

GROVE AND THE PROMISED LAND

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SINCE FREDERICK PHILIP GROVE had been writing for thirty years before he sold a book, the chronology of his novels is hard to establish. *A Search For America*, the first book conceived, was the fourth book published. In the thirty-five years between its birth and its publication the book was revised at least seven times. Many of his other books underwent extensive revision. *Settlers of the Marsh* was cut by a third from its original form as a trilogy called "Pioneers". That trilogy began to take shape in Grove's mind in 1917 and by 1923 he had completed the final version. Upon being informed that "no book of that kind stood a chance in Canada" he reduced the three volumes to one, which was published in 1925. In 1920, Grove tells us that he "simultaneously . . . re-sketched and largely rewrote . . . four other books."¹ These books were *The Turn of the Year*, "Adolescence" (later published as *The Yoke of Life*), *Our Daily Bread* and "Pioneers". *Fruits of the Earth* took forty years to take its final shape, going back to 1894 when Grove met a man who became a prototype for Abe Spalding. *The Master of the Mill* was conceived much earlier than its publication date. In 1928 Grove made an exhaustive examination of the flour-milling industry. In 1934 he accepted advance royalties from J. M. Dent and Sons for the book which he thought would be published in the spring of 1935. When *Over Prairie Trails* was accepted in 1922, Grove explained that he had a number of manuscripts on hand, enough to supply the trade with one a year for some time. The point of this discussion is that the publication dates of Grove's novels have little bearing on when they were conceived or written, and it is almost impossible to establish a

true chronology based on Grove's own evidence. In many cases it seems that they were being written concurrently. In this essay I will impose my own chronology based on a thematic examination of the novels. Grove was interested in the nature of life in America. He came in search of a Promised Land and remained to help chart the complexities of the life he found.

In his use of this Promised Land motif, Grove was articulating an essential myth of North American culture. Professor Frye has suggested that literature is "conscious mythology". He expands the point:

As society develops, its mystical stories become structural principles of story-telling, its mythical concepts, sun gods and the like, become habits of metaphorical thought. In a fully mature literary tradition the writer enters into a structure of traditional stories and images.²

In his use of the Promised Land myth, Grove was employing a story which has always had relevance to North American society. From the beginning the New World was viewed as a Land of Promise. Perhaps the first version was reflected by the Spanish Conquistadors who left Spain to find their fortunes in the new land. They accepted native mythology about the existence of great wealth and set out to find the "Seven Cities of Gold", the lost city of Cibola, the wondrous fountain of youth. While these lost cities were never found, the Conquistadors did locate Aztec and Inca gold and the New World fulfilled the promise of wealth. Once the metaphorical "milk and honey" was found, the procedure was to return to Europe and rejoin the society from which they had been barred for lack of means. The New World was a place where one could "make his pile" and then return to the more desirable milieu of upper class life in Europe. This view of the Promised Land has endured and it is still not uncommon for Europeans to come to America with the dream of refurbishing a failing fortune.

In Canada and the United States, the promise of quick wealth was provided by the fur trade, plantation crops, fisheries, timber and other raw materials. Thus the first vision of the Promised Land was basically economic in nature. The vision of the Promised Land as a "new Canaan", a place where the new covenant could be fulfilled, developed with the growth of immigration. The immigrant was attracted by the tales of the abundance of the new land. The lower-class immigrants were, like the children of Israel, living under severe conditions in their native lands. They were prey to a variety of tyrannies: conscription, unemployment, low wages, loss of farm land, religious prejudice, depression, famine, population explosion and the ills of industrialization. The New World promised a new

life free of the evils of a constricting society, a new chance to achieve salvation. It was the Promised Land of Moses reaffirmed in the New World.

IN 1892, WHEN Frederick Philip Grove arrived in America, the debate over the future of the Promised Land was being conducted by those who favoured agrarian life against those who felt that the new covenant could best be achieved through the advances of an industrial society. Grove felt that the industrial vision provided the least opportunity for man to find his soul. In his work he set out to explore the nature of the Promised Land, and his novels reveal the complexity of his reading of the myth.

