THE FICTION OF SINCLAIR ROSS

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AT THE END OF SINCLAIR ROSS' latest novel, *Sawbones Memorial* (1974), Doc Hunter, the sawbones of the novel's title, and the Reverend Grimble, in this instance at least a decidedly by-the-Book Christian, engage in an easy but earnest discussion of metaphysics. Doc, forty-five years a general practitioner in a prairie town, speculates that perhaps man is a kind of error, the product of a young "still learning" God who when "He realized we weren't working out, that something had gone wrong, [might have] gone off somewhere to try again" and "just left us to run down, tire out, blow ourselves up."

Predictably, Grimble is shocked at Doc's heresy, but he is also baffled, baffled that a doctor who is himself so intimately concerned with life, could see man's history as being without progress, without point. He tries to catch Doc out by reducing his argument to its lowest common denominator: "Like the ants, you mean, no progress, the same repetition — oh no." But Doc is adamant: "Like the ants and the flies and the crows — doctors trying to heal bodies, priests and preachers trying to heal souls — all miracles, all going nowhere. Creation one day, destruction the next — a sort of game — like turning out jugs and bowls just to be able to have the fun of smashing them."

When we look at the fiction of Sinclair Ross, it seems that Doc's vision is the reality and that the Reverend Grimble's God, the "Supreme Intelligence . . . Perfect and Eternal," is the child's fairy tale. Ross' first writing, his short stories, collected as *The Lamp at Noon and Other Stories*, grows out of the hailed-out, droughted-out, rusted-out Saskatchewan of the depression, a world in which it must indeed have seemed that if there was a God, He was at best indifferent to His creation and at worst active in His desire to destroy it. The prairie of the short stories is seemingly, to use Doc Hunter's image, the world of "the Great Sow that eats her own farrow. . . . The Great Mother and the Evil Mother, maybe one and the same, creating life only to turn and destroy it."

With his novels, Ross moves from the farms of the depression to "civilization," but his concern is still with the problem that absorbed him in the short stories:

how can man, an imperfect being, live in a universe which is seemingly without ordering principles or a caring God? The characters of Ross' novels are not devilled by the malignant prairie, but they are devilled nonetheless. Spared the farmer's agonized confrontation with the unknowable land, the men and women of Ross' novels must confront instead the agonized demands of their unknowable selves. Spared the physical isolation of the prairie farm family, the men and women of Ross' novels must face the final terror that comes when man realizes that, even in community, he is alone.

Thus in *As For Me and My House* (1941), Mrs. Bentley, safe in her parsonage, spinning out her tin of meat with lettuce and hard-boiled eggs, can, upon hearing her husband's infidelity, know the knife-plunge-into-flesh agony that Martha experiences in "A Field of Wheat" when the hail batters her home and leaves her family without "so much as an onion or potato" for winter. And the gifted Philip Bentley, dully subsumed in saving souls for a God in whom he does not believe, can know the spiritual numbness that the farmer, Will, in "Not By Rain Alone," knows when every spring he must once again gather up all the rocks heaved out by "the bitch-like earth" before he can plant the crop that, in all likelihood, will produce a flawed harvest. With Ross' novels, we see, then, that there is nothing in "civilization" which increases man's capability of dealing with a life in which we live, as Doc Hunter says, "strictly on our own — sink or swim in our infested, mud-bottomed, little Here and Now."

There seems little to rejoice about in Ross' world, but for all the hopelessness of their condition, Ross' men and women are rarely without hope for long. In a universe which is indifferent to their fate, Ross' characters are remarkable for the energy and courage which they bring to their attempts to make their lives make sense.

Simply put, Ross' people have backbone. Confronted with a hail-battered field, a broken marriage, a pair of purebred horses that balk, or a love affair that was doomed before it began, the men and women of Ross' fiction most often simply pick up the pieces and begin again. There is something heroic in their efforts to give their lives value and importance, and it is because of their heroism that we come from Ross, not with a sense of defeat, but with a feeling of pride in what man is and with a modified hope for what he may become.

