

# WHITEOAK CHRONICLES

## *A Reassessment*

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**D**OROTHY LIVESAY recently suggested that “the time has come when we must cease being literary snobs in Canada and look seriously at the work of our popular writers.”<sup>1</sup> Among those writers whose worth has been obscured by false myths is Mazo de la Roche, a writer who produced a substantial and significant body of work which achieved international recognition and admiration and yet has almost invariably been dismissed as a popular writer of romances. Since 1950, several writers<sup>2</sup> have expressed the belief that a reappraisal of de la Roche is needed; however, most recent studies have failed to provide a serious examination of her writing. Ronald Hambleton’s fragmented and occasionally inaccurate biography<sup>3</sup> largely ignores her literary significance and George Hendrick’s study is patronizing and superficial.<sup>4</sup> Repeatedly, critics have displayed an unwillingness to examine de la Roche’s writing with the care that it merits. This present study is an attempt to clarify the structure, range and central themes of the *Whiteoak Chronicles*, the series to which de la Roche gave — as she said — “the sustained work of a lifetime.”<sup>5</sup>

**B**ETWEEN 1925 AND 1960, Mazo de la Roche wrote sixteen novels which describe the history of the Whiteoak family from 1852 until 1954. At the time of her death, she had begun work on a seventeenth. These chronicles, her best known work, represent a significant imaginative achievement, for, within the limitations involved in writing sixteen novels which deal essentially with one family in one setting, she displays considerable inventiveness.

The principal setting for the Whiteoak series is the Jalna estate and a limited surrounding area, although many of the novels include events which occur in New York, Ireland or England. In general, the chronicle of the Whiteoaks is coherent and consistent in its framework, chronology, characterization and themes,

despite the fact that the various instalments were not written in chronological order. After *Jalna*, nine novels carry the Whiteoak history forward until 1954, while the remaining six move back in time to deal with earlier events in the history of the family. The three novels which followed *Jalna* proceed in a direct chronological fashion through events which culminate in the death of Adeline (*Whiteoaks of Jalna*, 1929), Finch's inheritance (*Finch's Fortune*, 1931), and Renny's affair with Clara Lebraux (*The Master of Jalna*, 1933). With one exception, the following twelve, published between 1935 and 1961, alternate between the history of the family before *Jalna* (1851-1924) and the events which follow *The Master of Jalna*. The six novels which return to the past do so in no clearly organized pattern. Of these, the initial three, *Young Renny* (1935), *Whiteoak Heritage* (1940), and *The Building of Jalna* (1944), move progressively further into the past until the earliest events, which are outlined in the second chapter of *Jalna*, have been expanded. The next two, *Mary Wakefield* (1949) and *Whiteoak Brothers* (1953), move forward to describe events just prior to those dealt with in *Jalna*. The final novel in the *Jalna* series, *Morning at Jalna* (1960), is actually the second in terms of the history of the Whiteoak family.

Throughout the Whiteoak chronicles a number of motifs, scenes, and plot patterns are repeated, often with little variation. Skating and swimming parties; flirtations; family squabbles; precocious children; violent quarrels; the family church; arrivals and departures of family members or outsiders; characters who receive legacies; characters who long for experience, adventure, or power, or who feel stifled and seek a freer life in a new country; characters who are secret observers of erotic scenes or refugees from repressive domestic situations; secret trysts in primeval groves, on *Jalna's* rustic bridge, beside flowing streams, or along the lakeshore; extra-marital intrigue; incestuous and homosexual relations; passionate encounters and husky voiced conversations; romantic love; violence; loyalty to the family — these are staple ingredients of the *Jalna* world. Likewise, natural descriptions and descriptions of family history, household pets and the numerous Whiteoak horses occupy considerable space in each novel. Sudden and almost inexplicable shifts in characters' attitudes combine with the most remarkable coincidences to produce plots which occasionally make inordinate demands on the reader's willingness to suspend belief.

