

# SEEKING "DIRECT, HONEST REALISM"

## *The Canadian Novel of the 1920's*

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THE PERIOD BETWEEN the close of World War I and the crash of the stock market in 1929 was a time of far-reaching political and social change in Canadian life. The government was forced to respond to the problems of the returned soldiers, and many believed its response inadequate. Rural disenchantment with post-war political leadership caused a major shift in the traditional centres of power from east to west and from industry to agriculture. Nonetheless, industries and cities continued to grow, fed by cheap immigrant labour, and the industrial labour force demanded higher wages and better working conditions. Nineteenth-century reform movements reached a height in the "social passion" of the twenties, and a Communist party was formed in Canada. Moreover, Canadian political autonomy was established firmly during the decade and British control over Canadian legislation effectively ended in 1931. Despite these dramatic social changes the dominant form of fiction during the twenties continued to be the rural romance, escapist literature which ignored the contemporary social situation. Realism, an ideal medium for the objective reporting of social phenomena, had still not made its way into Canadian fiction in the early decades of the twentieth century.

Continental literary realists had rebelled in the nineteenth century against the notion that the essence of experience was unknowable because it existed in a reality closed to sense perception. They had chosen to make the commonplace and the ordinary respectable subject matter for the novel. Describing a universe governed by material cause-and-effect required a technique which involved close observation of the details of everyday life, and the resulting record had not only to give the impression of mass social behaviour but also to explain the interplay between society and the individual. Flaubert, Zola, the Russian realists and others evoked middle-class settings and objectively revealed the folly of romantic passion, and naturalism explained the "lower depths" of life by a negative determinism. Grove's *The Master Mason's House* (published in 1906 as *Mauermeister Ihles Haus*) indicates an awareness of naturalistic developments in the French novel.

In the United States, William Dean Howells was championing the cause of realism in the pages of *Harper's Magazine* in the last decades of the nineteenth century, but American realists did not gain public acceptance until the first quarter of this century. Though *Sister Carrie* appeared initially in 1900, it had to be withdrawn. Ironically, only two years later Zola died and French realism *did* collapse. By the time the Canadian novel turned to realism in response to the dramatic changes in the social life of the twenties, Proust's *Remembrance of Things Past* (1913-1927) was more characteristic of the French novel and American realism finally had been accepted. Even today in Canada, the nineteenth-century realists are exerting fresh influences. The New Brunswick novelist David Adams Richards is heavily indebted to writers like Turgenev, Tolstoy, and Dostoevsky.

As a latecomer on the literary scene, Canadian realism managed to avoid the excesses of Zola's naturalism, to retain some sense of the unknowable, and to use concrete physical detail to suggest mental states. For example, Callaghan's urban realism included a religious dimension which ruled out determinism. Though his technique was based on the objective description of concrete reality, he had absorbed the lessons of his predecessors and his exterior world also depicts the interior world of his characters. Moreover, Callaghan's concentration on the city forced a re-examination of the romantic nationalism which connected the "real" Canada with the wilderness and the land. His "realism" is Canadian, as is MacLennan's, and Canadian realism has developed independently to the present time.

However, the first steps of the shift from the rural romance of the twenties to the realistic novel were awkward and difficult, often only imperfectly achieved by writers and imperfectly understood by readers and critics. For example, Nellie McClung's *Painted Fires* (1925) shows a recognition that the turmoil of the post-war decade required expression. A Communist maid is included in the plot, but she is a flutterbrain mouthing slogans she does not understand. McClung shows little comprehension of the genuine social issues behind the slogans.

Opposition to realism often was extreme. Watson Griffin, an economist who wrote *Canada: the Country of the Twentieth Century* (1915) for the Department of Trade and Commerce, also wrote a novel called *The Gulf Years* (1927). Griffin's heroine, Nancy, receives a contemporary realistic novel from her suitor Jack, whose character is questionable. Her opinion of it follows:

"A rank weed is real, Jack, but no more real than a violet or a rose, and when I am decorating my room I prefer to fill my vases with lovely flowers rather than with noxious weeds. . . . I am not denying that there are such people as that book describes, Jack, but I don't want to know them any more intimately than necessary. . . . As I know myself, my character is full of weeds — thoughts, feelings, impulses that I frequently have to suppress. Suppose that instead of trying to root

out these weeds as fast as they spring up, I cultivated them, dwelt upon them morbidly, studied them with a microscope, magnifying them so that they appeared to be the dominating influence in all human nature, and then wrote an autobiography or a novel describing them; that would be psychoanalysis according to the latest fashions, and many reviewers would praise me for my realism; but would anyone in all the world be better for the reading of such a book? I think not, and I am sure many would be worse."<sup>1</sup>

There is a reference in the conversation to Zola and "the modern novels of England and America," and likely it was one of these that Jack had given Nancy, not a Canadian realistic novel (by this time *Settlers of the Marsh* and *Wild Geese* had appeared). However, the point of view is clear. Nancy, acting as a mouth-piece for Griffin, does not believe that social discontent and human distress are suitable subject matter for the novel. The passage is a clear defence of sunshine novels of any nationality.