In *The Lamp at Noon and Other Stories*, Ross sets up the tension which will inform much of his fiction: the tension between a world which is inhospitable to illusion and the need for illusion in an inhospitable world. The prairie farm of the dirty thirties offered little place for illusion; the dust was too real, the bills too large, the drought too long. Yet when we look at the men, women and children of Ross' stories we see that illusion, the belief in something better, offered the only way out of the back-breaking, spirit-numbing reality of depression Saskatchewan.

We can best approach an understanding of what Ross is saying about the need for illusion in men's lives by looking at the role illusion plays in "The Lamp at Noon." Its protagonists, Paul and Ellen, have spent their short married life pitted against the same enemy, the "betraying prairie." Yet Paul has survived and somehow been strengthened by his struggle, and Ellen has been beaten. At the core of the story is the question of why confrontation with the same destructive force fulfils "the inmost and essential nature" of one person and drives another person into "a nervous dread of what [is] still to come." As Paul comes to realize, the answer to this question of survival lies in man's ability to dream:

> There was so much he planned. And so vivid was the future of his planning, so real and constant, that often the actual present was but half-felt, but half-endured. Its difficulties were lessened by a confidence in what lay beyond them . . . She looked forward to no future. She had no faith or dream with which to make the dust and poverty less real. He understood suddenly.

In Ross' fiction, then, illusion is first a weapon against being defeated by reality, but as Paul describes his dream of the future, we see that illusion offers the Ross hero more than a mere buffer against pitiless truth:

> He would plant clover and alfalfa, breed cattle, acre by acre and year by year restore to his land its fibre and fertility. That was something to work for, a way to prove himself. It was ruthless wind, blackening the sky with his earth, but it was not his master. Out of his land it had made a wilderness. He now, out of the wilderness, would make a farm and home again.

IN A WORLD IN WHICH MAN IS DENIED his Christian identity as a child of God and must instead accept himself as a kind of aborted experiment, it is critical that man, himself, make some sense of his existence. As Paul realizes, his belief that "out of the wilderness he would make a farm and home again" gives him a way of proving himself. Paul's dream is his assertion to an indifferent universe that as a man he has value. That is why, when confronted with proof absolute that his dream is folly, he refuses to abandon it. When, after three days of windstorm, Paul sees his land, the reality of his situation is apparent:

> before the utter waste confronting him, he sickened and stood cold. Suddenly, like the fields he was naked. Everything that had sheathed him a little from the realities of existence; vision and purpose, faith in the land, in the future, in himself — it was all rent now, stripped away.

But Paul knows that to accept as irreversible the "utter waste" his lands have become is to accept the fact that henceforth there will be nothing for him but the "realities of existence." As he must, he refuses to give in.

Repeatedly in Ross' fiction, we see characters who, like Paul, are confronted with the folly of their dreams, but who, again like Paul, refuse to accept the fact that their dreams have betrayed them. Because in Ross' world, the dream is, most often, not an exit from reality for the weak, but a statement of faith in the meaning of life by the strong, the Ross hero must hold fast to his dream. The dream is his only assurance of existence.

For the adults of the stories, the dream is pitifully grounded in reality. The men dream the simple dream of "one good year"; the women long for a better future for their children and a few nice things for the house. The dreams are small, but it is not the content of the dream that is important; it is the fact of being able to dream. It is towards this knowledge that Martha, the farm wife of "A Field of Wheat" moves.

When the new wheat, the "freshening promise" of Martha's life, is beaten down by "an act of God," she is furious, and her fury is fanned by knowledge of her own impotence, "how rebel against a summer storm, how find the throat of a cloud?" But as Martha sees her husband sobbing against his horse, she perceives what it means when a man accepts the fact that he has been bested by a malevolent universe. In her determination that she will not *let* John be defeated, Martha finds a partial answer for the question, "how rebel against a summer storm":

> Martha hurried inside. She started the fire again, then nailed a blanket over the broken window and lit the big brass parlour lamp — the only one the storm had spared . . . John would need a good supper tonight. The biscuits were water-soaked, but she still had the peas. He liked peas. Lucky that they had picked them when they did. This winter they wouldn't have so much as an onion or potato.