In surveying the *Jalna* novels, one may object to the repetition, the formulaic quality of some of the plotting, the lack of variety in style, the illogical resolution of emotional situations, the melodramatic tone of many of the conflicts, the sentimentality, the contrived and sometimes poorly integrated plots, the lengthy

debates over domestic trivialities and the awkward soliloquies and purple narration. Despite these objections, the extent of the Whiteoak history and the gradual expansion of that history without sacrificing unity and continuity; the creation of a large cast of clearly delineated characters; the humour, irony and sympathy with which these figures are most often viewed by their creators; the wealth of fine descriptions of flowers, animals and the changing seasons; the subtle blending of experience and imagination which is apparent in characterization and incident; the expression of a deeply felt concern for the decline of an era; the sharp definition of scene and background; the careful balancing of characters and intertwining of events; the sense of the close relationship between the human and the natural; and the successful expression of sincere feeling for individual freedom and tradition, represent a considerable achievement and therefore the chronicle merits attention, both as an extensive single work on an imaginery family and as individual novels which reveal the preoccupations of de la Roche and her readers.

The central and unifying themes of the Whiteoak chronicles are individual freedom on the one hand and tradition and order on the other. The chronicles consistently illustrate de la Roche's fascination with instinctive activity, vitality and rebellion as well as her devotion to tradition and to the family as an institution which provides stability and order. In the Whiteoak world, tradition resists change, and instinct challenges intellect. Characters regularly act or speak "passionately," "intensely," "truculently," "emotionally," "eagerly," "vehemently," and "suddenly." Yet, despite the disruptive results of instinctive and spontaneous behaviour, which often leads to infidelity, divorce and illegitimate children and threatens the fabric of family unity, life at Jalna remains fundamentally unchanged in the midst of a rapidly altering world.

Lovat Dickson, one of de la Roche's closest friends and her editor for many years, recently described the Jalna series as a single large house which began with *Jalna* and proceeded to grow as additional rooms were added to create an architecturally balanced and complete structure.<sup>6</sup> The original house, the additions and the complete whole reveal the architect's persistent concern for a design which would emphasize individual freedom and tradition, the most prominent themes of the Whiteoak chronicles. Thus *Jalna* (1927), *The Whiteoaks of Jalna* (1929), *Finch's Fortune* (1931) and *The Master of Jalna* (1933), the four novels which represent the core of the saga define the family and estate in terms of the conflict between freedom and tradition. This same conflict is apparent in varying degrees within each of the Whiteoak novels and in the larger contrast between the first

six and the last six instalments in the Whiteoak history. The initial six novels emphasize individual freedom; the final six novels stress the importance of tradition. To a large extent, the international success of these novels can be attributed to this design. De la Roche's popularity suggests not only the conservatism of her readers but also their longing for freedom. The Whiteoak novels satisfied the desire for personal freedom within the framework of traditional living; they offered both escape and reassurance. In a limited sense they embodied central ingredients of an entire culture, and to this extent de la Roche can be regarded as one who transformed social history into mythology.

JALNA (1927), *The Whiteoaks of Jalna* (1929), *Finch's Fortune* (1931) and *The Master of Jalna* (1933) carry the history of the Whiteoaks from 1924 to 1933. *Jalna* and *Whiteoaks* are among the most successful of de la Roche's novels; *Finch's Fortune* and *The Master of Jalna* are much less satisfying and seem to falter as a result of Adeline's absence and de la Roche's involvement with Finch Whiteoak. Nevertheless, in these earliest ventures into the Whiteoak world, the sources of de la Roche's original interest in the *Jalna* novels can be identified. On the foundation of these four novels, and, in particular, *Jalna* and *Whiteoaks of Jalna*, de la Roche was to erect the one-hundred year history of the Whiteoak family.

*Jalna* is a striking and original manifestation of de la Roche's desire to experience freedom and stability, to create an environment in which these contradictory and divisive values could co-exist creatively though not always harmoniously, and to demonstrate that stability could be achieved without repression and that independence need not lead to disorder and disintegration. Like the romance-novel form in which the Whiteoak series is written, *Jalna* and *Whiteoaks of Jalna* represent and reflect an unresolved tension between contradictory elements.

