

LA CHAINE TENUE

Roads & Railways in the Prairie Novel

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THE LARGE-SCALE SETTLEMENT of the Canadian prairies is bound inextricably with the existence of railways, which played almost precisely the same vital role for the farming communities as did the major rivers for those earlier white settlements, the fur-trading posts. Their importance lay in providing the means of access to the new "colony," in serving as the main artery for both transport and communication, and in forming the link between these colonizers and the centre from which they had originally come. Roads, apart from the few which developed from historical trails, were a by-product rather than an initiating factor of settlement; their role was different, but no less vital, and their importance grew as settlement increased. Because the homestead pattern of development led to widely-scattered districts rather than villages, roads were essential for all contact within the community; they also provided the connection with the nearest railway-station and served a valuable function as boundary-lines. In view of the extreme importance of these facilities in the historical existence of settlers, one is not surprised to find, in fiction which deals with the period of settlement and post-settlement farming in the prairie provinces, that roads and railways are frequently-recurring motifs.

Prairie roads as seen by writers may be divided into two kinds according to their physical appearance. A few are in an almost natural state like the one which, in 1919, links Avenir with Blueberry Lake in Marguerite Primeau's *Dans le Muskeg* (1960), following the lakeshore and the meanders of a stream, or that which Nipsya and her family take to Lac Ste. Anne (in Georges Bugnet's *Nipsya* [1924]), a path gradually developing from a game trail. Gabrielle Roy's track to the island in the Petite Poule d'Eau river is barely distinguishable from the grass around it; and Monge, the central figure in Constantin-Weyer's *Un Homme se penche sur son passé*, dispenses with roads altogether, riding over the open prairie. Most of the roads are far from natural, however — the new road to Avenir, for example: "C'était une route large et droite avec de profonds fossés de chaque côté pour le drainage. Il n'était plus question de jouer à cache-cache, la route allait droit devant elle comme quelqu'un qui se respecte."

Marguerite Primeau uses the straightening of the road to represent a change in the whole outlook of the village, from a place where no-one hurries — “on arrivera bien à Noël en même temps que les autres!” — to one where time is important. In Grove’s *Fruits of the Earth* the unnatural straightness is used as a mark of man’s presence, a reflection of the attitude revealed through the thoughts of Abe Spalding as he drives towards his homestead for the first time: “This immense and utter loneliness merely aroused him to protest and contradiction: he would change this prairie, would impose himself upon it, would conquer its spirit.” By completing the road into town, thus ensuring the firm establishment of the Spalding community, Abe marks his conquest. However, as soon as he relaxes his vigilance, nature retaliates, attacking the road at its weakest point, where it crosses a patch of bog, and showing its superiority by converting the road into a dam which floods surrounding farmland.

The concept that man is at war with his environment is, of course, not confined to *Fruits of the Earth*, for Northrop Frye’s notion of a “garrison” outlook, of being surrounded by a hostile frontier, is to be found in most western Canadian fiction in English. In French prairie novels, too, there are traces of an attitude similar to Abe’s — the original inhabitants of Avenir are described as “une poignée de colons seulement, accrochés aux *homesteads* qu’ils continuaient de disputer au *muskeg*,” and Cléophas, the old “Bonhomme” in Bugnet’s *Nipsya*, draws the contrast between the new farming way of life which his son has adopted (with almost Abe-like determination) and that of the Indians and the voyageurs, who “savaient vivre sans gripper tout ce qui leur tombait dans les mains.” On the whole, however, the “garrison” attitude is not prevalent in the French writing, and the people, like the roads they travel along, are usually in harmony with their natural surroundings.

This basic difference in outlook, the contrast between a willingness to accommodate oneself to nature and a desire to impose one’s rule upon it, is demonstrated clearly in *Nipsya* in the Métis reaction to the new system of dividing up the countryside into seemingly arbitrary rectangles: “Ca n’a pas de bon sens. Où seront les chemins alors? Faudra-t-il passer dans les muskegs et été? . . . Ca peut être beau sur le papier, mais c’est idiot.” It is worth noting that the one occasion when Abe’s household for a short time approaches the idyllic state which reigns on Luzina’s island in the Petite Poule d’Eau river is during the Christmas Day blizzard, when the straight lines of the road are obliterated by snowdrifts.