In the United States, the period from the end of the Indian wars to 1890 was one of western expansion. Those who rejected a commercial vision of the Promised Land could still head out to the western frontier where free land was available. By 1890, however, settlement had progressed to the point where the Superintendent of the Census acknowledged that "the unsettled area has been so broken into by isolated bodies of settlement that there can hardly be said to be a frontier line".³ The New World was slowly filling up and a dream of a new kind of Promised Land was usurping the old. While the first dream was still basically oriented around life on the land, the ultimate fruits of the new vision were to be achieved through industrial revolution. The nature of the dream was still essentially religious in its overtones, although the symbolism had changed from the agrarian to the mechanical. The machine was the new Messiah come among men to lead them to a new salvation in the industrial cities of America. The industrial society provided Grove with little substance for his soul, and soon after his arrival he became aware of the inherent flaws in the materially oriented life lived in the cities. His experiences with "getting the best" of the other fellow caused him to question the values of American society. He set out to discover the America of Lincoln and Thoreau and spent the best part of twenty years in agrarian surroundings. He summed up his feelings about the industrial society in an essay published in 1929:

An industrial society means . . . the reorientation of the immigrants' minds towards a religion, if we may call it such, whose god is a jealous god because he denies the human soul the soil in which it can grow according to laws of its own, his name being a Standard of Living; toward a law which bows before economic obesity; toward aims which exhaust themselves in sensual enjoyment and the so-called

conquest of nature. These things have become tools devised by a new, a nascent plutocracy for the enslavement of the mind and the spirit.⁴

Grove very early identified the conflict between the two visions of the Promised Land. In his fiction he set out to explore the implications of this conflict, and his novels reveal his deep understanding of the problems involved. He explored the imaginative force of North American culture and gave it structure.

The motif made its first appearance in *A Search for America* where it had strong autobiographical overtones. The motif which grew out of Grove's own search for a Promised Land was successfully transferred to a fable in the later novels. Briefly stated, the motif starts with a geographical search for a Promised Land where the individual soul can grow according to its own innate rules, but it ultimately becomes a striving for an ideal existence beyond physical environments: the Promised Land vision becomes an unattainable ideal luring men on to a new and better life. Grove expands the point in *A Search for America*:

When I came from Europe, I came as an individual; when I settled down in America, at the end of my wanderings, I was a social man. My view of life . . . had been in Europe, historical; it had become in America, ethical. We come indeed from Hell and climb to Heaven; the Golden Age stands at the never attainable end of history, not at man's origins. Every step forward is bound to be a compromise; right and wrong are inescapably mixed; the best we can hope for is to make right prevail more and more; to reduce wrong to a smaller and smaller fraction of the whole till it reaches the vanishing point. Europe regards the past; America the future. America is an ideal and as such has to be striven for; it has to be realized in partial victories.⁵

Fruits of the Earth and *Settlers of the Marsh* are novels concerned with the taming of the land. Abe Spalding and Niels Lindstedt are economic pioneers, striving to exist in an environment already tainted with the excesses of an industrial society. Grove was well aware that it was no longer possible to escape from the influences of technology, and in his novels his heroes face the problem of living a life based on essentials in an environment bombarded by non-essential materialism. For my purposes, I will refer to these men as pioneers of the first generation. They are the starting point for Grove's investigations.

The next pair of novels, *Our Daily Bread* and *Two Generations*, deal with the conflict between the first generation and the second. In *Settlers of the Marsh*, Niels Lindstedt is concerned with the problem of continuity between generations. He feels his destiny is to set down roots in the new world by engendering a family, and he and Ellen go forward at the end of that novel to fulfil that goal. The

continuance of life is necessary for the preservation of the Promised Land dream. In *Our Daily Bread* and *Two Generations*, the continuance of life has been assured. Both John Elliot and Ralph Patterson have produced offspring to carry on after them. In these novels Grove examined the problem of transferring individual visions from father to children.