*Jalna* presents a family of independent and spontaneous individuals who share in a life characterized by continuity and disorder. The family of the estate, with its history and associated traditions, provide a sense of symmetry, continuity and stability despite the spontaneous and independent actions of individual family members. The course of life and love at *Jalna* is far from stable; nevertheless, though irrational behaviour intervenes to cause dissension, disruptions and, occasionally, violence, the family remains essentially intact. The family is torn by large and small, real and imagined conflicts and animosities. Still, despite Eden's hurried departure, the conclusion is far from bleak or pessimistic. The reunion of

Pheasant and Piers, the marriage of Meg and Maurice, and the dance which joins the Whiteoaks in a celebration of Adeline's centenary confirm the resiliency of the Whiteoak family and its ability to withstand the shocks and pressure which are the inevitable concomitants of their free and impulsive way of life.

Although the central figure of *Whiteoaks of Jalna* is clearly Finch, the novel also seeks to define the uniqueness of the entire Whiteoak clan. It attempts to clarify the pattern of life at Jalna and the essential characteristic of the family who live there — the “extravagant and wasteful energy of their emotion,” their lack of reticence, the “solid wall they presented to the world”, “the closely woven, harsh fabric” of their relationships with one another, their warmth, their sense of a common past, their empathy with animals, their “extreme devotion as a family”, their negligence, variability and greed, their tendency to be a law unto themselves, their selfishness and selflessness: “They raised Cain and then they took hands and danced in a circle around the Cain they had raised. They sowed the wind and reaped the whirlwind, but they wanted no outside labour to help garner that harvest.” The Whiteoaks represent the blend of tradition and individuality which de la Roche felt was crucial for survival in a rapidly changing world.

The Whiteoaks recognize the importance of both individual freedom and tradition and endorse these contradictory values while remaining vital, creative and free of irresolution and frustration. In the Whiteoak chronicles the tension between individual freedom and tradition remains but it is presented as a source of strength and energy. Not surprisingly, few outsiders find it an easy task to become assimilated into the way of life at Jalna. Too often they lack the necessary sympathy for a combination of the spirit of individualism and the spirit of conservatism, and as a result they find the Whiteoaks too traditional or too willing to abandon traditional ways of thinking and behaving.

Jalna is a garrison but not the usual garrison associated with Canadian literature and described by Northrop Frye and Douglas Jones as a response to the threat posed by the irrational energy of the land. Jalna is an embodiment of “nature and culture”; it incorporates both “the world of appearances and the world of spontaneous feeling.”<sup>7</sup> The posture of Jalna and the Whiteoaks is defensive but the threat is associated neither with the anarchic individualism of the Whiteoaks nor with the pressure exerted by their wish that the traditions of the past be allowed to flow into the present. They are threatened by the changes accompanying the development of technology and the growth of the modern world. De la Roche's feeling that these changes would destroy individualism and

tradition resulted in an increasing nostalgia which gradually shifted the tone of the Whiteoak chronicles from celebration to lamentation.

**B**ETWEEN 1933 and 1961, de la Roche wrote six novels based on events in the years between 1852 and 1924. Three of these — *The Building of Jalna* (1944), *Morning at Jalna* (1960), and *Mary Wakefield* (1949) — are set in the last half of the nineteenth century and three — *Young Renny* (1935), *Whiteoak Heritage* (1940), and *The Whiteoak Brothers* (1953) — are set in the period between the turn of the century and 1924. Though all but two of these are generally inferior to *Jalna*, they reflect a number of de la Roche's preoccupations and reveal her conscious efforts to create a consistent and coherent family history. In comparison with the later instalments in the Whiteoak history, the first six novels are more often self-contained, less inhibited by family history, more positive in their outlook, less nostalgic, and more preoccupied with individuals in search of freedom. Altogether, they suggest that de la Roche was more confident and more successful when she wrote of the past.

Of the six pre-*Jalna* novels, *The Building of Jalna* is the most successful. It functions as an excellent introduction to the chronicles and emphasizes the energy of the Court family and the stability of the Whiteoak family. It also establishes a number of motifs, themes, scenes and character-types. Inheritance, the new life, the struggle for power in male-female relationships, emigration, the hidden observer, the outsider, and the tension between freedom and convention are prominent aspects of this novel.