The situation in Canada at the beginning of the decade may be understood by glancing at a McClelland & Stewart advertisement for its current list, placed in the January 1920 issue of the *Canadian Bookman*. The list included Lucy Maud Montgomery's *Rainbow Valley*; Marshall Saunders' *Golden Dickey*, described as "the story of a valiant little canary"; Grace McLeod Rogers' *Joan at Halfway*, "a charming romance of a sunshine girl"; W. A. Fraser's *Bulldog Carney*, whose title speaks for itself; and Ralph Connor's version of muscular Christianity on the battlefield, *The Sky Pilot in No Man's Land*. The McClelland & Stewart advertisement described Robert Watson's *The Girl of O.K. Valley* in some detail:

Here is a simon-pure romance of charm of atmosphere and vigor of action, by an author whose stories of Canadian life are distinguished by refinement of style and sentiment and touched by warm humanity.<sup>2</sup>

"Refinement of style and sentiment" and "warm humanity" were traits that characterized most Canadian fiction of the decade, but in accord with nationalist sentiments of the time, some critics looked chiefly for books that would establish that elusive concept — the Canadian identity. Donald G. French who, with J. D. Logan, published *Highways of Canadian Literature: a synoptic introduction to the literary history of Canada* (1924), addressed the Canadian Literature Club of Toronto (which he had founded in 1915) the year after his book appeared. His topic was "A Discussion of the Significance of Canadian Fiction as a Factor in the Evolution of Canadian Nationality." French suggested that the "foundations" of "a real Canadian literature" could be built only by the writing of books promoting knowledge and understanding between "the various racial elements of Canada":

Here is a great work for our Canadian novelists. Whether or not the novels which help to accomplish this are acclaimed great by the critics of Great Britain or the United States does not much concern us. . . . What they must do is vivify the

struggles and the achievements, the aspirations and the attainments of many diverse factors in the making of Canada. They must build up an adequate Canadian background and overlay it with a feeling of historical atmosphere that will suffuse all Canadians with a sense of reciprocal ownership, without which we can have no true realization of our Canadian citizenship — Canada is ours: we are Canada's. . . .<sup>3</sup>

French was prepared to throw over literary standards in the service of what he saw as a greater goal. Out of thirty works of fiction published in 1924, French chose as the most "significant" *Chez Nous*, which showed French Canada in its "persevering endurance and patient toil"; *Hansen*, which presented a picture of an immigrant "who becomes a truer Canadian citizen than many of the native-born"; *The Trail of the Conestoga*, another record of "high courage and perseverance, of endurance and toil"; and *The Gentleman Adventurer*, based on an account of the Hudson's Bay Company acquired "from the lips of an old gentleman who worked his way from a clerkship to the position of a high officer of the great company." Refinement of style and sentiment, not to mention warm humanity, appear to be at least as important as nationalism in French's short list.

THE FOLLOWING YEAR N. de Bertrand Lugin argued directly against the new realism in current English novels.<sup>4</sup> He regretted the "general weakening of faith throughout the whole of Christendom" and the disappearance of the "fine ideals" of novels of the past. He pleaded with Canada to "take upon herself the responsibility" of being the "new Peter Pan" of world literature. He visualized Canada as "young, beautiful, uncontaminated by the evils of effete civilizations," with a literature and art still in "swaddling clothes," but about to take her place in the "front rank of nations." Therefore, he thought the attention of a "jaded world" would be brought to bear on her. Thus, he argued, the future of Canadian writing and the future of the country lay in standing apart from the new realism, and he saw no need to delineate in literature what he called "ultra modern twentieth century men and women."

A characteristically orthodox view of the literature of the period was also held by Louis Arthur Cunningham. In the same year that he published a romance about the Acadians called *Yvon Tremblay* (1927), Cunningham wrote an article called "Traits of Canadian Literature" for the *Canadian Bookman* (November 1927). He listed strength, beauty, people, and romance as the main features of the country's literature. "Strength" is linked exclusively with a romantic view of the wilderness, that is, literature that dealt with the "steel and iron of Nature's ruggedness" and the "weird Aeolian music of pine forests." The "romance" Cunningham had in mind referred to "the days of the French regime when the blue and white uniforms of Gascon troopers were seen on the high-flung battle-

ments of Quebec. . . ." Cunningham's views left little room for new types of fiction. Only a few rural dwellers were pioneering in the bush in the twenties, a situation implied by Cunningham's use of "strength," and Canada was far from the days of the French regime. Jessie G. Sime's *Our Little Life* (1921), a bleak picture of Canadian slum dwellers in Montreal, probably presented a more accurate picture of a large part of the population, that is, the urban poor. But Cunningham does not mention the city in his list, and though he refers to "industry," he sees it in terms of the "boundless resources" of "rocks," "forests" and "rivers." Though the realistic novel is emerging during the period, neither critics nor readers betray much sympathy for it.

However, the literary-critical milieu represented by French, de Bertrand Lugin, and Cunningham had some intelligent opposition. Three years before Watson Griffin had published *The Gulf of Years*, Archibald MacMechan had published one of the most important early studies of Canadian literature, *Headwaters of Canadian Literature*. In it he had sent out the following *cri de coeur*:

Regarded as a whole, Canadian fiction is tame. It bears everywhere the stamp of the amateur. Nowhere can be traced that fiery conviction which alone brings forth a masterpiece. Modern problems are as yet untouched, unapproached. Direct, honest realism is also sadly to seek, though subjects are crying aloud for treatment on every side. . . . So far Canadian fiction is conventional, decent, unambitious, *bourgeois*. It has nowhere risen to the heights or plumbed the depths of life in Canada.<sup>5</sup>

Unlike other critics, MacMechan was not deceived by "refinement of style and sentiment" into believing that masterpieces of fiction had been written in Canada. One can imagine what he would have thought of *The Gulf of Years* with its "stamp of the amateur" on every page. One wonders also whether he had noticed Sime's *Our Little Life*, which does plumb "the depths of life in Canada."