"How stand up to an all-powerful universe?" By refusing to be beaten. By picking up the dream. In the simple act of getting the dinner ready, Martha makes her statement of faith in man's ability to exist with dignity in a meaningless universe.

If the dreams of the adults in *The Lamp At Noon and Other Stories* are all statements of faith in a better future, the dreams of the children are statements of faith in a better world. Faced with a world which is harsh in its demands on energy and spirit, these children tenaciously cling to any scrap of evidence that somewhere there is a world, not of crops, but of beauty, not of practicality, but of magic.

In "Circus in Town," eleven-year-old Jenny is given a piece of a poster advertising a circus. In Jenny's joy at this mutilated proof that somewhere there is a life quite different from that of the depression farm, we see again how deep the need for "something other" is in Ross' world:

> The bit of poster had spun a new world before her, excited her, given wild, soaring impetus to her imagination; and now, without in the least understanding herself, she wanted the excitement and the soaring, even though it might stab and rack her, rather than the barren satisfaction of believing that in life there was nothing better, nothing more vivid or dramatic, than her own stableyard.

Jenny's family respond to her dream with anger, with sorrow and with pity, but Jenny is stubborn in her refusal to give up that "sudden dilation of life within her" that her circus poster has brought. In her instinctive knowledge that she must guard her dream from the practical world, we see that awareness of the perishability of the dream which we will see in much of Ross' fiction. It is this awareness that makes *Whir of Gold*'s Sonny McAlpine see in Mad, his loving emissary from a practical world, an enemy who can destroy his dream of self. And it is this awareness that makes Jenny see in her practical and loving mother a force which can destroy a self Jenny does not yet know.

> she was afraid of her mother tonight. Afraid because all at once she felt defenceless, perishable. This sudden dilation of life was like a bubble blown vast and fragile. In time it might subside, slowly, safely, or it might even remain full-blown, gradually strengthening itself, gradually building up the filmy tissues to make its vastness durable, but tonight she was afraid. Afraid that before the hack of her mother's voice it might burst and crumple.

Despite her brother's warnings that she will "catch it" if she goes to the hayloft to cherish her scrap of poster, Jenny honours her dream. In Ross' account of the "dilation of life" Jenny experiences because she has refused to compromise her need for illusion, we have a key which helps us to understand the behaviour of other dreamers in Ross' fiction who risk "catching it" from a practical world in order to know a larger world and a better self.

> Catch it she did, but for once the threats of what would happen next time failed to touch her. The circus went on. All night long she wore purple tights and went riding Billie round and round the pasture in them. A young, fleet-footed Billie. Caparisoned in blue and gold and scarlet, silver bells on reins and bridle — neck arched proudly to the music of the band.

The demands of practicality and the need for beauty again clash head on when in "Cornet at Night" young Tom Dickson is sent to town to choose a farmhand and is drawn to Philip, a young man whose slender hands are obviously unsuited to farm work.

In Philip, the part of Tom which hungers for something more than crops and Sunday musicales in his mother's plushy parlour finds sustenance. Philip is a traveller from a larger world, and he brings with him a cornet, a symbol of that larger world. When Philip plays a march, Tom experiences the "dilation of life" that Jenny felt through her poster: "this was another march that did march. It

marched us miles. It made the feet eager and the heart brave. It said that life was worth the living and bright as morning shone ahead to show the way."

For the assurance that "life [is] worth the living," the Ross hero will sacrifice much. To ignore the cornet which "bright as morning" shines ahead to show the way to a life worth living is to be forever a prisoner of the "Here and Now." Tom's father senses this when he hears the cornet. To Tom's excited "Didn't I tell you he could play?", Mr. Dickson responds with anger. Tom, however, sees his father's response for what it is:

> It was helplessness, though, not anger. Helplessness to escape his wheat when wheat was not enough, when something more than wheat had just revealed itself.

Tom cannot decipher his mother's response to the cornet, but in his attempts to guess what she felt when she heard its "piercing, golden" notes, Tom comes close to explaining the force which makes the Ross hero, against all odds, follow his dream: "A harvest, however lean, is certain every year; but a cornet at night is golden only once."