The anti-nature roads are not only straight; they are also graded, raised two or three feet above the level of the surrounding land. Laurence Ricou has pointed out that “the image of man as a vertical intrusion in a horizontal world is primary” in prairie novels:¹ to place people on a raised road is to emphasize their verticality. Grove in particular often equates the use of the road with exposure, to the extent that much of Abe’s life seems to be lived on a stage. The concept of man’s ex-

posure to nature on the prairie is present in the metaphorical figure of Frau Grappentin, for whenever Abe travels along the road to town he is observed by this witch-like old woman who lives beside it. At best her reaction to his coming and going is indifference, as when she “dully” watches his arrival at the scene of Charlie’s death. Mostly, however, her commentary is malevolent, as she mocks Abe’s lordly attitudes and predicts his downfall, in a terrifying voice “like the voice of the prairie.” The natural roads, like those which Christine’s mother knew as a child (in Roy’s *La Route d’Altamont*), drawing the traveller on to find new hidden places, or like the path through tall reeds to Luzina’s island, offer protection rather than exposure.

JUST AS THE APPEARANCE of the prairie road becomes, in the hands of the writer, a reflection of the outlook of the inhabitants of the community, so the function of the road, the reason why people use it, takes on varying significance in the different novels. Historically, the most important function of roads in the prairie provinces was to join together the main distribution centre and surrounding points. The English writers under discussion succeed in turning this simple fact into a device to represent monotony, fragmentariness, and a sense of imprisonment. Since most of the people in these novels go only into town and back again, they are familiar with a very limited portion of their neighbourhood, and travel in such a form offers no possibility of escape from what R. J. C. Stead in *Grain* describes as the “interminable furrow.” In some ways *Grain* is a special case amongst the novels in English, since nature is not portrayed as the enemy, and the author’s main concern is with the struggle between two valid moral positions, a conflict which is by no means limited to a prairie setting. However, a feeling of being unable to escape is basic to the subject, and Stead makes exemplary use of the road motif. All through the war years, while Gander Stake is fighting his personal battle between idealism and unimaginative common sense, his only travel is the repeated journey from his home to Plainville, usually “hauling wheat.” When the end of the war brings him a feeling of release, as if he were a returning soldier, he begins to wander farther afield.

A similar sense of captivity prevails in Sinclair Ross’s *As For Me and My House*, for whenever Mrs. Bentley travels by car, it is to go only to Partridge Hill, a desolate little community of people whose acceptance of the “grim futility” of their lives makes one almost thankful for the “false fronts” of *Horizon*. On the one occasion when she and her husband succeed in leaving for a vacation, Ross is able to heighten the impression of fragmentation, and of the imprisoning isolation of *Horizon*, by simply placing the group in a car a few hundred miles away from home, with no indication of how they left the town which had previously

seemed to be roadless. (Apart from Main Street, of course, but streets within the towns deserve a special treatment of their own.)

Christine, the narrator in *La Route d'Altamont*, whose words often appear to be a commentary on what is demonstrated in other novels, recognizes the "fragmentary" possibilities of prairie roads, as she describes the intersection of two of them — "je me rappelle leur accolade muette, leur étonnement à se rencontrer à repartir déjà et vers quel but? car d'où elles viennent, où elles vont, jamais elles n'en disent mot." She sees portions of roads, with no origin and no goal, meeting at a crossroads perhaps similar to that at which Gander's Willow Green was located, or Spalding school, giving the impression of being lost, "perdu dans l'éloignement." Roads which do actually link places other than those forming the route from a particular farm to a larger community — are rarely found in these English prairie novels. One exception is the Somerville Line in *Fruits of The Earth*, "running in a straight line, from Somerville in the east to Ivy in the west," and, it passes through the village of Morley, "hesitating on its way, forming something like a node in the stem of a plant." This continuous line, however, has the effect of making a settlement like Morley seem very insignificant, so man's attempt to make his mark or, in Henry Kreisel's words, to "define himself,"² has become a contributory feature in his diminution by the landscape.

RAILWAYS EVEN MORE THAN ROADS intrude upon "nature's softer architecture," but that particular aspect, though usually implicit, is not a major part of their value as a symbol to the prairie writers. It is noticeable, however, that the tracks for themselves, apart from their function, may be important, and as such Sinclair Ross uses them to full effect in *As For Me and My House*. To find one's pleasure in walking along railway tracks, as do the main characters in this novel, is deliberately to choose sterility (since they are a place where nothing grows), fragmentariness (for one can never complete the journey), and a sense of captivity between the "double line of fence." E. A. McCourt, who, incidentally, uses the motif of the baseball diamond for a somewhat similar effect in *Music at the Close*, has obviously not appreciated the full implications of the railway track when he criticizes Ross for providing "a fairy-godmother kind of escape" at the end.³ Those inveterate track-walkers, Philip Bentley and his wife, are clearly destined never to live life to the full.