In 1928 A. J. M. Smith joined the battle with "Wanted — Canadian Criticism," the essay where he deplored the lack of intelligent reviewing of books, which he saw as particularly unfortunate as the country was becoming so "Canada-conscious." However, he saw Canada-consciousness as "a mixture of blind optimism and materialistic patriotism, a kind of my-mother-drunk-or-sober complex," in which a writer was forced to write "in the prevailing spirit of pep and optimism" or lose his readers:

Of realism we are afraid — apparently because there is an impression that it wishes to discredit the picture of our great dominion as a country where all the women are chaste and the men too pure to touch them if they weren't. Irony is not understood. Cynicism is felt to be disrespectful, unmanly. The idea that any subject whatever is susceptible of artistic treatment and that praise or blame is to be conferred after a consideration, not of its moral, but of its aesthetic harmony is a proposition that will take years to knock into the heads of our people.<sup>6</sup>

By 1928 Smith was in a position to praise Morley Callaghan, Raymond Knister, and Mazo de la Roche as writers of fiction on the right side of the struggle with commerce.

Smith rightly sensed that opposition to the realistic novel was linked to some extent with a puritan fear of frank discussions of sex. Mrs. Hilda Glynn-Ward, a British Columbia writer who published a lurid novel about Oriental immigration to the province called *The Writing on the Wall* (1921), wrote an angry "Plea for Purity" in the *Canadian Bookman* in March, 1924. Her views were representative of much thinking that saw literary realism solely in terms of sex:

There has come over the literature of the day the foetid breath of decadence. They call it Realism. They call it Truth. They call it anything but what it is: a pandering to the morbidly unwholesome in human nature. . . . Just that same section of the public who will tip the police to gain them entrance into an overcrowded divorce court will buy the dopish ravings of the modern sex-writers who describe the scenes in a brothel, who describe with horrible detail some exaggerated aspect of human perversion and wrap it all up in the cover of a novel, or, still more subtly, under the cover of "lessons in sex-hygiene."

Mrs. Glynn-Ward ends her article by chortling at the four months in prison spent by a London editor who published Sherwood Anderson's *Many Marriages*.

In reaction to Mrs. Glynn-Ward's "Plea for Purity," a "Plea for Tolerance" written by Francis Dickie appeared in the May 1924 issue of the *Canadian Bookman*. Dickie chided the *Bookman* for encouraging intolerance by printing Mrs. Glynn-Ward's "Plea for Purity," though the *Bookman* appears to have been practising the very tolerance Dickie was arguing for. Dickie pleaded for the new realism:

As for realism: If there arises in Canada now or in the near future, a writer who can picture the sordidness, the emptiness of the life of some Barnardo or other orphan home boy on the farm of some mean, unsentimental Canadian farmer; if there arises a writer who can picture the life of brothels in Calgary in the wide open days, show the women's sadness, their tragedy, and too their humour . . . then I for one will gladly read his book, and give him praise for a work well done.

For the good of Canadian literature, I say, let us be tolerant, let us strive sincerely to curb that bitter, proselytizing urge so deeply imbedded in the hearts of all men. . . .

There was little use in asking for a novel about Calgary brothels in the Canada of the twenties. The following year (1925) Grove's oblique treatment of sex in *Settlers of the Marsh* created enough disturbance so that the book was banned from some public libraries.<sup>7</sup> Grove himself could not be described as excessively tolerant. He dismissed *Wild Geese* in the following offhand way:

The petty 'sexiness' of many passages makes a mature person smile. One cannot avoid the suspicion that that sort of thing was sprinkled in as a spice or with an

eye on the 'movies.' In fact, how could a young girl know anything of the fierce antagonisms that discharge themselves in sex? Nobody will accuse me of prudishness. What I object to is the incompetence, psychologic and artistic, in dealing with these things. . . .<sup>8</sup>

Elsewhere, Grove describes the book as "trash."<sup>9</sup> Over fifty years later, the "young girl's" direct treatment of sex in *Wild Geese* seems more "artistic" than the prudish smokescreen Grove generates about Clara in *Settlers of the Marsh*. Grove makes clear in his essay "Realism in Literature" (published 1929) that he believes it is erroneous to define realism as "frankness in matters of sex."<sup>10</sup> He states clearly that realism is a matter of "literary procedure," not of "choice of subject," and makes a distinction between what he calls Zola's "pseudo-realism" and Flaubert's genuine realism. Eventually he concludes that the greatest realists in all literature are "Homer, Shakespeare, Goethe." In a letter to Raymond Knister,<sup>11</sup> Grove offers a substantive criticism of *White Narcissus* (1929) using the criteria set out in his essay. However, "Realism in Literature" never refers to Canadian literature (one reference to the view held of Zola in "America" suggests he means both Canada and the United States), an odd omission in view of his audience. Grove as writer seems to have found realism about sex in literature as awkward a subject as other Canadian writers did. Grove was not the writer who might have responded to Francis Dickie's "Plea for Tolerance." The "bitter, proselytizing urge" that Dickie disliked is more characteristic of Grove than tolerance and humour are.

