

AVENUES OF RESEARCH SUGGESTED BY THE FLETCHERS CASTORIA BOX

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SOME YEARS AGO I RECEIVED from one of the smaller universities in Ontario a letter from a student telling me that he was doing post-graduate work in English and that he had chosen as the subject for his thesis "The Lesser Writers of Canada" and could I give him some biographical information. I recall at the time a great surge of sympathy for this student, knowing from my own experience how unspeakably dreary such theses can be, having at one time or another been reader of such theses on, of all things, Theology, English, and finally the one for which I felt least qualified, Chemistry. But the academic world is, if nothing else, at least wide and tolerant and slightly "bushed," as we say in the West.

What I have always felt about such theses is that they lacked human warmth. As knowledge, literate and formal, they attract nothing but dust. And perhaps it was because of this very deft sureness with which this naïve student had selected me as one of the "lesser" writers of Canada that my heart went out to him. The biographical information he had requested happened to be bare bones of a life singularly deficient in incident so I decided that I would call upon one of my favourite great-grandmothers who as a chair-stealer for one of the Czars of Russia and as a cabbage-picker for one of the Borsch festivals of that country, had endeared herself to her countrymen.

She was a remarkable woman, this great-grandmother of mine. From her I had inherited my own ability to steal chairs from the neighbours whenever my wife gave a garden party for her church group on the back lawn, or to regale my own relatives with a soup which all agreed "had body to it" though it may have lacked in quality what it made up in quantity of cabbage. But what I really wanted to show this student was that my literary roots lay deep in Manitoba, that I was a true native of the West, despite the fact that one of my forebears had been from Outer Mongolia, certainly a fine academic point and one which should lend distinction to his thesis.

I pointed out to this lad working for his Ph.D., that although I had a rather tenuous relationship with Louis Riel, the first Premier of Manitoba, my real

connection was through this great-grandmother. She had been in her girlhood a daughter of one of the lesser chieftains of Outer Mongolia, a princess in her own right, but had been captured by some of the Czar's Cassocks one day when she was out picking violets. Because of her surpassing beauty and recognizing the danger of keeping such a treasure in their own possession, the Cassocks immediately presented her to the Czar who adopted her at once as a member of his own household.

In the course of time, however, the Czar tired of her and using as an excuse the fact that she had been discovered by one of her rivals sitting on one of the royal chairs, she was banished to Siberia. (An interesting footnote could be inserted here in the thesis that chairs at that time in Russia were very scarce since it was taken for granted that all had to stand in the presence of The Little Father the Czar of all the Russias and that only those of royal blood were ever permitted to sit down at all.)

After being banished to Siberia, this great-grandmother of mine, a woman of great resolution, escaped from Siberia by making her way over the polar ice-cap into northern Manitoba where she was adopted by the Crees. She was well received by this northern Manitoba tribe and supported herself by giving lessons in Mongolian bead-work. And although she always spoke Cree with a strong Russian accent she was finally adopted as a member of the tribe and married to one of the lesser chieftains of The Birch branch, as distinguished from the other chief division who were known as The Beavers. (Sonship in The Birch family was considered to be something of an honour in that region.)

Of this great-grandfather of mine our family knows nothing beyond the fact that he was pure Cree and Son-of-a-Birch, but his name, if ever known, has long been forgotten. Our interests lay more in the one descendant of this union, a daughter, also very beautiful, whose Indian name, Wowie-wowie-and-howie (I think I have it right), translated into English meant "Sitting Duck."

It was Sitting Duck who was my grandmother, and although I never knew her personally she was very much a living figure in our family because she married one Oofus Angus MacAngus, a Hudson's Bay Company Factor, my grandfather, through whom I traced my deep roots in the land of this country and the prairies of Saskatchewan.

I pointed out furthermore that our family was very proud of having descended from one of the Hudson's Bay Company Factors despite the fact that although the Factors in those days were common enough they still socially represented the highest in the community and that in our own family we always referred to him as the Highest Common Factor, a very contrived pun which although representing the lowest form of humour, I thought this particular student might possibly use as a mild leavening agent in his thesis.

