

PRIDE OF PLACE AND PAST

MARGARET LAURENCE's latest book, *Heart of a Stranger* (McClelland & Stewart, \$8.95) is not entirely her newest, for it consists of essays and memoirs written over a fair period, some of them published in magazines, others — like a fascinating essay on Mahammad 'Abdilla Hasan, the so-called "Mad Mullah" of Somaliland — written and put aside for many years. Together, with their echoes of experiences that stretch from Margaret Laurence's prairie childhood, through her periods in Somaliland and Ghana, down to her Ontario present, they form not merely an evocative background to her fiction, but also a minimal autobiography of a remarkable author and a remarkable person.

What emerges most strongly from *Heart of a Stranger* is that fact about recent Canadian writing which an excess of thematic criticism has tended to obscure: the extremely concrete feeling that emerges out of a heightened sense of place and past in so many of our novels, short stories and poems. Canadian writers — the best of them at least — have become highly visual in their way of expression, and real as their thematic motivations may sometimes be, it is more often their preternaturally intense projection of the Canadian land and Canadian life that is likely to stay in our minds. I believe that recent Canadian critics were attracted to the thematic element in our writing largely because of the simplistic and deceptive obviousness of the themes which the last generation of Canadian writers — the MacLennans and Mitchells — tended to develop. Our literature in the past had strong didactic inclinations, and what the thematic critics have found is largely the product of that lingering desire to teach. And this, I think, has led them to pay less than sufficient attention to the way in which Canadian geography and history are being used by our writers symbolically yet at the same time almost super-realistically to create a mythology very different from that developed by verse-writers in the 1940's, a mythology characterized by an almost

chthonian attachment to the solid earth and flesh of here and then, memory incarnated into myth.

This is something Margaret Laurence seems to have recognized clearly enough through reflecting on her works as well as her world, for her novels, while in no direct way autobiographies, have been rooted always in experience intensely lived and understood. Manawaka may, as she says, exist in the mind and not on any maps, but it would hardly be there but for the existence of the map town of Neepawa for Margaret Laurence to have grown up in. All of us, as writers, know that our works come into fullness only when their umbilical cords are severed, but also that there is no spontaneous generation in art any more than in life; somewhere there is always the parental organism that the creative imagination has abandoned. Or perhaps never truly abandoned, which may be why Canadian novelists and poets these days are so concerned to evoke and at the same time to exorcise the realities of place and past. Of this, in "A Place to Stand On", Laurence speaks wisely:

My writing, then, has been my own attempt to come to terms with the past. I see this process as the gradual one of freeing oneself from the stultifying aspect of the past, while at the same time beginning to see its true value — which, in the case of my own people (by which I mean the total community, not just my particular family), was a determination to survive against whatever odds.

(These words were written and published, incidentally, before Margaret Atwood's *Survival*, which in turn was written without prior reading of Laurence's piece, an illustration of the way ideas, when they become timely, often appear simultaneously in a number of minds.)

In a later essay, "Where the World Began", Laurence develops this dual aspect of the past in the writer's consciousness, and relates her personal experience to the more general shifts of consciousness that make us seek through history for the myths that distinguish a culture moving towards maturity.

When I was eighteen, I couldn't wait to get out of that town, away from the prairies. I did not know then that I would carry the land and town all my life within my skull, that they would form the mainspring and source of the writing I was to do, wherever and however far away I might live.

This was my territory in the time of my youth, and in a sense my life since then has been an attempt to look at it, to come to terms with it. Stultifying to the mind it certainly could be, and sometimes was, not to the imagination. It was many things, but it was never dull.

The same, I now see, could be said for Canada in general. Why on earth did generations of Canadians pretend to believe this country dull? We knew perfectly well it wasn't. Yet for so long we did not proclaim what we knew. If our upsurge of so-called nationalism seems odd or irrelevant to outsiders, and even to some of our own people (*what's all the fuss about?*), they might try to understand that for many years we valued ourselves insufficiently, living as we did under the huge

shadows of those two dominating figures, Uncle Sam and Britannia. We have only just begun to recognize our legends and to give shape to our myths.

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One direction in which the inclination to undervalue ourselves has been remarkably reversed in recent years is, of course, in history. I do not mean merely the kind of imaginativeness that has characterized the writings of historians like Donald Creighton, who are themselves notable myth-makers in the best sense of the term, but also the care and interest and mere cash that are being put into the rediscovery of the past's very texture through the resurrection of material long buried in archives and family treasuries.

This has been a nation-wide process, and its result has been a fleshing out, not merely of national history, but also of long neglected regional historical traditions. Everywhere in Canada old memoirs and cycles of correspondence are becoming available for the first time, and one notable project has reached the stage of first publication in Vancouver, where the University of British Columbia Press has started to issue scholarly editions of items preserved in the rich collections of the Provincial Archives in Victoria and the City Archives in Vancouver.