THE SHRILLNESS OF Mrs. Glynn-Ward's "Plea for Purity" may offend the modern reader, but others were proffering identical sentiments. In 1927 the English Club at Queen's University was addressed by P. G. C. Campbell on the subject of "Sex in Fiction."<sup>12</sup> Campbell argued that "Fiction to-day is overwhelmingly about sex," and that "it is not love, but lust that is portrayed." He suggested that young people were being corrupted by exposure to this type of literature. Unlike Mrs. Glynn-Ward, Campbell is balanced in tone and supports his argument by references to Plato, who argued for censorship on the grounds that art was an instrument of education. In the absence of an official Canadian censorship for works of fiction, Campbell advised the English Club to practise self-censorship. The desperate tone of A. J. M. Smith's "Wanted — Canadian Criticism" appears totally logical in such a literary climate.

Smith and MacMechan were not alone in deploring the fear of realism evidenced by writers and readers of Canadian literature. Lionel Stevenson's "The Outlook for Canadian Fiction," published in 1924,<sup>13</sup> divided fiction into three categories: historical romance, the "Ralph Connor" school, and the "L. M. Montgomery" school. He characterized the last two as follows:

From H. A. Cody in the east to Robert Allison Hood in the west, the Connorites have peopled the land with handsome youths absorbed in their chivalrous concerns. Nor is there absolute uniformity among the writers whom I am grouping for convenience around L. M. Montgomery. . . . But in this category, as in the other, there is a basic similarity in the scope of the books — a whimsical, sympathetic portrayal of naive characters in everyday surroundings.

Stevenson's essay concludes that "The novel, civilisation's most complex literary expression, is not yet fully acclimatized in Canada," though he held out hope for the future. Stevenson felt able to identify a number of books as realistic and thought he could give the term "realism" a definite meaning in terms of the Canadian novel: "In revulsion from egregious heroes and insipid heroines there is a distinct cult of unpleasant characters and an assumption of the harshness that is loosely termed realism."<sup>14</sup> Stevenson traced the beginnings of realism to Louis Hémon's *Maria Chapdelaine*, Merrill Denison's "unsparingly realistic plays," and Marjorie Pickthall's *The Bridge*.

Though many of Stevenson's judgments hold today, his tracing of the "beginnings" of realism to *The Bridge* strikes the modern reader as a misinterpretation. Even sympathetic critics were not always able to distinguish clearly between the old and the new techniques:

It is admitted that [Pickthall's] handling of the plot suffered by comparison with her haunting pictures of natural phenomena; but for several reasons — as an effort to depict deep and terrible spiritual experience, as a representation of the supreme importance which nature assumes in this country — "The Bridge" is a landmark in Canadian fiction.

Though the hero of *The Bridge* is not "egregious" and the heroine is not "insipid," neither are they realistically presented. In this passage from the book, Sombra (heroine) renounces Maclear (hero) because Salvator (brother of the heroine) has killed a man:

She uncovered her face; it was colourless, her eyes were sunken in dark rings, but they looked at him with steadiness; her whole being was keyed to this passion of suffering and sacrifice; having seen this agony, she embraced it. . . . She — pure child, pure wife, pure mother that was to be — called herself a murderer's sister; she was resolute to keep Maclear aloof from that stain. Looking forward, she thought it would be well if she died and released him from an inconceivable wrong.

If she could have ceased to be his wife she would have: if she could have blotted from his mind every memory of her she would have; if she could have charmed him so that he would have passed her and thought her a stranger, it had been done. The height of her love alone could now plumb the depths of her abnegation. She had shut a door between them. She would not defile him to admit him.<sup>15</sup>

Is this the rhetoric of "terrible spiritual experience" or of melodrama? The parallel structures which are intended to raise the narrative to a high level of



intensity only succeed in creating bathos. One must continue to bear in mind that Stevenson was comparing Pickthall to Montgomery-Connor, and that the seriousness of intent that Pickthall exhibited would have been deceptive to a critic sympathetic to the new realism. Here is Pickthall's dialogue (the speakers are Maclear and Sombra) :

"Speak to me, dear love."

"Dear love," she echoed him out of her passing dream.

"Give me your hands, your poor cold hands, Sombra.

Let me warm them for you this way, against my heart."

"My heart," she said.

"I've found you, my poor girl."

"Poor girl," sighed the little wandering voice.<sup>16</sup>

The dialogue has the same lyric quality found in the librettos of Puccini operas, and confirms Pickthall more as a lyric poet. MacMechan pointed out that in spite of "excellent passages," *The Bridge* could not be considered a successful novel: "The Canadian setting seemed to make the tale unreal; and it is doubtful if she would have ever succeeded as a novelist."<sup>17</sup> It is clear, too, that she cannot be categorized as a realist.

In estimating Stevenson's judgments, one should also look at *Maria Chapdelaine*, which appeared in English translation in Canada in 1921, though it had been published in French in 1916 in Canada and in Paris in 1914. In a curious review of the book in the December 1921 issue of *The Canadian Bookman*, the anonymous reviewer (possibly B. K. Sandwell) praises Hémon for being totally unaware "that there was in Canada any such thing as a 'clash,' or a bi-lingual question, or Imperialism, or immigrants, or rich and noisy cities, or the British North America Act." The reviewer argues that this ignorance has enabled Hémon to write about "the hard life of the northern frontier parishes as in itself a poem of beauty and heroism." He states that a Quebec habitant equipped with the power of self-expression would not have been able to write the book in the same way, because his mind would have been filled "with many other preoccupations, the preoccupations of politics, of religion, of wealth, of social advancement, of power — to say nothing of the preoccupation of self-defence." The reviewer understands that the book is a romance, but sees the romantic version of the life of the habitant as realistic because politics, religion, wealth, social advancement and self-defence do not figure in the narrative. Presumably, a concern with such topics would turn the novel into an unrealistic one, whereas now it is realistic because it is a romance. The reviewer's description of the contents of the book includes the phrase, "the mystery and the tragedy of youth and love and death under the brief but burning northern sun and the long and terrible northern snow."