If in *The Lamp at Noon and Other Stories*, Ross speaks of the need for the dream in man's life, in *As For Me and My House*, he begins to examine the relationship man should establish between his dreams and the reality of his life. In *As For Me and My House*, we see that Philip Bentley distintegrates because his commitment to his dream has been niggardly and that Mrs. Bentley disintegrates because her commitment to her dream has been overly-prodigal.

In the child Jenny's hoarding of her illusion against "the hack of her mother's voice," we see the knowledge that dreams must be nurtured and kept faith with if they are to flourish. Philip Bentley seems never to have been granted this knowledge. He has been miserly in meting out faith to his dream; his dream, half-nurtured, is slowly dying, and Philip is dying with it.

The life of one Ross hero is often an implicit comment on the life of another, and there is an incident in the life of *Whir of Gold*'s Sonny McAlpine which brings to light the malignancy at the core of Philip Bentley's life. Young Sonny, drawn by the beauty and promise of a flicker, "flashing like a whir of gold, a gust of feathered light," is seized by the desire to capture the flicker. In his words, he wants "to possess and delight in, not to maim." To capture his flicker he uses a gopher trap because "the trap was all I had, all I could think of." But in Sonny's practical application of the means at hand to come to know the illusory beauty of the flicker, the flicker and its beauty are destroyed:

> half an hour later there it was. Head down, suspended by the chain, its legs mangled, its wings flapping feebly, ruffled and bruised. And the eye, just about level with mine, an unsparing, snake-hard little drill of hate.

In *Whir of Gold*, Sonny McAlpine comes to realize that to pursue a shining dream with less than shining means sullies both dream and dreamer so that neither

can ever shine again. Philip Bentley's life bears witness to the truth of Sonny's perception. In his decision to enter the ministry to make his dream of an artist's life a reality, Philip has used a gopher trap to snare a flicker. His dream, like Sonny's, has been "mangled, ruffled and bruised" because he has not kept faith with it. Philip has betrayed his dream, and his dream has repaid him for this betrayal by sapping the life out of his art and by making of Philip, himself, a hollow man.

In the short stories, we saw how a man's dream becomes his one stand against accepting his nothingness in an indifferent universe. Philip in ceding his dream has also ceded his claim to be master of his own life. Mrs. Bentley says of her husband:

> And now, withdrawn, he seems to feel that the responsibility for what's ahead is no longer his. He's finished. This one, the next one, it's only Main Street anyway. And there's the strange part — he tries to be so sane and rational, yet all the time keeps on believing that there's a will stronger than his own deliberately pitted against him.

In Ross' fiction, the fate of the betrayer of the dream is fixed: nothing can ever be right for him again. Philip experiences a brief resurgence of life when he sees in the boy, Steve, a Pegasus who will lift him above reality, but as Mrs. Bentley comes to discover, you cannot make a Pegasus of a boy or of a husband. Steve leaves, and Philip becomes apathetic and accepting, a spouter of false wisdoms about the folly of keeping yourself "keyed up for something beyond yourself all the time" and about the virtue of "being just as casual with life as life is with you."

But the "unflaring leaden" look in Philip's eyes reveals what his betrayal of his dreams has cost him. At the novel's end, the Bentleys adopt Philip's illegitimate child, and Mrs. Bentley hopes that "for his son's sake he will be worthy of himself." The reader finds it difficult to share her hope; he is left with a very real question about whether for Philip, betrayer of his self, the miracle of a child will be, to use Doc's phrase, "another miracle going nowhere."

> To have him notice me, speak to me as if I really mattered in his life, after twelve years with him that's all I want or need. It arranges my world for me, strengthens and quickens it, makes it immune to all other worlds.

This is Mrs. Bentley's dream. But in Ross' world, a world without ordering principles, peopled by imperfect beings, it is the cruelest kind of folly to premise your existence upon the existence of another person. To her dream, Mrs. Bentley has sacrificed music, the dream of her young womanhood. Most damagingly, Mrs. Bentley has yielded the very essence of her self to her struggle to "possess" Philip, to "absorb his life into hers." She has made her dream of Philip her only refuge against acceptance of the fact that "my day is finished . . . the rest has but

little meaning." After twelve years, Mrs. Bentley knows her dream of Philip can never be realized, but like Paul in "The Lamp at Noon," Mrs. Bentley senses that to accept the devastation of her dream is to accept the end of her life. She persists:

> In the darkness, perhaps I see clearly, but I don't admit it. Don't dare admit it. I must still keep on reaching out, trying to possess him, trying to make myself matter. I must, for I've left myself nothing else. I haven't been like him. I've reserved no retreat, no world of my own. I've whittled myself hollow that I might enclose and hold him, and when he shakes me off I'm just a shell.