In these two sets of novels the setting is becoming more and more involved with the problems of materialism. In *The Yoke of Life*, Grove deals with a hero from the second generation. He examines the impact of industrial society upon a young and intuitively sensitive farm boy. Len Sterner is a misfit, unable to cope with either the land or the city. He moves through both, finally rejecting each and returning to the wilderness to die.

The Master of the Mill, is wholly concerned with life in the industrial society. Here Grove traces the lives of three generations of men operating in the technological milieu. The novel projects Grove's views into the future of North American society. In this book he considers the question of whether the covenant of the Promised Land could be obtained in the here and now, as the disciples of industrialism were predicting. This novel is the logical conclusion to a series of novels which start with a consideration of the first generation, then move to the second generation's conflict with the first, then to a study of the second generation alone, finally projecting a vision into the future generations. I suggest that an examination of Grove's total vision of life in America within the framework of this chronology gives new insight into his function as a spokesman for North American society. Considered in this order, each novel gains in impact as it is viewed as a part of a larger scheme.

Having examined the seven novels of Frederick Philip Grove according to the above chronology, we may offer some conclusions about Grove's use of the Promised Land motif.

THERE IS LITTLE DOUBT that Grove was influenced by two archetypal figures: Moses and Prometheus. Both displayed, for Grove, man's essentially tragic nature: both are embarked on hopeless struggles against forces they do not understand, knowing they will fail. Each is content to carry the banner for future generations. Moses especially was an important figure in Grove's imagination. Moses knew that the Children of Israel would go on to achieve the Promised Land. He could acquiesce in the knowledge that ultimately his people

would enjoy a success he would not live to see. Like Moses, Grove's heroes have epic stature; they are larger than life. Like Moses they are the leaders in the community. Moses never reached the Promised Land because he was human; he had the human flaw of egotism. Grove's characters suffer from the same fault. Abe Spalding and Niels Lindstedt had to learn to identify themselves with all that was not "I". Abe had to realize that no personal victory was possible in the battle against the forces in the universe which were trying to overcome him. He had to accept the fact that victory came collectively through the continued battle fought by many men through the ages. Niels had to learn that he could not exist in a meaningful way in isolation. He had to learn to live as a social man before his dream of life in the Promised Land had validity. In *Our Daily Bread* and *Two Generations* a similar type of egotism is encountered. The first generation must learn to accept the fact that their personal visions of life are not going to be those of their children. John Elliot must learn to accept the fact that he will never have his children living around him like the patriarchs of old. Ralph Patterson must learn to allow his children to work out their own destinies. Each man makes the mistake of living his life through his children, by this means robbing himself of personal fulfilment. Len Sterner is guilty of moral egotism. He isolates himself from other men with the idea that he is morally superior to them. Edmund Clark is guilty of attempting to change the course of world history single-handedly. He refuses to become a social man; he refuses to give birth to future generations who might carry on the chore he has set out to accomplish. Both Len Sterner and Edmund Clark die with no hope for any continuance of their lives. Each has denied life to future generations.

Central to the Promised Land motif is the importance of land itself. The Children of Israel are in search of a land of milk and honey where a spiritual life based on the essentials is possible. Grove's characters are involved with the land as well. Grove himself was strongly influenced by landscape which was flat, unrelieved, uncomplicated and vaguely menacing. He felt most at home on the prairies and the sea. On these flat expanses, man's contest with nature is reduced to a basic equation: horizontal nature and vertical man. Such landscape helps to simplify life, reducing it to fundamentals. In such a setting it is easier to find the essentials of life; to weed out the non-essentials. Phil Branden goes in search of the real America, and in the early stages of the book his search is geographical. Abe Spalding is looking for land upon which he can carve his own history. Niels Lindstedt comes from Sweden to the land of a million farmsteads. For John Elliot there is no other occupation than tilling the soil. The same holds true for Ralph

Patterson. Len Sterner finally is forced to escape to the wilderness in his search for insight. Only the Clarks in *The Master of the Mill* do not reflect a strong affinity to land, though even in that book, Sam Clark becomes a student of botany, creating world-famous gardens on his estate. The mill itself is the link, concerned as it is with converting wheat into man's daily bread.