I never heard from this student again and I have an idea that in his pursuit of the lesser writers of Canada he was simply too successful in acquiring material — in numbers if nothing else. I would personally always have been pleased to think of my grandmother's memory gathering the dust of centuries in some university library "unhonored and unsung" as John Swivel, the Great Dean of the Saskatchewan School of Seven-and-a-Half, says of himself and his works, but Sitting Duck did at last leave to the Cree civilization a fairly respectable soup made of wild cabbage and prairie dill, by which she will always be remembered.

BUT THE POINT OF ALL THIS is to call attention to the splendid opportunity recently presented to the academic world of Western Canada for the introduction of life and warmth in the otherwise dry-as-dust Ph.D. Theses. The fortunate break in the binder-twine which for years had been holding together the Fletchers Castoria box containing the material of Sarah Binks' pre-P.R. period scattered so much rich historical data on the floor of the Binksian Museum and in such a manner that it had to be put back right away and could no longer be ignored. This was particularly true since it had to be separated from other material which had accumulated on the floor.

I should imagine that a small thesis of the M.A. calibre could result from a study of the unfinished efforts of Sarah and Mathilda to translate in all its completeness Schiller's "The Song of the Bell."

The great success of their combined efforts in the translation of Heine's "Du bist wie eine Blume" had led them to more ambitious ventures but "The Bell" had apparently proven to be too much for them. Moreover, though Sarah may have known something about love and flowers, she knew nothing about bell-casting with the result that her translation seems contrived and lacks the poetic flow of the original:

Freshly plastered in the soil,
Stands the casing, burned of lime —
Today must the bell be burned —
Fresh, My Hearties, be on time!
From the forehead hot
Sweat must run, must it not!
Though the work the masters praise
Blessings are up-top, always!

One can quote only fragments of such translations in an article such as this but it is obvious that in the Departments of Modern Languages such tit-bits would be more than welcome for academic discussion. Of more profound interest from the standpoint of scholarship would be a study of the work of Sarah Binks herself.

Why, it has often been asked, could a simple country girl like Sarah, without any great formal education, not only write about such a wide variety of subjects but write about subjects of which she had had no experience whatsoever yet with complete confidence? Why, for example, could she write so realistically about "Storm at Sea" with all its tragic consequences when she had never seen a body of water larger than Lake Waskana which in her day was much smaller and of which she could say without too great poetic licence, "I could spit across it." So too her visualization of the Roman occupation in Saskatchewan which research has since proved to have been not Roman but Ukrainian, can easily enough be explained by the confusion in the teacher's mind concerning British and Canadian history, both of which were at that time taught in the Saskatchewan schools. And her knowledge of the Indian and Mound builder, though at times faulty, is simply her poetic projection of what in fact was local lore. But her wider knowledge and her occasional use of exotic phrase and idiom can only be accounted for by the fact that Sarah was an inveterate reader and that everything printed upon which she could lay her hands was, to use a term from her biographer, "Grist for her mill."

Like many people who read a word again and again and never happen to hear it pronounced she would accent the word wrongly. We find, for example, in the Fletchers Castoria box a fragment concerning the weather in which our humidity is rhymed with pretty. Thus:

Come cold and sleet we're sitting pretty,
In rain and relative humidity.

The reverse could also be true. She had heard, for example, the word hurricane, pronounced as she thought "hurricale," and had treasured it as a good word in connection with the eternal feud against the Saskatchewan wind, and when the occasion finally arose to use the word she had used it in terms of derision:

Despond not, though time be bale,
And baleful be,
Though winds blow stout — a hurricale,
What's that, what's that to you and me!

Incidentally this verse can be used to exemplify Sarah's style of achieving her effects through repetition; "What's that, what's that," she states and this particular literary trick, though not as obvious or effective as that of "Boom, Boom, Boom," in the poetry of Baalam Bedfellow of the Saskatchewan School of Seven-and-a-Half, is in Sarah's hands nevertheless very effective.

In my little book, in my little book,
I write verses,
Sometimes they don't rhyme —
Curses!

This is the classic example, but one can find the same trick in "The Duck Hunt," and in the repetition in "I'm a genius, I'm a genius."

But it was Eaton's catalogue in particular which opened the vision of this simple and unspoiled country girl to the outside world. Sarah may have picked up the odd word of German from her association with Mathilda, but certainly never French. And yet we find her using in her description of the wedding dress such words as *petite* (rhymed with tight) and *chick* which was her version of the French *chic* and which she took from her experiences with the family chickens, to mean cute.