Like roads, the railway track may be used to make communities seem insignificant — the line through Morley, for instance, was "strung with towns at intervals of ten or twelve miles. From a distance all looked alike. . . ." However, such an image as "beads on a string" is valid only from an above-the-ground perspective; at ground level, the track, like "the Soo Line of the C.P.R." in W. O. Mitchell's

Who Has Seen the Wind, tends to disappear into "the prairie's flat emptiness." Thus there is a feeling of isolation which is not entirely justified by the remoteness of communities one from the other, and an impression of their individual loneliness rather than of their being linked together. That the track is in some sense a physical barrier augments this feeling of isolation — Morley is typical of many small towns: "the growth of the settlement was arrested by the right-of-way, no buildings but the grain elevators having been erected beyond it." Sometimes, however, the barrier of the railway is within the town, contributing to what Frye calls the "multiplying of garrisons," as it does in the town in *Who Has Seen the Wind*.

On the whole there is little in these English prairie novels to justify the assumption that the primary importance of a railway track is as a link with the outside world, or even as a means of travel at all. The few trains we see are mostly freight-trains, and their artistic function in the novel is usually to represent the machine — in reflecting the mechanical side of Gander Stake's personality, for example, or as a sign of destructive progress in connection with Abe's daughter, Frances. It will be recalled that, for all Mrs. Bentley's talk about the railway, her only train-ride during her residence in *Horizon* is on a handcar. Railway tracks without trains add to the sense of imprisoning isolation which characterizes many of the novels, and even when trains exist they have the effect of making one feel left behind, like those in Philip Bentley's youth "roaring away to the world that lay beyond."

Although the feeling of imprisonment is fostered by apparently fragmented roads, and train-tracks which lead nowhere, it is generally seen to be a mental condition projected onto the environment, with the prairie as the equivalent of the world outside. Mrs. Bentley, whose life is inextricably bound with her husband's failure, gives expression to such an outlook as she watches the departure of a freight-train: "It was like a setting forth, and with a queer kind of clutch at my throat, as if I were about to enter it, I felt the wilderness ahead of night and rain." Neil Fraser's prison (in *Music at the Close*), of which first the river and then the mountains seem to mark the edge, is similarly within himself, the result of his inability to balance dreams and reality. Although he claims to have travelled all over the continent, he is still mentally tied to the prairies, as we observe through the scene at the bus station in *Calgary*, and only his death in the war brings mental escape. The condition of mental imprisonment is even stronger in Gander Stake, who cannot bring himself to go to become a soldier because old abstract values like heroism fail to overcome his modern mechanical and common-sense outlook. The war between these two concepts is fought on the prairies — to the extent that *Grain* has many aspects in common with First World War novels⁴ — and Gander can leave only when he has finally resolved his dilemma.

The sensation of being unable to escape is rarely found in the French novels

under discussion, for one of their most striking aspects is the amount of travelling which occurs. Monge, in *Un homme se penche sur son passé*, travels constantly, by all means and in all directions; in fact, his tragic mistake seems to be that he temporarily abandons his travelling way of life and tries to become a settler. The different stages of Nipsya's spiritual development are separated by journeys; there is constant coming and going around Avenir and the Petite Poule d'Eau island; and travel is the element which unites the separate sections of *La Route d'Altamont*.

The roads and railways which these travellers use, far from being fragments in the middle of nowhere, are obviously parts of a continuous system, and because of such connectedness the sense of isolation of the remote community is reduced. The technique used by several authors — Roy, Constantin-Weyer, Primeau — to introduce the reader to the settlement, relying on those same travel facilities, has similar effect. Portage-des-Prés may be a "petit village insignifiant," far away "dans la mélancolique région des lacs et des canards sauvages," but we are shown how the village is linked with Rorketon, the end of the railway — albeit only by "un mauvais *trail* raboteux" — as well as the four stages by which one reaches the even more remote island. Monge's journey to the settlement where he meets Hannah is less clearly specified, but one follows his general route over prairie and bushland. The effectiveness of this overland step-by-step linking of one place to the next may be appreciated through its contrast with the aerial approach to location which Mitchell uses in *Who Has Seen The Wind*, the gradual narrowing from a view which encompasses "land and sky" to focus on a boy's tricycle on the sidewalk. One has the impression that the possibility of ever finding this town again, having left it, would be remote, particularly since it has no name.