Driven by her dream of possessing Philip, Mrs. Bentley, like Philip himself, uses a gopher trap to snare a whir of gold. She desperately attempts to bind Philip to her with the cozy bonds of domesticity, but like other Ross characters, Mrs. Bentley comes to the realization that illusion cannot be trapped and that a cruel attempt to capture a dream can forever alter both dream and dreamer. When Steve leaves, it seems finally that Mrs. Bentley has trapped her "whir of gold." Philip, beaten, seems at last ready to take his place in her world. But in the "leaden look of resignation" in Philip's eyes, Mrs. Bentley sees the truth: captured, her quarry seems not to have been worth the hunt. She has triumphed, but to what end? Her whir of gold is an embittered shell, and she, herself, is "a fungus or parasite whose life depends upon his."

We leave Mrs. Bentley as we leave Philip, unconvinced that there has been enough change. In her clinging to Judith's baby, whom she also names Philip, we wonder if Mrs. Bentley is starting afresh to make sense of her life through the life of another person. Like the old dream of Philip, the new dream of the child seems too fragile to withstand the malevolent cycle of "creation one day, destruction the next."

In *The Well* (1958), Ross examines the paradox of illusion: although illusion is necessary for existence in a hostile world, illusion can, in cutting you off from your own humanity and from the humanity of others, separate you from the only forces that make the world less hostile.

Chris Rowe, the hero of *The Well*, comes out of a world which, like depression Saskatchewan, seems to have been created to destroy the human spirit. Chris is the product of Boyle Street, Montreal. He is young. He is tough. He is, in his own mind at least, without illusion about the world, but for all his pride in himself as a realist, Chris is a prisoner of his illusion of himself.

To survive in the Boyle Street gang, Chris has crafted himself an illusory Chris Rowe, whose credo is "to take and never be taken" and to trust no one. In Chris' relentless efforts to maintain his idea of himself, we see the same drive to make sense of his existence that we have seen in other Ross heroes. All of Ross' pro-

tagonists are vulnerable, but even among the vulnerable Ross heroes, Chris Rowe is peculiarly fragile. Ross says of him:

> His needs were urgent: to stand out and shine, to be liked, looked up to — and because his sense of validity and purpose was involved, it was as necessary to satisfy them, as much a duty to himself as to satisfy his hunger.

Like Narcissus, Chris finds his only assurance of existence in the reflected image of himself. He constantly seeks out mirrors to make certain that his beauty, and hence his self-esteem, are intact. His treatment of people is marked by his need to find reflected in them an image of his own worth. But as Ross notes, narcissism carries its own peril: "Because he existed only in the reflections [the gang] gave back, he was at their mercy, even while he went among them, assured and slickly superior." Moreover, Chris' narcissism has sapped his will. He has killed (or perhaps killed) a man because he found insupportable the image of an un-armed Chris Rowe staging a hold-up. Remote from the Boyle Street gang, Chris is still at the mercy of his self-crafted image as a man without decency or humanity.

This is Chris Rowe as he comes, on the run from the law, to live on the prosperous farm of Larson, an old farmer who is himself a prisoner of his dream of a happier time, and of Sylvia, Larson's young wife, who has married Larson because, after a childhood of fantasies about the "slicked up and smooth" men in the Eaton's catalogue, she has known too many slicked up and smooth men.

The Well is a seriously flawed novel. It is, by turns, trite and melodramatic, but despite its flaws, *The Well* is important to the student of Ross because in it Ross sets forth some concrete ways in which men can give value and importance to their lives.

