

# THE HOUSE ON THE PRAIRIES

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**G**IVEN THE RELATIVELY RAPID SETTLEMENT of Canada's prairie region and the opportunities open to individual enterprise during the formative years of Western society, the frequent moral examination of materialism in prairie fiction up to 1935 is understandable; so is the altered mood of prairie novelists after the economic and spiritual trials of drought and depression in the Thirties. The broad outlines of this shift from social commentary to character study can be indicated in a few paragraphs. What will be noted at greater length in the following pages is the consistency with which one symbol — the house — speaks for the changing attitudes of Western writers over half a century, from Nellie McClung in 1908 to Margaret Laurence in 1964. In brief, the significance of the word "house" begins from a straight-forward reference to the physical structure which provides shelter, and by association extends to the money needed to build and support it, and develops into the broader concept of a family establishment, a continuing blood line which inherits both material and cultural acquisitions. This development reflects a recurring theme in the fiction of rural Western Canada: that of the family as the basis of social organization and the source of moral values.

The fiction of "settlement", *i.e.*, those novels which concern themselves with the development of rural society in the Canadian prairies, falls into two main phases: the morally-directed fiction of writers up to and including F. P. Grove; and the psychological enquiry of novels which followed Ross's *As For Me and My House*. (1941). Until the late 1920's the rural West built up a social ideal that was rampantly acquisitive, to which many prairie writers responded by insisting on the superiority of spiritual resources over material ones. Ralph Connor and Nellie McClung pictured the spiritual poverty of the material life, while showing how those who were poor but selfless — the Sky Pilot, Shock McGregor, Pearl Watson, Maggie Corbett — could lead their misguided neighbours back to

the true path. In Martha Ostenso's *Wild Geese* the curse of Mammon is less explicit; nevertheless, the novel is constructed in such a way that Caleb Gare's death could easily be interpreted as retribution for his perverse search for wealth and power. In the novels of Grove, the corrupting influence of wealth is an inescapable theme, particularly evident in the two novels of the southern prairies, *Fruits of the Earth* and *Two Generations*. Abe Spalding is the materialist who comes to see the futility of his possessions; John Elliot, Spalding's moral opposite, subordinates financial success to his ideal of family life. This ideal is undermined by Elliot's inability to arouse love and respect in his children, but also by what Grove saw as the spirit of the age — financial and moral irresponsibility.

To this tradition of moral writing in prairie fiction R. J. C. Stead contributes an interesting variation. He too warns against the dangers of dedication to material success: see, for example, John Harris and Hiram Riles in *The Homesteaders* and Dave Eldon in *The Cowpuncher*. However, Stead sees ambition as a danger only if allowed to crowd out the more important task of "widening one's horizons", Stead's shorthand formula for increased mental, social and cultural activity of all descriptions. For Stead, full participation in life is the moral good; he values material ambitions in so far as they lead outward to wider horizons. Dennison Grant, the philanthropic idealist, represents Stead's only unabashed indulgence in Utopian moralizing; in his other novels Stead points up the restrictions of poverty, leading his heroes through the temptations of Mammon to the appreciation of the finer life which financial security permits.

In the novels published after Grove, however, this insistence on the moral use of Mammon has faded into the background, to be replaced by greater emphasis on character study. The West had grown up during the thirties; the rapid expansion of the century's first three decades and the questions which this phase presented belonged to a by-gone age of adolescence. The concern of fiction writers became not, how should the young sensibility be guided, but, in what form has the adult Western character emerged? Grove had spoken (in *In Search of Myself*, pp. 224-7) of the pioneer "race", made up of certain types of men and women who were particularly attracted by the challenge of pioneering; in *Fruits of the Earth* he referred to the "distinct local character and mentality" of the residents of Spalding District. With Ross's *As For Me and My House*, Grove's generalized interest in prairie psychology became the primary concern of most Western writers.

The two phases of rural prairie fiction here distinguished, the preceptive social fiction up to Grove and the analytic psychological fiction of 1940 and after, are

intended only as broad categories; however, their over-all accuracy is illustrated by a survey of the various uses by Western writers of one major symbol, the house. The presence of the house as symbol is surprising only in its ubiquity, for a moment's reflection on the nature of settlement on the plains will indicate how natural is the symbolic use of this physical object as a means of expressing certain themes. As Stead and Grove show more explicitly, the provision of shelter on the prairies was equivalent to proclaiming one's social status: the settler could initially build a sod hut at no expense, progress to a lumber shack with lean-to additions at a cost of perhaps forty dollars, and finally, should he prove to be a financial success, announce his wealth with the building of a "New House".