This review should be weighed against Stevenson's assessment of the book as one containing the "beginnings" of realism, and there are indeed "realistic" elements which are not concerned with politics or social advancement. These include the death of François Paradis in the snow, the painful death of Mme. Chapdelaine, the numerous references to the country being rough and the work hard, and the descriptions of the bitter cold. Nonetheless, the last word is with the "voice of Quebec" which comes to Maria in the night as she makes her decision to remain in the wilderness:

Then it was that a third voice, mightier than the others, lifted itself up in the silence: the voice of Quebec — now the song of a woman, now the exhortation of a great priest. It came to her with the sound of a church bell, with the majesty of an organ's tones, like a plaintive love-song, like the long high call of woodsmen in the forest. For verily there was in it all that makes the soul of the province: the loved solemnities of the ancestral faith; the lilt of that old speech guarded with jealous care; the grandeur and the barbaric strength of this new land where an ancient race has again found its youth.<sup>18</sup>

The voice brings the message that "In this land of Quebec naught shall die and naught shall suffer change. . . ." And it is indeed a romantic, timeless world that is contained in the novel. The atmosphere of *Maria Chapdelaine* is close to that of a fairytale. Maria is noble in her purity and beauty, and the dark forest, though menacing, can be conquered through strength and love. The anonymous reviewer thinks the book realistic because it is a romance, and Stevenson includes the book in his list because of a few passages, but by no modern standards would the book be considered realistic.

A third contemporary view of the book argued for its realism on the grounds that setting, characterization and plot were authentic. Professor Frank Oliver Call published "The Country of Maria Chapdelaine," in the December 1924 issue of *The Canadian Magazine*. He had spent a day travelling along the northern and eastern shores of Lake St. John in Quebec, the setting for the book, and he had photographed the area and located a man, Louis Gagnon, who could have been the model for Samuel Chapdelaine. The editor's introduction to the article closed with the following statement: ". . . no one now can challenge the authenticity of 'Maria Chapdelaine,' which is a most remarkable study of frontier life." Hémon's intent may have been to write a realistic novel (he was a journalist who had already written a novel of manners about English society called *Lizzie Blakeston*), but Hémon was French, not French Canadian, and was therefore looking at this pocket of French culture in the new world with a certain romantic curiosity. Hémon may have got his facts about the life right, but he looked at its spirit with romantic eyes, and on this disparity hinges the problem of assessing the book.

REALISM IS A SLIPPERY CONCEPT at best, and in the context of the Canadian novel of the twenties, it is especially hard to define. A look at another contemporary critic might be useful. Francis Dickie, whose "Plea for Tolerance" I have already discussed, published an article called "Realism in Canadian Fiction" in the October 1925 issue of *The Canadian Bookman*. He stated that as he understood the term "realism," it did not exist in Canadian fiction. He divided realism into two categories. In the first he placed Zola, Flaubert, the brothers Goncourt, George Moore, Dreiser, Anderson, and Upton Sinclair. In the second category, "kindlier realism," Dickie placed Daudet, Frank Norris, and Walpole, and four Canadian writers who had "something of an approach towards realism": Frederick Niven, J. Murray Gibbon, Bertrand Sinclair, and Arthur Stringer. All four candidates fall short for him, and he concludes that "Canadian fiction as yet has not enough artistic balance, without which no great literature is possible. That artistic balance will come with the advent of realism." However, a look at J. Murray Gibbon's *Pagan Love* helps explain why confusion existed about realism in a Canadian context.

*Pagan Love* (1922) had been described by an anonymous reviewer in *The Canadian Bookman*<sup>19</sup> as "written throughout with that extraordinary and realistic wealth of detail that has always distinguished Mr. Gibbon's novels, and that makes him look like a sociological investigator *when he has least desire to be one*" (italics mine). It is precisely this wealth of detail that gives the appearance of realism, but the novel is total fantasy. It deals with the business methods of a self-made American millionaire named Frank Neruda who turns out to be a woman in disguise. She is saved from accidental death by an impoverished Scot named Walter Oliphant whom she grooms to be her lover while maintaining her male disguise. The surprise revelation of her sex is designed to titillate the reader as he reviews all the encounters between the couple. Most of the book takes place in New York City, but as a concession to Canadian readers, Gibbon introduces a group of Canadian expatriates living there, one of whom remarks that she was "born for the open air, for the woods and for the mountains. . . ." She emphasizes that she is not a "New Yorker," but a "Canadian" and "shall live and die" as one.<sup>20</sup> The "sociological detail," especially about Neruda's business methods, must have been confusing to some critics, including Dickie, who otherwise had shown himself fairly astute. Donald French, in his address to the Canadian Literature Club of Toronto in 1923, had called *Pagan Love* a "novel of current problems."<sup>21</sup>