Quite apart from the Fletchers Castoria box so invitingly rich in material, more than one scholarly thesis for the Ph.D. could be written from a study of Sarah's already published works. Her influence upon the Saskatchewan School of Seven-and-a-Half who succeeded her, for example, the fact that Purge Potatok, D.P., takes the same attitude toward winter as did Sarah. Sarah had written after remarking on the discomforts of the season in terms of chilblains, dripping nose, and scratchy underwear that there still must lie

though drifts conceal
Some hidden good for man's descry,
Some secret bounty for his weal,
Which man should shovel out — or try

whereas Purge, the simple D.P. (Displaced Person) writing at the encouragement of the Saskatchewan government in the Ukrainian dialect in the hopes that he may do for Saskatchewan what William Henry Drummond once did for Quebec, says about Sarah's unshovelling of the province as "Dis country good" and like Sarah expresses his opinion of winter which both regard as a mistake. The country may be good according to Purge, but he adds without any hesitation:

Dis country good, I like him here,
Potato crop can hardly lug her —
But when at Christmas winter comes —
De cold! Boy, she's one bugger!

Perhaps I am tying here a rather tenuous thread. Potatok's one-time home had been in southern Russia and Sarah was only one generation removed from South Dakota, but it would still make an interesting point in a thesis.

One can find many traits and tendencies in Sarah's works: her love of nature as exemplified in that sweet little poem in which the kindly sparrow "got behind the toad and shoved" or, in another case, her sympathy for the "helpless and infirm" worm in the apple whom she had thoughtlessly destroyed.

Above all for deep study and subject matter suitable for one thesis after another is Sarah's philosophy of life. I have no doubt that a parallel could be drawn

with the sombre outlook of the Great Dean of Western Literature, the late John Swivel, with his repeated emphasis upon the passing of time and the complete annihilation of all human achievement, not even excluding the "elevator's pride" which was always the glory of the prairie west. But one feels that in Swivel's case his resignation to the disappearance of all things was induced by his sale of life insurance followed by the writing of the In Memoriam poems with which he encouraged the later sale of tombstones which he felt complemented his sale of life insurance. But in the case of Sarah her inborn optimism continually shines through. Hers was, without ever becoming too explicit, an eternal philosophy of hope and one need only read her "Hymn to Rover" to find it expressed. Sarah might reflect upon her own demise as "Beneath this marble slab lies Sarah, a poetess though prematurely dead," but it is not a bitter or a despairing thought as in the case of Swivel. Swivel, buried according to his own wishes, on his father's farm and ploughed over to be one with the soil he loved, could say:

No bricks outline his resting place,
 No rhubarb grows upon his grave —
 Harrow and plow alike efface
 His one-time gilded architrave —
 And save for gopher now and snearth,
 He lies unhonored and unsung
 Who sang of prairie sky and earth,
 And gave to prairie wind a tongue.

Whereas Sarah, despite her misgivings when, as she says, "This makes me scratch and ask, when shall my powers fade?" still has no doubt as to her place in literature. Literature, she declaims, "is mostly doleful choral, and grief the poet's steady stock in trade," but such expressed sentiments never seem to dampen her boundless optimism and her confidence in the future.

IT MIGHT BE INTERESTING to ask ourselves at this point why Sarah, on the occasion of her award of the Wheat Pool Medal, should have dedicated a poem of what appears at first sight to be one of frustration "To My Father, Jacob Binks." But the truth is that it is not a poem of frustration at all but of eternal hope.

One must remember that the wheat farmer, particularly in Sarah's time, was a perfectionist. No crop, regardless of how good, was the perfect crop; no crop ever reached the ideal. And Jacob Binks, perhaps even more than most, having left the fertile plains of South Dakota for the more hopeful ones of Saskatchewan, was

no exception. The perfect crop, the ideal crop, had always eluded him, and Sarah had been brought up from early childhood to hear her father's opinion of farming in general and his repeated assertion that he would quit it forever if at least *one* good crop would enable him to do so. Sarah herself may even have echoed these sentiments at times, but she was quite aware that both in the case of her father and herself the love of the land would never permit them to leave even if they were to starve. "To My Father, Jacob Binks," is an exposition of character which she shared, and her final lines of that splendid tribute to her father in which she says, "And if, perchance the crop is ever yielded, You'd never see the farmer for his dust," is not an expression of intent but of the eternal hope which springs in every human heart.