The erection of the New House became more than a question of comfortable housing in almost all the pre-World War II novels, for it was to reflect as well the state of the soul: a moral wrong was committed when a settler demanded from the soil wealth and grandeur, in the form of extravagant housing, instead of a modest living for himself and his family. This view, while again most evident in the writing of Stead and Grove, can be traced back to Nellie McClung's first novel in the first decade of the century. After 1940, with the shift from social concerns to individual characterization, the house/home theme reflects more closely relations within the family group. It is a truism that Canadian writers prefer to examine the relations between generations rather than between individuals of the same generation, and this preference is particularly marked among prairie novelists. In the Western fiction of the past quarter-century the house frequently symbolizes the dominant power within the household, the character who asserts, implicitly or (as is more often the case) explicitly, "This is *my* house." This tendency culminates in Sheila Watson's *The Double Hook* and Margaret Laurence's *The Stone Angel*, where the house is seen to be expressive of the very existence of the central characters. In these novels the "new place" takes on a more clearly symbolic aspect, representing the human need of hope for the future. The word "house" thus progresses in meaning from the moral significance of absorption in material possessions to an inquiry into the rights and responsibilities of individuals within the family.

NELLIE MCCLUNG first employs the house as a symbol of spiritual values in *Sowing Seeds in Danny* (1908). The Motherwells live in "a large stone house, square and gray, lonely and bare". Mrs. Motherwell protests when the visiting Pearl Watson opens a window, saying, "There hasn't been a

window open in this house since it was built." Mrs. Motherwell did not always have a soul of "dull drab dryness", for her avarice developed only after she had become mistress of the big stone house. Late in the story Mrs. Motherwell is made to feel remorse for her selfishness, and, making more explicit the equation of Mrs. Motherwell and her house, Mrs. McClung entitles the chapter which deals with this temporary reformation, "A Crack in the Granite". Mrs. McClung's symbolism is never subtle (*cf.* the poppies in the same book); we can see her use of the house as evidence that it is a symbol which comes readily to hand.

R. J. C. Stead makes more extensive use of the house as an indication of moral health. In *The Homesteaders*, Stead's second novel, the Harrises' first house is a sod hut, humble perhaps, but "absolutely the product of their own labour." The Harrises prosper, as do their neighbours; yet amid the advance of "civilization and prosperity",

There were those, too, who thought that perhaps the country had lost something in all its gaining; that perhaps there was less idealism and less unreckoning hospitality in the brick house on the hill than there once had been in the sod shack in the hollow.

Idealism is a virtue in Stead's novels: Dennison Grant, in the novel of that name, plans and builds his house to express his own ideals. The house is modest in size, yet sun-lit, airy and gracious, with a whim-room to allow for the exercise of impulse and imagination.

Although Stead's moral framework is essentially romantic, his eye for everyday facts of life on the prairies has given him a considerable reputation as a realistic writer. One commonplace in Western life which Stead deals with in *Grain* is the fact that the farm wife often has to wait for a decent house until the debts on land and machinery are paid off — an eventuality which might be postponed until her children have grown up and left home. The most persistent disappointment in Susie Stake's life is the house which Jackson promises will be built "next year, if the crop comes off."

There was a cheerful virility about [Jackson], and when he had promised Susan Harden a frame house with lathed and plastered walls and an upstairs she had said yes, not for the house, but for himself. But that was before he left the East, when he and his hopes were young. Gander was driving a four-horse team before the ribs of his father's frame house at last rose stark against the prairie sky.

By the time the New House is built, when Susie Stake is forty-five, she has "ceased to be an optimist." However, as Jackson Stake points out to his rebellious son, who sneers at "that log shack we eat and sleep in", "Lath an' plaster don' make

a home, an' sometimes poplar logs do." It is not the house itself that is important, but the spirit of contentment and family unity within.

In Martha Ostenso's *Wild Geese* the New House exists only in Martin Gare's dream, a dream which will continue to be frustrated as long as his father lives:

Martin loved the land, but there was something else in him that craved expression. It had been represented by the dream of the new house, the dream of the thing that was to be made by his own hands, guided by his own will. Now that, too, was gone. Nothing to do now but toil on without a dream. It might have been kinder of Caleb to have deceived him until the end of the harvest — there would then have been a vision to ease the burden. A false vision was better than none.

Here the New House in its very absence symbolizes Caleb's maniacal determination to chain his family to the soil, his conviction that thinking is a threat to having and therefore must be rooted out as one would root out a dangerous weed. In other novels of this period the New House is an outward manifestation of wealth and power; in Miss Ostenso's novel its denial is a symptom of avarice and tyranny.

With F. P. Grove we return to a more conventional use of the house as representative of the moral condition of the novel's characters. Grove seems to be particularly conscious of the symbolic expressiveness of the house. Pacey notes, for instance, how in *Our Daily Bread* Grove equates the disintegration of the house with John Elliot's gradual decay; when Elliot's children gather at his deathbed, they are "horrified" at the condition of the house and of the aged man within, as if only the sight of the physical structure of their former home can make them see clearly the man they have treated as a thing. In *Fruits of the Earth* the house becomes the dominant symbol. Grove explains that his conception of the novel took shape after he had come across a huge farmhouse which had been abandoned by its owners. This house, in the back of Grove's mind while he wrote, represents the tragic experience of Abe Spalding, heroic pioneer.

