitaker, to cross the border, and it forced them to keep the mythical northland in popular fiction alive. The influence of the American magazines becomes obvious also in the work of Gilbert Parker, whose first stories were published in the *Independent*, a New York magazine. In book form (as *Pierre and his People*, 1882) his stories became a best seller. They were followed up by a second collection, titled *An Adventurer of the North* (1889), in which the chief character of the first collection, Pierre the half-breed trapper, reappeared. Pierre is an adventurer of almost gigantic proportions, careless and fearless, passionate and obsessed by an irresistible urge to roam the Canadian North from Labrador to the Rockies. In the last story, "The Plunderer," Parker comes closest to the American Western. Although the story is set in a little prairie settlement sprouting up near a Hudson's Bay Company trading post, Pierre is more like a Western hero in whom some of the typical Western conflicts are concentrated: East versus West, freedom versus order, play versus work, physical prowess versus sham morality, and so forth. The story also displays a few Western gadgets: the hero hunted by a posse, a shooting (in which Pierre is triumphant), and the hero's escape. In the end, after Pierre has confounded the posse of indignant townspeople, he elopes into the prairie, on a horse with his sweetheart, where he is silhouetted against a prairie fire, a grandiose finale which would do credit to any Western:

> Far behind upon a divide the flying hunters from Guidon Hill paused for a moment. They saw with hushed wonder and awe a man and a woman, dark and weird against the red light, ride madly into the flickering surf of fire.[43]

Needless to say, Parker also had never been in the Canadian North and, like Stringer, became an expatriate.

It is perhaps appropriate to conclude this survey with an historical novel by another Canadian expatriate, Agnes Laut's *Lords of the North* (1900). It is not easy to see why the subject of the fur trade made a relatively late appearance in the form of historical fiction, for Sir Walter Scott was one of the most powerful literary influences in nineteenth-century Canada and his model of the historical novel would have been also suitable for a treatment of the fur trade. Scott's novels focused on the clash between historically reactionary and progressive forces, with the progressive side victorious. Scott's typical hero is the so-called mediocre hero with a Romantic predilection, who travels from civilized England back to the primitivism of the Scottish Highlands, where he soon finds himself involved in the rebellions of the Highland clans. In the end he returns to England with his romanticism worn off and with the prospect of becoming a useful member of society by getting married and by starting a business career. In some ways, the pattern of *Lords of the North* is reminiscent of Scott's *Rob Roy*: the hero sets out from civilized Quebec into the wilderness, though on a personal mission he becomes involved in an historical conflict, the feud between the Hudson's Bay and North

West companies, and he finally returns to get married. But this is where the parallels end. For Scott never idealizes the past, he constantly questions heroism, and the encounter with the negative aspects of primitive life hastens the hero's abandonment of his romantic notions. In contrast, Laut emphasizes the heroic elements of the fur trade period on which she imposes a pseudo-chivalric ethic. Her central character, the well-educated Rufus Gillespie, joins the North West Company only in search of his friend's wife who has been abducted by Indians. Though in the garb of a trapper, he moves about like a knight who in his dealings with his own lady-love and a French-Canadian opponent constantly resorts to a chivalric code. This earns him not only the lady's hand, but also the respect of his French-Canadian adversary, who, as the offspring of a degenerate seigneur family, has retained enough dignity to remember his dues.

He assists Rufus in freeing the damsel in distress from the clutches of a witch-like Indian woman. Despite their involvement in the historical conflict, the characters are far removed from history, which is used only to put additional ordeals in the way of the rescuers. As in *Rob Roy*, the story is told in retrospective by the chief character, who, in contrast to the narrator in Scott's book, has lost none of his useful romanticism. Laut's intention is clear: Canadians need not be ashamed of their history, which even surpasses the splendours of the chivalric age in Europe, or to quote the narrator of Laut's second novel on the fur trade, *Heralds of Empire* (1902):

> Your Old World victor takes up the unfinished work left by generations of men. Your New World hero begins at the pristine task. I pray you, who are born to the nobility of the New World, forget not the glory of your heritage; for the place which God hath given you in the history of the race is one which men must hold in envy when Roman patrician and Norman conqueror and robber baron are as forgotten as the kingly lines of Old Egypt.[44]

The works discussed here all tapped Canadian history without granting their readers historically faithful insights into the fur trade period. Yet literature follows its own rules. The dictates of literary conventions and tastes often override any concern for objectivity and historical truthfulness. The critic researching the artistic transmutation of history is left with a paradox: literature is the instrument of transforming history into myth, and at the same time history becomes palatable to the mass of readers only through mythopoeic distortions of history.

<div align="center">NOTES</div>

[1] The only critical treatments are Jack Warwick, *The Long Journey. Literary Themes of French Canada* (Toronto: Univ. of Toronto Press, 1968) and David Tretheway, "Alienated Adam: The Voyageur," *Copperfield*, 5 (1974), 11-33.

[2] (London: Thomas Nelson, 1909).

[3] Exceptions permitted, of course.

[4] Eric Quayle, *Ballantyne the Brave. A Victorian Writer and his Family* (Chester Springs, Penn.: Dufour Editions, 1967), 104.

[5] Judging from its title, *The Young Voyageurs* (1853), a juvenile novel by Th. M. Reid, may be an earlier treatment of the fur trade.