However, one can identify a number of novels that are not as dubious in their realism as *The Bridge*, *Maria Chapdelaine*, and *Pagan Love*. If we take a second look at Lionel Stevenson's 1924 list of realistic novels, we find that he cites a

number of books that followed through on the "beginnings" of the realistic novel: for example, Beaumont Cornell's *Lantern Marsh* and Douglas Durkin's *The Magpie*, both published in 1923. The former book depicts Ontario farm life negatively, is cynical about the power structure of the history department of the University of Toronto, and attacks the snobbery that characterizes upper-class social life in Kingston. *The Magpie*, set in Winnipeg, presents an unromantic picture of the grain exchange and the 1919 strike. The book describes the collapse of the idealism that had kept patriotism high during the war. Mazo de la Roche's *Possession* (1923) also is included on Stevenson's list, probably because of what was for the period a certain frankness about sex. However, the book romanticizes its heroine, an Indian girl, and its landscape, southern Ontario, to a point where they are barely identifiable. Stevenson also mentions *The Viking Heart*, which includes precise descriptions of the everyday life of Icelanders settled in Manitoba. We are confronted with a problem similar to that in judging *Possession*. In the context of the period, the realistic sections of *The Viking Heart* set it apart from the bulk of the literature being published, but at this distance in time, the book clearly is a romance. In fact, Edward McCourt has compared it with *Maria Chapdelaine*. Stevenson also mentions Arthur Stringer's *Prairie* trilogy (*The Prairie Wife*, 1915; *The Prairie Mother*, 1920; *The Prairie Child*, 1922). These books offer even less in the way of realism than *The Viking Heart*, whose overall tone is more consistent and more honest (Stringer's "inconsistency" is calculated to create a flashy effect).

Bertrand Sinclair appeared on the lists of both Dickie and Stevenson, who specifically referred to *The Inverted Pyramid* (1924). Though Sinclair had been writing since 1908 (*Raw Gold*), it was not until *Burned Bridges* (1919) and *Poor Man's Rock* (1920) that his narratives began to contain realistic elements. In the former book he takes a critical attitude towards the Great War, and in the latter book he exposes injustices in the salmon fishing industry in British Columbia. As was the case with Douglas Durkin, the war pushed Sinclair into confronting the problems of everyday life in his writing. Sinclair's *The Inverted Pyramid* is based on the collapse of the Dominion Trust Company in British Columbia in 1914. Sinclair's purpose in the book is to make clear the link between the building of shaky financial empires and the war, so he adjusts the facts and has the Dominion Trust (the Norquay Trust in the novel) fail in 1919. As one character states, "Armies are the policemen of trade."

Stevenson's reference to Robert Stead must be to *The Smoking Flax* (1924). (Stead's *Grain*, perhaps the major novel of rural realism of the decade, did not appear until 1926.) Stevenson probably noted Stead's inclusion of a character named Cal Beach, a sociologist who is gathering material for a series of articles and a book on a subject connected with his thesis: "The Reaction of Industrialism Upon Rural Social Atmosphere." However, Cal's theorizing about agrarian life

is less realistic than Stead's direct presentation of, for example, the physical disorder of the Stake farm. Gander Stake, who appears in *The Smoking Flax* as a comic figure, is transformed in *Grain* into a pragmatist as efficient at tilling the soil as he is at handling machinery. The "romance" of the soil is less evident in *Grain* than it is in *Settlers of the Marsh*, frequently held up as a model of early realism.

Like MacMechan, Stevenson did not seem to be aware of Jessie G. Sime's *Our Little Life* (1921), set in the Montreal slums in 1917-18.<sup>22</sup> Sime's book probably is the only genuinely realistic novel written between the end of the war and the date of Stevenson's article, July 1924. Her book was reviewed in the *Canadian Bookman* by B. K. Sandwell in September, 1921 under the title "A Good Novel About Your Dressmaker," and was available in Canadian bookstores. Of course, Stevenson's list was intended to be suggestive rather than exhaustive, but because Sime's novel was so extreme for its time, its omission is puzzling in a list which was so specific. *Our Little Life* depicts the life of a middle-aged seamstress who works by the day. Miss McGee is a second generation Canadian who survives poverty and failure through her courage and endurance. She is contrasted with Robert Fulton, an Englishman who has lost his money through bad investments. Fulton's frailty makes it impossible for him to survive the harshness of his life in the slums, and his death in the influenza epidemic of 1918 is inevitable. The relationship between the two people, love on her side, friendship on his, is delicately delineated, and the inevitability of its development under the conditions of their lives is what makes the novel "realistic." The "sociological detail," and there is a great deal of it, is an essential part of the relationship. For example, the two view Christmas differently. Robert always had found it boring and tiresome in England and had not thought much more about it. In Canada he is required to work at his job at the dairy counter of Arundel's Market until ten at night during Christmas week. He receives no extra compensation for this work and his boredom with the holiday becomes outrage at his exploitation. Miss McGee regards Christmas as the "poor man's treat," as a breathing space in the toil of the year, though her income usually falls off and she is short of money at a crucial time. On the Christmas Eve in question, Robert leaves work at eleven at night and, despite his exhaustion, thinks of Miss McGee's pleasure in the holiday and spends what is for him an extravagant amount of money on roses for her. Thus, we are offered a picture of a busy food store on Christmas Eve in 1917, the social attitudes of one of the store clerks, and a scene in a flower shop, but the precision of the detail is working towards the moment when Robert lays his offering of flowers across the threshold of Miss McGee's door. It is not until the publication of Morley Callaghan's *Strange Fugitive* (1928) seven years later that we have such a smooth combination of realistic detail and realistic inner conflict.

