

TELLING TALES

I HAVE BEEN MEANING FOR SOME TIME to say something about the short story, and to draw attention to the useful series of reprints which for several years now the Books for Libraries Press has been publishing in Freeport, New York. There are at least fifteen Canadian short story texts in the series. Though reading through them by themselves charts only a selective map of Canadian short story history, it nonetheless proves instructive. For there emerges a glimpse of an unofficial canon of writers, a canon that needs questioning if we are adequately to reread and re-evaluate works from the past.

There are two anthologies among the fifteen reprints, which serve as a convenient guide to what I mean by "canon." Raymond Knister's *Canadian Short Stories* (1928) — gathering Denison, Duncan, Parker, Pickthall, Thomson, Roberts, de la Roche, Scott, and (more surprisingly) Leslie McFarlane, who went on to become more famous as the Ghost of the Hardy Boys — celebrates the "realistic" as it was "emerging from the imitative stage," a view of the times which has nudged its way into critical dogma. The other, May Lamberton Becker's *Golden Tales of Canada* (1938), more openly reveals its bias, which makes it easier to put down: "The charm of Canadian literature," the editor writes, "... is largely due to its romantic reassurance that in an over-crowded world, wide and wonderful spaces yet remain." Moreover, the "stories in this collection, like those in the five original anthologies that have preceded it, bring back an America that has ceased to be." In an age wanting realism, cosmopolitanism, and national character, neither the attributes of "charm" and "romantic reassurance" nor the backswing compliment of being a "region" of America were likely to take critical root. Yet clearly the interpretation involves a question of perspective, for the list of contributors to Becker's anthology is familiar: Denison, Duncan, Parker, Pickthall, Thomson, Grey Owl, Connor, and others. The "others" (Leacock, Haliburton, Hémon, Richardson, McClung, Beames, and Sime) scarcely alter the flavour — a flavour which Becker characterizes as Tory, Scottish, and influenced by "the manse." Jessie Sime, fascinated by Irish Catholic

Montreal, is a writer worth investigating a little, but the "story" from Richardson is merely a chunk from *Wacousta*, and the "story" by John Beames a bit from his novel *Army without Banners*, a tonally uneven tribute to the English contribution to Saskatchewan settlement. For editor Becker a "Golden Tale" seems to have meant an excerptable anecdote. But "anecdote," "sketch," "tale," and "short story" do not all mean the same thing, and a careful reading of the short fiction of the turn of the century shows that writers were experimenting with form as much as with romantic charm or national persuasion.

It is this continuum between form and political impulse that the Books for Libraries reprints (of volumes by Thomson, Scott, Parker, Barr, Allen, Roberts, Grenfell, Hickman, and de la Roche) reveal. E. W. Thomson's *Old Man Savarin Stories*, in its 1917 form (that is, with the addition of some late stories to the 1895 edition), is the most anecdotal, full of artificial dialect and high political principle. "'Dey's fight like dat for more as four hours,'" says one character. "'God be praised, I die in British waters!'" breathes another. A third, reminding us of the reality we are expected to find in an internal tale, declares, "I myself had shuddered and grown cold, so strongly had my imagination realized the awful experience that Petherick described. At length he resumed his story. . . ." Today we might balk at both the elevated tone and the sense of exaggeration that derives from the inverted syntax, but the "value" of these stories lies elsewhere than in technique. They are works which assert the validity of neighbourliness, the capacity to overcome temptation, and the existence of justice. Irony for the early Thomson did not declare a cynicism about life; it reinforced the values of a time. But it could do little in practice about public behaviour, and the later stories — "Boss of the World" and "Miss Minnelly's Management" — alter in tone, observe satirically such matters as urban political manoeuvres and business ethics, and perhaps therefore appeal more to the modern reader, who is more likely to find *them* "shrewd" and the *early* sketches "sentimental." For Thomson, one suspects, it wasn't shrewdness at all, but disappointment.