Poetry is undoubtedly Saskatchewan's highest contribution to Canadian culture, a fact which the government of that province was quick to recognize by the awards of the Order of Merit upon all the members of the Regina School of poets who met in Willowview Cemetery to celebrate the twenty-fifth anniversary of the death of Sarah Binks. (The Half-Order awarded to the unknown voice of the so-called "Muse" on the tape recorder, which was given so that they might be at least half a point up on the Group of Seven in Ontario, might in itself prove to be a rewarding subject for a Ph.D. thesis.) But the interesting thing about its poetry is that it seems to have been drifting into northern Manitoba even to the point where the native, or at least the near native, has been touched by it. Cultural drifts are not unknown in literature and they cannot be explained as easily as, for example, the introduction of the wild pumpkin into northern Manitoba by the casual matings of the snearth with the Manitoba magpie in his brief detour into that province on its return from the Arctic Circle where it has hibernated through the winter. (It often carries a small quantity of the seed of the Arctic pumpkin to sustain it on its journey back to Saskatchewan. There is the possibility for a thesis here.) Apparently it is all in fun — this brief mating of the snearth with the Manitoba magpie has so far resulted in no hybrids and beyond the interest it has drawn from bird-watchers it has attracted little attention, but when it comes to poetry we have more subtle and deep-rooted influence.

A case in point is a poem which just reached me from Pickerel Landing. It is not poetry of the highest quality but it is a big departure from the Hi, Yi, Yi, Yi, going on for hours like a musical evening on the CBC which is the type of lyricism the brave of Sarah's Skin Age could seldom surmount. The poem is entitled "Goosie" and was written by Mary Woodtick, one of the more advanced students of the local school at Pickerel Landing. In this poem Mary Woodtick pays tribute to the idyllic life of the north, but in addition renders her gratitude to a kindly government in meeting local needs as the occasion arises, in this case the introduction of electric power to promote the sale of vacuum cleaners:

GOOSIE

Up near Island Lake there lived a Cree girl whose name was Goosie,
She lived with a Scotch trapper in a little cabin which he always referred to as his
wee hoosie,

It was made of spruce log and was ten by twelve and smelled sprucy.
Needless to say their little boy was called Brucie.

Well, one day Goosie was making a bannock for dinner,
She was feeling all in because she was going to have another baby which made her
feel all-inner,

When an agent came to the door and said, "How would you like to buy for dis nice
cabin a nice wacuum clinner?"

(Up in Island Lake they dont always speak very good grammer)

Well, at first Goosie didn't think circumstances would allow her
But she bought one anyway and now everybody in Island Lake is getting paid by
the hour,

Because the Government is putting up tower after tower,

That's because they now feel there is a local demand for power.

"Goosie" is a charming thing and is but one example of the ever-growing forest of poetic writing in Saskatchewan. Its fibres extend into the School of Seven-and-a-Half which in turn has its cultural roots in Sarah. The connection is apparent; the fact that Goosie's cabin is specifically described as being ten by twelve and made of spruce logs is also characteristic of Sarah's tendency to be specific in her measurements without losing herself in poetic haze. She visualizes herself, for example, as lying "seven and a half feet deep" after her death, and it is the half foot which is significant. And again, she allows, even in speaking of the farmer's kingship, for the "odd" acres which the government of the day specified in its titles to the quarter section, to ensure itself against mistakes of the surveyors. In "Spreading Time" she details those necessary articles of farm life which are going to be overlooked and buried in snow throughout the winter: "the shovel, and the stone-boat, and the barrow." An outstanding example of Sarah's attention to detail occurs in "Little Papoose" where the Algonquin mother's concern for her daughter's evening meal is itemized: a pickle, bread and molasses, stewed dried apples, sardines, two cups of tea, fifteen crackers, and a double handful of saskatoon. Ample and generous, but given with methodical precision. So also the term "dodecahedral" which Sarah had heard somewhere, is used to describe the many-sidedness of the Indian character on the part of Moon-in-the-Eyes in contrast to the off-squareness of Patrick O'Connell.

One can cite many examples, but it is the business of the research student to dig them out. The rewards in prestige and scholarship are great and the opportunities presented by the Fletchers Castoria box should not be missed.