*The Building of Jalna* dramatizes and expands upon the outline of family history provided in the second chapter of *Jalna*, and nearly a third of the book presents events prior to the arrival of the Whiteoaks in Ontario. The opening chapter describes the meeting and marriage of Philip and Adeline and fills out their family backgrounds. Adeline, born in County Meath, Ireland, left her home when, despite her obvious beauty, she failed to attract any admirer with "sufficient means to set up an establishment." When her sister married an officer stationed at Jalna, Adeline accepted an invitation to visit there and in her sister's home in India, she was introduced to Philip Whiteoak, an officer in the Hussars. They were married in 1847 and, soon after the birth of their first child, Augusta, they decide to begin a new life away from the "conventionalities of Army life." Then, even as they ponder the move, Philip's uncle dies "leaving him a considerable property" in Quebec. Consequently the Whiteoaks depart for Canada; their

primary motivation is a deepset longing for freedom: "There was in them both an adventurous pioneer spirit that laughed at discouragement, that reached out toward a freer life."

In the spring of 1853, Philip, dissatisfied with life in Quebec, decides to move to Ontario where a military friend, David Vaughan, a retired Anglo-Indian Colonel, has settled "on the fertile shore of Lake Ontario". In his letters to Philip, Colonel Vaughan clearly indicates some of the essential values of the settlement into which the Whiteoaks move:

"Here," he wrote, "the winters are mild, we have little snow, and in the long fruitful summer the land yields grain and fruit in abundance. An agreeable little settlement of *respectable* families is being formed. You and your talented lady, my dear Whiteoak, would receive the welcome here that people of your consequence *merit*."

Colonel Vaughan, the spokesman for this British garrison, "was one of those fortunate men . . . who can look forward to the future secure in the thought . . . that no further change is to be considered." His announced aim is "to keep this little settlement purely British".

It was his most cherished wish to draw congenial people to the corner of the province where he had settled, and, with their help, establish the customs and traditions of England, to be enjoyed and cherished by their descendants. To these he wished to add the breadth and freedom of the New Land. He believed the combination to be the ideal one for comfort, tolerance and content.

Two of the elements indicated by Colonel Vaughan, tradition and freedom, are the essential components of the Jalna world. Novel after novel in the Jalna series celebrates the British connection and the traditions associated with that connection, as well as the importance of individual freedom and the instinctive life. The struggle depicted in the early novels of settlement and in the later novels of consolidation is not the result of man's attempt to subdue and then exploit a hostile environment but the outcome of a determined effort by members of the Whiteoak family to preserve these values in the midst of rapidly changing social, political, economic and physical conditions.

Six chapters of *The Building of Jalna* are devoted to events preceding the arrival of the Whiteoaks in Ontario in June 1853. The remaining seventeen chapters describe the events between then and October 1854, when both Jalna and the new Whiteoak church were completed. Considerable attention is devoted to the gradual evolution of the Whiteoak estate. From the outset, Jalna is asso-

ciated with energy and lively activity as well as stability and permanence: "Always there was some living thing to watch at Jalna". Its birth is accompanied by dance and song and we are told that "the house would teem with life, with emotion". The formless "vastness of the forest" is gradually shaped into a " 'park' " and Jalna grows amid the songs of French Canadian woodcutters and dance music provided by Fiddling Jock, an elderly Scotsman who lives in a small cottage on Whiteoak property.

In the later chapters of *The Building of Jalna* a number of social activities serve to introduce the members of the community in which the Whiteoaks live. Both Philip and Adeline are presented as " 'unconventional people' ": "They had wanted reality, freedom from rules made long before their time, the opportunity to lead their lives in their own fashion." Yet the community in which they settle is " 'close and conventional' " and, soon after their arrival, Adeline's "wild behaviour" and "unconventionality" give rise to criticism in the neighbourhood. Elihu Busby, a descendant of a United Empire Loyalist who in some respects resembles de la Roche's grandfather (Daniel Lundy) is particularly critical. Elihu was the original owner of much of the land about Jalna. Proud, egotistical, conservative and authoritarian, Busby shares several of Daniel Lundy's prejudices and, like him, resists his daughter's plans for marriage. Eventually, as the Whiteoak history develops, one of his grand-daughters marries Adeline's fourth child and becomes the mother of Renny and Meg Whiteoak.