Thomson's set of beliefs has its parallel in works by C. G. D. Roberts, Gilbert Parker, and Wilfred Thomason Grenfell; his disappointment, a parallel in D. C. Scott's *The Witching of Elspie* (1923), which remains one of the finest collections of early Canadian prose. Gathering together *loup-garou* tales and trading-post narratives of psychological warfare, Scott's book carefully balances its respect for the idea of independence with its observation of the reality of human pettiness and tyranny. Scott, moreover, manages to convey the cadences of vernacular speech without the artificiality of Thomsonian dialect. But for Parker, Roberts, and Grenfell, something other than "tyranny" or political tension is true and real: an amalgam of duty, love of Woman, death, justice, and faith — mostly faith, which in their writings tends to override both human discomfort and literary form. With Grenfell it takes its most obvious and least effective shape.

Yet such a code appealed in its day, and will still appeal to those for whom it reinforces a particular moral set. Henry Van Dyke, who introduces Grenfell's *Off the Rocks* (1906), avers: "you who feel that religion is just as real as Nature, just as real as humanity, and that brave adventures may be achieved in the name of Christ, — this book is for you. This is the real thing." But as with the tales of *Down North on the Labrador* (1911) and *Labrador Days: Tales of the Sea Toilers* (1919), there is such elevation of suffering in the life-stories Grenfell tells that the effect is grotesque rather than truthfully eloquent. The tales may well be stories drawn from life, as Grenfell declares — and the photographs of his own Labrador travels, which he includes in his books, reiterate Grenfell's veracity — but their cumulative effect does not heighten a reader's awareness of human misfortune; instead, it emphasizes *Grenfell's presence* at the disasters he describes. The narrator intrudes into the tale just as much as he does in Thomson's anecdotes, in other words, but with a twist: for it is less the declared selflessness of the narrator than his undeclared ego that commands a contemporary reader's attention. The difference between intention and effect only stresses further the flaws in Grenfell's artistry, and by contrast stresses again the achievement of Scott, who as much as Grenfell accepted moral standards but made his readers come to understand them through art — using his art to reveal life's values in the context of its daily uncertainties.

Sir Charles G. D. Roberts was, of course, as aware of life's ambivalences as Scott was; his preface to *Earth's Enigmas* (1895), in which one finds such familiar sketches as "Do Seek Their Meat from God," stresses just such a perception. "Most of the stories in this collection," he writes, "attempt to present one or another of those problems of life or nature to which, as it appears to many of us, there is no adequate solution within sight. Others are the almost literal transcript of dreams. . . . The rest are scenes from that simple life of tide-country with which my earlier years made me familiar." Combined in theory, therefore, are his notions about real life, the life of the imagination, and the appropriate means for representing such life in literature. Hence Roberts' failure to match Scott derives not from his initial perception of life but from his lesser skill in manipulating words; whereas Scott pared his language back and revealed reality from inside his limiting forms, Roberts (like Parker in this respect) laid reality on his characters and scenes externally, by adjectival statement. One of Roberts' stories opens: "He was a mean-looking specimen, this Simon Gillsay, and the Gornish Camp was not proud of him." One of Parker's, from *An Adventurer of the North* (1896), begins in comparable fashion, though its crisp brevity gives it a certain cachet: "He was seven feet and fat." Far worse than either of these sentences are those which by intention use their adjectives to elevate the effect or the moral tone of a passage but in fact prove reductive because the diction is hackneyed or the comparisons forced. Hence Roberts:

Her hair, in color not far from that of the red ox, was rich and abundant, and lay in a coil so gracious that not even the tawdry millinery of her cheap "store" hat could make her head look quite commonplace.

And Parker, in excerpts from *Pierre and His People* (1894):

He was busy with the grim ledger of his life;

and *A Romany of the Snows* (1896):

"For heaven or hell, my girl," he cried, and they drove their horses on — on. Far behind upon a divide the flying hunters . . . saw with hushed wonder and awe a man and woman, dark and weird against the red light, ride madly into the flicking surf of fire.