In his stay with the Larsons, marked as it is by lust and violence, Chris discovers the falseness of his old dream of self, and he finds a self he can live with. As if often the case in Ross' fiction, Chris finds his better self through his relationship with horses. The old work-horse, Ned, teaches Chris "a kind of respect" for those who have worked hard in adversity and who, against all odds, have survived. Fanny, the matronly mare, always bloated with foal, always friendly, has "a serenity and fulfilment" that disturbs Chris.

In his reluctant admiration for the "old values" of Larson's stable, Chris discovers that there is a better world than Boyle Street; most significantly, he begins to perceive that there is a part of himself that is better than anything in the Boyle Street Chris Rowe. When Fanny has her colt, Chris, the fastidious boy trapped in his mirror image, is re-born into Chris, a man who is no longer afraid to sully himself in the cause of another. "Repelled," "outraged" by the birth process, Chris helps Fanny deliver because "his sense of responsibility pressed on him." Slavish subservience to his idea of himself has made Chris a prisoner; acceptance of responsibility makes him a free man.

The death blow is dealt to the Boyle Street Chris Rowe when Sylvia Larson thrusts a gun into his hand and demands that he shoot her husband. The old Chris would have pulled the trigger, not because he wished Larson's death, but because his idea of self could not have survived the thought he had acted with "cowardice." But the new Chris does not shoot, and with his "cowardice" comes release; "He was free — there was room for nothing else. He had been living under a spell — of what he was, always had been, always must be, a doom of Boyle Street cheapness and frustration — and now the spell was broken."

With *Whir of Gold* (1970), Ross returns to a study of the need for the dream in man's life and of the need for integrity in pursuing that dream. Its protagonists, Sonny, the hero of Ross' short story "The Outlaw," now twenty-four years old, and Mad, a thirtyish Maritimes blonde who has too often loved not wisely but well, are dreamers. Sonny wants the world of music, "a clean, brave, honest world, where men and clarinets receive their due." Mad wants "a right one," a man who will give her again that feeling about the rightness of life that she felt when, at sixteen, she fell in love with a man who was everything she dreamed a man would be.

Like other Ross protagonists, Sonny and Mad are committed body and soul to recapturing that "dilation of life" they sensed once when they touched the better world of their dreams. The tension of the novel grows out of the fact that the dreams of Sonny and Mad are mutually exclusive. Sonny wants music: Mad wants Sonny. Their situation is, in short, much like the situation Philip Bentley and his wife faced twelve years before they came to Horizon.

No two women could be more dissimilar than Mrs. Bentley and the slightly blowsy, cheerful, "take it on the chin" Mad. Yet these two women are driven by the same force: the need to absorb another person into their lives to make sense of their own existence. In Sonny, we have a character much like Philip before the fall, unswerving in his commitment to his dream and capable of displaying a degree of emotional ruthlessness towards those who stand in the way of his dream.

I have suggested that the life of one Ross character can often shed light on the life of another. The flaw of *Whir of Gold* lies in the fact that we really cannot make much sense of its hero's behaviour unless we have read much of Ross' fiction. We know that Sonny is committed to his dream of playing the clarinet, and we know that he feels his life will be soured and diminished if he compromises with his dream, but we *know* rather than *feel* this. Our sympathies are not with Sonny's dream of having his own band; they are with Mad's small dream of a clean well-lighted place and "a right one."

For the reader who comes to *Whir of Gold* with the memory of the Bentleys fresh, Sonny's refusal to crawl into Mad's safe and loving world is both clean and courageous. Knowing what compromise has cost Philip Bentley and the woman who wanted the compromise, this reader judges Sonny's repeated rebuffs of Mad

necessary and humane. But Sonny's instinct for survival strikes a different chord in the heart of the reader who is less concerned with metaphysical ends than with humanitarian means. *Whir of Gold* fails, I think, because it leaves us with a very real question about the price of survival in the mud-bottomed Here and Now.

There is a good feeling about *Sawbones Memorial.* To this point, Ross' fiction is characterized by a certain tension. His heroes, young, introspective, unsure, are engaged in what, for them, is a life and death struggle to bring some meaning to their own existence. They must operate in a world which they see at best as indifferent, at worst as hostile, to their efforts. The very nature of their search demands that they be loners. They are all, as Philip Bentley would say, "keyed up for something else." They are all, to paraphrase Sonny's piano teacher, Miss Whittle, engaged in the fishes' struggle to walk on land.