Among the most familiar scenes in the fiction of de la Roche is the one in which one or more characters swim, often to the unconcealed delight of some secret observer. Swimming is consistently equated by de la Roche with freeing of emotions and a return to a childlike simplicity. In *The Building of Jalna* this scene becomes the focal point for several motifs and themes. Adeline decides to " 'give something more spirited in the way of entertainment' " and proposes a bathing party to which the " 'oldsters who carp at the licence of the young' " will not be invited. As the party develops the participants undergo a transformation and loss of inhibition: "the old conventions seemed cast aside and they lay relaxed in childlike abandon." For the swimmer, "life seemed strange and full of beautiful and violent possibilities."

This mood is shattered by the sudden appearance of Elihu Busby whose "sense of decorum is outraged"; he accuses the Whiteoaks of importing " 'outlandish habits from the Old World' " and describes their activities as " 'Dissipated' " and detrimental to the morality of the community:



What I do say is that so much license is not good. In time it will lead to disgraceful things . . . Manners and morals are never at a standstill. Either they rise or they decline.

Busby's attempts to end the party are unsuccessful. Throughout the Jalna chronicles the forces of convention make repeated attempts to subdue instinctive and individual behaviour.

*The Building of Jalna* is among the most successful of the Jalna chronicles. It is well constructed and carefully plotted, and clearly sets forth some of the crucial aspects of the Whiteoaks, their way of life and their estate. It also serves to set the tone for most of the early chronicles and provides an interesting contrast to *Centenary at Jalna*, the novel in which de la Roche describes the one-hundredth anniversary of the building of Jalna.

JALNA IS ESSENTIALLY detached from specific social, economical or political issues and developments; nevertheless, as the final six novels reveal, the Whiteoaks could not permanently ignore the implications of the changes which are taking place all around them or the effects of the depression and the Second World War, and the erosion of traditional sources of order and continuity. In the final six novels of the Jalna series, de la Roche's awareness of these events and conditions led to an increasing preoccupation with change. Her consciousness of one's family and one's sense of a common past as means of offsetting the sense of insecurity and meaninglessness engendered by rapid change are increasingly apparent in these works. Her nostalgia for the past and her antipathy for much that was modern are equally obvious. Not surprisingly, in the later novels the Whiteoaks, their home and their traditions, are seen by de la Roche increasingly as symbols of permanence and tradition and less as the upholders of individual freedom. Ultimately, de la Roche seems to imply, the individual must be willing to sacrifice himself to maintain tradition and continuity.

In the final six instalments in the Jalna chronicles — *Whiteoak Harvest* (1936), *Wakefield's Course* (1941), *Return to Jalna* (1946), *Renny's Daughter* (1951), *Variable Winds at Jalna* (1954) and *Centenary at Jalna* (1958), de la Roche was writing of her immediate present. All but one of these books were written after she had been forced to give up her life in the English countryside and return to Canada and life in Toronto. They reveal her bitter antagonism towards much that is characteristic of the modern world. Though the tension between individual freedom and tradition is evident throughout these works, there is an increased

tendency to sentimentalize the past, to resist all change, and to cling with a kind of desperation to those traditions which survive. These novels depict de la Roche's private confrontation with a world utterly unlike the one in which she had grown up and the one she had for several years been able to create while living in England. In the earliest Jalna novels, de la Roche turned comfortably to an essentially pastoral and idyllic world where change was gradual and life allowed a mingling of tradition and individual freedom. In the final Jalna novels nostalgia for that world is blended with a conviction that the modern world is less innocent, less free, more violent and more prone to disintegration. In the midst of significant change, she became sceptical in her attitude toward the modern world and more committed to the past and the values she associated with it. To her, change and progress often seemed synonymous with a decline in individual freedom and a loss of valid traditions.