Most of Grove's characters require the solace of landscape. They must make the symbolic trip to the wilderness to listen for truth. Under its influence they become intuitively aware of the value of their own souls. Phil Branden was the first to go into the wilderness in the search for personal equilibrium. Len Sterner also makes his last trip into the wilds in search of truth. Phil and Alice Patterson experience transcendent feelings from nature while working at the "Sleepy Hollow" farm. The wilderness strips man of his conventions and enables him to see into his essential humanity.

While the land fosters the intuitive process which makes people aware that they have souls, it does not act as a deterministic force. Rather it works as a catalyst, causing spiritual development without becoming actively involved in the process. If Grove believed in any kind of determinism it was a psychological determinism. "We are what we are." The individual must work out his own destiny in the search for the Promised Land. That destiny is fixed like the image on an undeveloped photographic plate. Life is the developing agent which produces a visible image. Thus man's reaction to life determines whether his destiny will be fulfilled. Central to fulfilment is awareness of soul. Awareness of soul is the ability to identify with all that is outside of self, with all that is not "I". The Promised Land becomes an ideal of what life could be for mankind if all men had awareness of soul. Grove states that the Golden Age lies at the never attainable end of history. We can approach closer and closer to that Promised Land as more and more good prevails through the efforts of an increasing number of aware people, but we can never fully achieve complete realization.

The realization of a goal spells the end of its value as an inspirational force. Grove believed that if God were known he would be dead. From this view Grove developed a paradox basic to his vision of life. Man must have a goal in life to give his existence meaning; he must have a destiny to fulfil. But the completion of that goal or destiny spells spiritual death. Edmund Clark points out that every culture is born with the seeds of death in it. So every man's creative life spawns its own destruction. For the pioneer this paradox works out in the taming of the land. When he has successfully cleared and tamed the land he has removed the very impetus which gives his life meaning and he finds himself unable to enjoy

the fruits of his labour. The industrialist, fighting to free man from the necessity of working — when and if he accomplishes this aim — will also destroy the very drive which gives him life. In terms of love, if the complete union of personalities were accomplished, the act would destroy the individual longing which fed the love in the first place. It is always, in Grove's world, the striving for a goal that is most significant. Thus it becomes imperative that man choose a goal which will be beyond his abilities to achieve. The battle for the realization of the Promised Land is such a goal.

There is a basic dichotomy in Grove's vision of life. On one hand he saw that man remains today what he was in the time of Moses. The essentials of life never change. Opposed to, and separate from, this essential nature of man lies man's history. Man's nature is timeless; man's cultural experience is within time. Man's history tends to be cyclic, with cultures rising and falling. Each culture is an attempt to realize the Promised Land; each culture gains its impetus through revolution. It finds the old culture stultifying and degenerate. Revolution is necessary to break from the old conventions. The new society, however, never manages to carry its revolution through to its logical conclusions. Man becomes frightened of the implications of his revolution and turns reactionary, reverting eventually to the same state from which he had originally revolted. If a revolution could work out to its logical conclusion the Promised Land might be obtainable. Man's history then would become part of that timeless force of nature; his revolution would become evolution. While it is the nature of cultures to follow a circular route, Grove did acknowledge the existence of progress. He saw the circular motion in terms of a wheel. While a point on the wheel always returns to the same point on the circumference as the wheel revolves, at the same time the wheel moves ahead. This slow, spiralling progress comes as man learns more about himself and his relationship to others around him.

Just as revolution is necessary in the overthrow of societies, it is also a fact of family life. Children, faced with parents who insist upon forcing their own visions of life on them, must rebel in order to insure the right of fulfilling their own destinies. Fundamental to this conflict is the role of the wife and mother. Grove places the responsibility for maintaining continuity between the generations firmly on the shoulders of the woman. It is her job to mediate between the father and his children. In the novels where there is no mediating mother, rebellion is guaranteed. Such is the case in *Our Daily Bread* and *The Master of the Mill*. Where a mother is available, compromise is often achieved. *Two Generations* is the best example of this. Grove holds that life proceeds by compromises only.