THE INTERCONNECTED SYSTEM OF ROADS and railways offers the chance both to depart and to return; Luzina goes gladly, knowing that, like the birds, she will come back, just as the Capucin, for all his wide travelling, always returns to the island where he feels at home. Similarly, many of the young people who leave Avenir — Tommy and Lucette, Frank l'Hirondelle, Antoinette — return, and all, incidentally, bring with them a new air of confidence. On the other hand, in the English works journeys out of the community are mostly one-way, into some kind of oblivion. Young people leave for the city and are hardly mentioned again, or they depart for the war, and die. Although Luzina's children leave their nest never to return, they do at least continue to exist and she is able to maintain contact with them. One need only compare the consolation which she gains from locating them on the old map with Mrs. Stake's futile attempt to find Jackie, to appreciate the difference between the two groups of novels in this respect.

A remote community immediately loses some of its isolation when it may be reached by outsiders, and visitors play a significant part in the lives of the French settlers. Travelling priests, who are prominent in most of the novels, help considerably in destroying any feeling of being lost, partly by the fact that they provide human contact under the most extreme circumstances, and partly, also, because they indicate that even the smallest and apparently most insignificant settlement is worthy of attention, but primarily because they respect a vital link with the cultural tradition. Thus the road which brings the Capucin to Luzina's island, or le Père Letournec to Avenir, serves as a reminder to the inhabitants that, in spite of their remoteness, they are still a part of a religious unity.

A similar sense of belonging results from maintaining contact with the secular aspect of the cultural heritage, the tradition of the early French colonists. Monge goes to Quebec and studies the history of French Canada; Mlle. Côté, on her first day in the Petite Poule d'Eau school, introduces Luzina's children to the tales of the early explorers, and Lormier, newly arrived in Avenir, reminds the villagers of their cultural heritage. *Dans le Muskeg* demonstrates, however, that adherence to the tradition must be natural and voluntary, rather than something arbitrarily enforced, for the future is also important. It is noticeable that, as soon as Lormier and his supporters talk of preserving the culture, garrison words appear in their vocabulary — *entrer* instead of *arriver*, *murs*, *entourer*, *défendre*, *serrer les rangs*. . . . Nevertheless, there can be no doubt about the pride which the French settlers feel in their forbears, the early explorers and the voyageurs, and especially about their pleasure in knowing that they are following a similar pattern.

Unfortunately, neither the secular nor the religious heritage may be looked upon as a unifying factor in the English novels. Religion is seen, on the whole, to be of little importance in the lives of the settlers; when it plays a larger part, as in *Who Has Seen the Wind* or *As For Me and My House*, it is equated with bigotry and hypocrisy, and with fragmentation rather than unity. Interest in the secular tradition is similarly lacking, and almost the only reference to the country's past, in Stead's description of the schoolroom at Willow Green, suggests a divisive rather than a unifying function: "on the west wall . . . was a lithograph of Sir John Macdonald, for many years Prime Minister of Canada, but now sufficiently dead to have his portrait displayed in a schoolroom without suggestion of partisan designs upon the young minds exposed to its contagion."

It is clear that any newcomer is unlikely to find the security of a familiar and unified tradition in the English community. His only hope for a sense of belonging is therefore through the awareness of a personal heritage, of the sort which links Christine with her mother and her grandparents, or like that of Monge at the beginning of Roy's novel, content with his past and unconcerned about the future. Marguerite Primeau uses Lormier's train-journey to Blueberry Lake to provide just such a link:

Bercé par le roulement du train . . . il remonte le cours des dernières semaines. Sa décision de venir dans l'Ouest, sa demande d'emploi auprès du Ministère de l'Instruction publique d'Alberta, ses adieux aux grand-parents qui l'avaient élevé, tout cela se confondait avec les péripéties de l'interminable voyage à travers les villages québécois, le long des forêts et des lacs de l'Ontario, jusqu'au fin fond des immenses plaines de l'Ouest.