One of the first two volumes to appear in the series is a work that has long been known and used by local historians, though it had to wait until 1975 for publication: *The Reminiscences of Doctor John Sebastian Helmcken* (\$18.95). Helmcken, London-born of German parents, came to Fort Victoria in 1850; he died in 1920, having played a central role in the colonial politics of Vancouver Island and, later, British Columbia, and having been deeply involved in the events that led up to British Columbia's entry into the Canadian confederation. His experience and his memories were rich, and early in the 1890's, having written a series of reminiscent articles on Victoria in the 1850's for the *Victoria Colonist*, he sat down to his autobiography, beginning with his London childhood and his medical apprenticeship at Guy's Hospital in pre-Lister days, and describing very vividly the Victoria he first knew, dominated as it was by the Hudson's Bay Company's fur interests; the great changes that came about through the gold rushes from 1858 onwards; and the political history of the Pacific coast colonies until British Columbia's separate existence vanished into Confederation; at this point, with dramatic appropriateness, Helmcken put down his pen. His later life was that of an ageing general practitioner in a small provincial capital, and we have to see it from outside in fugitive references made by other writers, notably Emily Carr, who in her *Book of Small* presents an engaging vignette of Helmcken in his old but active age as one young patient knew him. The *Colonist* articles, somewhat more sharply impressionist than the *Reminiscences*, are printed as an Appendix, and, with a useful introduction by Dorothy Blakey Smith, the whole volume combines not only to give a unique view of early European life on the

Pacific coast, but also to project a sympathetic personality whose qualities of humour, of endurance, of good sense tempered sometimes by excessive loyalty, emerge very clearly through a serviceable and often eloquent prose.

There was more of the self-conscious writer about Susan Allison, whose *Recollections* are published as the second volume in the UBC Press series, under the major title of *A Pioneer Gentlewoman in British Columbia* (\$18.95). As Susan Moir, the author of these recollections arrived at Fort Hope on the Fraser River with her mother and her spendthrift stepfather, Thomas Glennie, who was attracted by the thought of becoming a country squire in the rich land of the goldfields. Fortune did not flow as easily as Glennie had expected, and in 1864 he vanished, leaving his wife and children to make do as best they could with the help of genteel acquaintances in Victoria and the Fraser Valley. In 1868 Susan Moir married John Fall Allison, after whom the Allison Pass is named. Allison was one of the pioneer farmers in the Similkameen Valley and in the Okanagan, and one of the founders of Princeton, and Susan shared the life of a rancher-trader that he pursued. She was deeply interested in the Indian peoples of the region, and deeply concerned as she watched their decline during her decades in these valleys whose late nineteenth century remoteness is hard to envisage now that they are traversed by main highways.

The fact that she was often involved in life at its most elemental — for fire and flood several times left her homeless in a virtual wilderness — did not diminish Susan Allison's interest in the artistic accomplishments she had learnt in her girlhood, and after Allison died in 1897 she began to turn to writing, publishing a long poem on the Similkameen Indians and also a paper on them which was published by the British Association for the Advancement of Science. But most of her work went into the *Recollections* which are here printed. They are the only major account by a woman of pioneering life in British Columbia during the mid-nineteenth century; it would not be inappropriate to describe *A Pioneer Gentlewoman in British Columbia* as the far western equivalent of *Roughing It in the Bush*, though Susan Allison had greater qualities of philosophic endurance than Susanna Moodie and also a greater empathy not only with the wild land but also with the strange and sometimes alarming people she encountered.

Mrs. Allison's actual text is in fact quite short; together with a couple of her versions of Indian stories as an appendix, it runs to little more than 80 pages. The remainder of the 200 odd pages of *A Pioneer Gentlewoman of British Columbia* is taken up with Margaret Ormsby's long introduction and her elaborate notes identifying and telling the basic history of every individual and place named in the text. Some such apparatus was needed, since Susan Allison writes as if on the assumption that her readers would know everyone she mentions; Dr. Ormsby's work has been done so well that what we have is not merely the story of one woman, but a kind of shadow history of the extraordinarily beautiful region

through which one travels from Hope across the ranges to the Similkameen Valley and on to the western shores of Okanagan Lake.

Finally, a note of regret. Roderick Haig-Brown, a contributor to the first issue of *Canadian Literature*, a constant friend of the journal, a personal friend of the editor, has died with sudden grace in his garden, near to the unsleeping river he loved. We know all of our readers who have read his works will join us in our sadness over the departure of this splendid prose-writer who carried the tradition of the great naturalists and was the true heir of Isaak Walton and of W. H. Hudson.

GEORGE WOODCOCK

BLUE CITY

Ralph Gustafson

The air is quiet
and the window
holds a truce
with the sun
red
where it went down.
The sill is dust.
This is
a dirty city.
Blacks sing in the dusk
slowtime.
They have invaded
the neighborhood
with harmony,
gretchords
like sorrow,
a broken armchair,
TV, bedsprings
Junk
on the street,
and the universe
constructed of stars.
*The Lord God was hung
on the lonesome tree*

they sing in the dusk.