[6] *The Complete Poetical Works of Thomas Moore.* Shamrock edition (London: Longman's, 1869), 105.

[7] See Howard Mumford Jones, *The Harp That Once — A Chronicle of the Life of Thomas Moore* (1937; rpt. New York: Russell & Russell, 1970), 86. For an English translation of the French text see Grace Lee Nute, *The Voyageur* (New York and London: Appleton, 1931).

[8] See footnote in Moore, *Complete Poetical Works*, 105.

[9] Later Moore apologized for his anti-American comments, cf. A. G. Strong, *The Minstrel Boy. A Portrait of Tom Moore* (London: Hodder & Stoughton, 1937), 100.

[10] Printed in Madeleine Béland, ed., *Chansons de voyageurs, coureurs de bois et forestiers* (Québec: Presse de l'Université Laval, 1982).

[11] George Beers, "The 'Voyageurs' of Canada," *British American Magazine*, 1 (1863), 473.

[12] Daunt, 17.

[13] Alan Sullivan, *The Fur Masters* (London: John Murray, 1938), 48.

[14] *Ibid.*

[15] (1957; rpt. Vancouver and Toronto: Douglas & McIntyre, 1983), 24.

[16] Printed in Jules Fournier, ed., *Anthologie des poètes canadiens* (Montreal: Granger Frères, 1920).

[17] Octave Crémazie, *Oeuvres I: Poésies* (Ottawa: Univ. of Ottawa, 1972), 395. The composer's name was M. Dessane. An English translation ("The Song of the Voyageurs") appeared in the *Canadian Magazine of Politics, Science, Art and Literature*, 15 (1900), transl. by William Wilkie Edgar.

[18] Printed in Theodore H. Rand, ed., *A Treasury of Canadian Verse* (Toronto: William Briggs, and London: J. M. Dent, 1900).

[19] Printed in Edith Fowke, *Folklore of Canada* (1976; rpt. Toronto: McClelland & Stewart, 1979).

[20] *The White Wampum* (London, 1894), rpt. in *Flint and Feather. The Collected Poems of E. Pauline Johnson (Tekahionwake)* (Markham, Ont.: Paperjacks, 1979).

[21] 1891; rpt. in Rand.

[22] Roberts, *Selected Poetry and Critical Prose*, ed. W. J. Keith (Toronto: Univ. of Toronto Press, 1974), 66.

[23] The unabridged chapter is reprinted in Albert Durrant Watson & Lorne Albert Pierce, eds., *Our Canadian Literature. Representative Prose & Verse* (Toronto: Ryerson, 1923, 1922), 227, 229.

[24] Fowke, ed., *The Penguin Book of Canadian Folk Songs* (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1973), 205.

[25] Watson & Pierce, 230.

[26] *Ibid.*, 229.

[27] *The Complete Poetical Works of Whittier.* Cambridge Edition (Boston: Mifflin, 1894), 69.

[28] I disagree with Joan Selby who detects traces of authenticity in the description of the male characters ("Ballantyne and the Fur Traders," *Canadian Literature,* 18 [1963], 40-46).

[29] *The Young Fur-Traders* (London: P. R. Gawthorn, n.d.), 196.

[30] See the discussion of German adventure fiction in Ralf-Peter Märtin, *Wunschpotentiale. Geschichte und Gesellschaft in Abenteuerromanen von Retcliffe, Armand, May* (Königstein i. Ts.: Hain, 1983), 11.

[31] *Young Fur-Traders,* 11.

[32] *Ibid.,* 53.

[33] *Voyages from Montreal on the River St. Lawrence through the Continent of North America to the Frozen and Pacific Oceans in the Years 1789 and 1793* (1801; rpt. Edmonton: Hurtig, 1971), ii, xlvi.

[34] *Ibid.*

[35] *Beers,* 473.

[36] David Sinclair, ed., *Nineteenth-Century Narrative Poems* (Toronto: McClelland & Stewart, 1972), 48.

[37] *Hesperus and Other Poems* (1860), rpt. in Douglas Lochhead & Raymond Souster, eds., *100 Poems of Nineteenth Century Canada* (Toronto: Macmillan, 1974), 32.

[38] Printed in Rand, 25.

[39] *The Works of Francis Parkman.* VIII: *The Old Régime in Canada* (1874), vol. 2 (1902; rpt. New York: AMS Press, 1969), 113.

[40] Both stories were printed in William McLennan, *In Old France and New* (Toronto, 1900), 105-51. "The Coureur-de-Bois" appeared first in *The Canadian Magazine of Politics, Art, Science and Literature,* 11 (1898), 321-25. On McLennan see also E.Q.V., "Canadian Celebrities. No. v: Mr. William McLennan," *Canadian Magazine of Politics, . . .* 13 (1899), 251-53.

[41] 9 (1897), 162-67; 27 (1906), 561-67. Whitaker's story first appeared in his story collection *The Probationer and Other Stories* (New York: Harper, 1905).

[42] Whitaker left Canada in 1895 to become a journalist in the U.S. See *Who Was Who in America,* 1: 1897-1942 (Chicago, 1962), s.v. Whitaker.

[43] *An Adventurer of the North* (London: Nelson, n.d.), 287.

[44] *Heralds of Empire* (Toronto: William Briggs, 1902).