In nature and in tone, *Sawbones* is quite different from Ross' questing fiction. It is entirely dialogue; hence there is no place for the brooding introspection which marks Ross' other works. And the nominal hero of *Sawbones* is a seventy-five-year-old man who, after years of general practice in a small town, is saying good-bye to life as he has known it. The novel is not concerned with the search for self-realization which is so much a part of Ross' other fiction. Doc Hunter's dreams have been dreamed long before *Sawbones* opens. If ever he found that "dilation of life" which is the reason for being for so many of Ross' characters, we do not know it. If ever he lusted for a whir of gold, the lust has long since turned to ashes. Alone of Ross' protagonists, Doc Hunter has found his place in the mud-bottomed Here and Now and accepted it. It is his acceptance, I think, which gives the novel its sense of peace.

I believe the change in form, in hero and in tone argues that, in *Sawbones*, Ross is doing something quite different from what he has done in his other fiction. I think that in *Sawbones Memorial*, Ross has stopped fighting life and come to terms with it.

To this point, the outstanding characteristic of Ross' people is their inability or refusal to accept half-measure from life; in *Sawbones*, we see men and women who have had to accept half-measure and who, while they have not triumphed, have not disintegrated. In the townspeople of Upward, there are those who have made a success of life and there are those who have failed, but in contradistinction to Ross' other fiction, the dividing line between success and failure is not that between those who have been faithful to their dream and those who have compromised with it. The heroes of *Sawbones* are people who have worked at bringing their existence into line with what they believe life should be, but who have also come to accept the fact that their work will have limited results. They are heroes, not because they survive, but because they survive with grace.

Ida Robinson, pioneer farm wife, is one of these heroes. Doc Hunter says of Ida: "she stood out because she had her own standards, her own laws. She didn't

just survive, she came through with her head up, telling a joke on herself." Appalled at the treelessness of the prairie when she arrives as a bride from Ontario, Ida plants hundreds of Manitoba maples. When they die, Ida plans caraganas, a sure thing in Saskatchewan.

This cheerful acceptance of "the way it is" also characterizes Ida's granddaughter-in-law. Caroline Gillespie, an English war-bride, wastes no time in languishing for the old country. She becomes an Upward "booster," standing up and criticizing because "I want this to be a better town." As with Ida, Caroline's openness to life is reflected in her openness to the botanical possibilities of her adopted home. At Doc's farewell party, someone remarks upon the beauty of the ivy in the picture of Caroline at home in England. Caroline says: "yes, the ivy is at least a hundred years old, but there's something too to be said for growing geraniums and begonias in pots."

When we look at the people of *Sawbones*, we see that those who have brought value and importance to their lives are those who, like Caroline, have seen the worth of "growing geraniums and begonias in pots." The heroes of Upward are the people like Sara and Dunc Gillespie who have not only accepted but also welcomed life as it has come to them.

Pre-eminently, of course, the hero of *Sawbones Memorial* is the Sawbones himself, Doc Hunter, "a salt and aspirin man" who, by his own account, has "never done anything but deliver babies and set a few broken bones." But if Ross has a message in his latest novel, it can be found in what this deliverer of babies and setter of broken bones finally has to say to the Reverend Grimble about the business of being alive. Grimble tries to dismiss what he sees as the Doc's dark vision about man's existence:

> "If you were so convinced the prospect was so bleak, that we were all just so many discards, doomed, you couldn't have carried on, couldn't have cared."
>
> "Bleak? Well, yes and no. Discards, perhaps — nobody up there even aware of us, much less concerned about our fate, nothing working for us but a few traces of intelligence, maybe a little dust and sweat rubbed off from the original contact. But just supposing in spite of everything we could hang on a while, learn to use the intelligence, spread it round — "

" . . . just supposing in spite of everything . . . " — not a bad epigraph for the fiction of Sinclair Ross, a man who seems at last to have come to terms with the mud-bottomed Here and Now.