Here the railway track serves not only as a physical link across the country, a filament joining the place the protagonist has left with that in which he is arriving, but also as a connection between his past life and his present. In the final stages of his journey Lormier meets several people who will be important in his new life, so the continuous line also extends to his future.

Since almost the only exception to the "no train-travel" rule in the English novels is in the fact that several of the main characters arrive in their new communities by rail, one might hope to find there a similar kind of connecting with the past. However, the reader is usually brought onto the scene too late; the hero — Abe, for example, already arranging for the unloading of his possessions, or Neil Fraser, riding in his uncle's wagon — has left the train, so even that tenuous link is severed and no possibility for continuity remains. As a result, most of the people in English prairie novels seem to be simply "there," having come from nowhere, and Mrs. Bentley's feeling of being "lost, dropped on this little perch of town, and abandoned" may well be generally applicable.

Without the security of some kind of continuity, the newcomer to the prairies is subject to a loss of confidence. Even the intransigent Abe, deliberately choosing to abandon his past and to live only with a future, a "clear proposition," has momentary doubts when he appreciates the totality of his commitment. For Neil Fraser, cut off by circumstances from his former life, and arriving on the prairie as a twelve-year-old orphan, the loss of confidence is complete. He looks in vain for anything familiar, and "because the word river suggested something of the world he had left behind" he is anxious to see the one his uncle talks of. But the Saskatchewan, "black lookin' and black hearted," has little in common with the rivers he knew in Ontario, and the sight of it offers no consolation. As he goes to bed on his first night, his attempts to conjure up a vision of his mother fail before the "immensity of darkness" of the prairie night, and he knows that the vision is gone for ever.

By contrast, confidence is almost a key-word in the French novels. The village where Lormier goes, "ce lopin de terre perdu au bout du monde," is at the farthest point of civilization, but its inhabitants, even a newcomer like Lormier, are little troubled by its remoteness. Far from being made uneasy by the "vastes horizons" and the "sombre opulence" of the muskeg, they simply accept them, feeling, like Poulin, that in this community one is "chez soi, libre et indépendant." What distinguishes Avenir from a place like Horizon or Pine Creek is that "les Aveni-rois

avaient le regard clair et le rire facile de ceux qui ont confiance." The same confidence is to be found in the personality of Monge on the prairie or in the North, in the whole atmosphere of the Petite Poule d'Eau island, in the "tranquillité sereine" which Nipsya finds, and in the manner in which Christine happily and deliberately loses her way on the prairie. When confidence prevails, it seems, the need to look upon the landscape as a hostile frontier disperses in a mutually acceptable relationship with nature.

The basis of such confidence is the awareness of having connections. Roads and railways here provide the physical links which encourage one to travel and to return, permitting one to maintain contact not only within the community but also with the world outside. At the same time, they represent non-physical connections — the knowledge that one is not cut off from one's past or from one's family, and the sense of being part of a tradition which extends, in both space and time, far beyond the remote community. Marguerite Primeau's words, explaining the eagerness of the Avenirois to attend the monthly Mass and the social gathering which follows, will serve as a summary: "C'était une façon de maintenir leur solidarité d'êtres humains en face de tant d'éléments étrangers, de s'assurer que la chaîne tenue qui les liait tenait bon." To know that one belongs, that one is connected to the rest of humanity, even if by a "chaîne tenue," places one in an entirely different situation from those who, leading their essentially lonely lives with, perhaps, material success but in spiritual poverty, feel that they have been dropped on a perch of a town in the middle of the prairie and abandoned.

NOTES

- ¹ Laurence Ricou, *Vertical Man/Horizontal World* (Vancouver: U.B.C. Press, 1973), p. 18.
- ² "The Prairie: A State of Mind." *Transactions of the Royal Society of Canada*, 6, Series 4 (June 1968), p. 179.
- ³ "Prairie Literature and its Critics," in *A Region of the Mind*, ed. Richard Allen, Canadian Plains Studies 1 (Regina, 1972).
- ⁴ For example, the conflict between civilians and soldiers (the latter represented here by the non-soldier, Gander); the brutalizing effect of the tension caused by war (seen in his relationship with Jo); nature as an escape from confrontation; the ridiculing of military drill; in general, the prevailing sense of being compelled to stay at or near the scene of battle. All of these aspects are to be found in that conglomeration of World War I literary motifs, Remarque's *All Quiet on the Western Front*, and individually in other novels.