Though individual freedom is stressed throughout the Whiteoak chronicles and remains a significant theme in the final instalments, the focus in the novels which deal with the Whiteoak history from 1934 to 1954 is on the conflict between the defenders of tradition and those forces which threaten to undermine and destroy it. Each of the novels which present the history of the Whiteoaks between 1934 and 1954 emphasizes change and the efforts of the Whiteoaks to protect Jalna and the way of life it represents from those developments which would alter or destroy it. Renny's willingness to arrange a loveless marriage for his beloved daughter is the final evidence of the sense of desperation with which he attempts to resist the erosion of Whiteoak traditions. It is difficult to read these final instalments in the history of the Whiteoaks without feeling that de la Roche was no longer celebrating a dream of liberty and order but lamenting the failure of that dream. This is nowhere more evident than in *Centenary at Jalna* (1958).

Like *The Building of Jalna* (1944), the introductory novel in the Jalna series, *Centenary at Jalna*, the final instalment, is one of de la Roche's better novels and provides an interesting conclusion to the long Whiteoak history. The book examines the events which culminate in the celebration of the one-hundredth anniversary of the building of Jalna. It reveals Renny's plan to arrange a wedding between the cousins Philip and Adeline (descendants of the original Adeline and Philip) as a fitting means of celebrating Jalna's one-hundredth birthday. Although he succeeds and although the novel and the series end, as they began, with a wedding and with the christening of a child whose name is Ernest Whiteoak, the centenary celebrations are shadowed by the violent and tragic events connected with Finch's son Dennis. And despite the novel's affirmation of the

continuing life of the family and its traditions, there is an underlying pessimism that reveals itself as a warning about the violence that a breakdown in family structure can precipitate. The malice and violence of several scenes in *Centenary at Jalna* are not equalled in any of de la Roche's other writings.

Renny's "worship of family tradition" and his devotion to Jalna result in his proposal of a marriage between his daughter Adeline and Piers's son Philip; Adeline and Philip are strikingly like the original pair of Whiteoaks in appearance and temperament, and Renny fosters the idea of their marriage with all his Court determination. As he explains to Philip:

"It would be establishing the family all over again — in a fine sort of way. Another good-looking healthy pair — in love with each other and with life at Jalna."

Renny is not deterred by the fact that Philip and Adeline do not reveal any love for one another. To him, it is more significant that Philip always is "respectful toward tradition", "accepts with pride the traditions of his family" and regards himself as "dedicated to their preservation". Renny is quite willing to gamble with the future happiness of his own daughter in order to ensure the continued existence of Jalna:

A new and desperately urgent life was thrusting up, out of the colonial past, but he ignored it, not so much in antagonism as in absorption by his own manner of life. He simply could not imagine a change in Jalna itself.

The fine-clad house, surrounded by its lawns, its meadows, its pastures and woods, was to him the enduring symbol of the life his grandparents had carved out of the wilds of a new country, and to which his uncles and parents had adhered. He saw no reason for changing it.

The loyalty of the Whiteoaks to the family is particularly evident in this novel. When Archer (Renny's son) questions Renny's purchase of a two-hundred-acre farm adjoining Jalna, Piers comments on "the many insignificant little places going up all about" and then explains: "Its been our tradition, Archer, to follow in the footsteps of our forebears. To be like them and even more so . . . ." Archer, despite his unemotional nature and his detached point of view, responds to the family mystique: "This family has been the structure of all our lives. We don't think about it. It's like the air we breathe. It's sacred to us."