Jessie Sime was born in Scotland in 1880, brought up in London, and she lived in Canada from 1907 until World War II. She was the niece of Sir Daniel Wilson, Principal of Toronto University. The bulk of her writing was done in Canada, though after her return to Great Britain, she published several books in collaboration with Frank Carr Nicholson, Librarian of the University of Edinburgh from 1910 to 1939. Sime was an early feminist (*The Mistress of All Work*, 1916; *Sister Woman*, 1919), but her principal importance for Canadian literature is as a pioneer realist in *Our Little Life*. In 1953 she published, with Frank Nicholson, *A Tale of Two Worlds*, a long realistic novel that traces the fortunes of a Viennese family, some of whose members move to Canada. Sime herself appears in the novel under the thin disguise of a family friend who, because she is free to travel back and forth from Canada to Austria, is able to keep the two branches of the family in touch with each other. This plot device gives Sime the opportunity to comment extensively on the immigrant experience in Canada, a theme which makes up a significant section of *Our Little Life*. Sime even presents Robert in *Our Little Life* as the author of a volume of impressions of his experiences in Canada.

The bulk of the important realistic writing of the twenties appears after Stevenson's article, in the second half of the decade. *Settlers of the Marsh* and *Wild Geese* are both published in 1925. Grove's novel inventories pioneer farming in northern Manitoba, but its characterization is melodramatic (for example, the polarization of his female characters into virgin and harlot), and its dialogue is stilted and unnatural. The value of *Our Daily Bread* (1928) and *The Yoke of Life* (1930) as realistic novels also is vitiated by their unintentional melodrama, though both books offer careful observation of the day-to-day drudgery of farming. As a realist, Grove is most successful in *Over Prairie Trails* (1922), whose accumulation of data helps persuade the reader of the strength of the narrator's emotions. Indeed, this volume probably contains his finest writing. There are also strong realistic passages in *A Search for America* (1927), such as the scenes in the cheap Toronto restaurant.

*Wild Geese* also offers a combination of clearly observed detail about the struggles of farming and some suspect characterization. Though Judith's internal life is believable, Caleb Gare seems better suited to a Gothic novel. Peter E. Rider, who wrote the introduction to the 1974 reprint of Douglas Durkin's *The Magpie* (1923), points out that *Wild Geese* was the result of a collaboration between Durkin and Ostenso who had "compatible talents."<sup>23</sup> The contest which Ostenso won with *Wild Geese* was open only to first novels, and Durkin's collaboration could not be acknowledged. If this is true, Durkin simply was following through on realistic techniques he had developed in *The Magpie*. Like *Settlers of the Marsh*, *Wild Geese* was thought to be sexually frank, and that certainly contributed to any assessment of it as realistic. But the accuracy of Ostenso's (and

Durkin's) presentation of prairie life, more than the ostensible sexual frankness of the book, is more significant to the modern reader looking for the beginnings of realism.

A few other novels written from the middle of the decade on deserve mention as pioneer attempts at realism. Madge Macbeth's *The Land of Afternoon* (1924) depicts social and political life in Ottawa with some fidelity to fact. Macbeth wrote this book under the pseudonym "Gilbert Knox," and in collaboration with another writer who may have provided the details about parliamentary and cabinet activity. In a personal letter to me, Wilfred Eggleston, a friend of Macbeth's, speculated that the collaborator may have been A. B. Conway, a pen name for Major General E. L. M. Burns, who served in both World Wars and has published a number of books on military strategy and history.

The drama critic, Fred Jacob, wrote two novels, *Day Before Yesterday* (1925) and *Peevee* (1928), the former set before the turn of the century in southern Ontario and the latter set before the war, partly in Toronto and partly in two Ontario towns. Jacob's stated purpose in writing the books was to "preserve an impression of the Canadian scene" by picturing "several phases in the development of Anglo-Canada. . . ." <sup>24</sup> Thus Jacob carefully recorded social customs such as the provision of fine French merino to the mourners at a funeral in order that the dead man be honoured appropriately. Jacob had planned a group of four novels but died before the third and fourth could be written.

Hubert Evans' *The New Front Line* (1927) contrasts busy Vancouver with the peace and silence of the British Columbia wilderness. Though its close is sentimental, the book offers precise details of pioneering in the north of the province and depicts Indian life in an unromantic way for its time. Evans recently published *O Time in Your Flight* (1979), an autobiographical fiction about his youth in Ontario at the turn of the century. The book depends so heavily on realistic detail for its effect that it is sure to be consulted in future by social historians for information about the period.

Thus, the significance of the publication of *Strange Fugitive* in 1928 cannot be over-estimated. When the book is viewed against the background of the sunshine novels, the romances, and the imperfectly realized realistic works of the period, Callaghan's innovativeness is startling. Despite flaws (for example, clumsily introduced Freudianism and Marxism), Callaghan's book is consistent, clear, and direct in its use of what was for the Canadian novel a new literary technique. (One wonders how Sime's *Our Little Life* would have been received if it had appeared at the end of the decade rather than at the beginning.) In 1929 Callaghan went on to publish an excellent collection of short stories called *A Native Argosy*, confirming his position as the major realist in Canadian fiction and establishing himself as an important figure in Canadian letters generally.

Raymond Knister emerges at the end of the decade as well. Though Knister

had been publishing good realistic short stories with rural settings from 1922 on, *White Narcissus* does not appear until 1929. The novel is a curious combination of fairy tale and rural realism. Though the southern Ontario farm scenes are undeniably accurate, an improbable and romantic superstructure is awkwardly imposed on them. The short form was better suited to Knister's talents, and that probably is the case with Callaghan as well. Thus, two of the best practitioners of the realistic short story in Canada came on the literary scene at approximately the same time.