The point is that despite these sentimentalizing techniques, both Roberts and Parker were aware of the moral distinctions that bedevil human experience, that mark it off from the kind of life governed by what Roberts calls "Natural Law"; and implicitly these distinctions call human judgments into question as well. Parker goes so far as to question even human institutions, having his trickster character Pretty Pierre champion Conscience over Law. But neither Pierre nor Roberts' characters can escape the language in which their authors have trapped them. In order to demonstrate their human nobility, Roberts' characters repeatedly have to discover their "slumbering manhood" (adjective, noun). Pierre's frontier compatriots have to express their "keen discernment." And Pierre himself, the outsider and the centre of Parker's interconnected "histories," is presumed to appear French because he punctuates his speech with "*Enfin*" and "*Alors*." The adjectives are too much. *Alors* is not enough. And the balance between heroic romance and real life falls apart.

Why, then, should Parker, Roberts, and Thomson have emerged as the "classic" Canadian story-writers of their day? The answer has, I expect, more to do with fashion than with taste. Commentators located natural morality in Canadian Nature and found it good: elevating their approval of a stance and a place into an assertion of reality (as Knister did) or locating charm and reassurance in it (as did May Becker). Writers like Mazo de la Roche, in the truly awful stories of *The Sacred Bullock* (1939), attempted to continue the Parker tradition, and it is perhaps not too far off the mark to find it continuing still, in an inverted form, in Joyce Carol Oates' world-weary fascination with naiveté in *A Sentimental Education* (Dutton, 1980). But it is worth reminding ourselves that fashion has to do with time, and that if in the present we might be seeking alternatives to Parker and Roberts, then Parker and Roberts wrote as they did in part because they in their day were seeking to be different from other traditions, too.

In this context it is worth going back to Knister, to ponder his assertion that Pickthall and Leacock show in their work that they were born in England,

whereas Albert Hickman is "Canadian through and through." So completely has literary history buried Hickman that one might be forgiven for asking "Albert Who?" Even Knister, after singling him out, does not include him in his anthology, and it is therefore bracing to find Hickman's volume *Canadian Nights* (1914), along with Robert Barr's *In a Steamer Chair* (1892) and Grant Allen's *An African Millionaire* (1897), among the Books for Libraries reprints. Reading Hickman, I am not clear what Knister meant by his distinction. Reading Hickman beside Allen, Barr, and Parker & Co., however, offers glimpses of a world of fashion that Parker and Roberts rejected as shallow, a world given to wit rather than to sentiment, to Style rather than Pathos, to society rather than nature. By opting for nature, the Parkers of Canadian literature felt they were opting for reality. From our vantage point in the 1980's, we can see that they simply opted for another form of artifice. While they offered a way of legitimizing Canadian nature in literature — and of developing a literary vernacular — they also established a rural illusion of Canada which it has taken many decades to shed. In their way, that is, Knister and Becker were both right. By the time of Knister and Callaghan, in fact, writers were trying to pare sentiment out of the laconic dialogues they found characteristic of Canadian speech; the little-known Thomas Murtha, whose 1930's *Short Stories* have recently been collected and published by the University of Ottawa Press, was one of these, though he more often *told* experience ("Irene was very happy") than realized it. But the literary games of the 1970's, which were part of the dismantling of the sentimental tradition and which have required us to view artifice anew, also allow us to return to Hickman and Allen with a different eye and to find in them not (dismissively, or "merely") practitioners of a "dated" international mode, but artificers (admittedly flawed ones) of ironic and urbane literary forms.

Barr is the least successful of the three, but even he could pen Wildean conceits. "I am glad to find that I am in the majority," says one character, discussing Howells, James, and Chutney, "even in the matter of ignorance." But Barr's solemn comedies — romances between the naive and the articulate, gamesmanship among the low and the highborn — scarcely reach beyond anecdote and do not survive their time. Characters called Plodkins and Cupples are pre-Leacockian stereotypes, of the sort that Leacock himself satirized. And a story like "The Man Who Was Not on the Passenger List" — about a man killed on shipboard and buried at sea, whose ghost keeps returning and requiring reburying because he paid the fare for a WHOLE transatlantic trip — begins in suspense and ends in banality. Allen and Hickman could both manage better the artful craft of literary silliness.