Compromise is the mark of a man who can over-rule his own egotism and identify himself with others. This emphasis on man as a social creature is important to Grove. Commitment to the service of mankind is basic to his view of life. In *A Search for America*, Phil Branden goes forth to assist fellow immigrants. Abe Spalding commits himself to public service in his district. Niels Lindstedt must learn to live as a social man. The two Clarks, Sam and Edmund, have idealistic visions of freeing man from toil by supplying them with their daily bread. Grove himself lived a life of commitment to mankind. He taught, often using his own funds to establish classes and equip laboratories. In 1943 he ran for the Ontario legislature as a C.C.F. candidate.⁶ His aim as a writer reflects his desire to serve mankind:

I, the cosmopolitan, fitted myself to be the spokesman of a race — not necessarily a race in the ethnographic sense; in fact not at all in that sense; rather in the sense of a stratum of society which cross-sectioned all races, consisting of those who, in no matter what climate, at no matter what time, feel the impulse of starting anew from the ground up, to fashion a new world which might serve as the breeding place of a civilization to come.⁷

There is a strong stoic influence in Grove's vision of life. He stresses the necessity of living in the present rather than in the past or future. He emphasizes stoic endurance in the face of ultimate failure, seeing this as the heroic stature of mankind. Those characters who live in either the future or the past find their lives slipping by un-lived. Abe Spalding experiences this problem. He lives for a future of materialistic success and finds that he has never known his own family. Sam Clark, on the other hand, is bound to the past, shackled by his father's unscrupulous practices. Each day must be lived as it comes. Grove's ideal is a life based on the essentials; on the raising of families, the growing of food, on an awareness of the fellowship of man. The city, for the most part, does not promote this kind of life. There one can become lost in the rush to acquire the spoils of an industrial society. Life becomes a continual race to acquire material goods which once acquired, quickly lose their novelty. The arts, Grove suggests, are eternal. Great music, art, or literature never lose their novelty: they remain fresh and significant. Grove feels that the fundamental function of art is to lead man into the recesses of his own soul. Materialism cannot offer any solace to the soul.

For Grove, the conception of the Promised Land begins as a geographical search for landscape which will allow his soul to grow according to its own innate rules. North America offered him that environment but he learned that the Promised Land was really an unattainable ideal, yet an ideal which all men could

strive to achieve. In *The Master of the Mill* he raises the question as to whether that ideal could be achieved through the Industrial Revolution: he replies in the negative. The ideal must prevail as a vision to spur men on to a better life. Each generation will advance its own conclusions about the nature of the Promised Land, and it will matter little that their observations are at odds with earlier or later generations. The fundamentals of life will remain constant, even though individual visions change. There will be progress; men will gradually become more and more aware of their own souls; the Promised Land will draw closer. Its final attainment will mark the end of history.

FOOTNOTES

- ¹ Frederick Philip Grove, *In Search of Myself* (Toronto, 1946), p. 351-52.
- ² Northrop Frye, *The Literary History of Canada* (Toronto, 1965), p. 836.
- ³ Quoted by Frederick Jackson Turner, "The Significance of the Frontier in American History," *The Turner Thesis Concerning the Role of the Frontier in American History*, ed. George Taylor (Boston, 1956), p. 1.
- ⁴ Frederick Philip Grove, *It Needs To Be Said* (Toronto, 1929), p. 145.
- ⁵ Frederick Philip Grove, *A Search For America* (Ottawa, 1927), p. 436.
- ⁶ Bruce Nesbitt, "The Seasons: Grove's Unfinished Novel," *Canadian Literature*, No. 18 (Autumn, 1963), 48.
- ⁷ Quoted by Desmond Pacey, *Frederick Philip Grove* (Toronto, 1945), p. 11.