Nonetheless, the realistic novel had established its legitimacy by the end of the decade, and in the thirties Callaghan consolidated his position with *It's Never Over* (1930), *No Man's Meat* (1931), *A Broken Journey* (1932), *Such Is My Beloved* (1934), *They Shall Inherit the Earth* (1935), *Now That April's Here* (1936), and *More Joy in Heaven* (1937). Grove also published *Fruits of the Earth* in 1933. In response to the Depression, the novel of social propaganda appeared and helped to move the vital centre of Canadian fiction away from the Montgomery-Connor school of writing and away from what McClelland & Stewart had called "refinement of style and sentiment" and "warm humanity." Ralph Connor's last Glengarry novel, *Torches through the Bush: A Tale of Glengarry* appeared in 1934, and with its publication the type of fiction that had dominated the early part of the century passed out of the literary picture.

## NOTES

- <sup>1</sup> Watson Griffin, *The Gulf of Years* (Toronto: The Point Publishers, 1927), pp. 167-70.
- <sup>2</sup> Advertisement headed "Famous Canadian Novels by Famous Canadian Novelists," *Canadian Bookman*, 2 (January 1920), 78.
- <sup>3</sup> *Canadian Bookman*, 7 (February 1925), 26. An anonymous reviewer is summarizing and quoting from French's address.
- <sup>4</sup> "A Peter Pan of Literature," *Canadian Bookman*, 8 (April 1926), 116-17.
- <sup>5</sup> (1924; rpt. Toronto: McClelland & Stewart, 1974), p. 215.
- <sup>6</sup> Rpt. in *Towards a View of Canadian Letters: Selected Critical Essays 1928-1971* (Vancouver: Univ. of British Columbia Press, 1973), p. 169.
- <sup>7</sup> It is not clear how many Canadian public libraries actually banned *Settlers of the Marsh*. Thomas Saunders in his introduction to the New Canadian Library edition of *Settlers* makes the following remark: "Reviewers attacked its alleged indecency; it was banned from most public libraries; a university professor branded it as 'filthy.'" Saunders gives no source for his comments. In Desmond Pacey's edition of Grove's *Letters*, Pacey includes the following remark in a note (p. 29): "About the banning of the book by public libraries, J. F. B. Livesay, father of the poet Dorothy Livesay, wrote to Grove, 'I am glad to note that "Settlers in the Marsh" [*sic*] has been banned from the Winnipeg Public Library—the best kind of advertisement for a young author. Toronto Public Library lets it out only to mature people of good character.'" What is clear is that access to the book was not total.



- <sup>8</sup> "To Austin M. Bothwell," in *The Letters of Frederick Philip Grove*, ed. Desmond Pacey (Toronto: Univ. of Toronto Press, 1976), p. 26.
- <sup>9</sup> "Letter to H. C. Miller," *Letters*, p. 41.
- <sup>10</sup> In *It Needs To Be Said . . .* (Toronto: Macmillan, 1929), p. 51.
- <sup>11</sup> Grove, *Letters*, pp. 275-76.
- <sup>12</sup> "Sex in Fiction," *Queen's Quarterly*, 35 (August 1927), 92.
- <sup>13</sup> *Canadian Bookman*, 6 (July 1924), 157-58. Rpt. in his *Appraisals of Canadian Literature* (Toronto: Macmillan, 1926), pp. 124-37.
- <sup>14</sup> Stevenson, *Bookman*, p. 158.
- <sup>15</sup> M. L. C. Pickthall, *The Bridge: A Story of the Great Lakes* (London: Hodder and Stoughton, 1922), pp. 204-05.
- <sup>16</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 293-94.
- <sup>17</sup> MacMechan, *Headwaters*, p. 229.
- <sup>18</sup> Louis Hémon, *Maria Chapdelaine*, tr. W. H. Blake (Toronto: Macmillan, 1921), pp. 258-59.
- <sup>19</sup> "A Surprising Surprise," *Canadian Bookman*, 4 (December 1922), 329. See also another contemporary review which describes *Pagan Love* as "realistic": Florence Deacon Black, "The Literary Table," *The Canadian Magazine*, 60 (March 1923), 484.
- <sup>20</sup> John Murray Gibbon, *Pagan Love* (Toronto: McClelland & Stewart, 1922), pp. 217-18.
- <sup>21</sup> Anonymous report of an address given by Donald G. French before the Canadian Literature Club of Toronto on January 25th, 1923, "Canadian Novels of 1922," *Canadian Bookman*, 5 (February 1923), 29-30.
- <sup>22</sup> Jessie Georgina Sime, *Our Little Life* (New York: Frederick A. Stokes, 1921).
- <sup>23</sup> "An Introduction" to *The Maggie* by Douglas Durkin (Toronto: Univ. of Toronto Press, 1974), p. xvii.
- <sup>24</sup> "Foreword," *Peevee* (Toronto: Macmillan, 1928), p. vii.

## CARDIAC GRIZZLIES

*Erin Mouré*

At Banff this summer, the river lunged steeply at us,  
ungainly beings picking our bodies across the rocks,  
balanced incredibly on the cliff above.

Or alone

the three of us hulked over coffee in the Praha  
working our way thru the mood  
of each other, the speeches.