Hickman, for example — and perhaps this was the quality that Knister acknowledged in him: a sensitivity to social attitude that could express itself in literary nuance — wrote a story about an architect from Ontario who on a visit

to a Quebec bar is disrespectful to Montreal, and is promptly taken up to Mount Royal and made to apologize to all the institutions separately. In another story he drily observes that

In North America there is a small but delicately perfumed army of young ladies who have made it their business to start an aristocracy. For certain obscure reasons, including the lack of aristocrats to fill it with, they have failed; but, instead, they have what is called a plutocracy, which is the same thing from the inside, though from the outside it is quite different.

Still other stories, certainly, show that Hickman was capable of overwriting adventure, but he was also magnificently adept at indirect satire; one forgives a lot for a polished sentence like this one :

Miss McNab . . . braced both feet against the sloping footboard and labored with her expression.

Hickman's stories are, in other words, about politics and manners rather than about combat in nature, and are no less real for that. And they are no less unaffected by fashion — as Hickman himself was aware. He opens his story "Oriented," for example, this way :

This is a poor story, for it has no plot, and all stories written in America are supposed to have a plot. Nothing else matters. This story has a girl and a man and a chief event.

The language of the time tells us about the social relations of the time; it also helps to distinguish between the plotted American tale and the fragmentary Canadian sketch form, which Hickman (like Scott, and like Leacock and Callaghan and Hugh Hood much later) was making his own.

By contrast, Grant Allen in *An African Millionaire* was more attracted to the tale and was using it to reach a more international readership. His book (which is also full of pungent asides: a definition of "bigamy" as "occasional marriage," or an observation that "two things go to produce success — the first is chance; the second is cheating") is subtitled "Episodes in the Life of the Illustrious Colonel Clay." It tells of the escapades and final capture of a Robin Hoodish character with an India-rubber face, an elusive name and nationality, the profession of wax-figure maker, and the skills of a con-man — whom the crowd loves and the narrator deplors. Over the series of linked adventures, what emerges is a revelation of the "honest" narrator's shady morality, which it is tempting to read as parable; using the familiar convention of the honest con-man, Allen reports on the connection between South African economics and European politics, and more particularly on the inability (or the failure) of ordinary public power to contend with multi-national enterprises. Allen writes to entertain rather than to preach, but he pens a clear message anyway, a message of some literary facility and some political sophistication. If he is not a great

writer, he is at least as good as many who are now known better. But he was an expatriate, and his mannered message was one which post-Victorian Canada would either dismiss as formal contrivance, or find irrelevant to the new century and the growing nation, or ignore.

It seems one cannot overestimate the impact of the new nationalism and the First World War upon the direction Canadian literature took in the early decades of this century. As Elizabeth Spencer observes about two of her characters, in one of the rare Montreal stories in *The Stories of Elizabeth Spencer* (Doubleday, a collection of works written between 1944 and 1977): "The man and his wife . . . seemed, above everything else, concerned with their own relevance to the world they lived in." Enquiring into the relevance of the world to *them* seems beyond their capacity to imagine, and it is just such a closure of mind that literary and political isolationism begets. Perhaps it is the fate of every generation to presume that cultural sophistication is the achievement of its own day. Glimpses of the international connections that stimulated (and perhaps also threatened) Canadian life at the turn of the century suggest, however, how much was cut off by the exigencies of the war in 1914 and by the subsequent determination to forget what led to war, and therefore how much in the way of political, social, and cultural connection with the rest of the world had to be started anew after 1945. A true cosmopolitanism is not something Canada has yet acquired. And a lot of the old connections, with their attendant biases, have persisted in the society, unrestrained. To look back carefully at the writings and the urbane culture of turn-of-the-century Canada, however, is to see how lively the culture actually was, to reassess the literary judgments that have shaped our picture of it, and to appreciate once again how important the satiric voice is in shaping a politically astute and culturally informed society.

W.H.N.

BATS

Judith Harway

At night the orchard shook with bats
 in flight, tight-ropes of sound strung
 tree to tree. Between the leaves
 their whine evaporated to gnat hum
 and toad antiphony. On the way home,
 crushing apples underfoot, you'd pause
 and listen for the gypsy moths,
 for fish teeth clicking, ants among the roots.
 We heard, we did not hear.