Although Mazo de la Roche intended to write further instalments in the history of the Whiteoaks, *Centenary at Jalna* became the final chapter in the one-hundred-year saga. Despite its dances, dinners, weddings and its parallels with the events described in *The Building of Jalna*, *Centenary at Jalna* does not

recreate the sense of innocence, vitality and excitement which pervades the earlier novel. At times the “unrestrained high spirits” and the elaborate celebrations in *Centenary at Jalna* seem like artificial ceremonies that have lost much of their validity and significance and that scarcely conceal harsher realities. Those realities include violence, loneliness, change and death. The appearance of grey in Renny’s hair, Noah Binn’s tale of an old grey horse driven mad by a sudden encounter with one of his own species in a city where he had grown accustomed to seeing only “‘millions of cars’” the reference to “a changing world”, the “troubled and uneasy state of the world”, and “the crudity, the violent immaturity of modern life”, and the reminder that “‘Time takes away our pleasures’” seem to undermine a gaiety which often appears artificial. Noah’s macabre wedding gift, an enlarged photograph of the Whiteoak family plot in the graveyard, is equally sobering: “‘It goes to show what young brides and bridegrooms come to. Like the rest of us.’”

*Centenary at Jalna* begins and ends with the reflections of Mary Pheasant, a delicate, shy and nature-loving child who represents the anti-thesis of the neurotic and morbid Dennis. In the midst of threats, attempted suicide, violent death, incest and jealousy, she manages to remain refreshingly innocent. When Dennis accuses her of being “‘an ignorant little girl’,” Mary replies: “‘I don’t want to know.’” She delights in spiders and roses, “the sound of leaves being tumbled by a breeze or a sudden burst of song from an unseen bird,” and the fairy-like atmosphere of Fiddler’s Hut, and does not question “where or why”. Though the adults have given her a watch “to make her more conscious of the passing of time”, Mary still lives in an essentially timeless world, inhabited by Humpty Dumpty, the Mad Hatter, the Three Bears and Red Riding Hood. One is tempted to see Mary and Dennis as opposing sides of de la Roche’s awareness and to regard Mary’s appreciation of the innocence and vitality of childhood and her tragic awareness of their inevitable destruction. *Centenary at Jalna* may well reflect de la Roche’s despairing acceptance of the fact that the world of order and independence which she had created through the one-hundred-year history of the Whiteoaks had become more remote than ever from modern reality.

THE WHITEOAK CHRONICLES, although they are often individually weak, represent an impressive accomplishment when viewed as a single history. Inevitably, the repetition of scenes and situations and even the consistency of the characterization detract from these works. Particularly in the novels set in

the post-*Jalna* years, one finds the new twist of plot and the new characters an insufficient antidote to the monotony developed by the repetition of family history, the similarity of scene and the predictable nature of so many episodes. Inescapably, the references to the portraits of Philip and Adeline, the lengthy debates over domestic trivialities, the inconsequential talk about horses, the conversations emphasizing character traits which have already become too familiar, and the repetition of family history grow tiresome. At the same time, the consistency of de la Roche's vision is a part of the attraction of the chronicles. In this large and complex tapestry with its innumerable strands and continually proliferating patterns one becomes increasingly aware of the creator's imaginative energy and the conscious and unconscious preoccupations which directed that energy. De la Roche was deeply involved, emotionally and intellectually, in the world she created and then extended over a hundred years: ". . . the Whiteoaks without her quite realizing it held a mortgage on her imagination; they would not leave her in peace unless she was writing about them."<sup>8</sup>

The Whiteoak chronicles provide an intimate insight into the nature of their creator and a fascinating documentary on the special tastes and needs of a very large group of readers, for one easily arrives at the conclusion that de la Roche's conscious and unconscious preoccupations were also those of a large proportion of her readers. The most prominent of these is the conflict between individual freedom and tradition which, with the exception of a few occasions on which de la Roche's involvement with events in her own life blurs this conflict, is developed with consistency throughout the Whiteoak chronicles. Her history of the Whiteoak family can be regarded as a defence of individual freedom and "the conservative ethos", which Philip Thody regards as "inseparable from the family novel as a literary form".<sup>9</sup>

The Whiteoak novels combine elements of romance and elements of the novel. On the one hand, their lively and convincing presentation of highly individualistic characters, the immediacy with which they dramatize domestic action, their working out of quite complex family relationships in the "great tradition" of Jane Austen, George Eliot and others, and the readers' awareness that *Jalna* has counterparts in past and present social history contribute to their sense of realism. On the other hand, *Jalna*'s separation from the outside world, the fact that much of the action occurs outside the social order, the tendency toward anarchy and the equation of the wilderness with liberty, the looseness of the books' structure and their characteristic shifting from violent melodramatic actions to comic or pastoral scenes show the extent to which elements identified with the romance are

also incorporated in these novels. The contradictions which Richard Chase associated with the romance-novel<sup>10</sup> and the tensions which Douglas Jones, Northrop Frye and Warren Tallman identified with the tradition of Canadian fiction are present throughout the Whiteoak chronicles.

In the Jalna novels de la Roche created a microcosm which often suggests that civilization need not be founded on repression, that individual freedom and spontaneity are not necessarily destructive of order and tradition, and that the life instinct need not be sacrificed to culture. *Jalna* and the other novels in the Whiteoak chronicles are the imaginative expression of an ideal toward which de la Roche had been moving since the earliest of her short stories. In it she found a viable resolution of a problem with which she had long been concerned. From this point of view, her willingness to linger within the Whiteoak world is not difficult to understand.

The imaginative history of the Whiteoaks records de la Roche's sceptical reaction to the modern world and her nostalgia for an earlier existence, perhaps partly idealized as childhood recollections often are. Her sense of loss as well as her doubt are not simply a result of her recognition that the English influence was being weakened in Canada, though she clearly experienced this attenuation as a loss; she found too much in the emerging world which was destructive of a way of living and an attitude toward life which she cherished, perhaps not only as an idealized memory but also as a dream fostered by the constricting circumstances of her own childhood. In defiance of change, de la Roche clung tenaciously to a past in which memory and fantasy were interchangeable and created for herself and the multitudes who read and enjoyed the Jalna novels a world which appeared more free, more vital and more stable than the present.

"I think my readers have a longing for the stability and freedom of those distant days when the world seemed very large."

The Whiteoaks are distinguished by their capacity for embracing the contradictory values which fascinated de la Roche all her life. They recognize the claims of both individual freedom and tradition and are able to live creatively despite, or perhaps because of these divisive pressures. Jalna and the family it protects and supports are the ultimate manifestations of de la Roche's need for an imaginary retreat characterized by freedom and stability without repression or chaos. Jalna is a symbol not only of the divided nature of Canadian culture but also of belief in the creative potentiality of the tension between the individualism and the garrison mentality.

NOTES

- <sup>1</sup> Dorothy Livesay, "Getting It Straight," *Impulse* (Volume 1, No. 2) p. 34.
- <sup>2</sup> Claude Bissell, "Letters in Canada," *University of Toronto Quarterly*, 23 (1953), p. 270. See also Dorothy Livesay, "Mazo Explored," *Canadian Literature*, 32 (Spring, 1967), p. 59.
- <sup>3</sup> Ronald Hambleton, *Mazo de la Roche of Jalna* (Toronto: General Publishing, 1966).
- <sup>4</sup> George Hendrick, *Mazo de la Roche* (New York: Twayne Publishers, 1970).
- <sup>5</sup> Mazo de la Roche, *Ringing the Changes* (London: Macmillan, 1957), p. 265.
- <sup>6</sup> Lovat Dickson, taped interview with D. Daymond, April 21, 1972.
- <sup>7</sup> Douglas Jones, *Butterfly on Rock* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1970), p. 33.
- <sup>8</sup> Edward Weeks, letter to D. Daymond, March 2, 1972.
- <sup>9</sup> Philip Thody, "The Politics of the Family Novel: Is Conservatism Inevitable?" *Mosaic* (Fall, 1969), p. 95.
- <sup>10</sup> Richard Chase, *The American Novel and Its Tradition* (New York: Anchor Books, 1957).



## HONESTY

*Audrey Conrad*

I am laid bare —  
a field of worms and flowers  
open to the birds  
and eyes of all.

I stretch my muscled abdomen  
in adulation.  
A lover's tongue  
can find no secrets here.

Yet it is possible to find  
in dark spirals of the mind  
a small white nude  
who curls herself and hides.

Openness is as fine  
defense as any.