To Abe the building of the New House means the culmination of his labours, to be not just a house but a mansion. The contrast between Abe's longing for pre-eminence in the district and his wife's more moderate aims is shown in their attitudes to the proposed house: "When Abe said that . . . one day he would build her a house which was to be the envy of everybody, she could not summon any enthusiasm; she wanted comfort, not splendour; convenience, not luxury." The house also represents Abe's patriarchal ambitions. In answer to Ruth's question, "What is it all for?" he says, "To build up a place any man can be proud of, a place to leave to my children for them to be proud of." However, the

building of the house is put off until twelve years after the Spaldings' marriage, leaving Ruth to cope with four small children in a two-room shack. By the time the house is built Abe can no longer give her a home; he can only give her all the labour-saving devices money can buy. As far as the neighbours are concerned, moreover, the huge edifice that Abe erects is "Spalding Hall", the ancestral seat of the great lord.

After the death of his favourite son, Abe questions the meaning of his achievement. He looks at his brick house and notes that already nature is reclaiming her own. His attitude to the house changes:

When, these days, he approached his place, the place built to dominate the prairie, he succumbed to the illusion that he who had built it was essentially different from him who had to live in it. More and more the wind-break surrounding his yard seemed to be a rampart which, without knowing it, he had erected to keep out a hostile world. Occasionally the great house seemed nothing less than a mausoleum to enshrine the memory of a child.

Because the house serves to emphasize Abe's isolation from the rest of the community, his pride in it as a status symbol becomes meaningless and empty; so too does his patriarchal ambition when the child who was meant to inherit the house dies.

Abe Spalding's desire for a house of which he can be proud, as a material possession signifying his success to the world, and which he can leave to his children, as a tangible representation of the family line he hopes to establish, combines the two symbolic meanings of the house earlier distinguished. Ross's *As For Me and My House* is typical of prairie novels since 1940 in its use of the house in relation to the family group. Certainly Ross employs the confining and depressing aspects of the Bentley's house in *Horizon* to emphasize the repression of their lives there, but these details are used realistically rather than with primarily symbolic intent. "The house of Bentley", however, is a semi-ironic reference to the internal tensions which exist behind the false front Mrs. Bentley so painstakingly erects. The title itself suggests the domestic conflict around which the novel centres, for although the text ("As for me and my house we will serve the Lord") is Philip's introduction to his professed creed, he is unable to believe in it himself. Mrs. Bentley, on the other hand, is the speaking voice in the novel, and the logical referent in the reader's mind of the pronoun "my". Finally, when one considers that Mrs. Bentley rather than her husband makes all the major decisions, the controlling power in "the house of Bentley" is left in little doubt.

Like Greta Potter and Hagar Shipley after her, Mrs. Bentley tells the reader, "This is *my* house," although not in so many words.

Nellie McClung's inclusion of the house among her few symbols was, it was suggested, a sign-post that such an object formed obvious associations in the reader's mind, for Mrs. McClung desired above all that her message be clear. Similarly, although for different reasons, its prominent use in Edward McCourt's *Home is the Stranger* is a sign that the concept of the house as representing the establishment of family roots is a congenial one to Western fiction. Published in 1949, two years after McCourt's critical study of Canadian Western fiction, *Home is the Stranger* offers its own commentary on what McCourt found to be the prominent features of prairie fiction to that date.

McCourt first considers the house as home. When Norah Armstrong first sees the prairie house that is to be such a pain-filled home to her, she is amused by the figure her imagination makes of it: "'Jim, it's human! It's alive'" she laughs, thinking that it looks like a funny old man. Moving in, she feels that "fear and insecurity were at last vanquished." Norah has to learn to be at home with fear and insecurity, for they accompany her to this house and invest its "aliveness" with a terrible malignity.

In the Armstrongs' future there is also a New House, which they plan to build some day. This plan represents Jim Armstrong's fundamental ambition, that of establishing roots in the West. Jim and Norah are the second generation; Jim envisions sons and grandsons to carry on. Then, with the existence of family traditions, there may come the spiritual traditions which constitute a culture: "'The house of Armstrong,' Jim said. 'And maybe, if we stay long enough, the gods will come.'"

Brian Malory is the advocate of 'culture' in its more obvious forms. He insists that Armstrong House be built facing the river, so that it will have a view of something besides unrelieved prairie. But "he was not just arguing about the proposed site of a house. Some principle was involved, for the time being obscured by irrelevancies." The principle is that of the North American contribution to the cultural heritage of the western world, and according to Brian this contribution can be represented by the sound of that great material invention, "water flushing down a toilet bowl." The modern North American house becomes for him the symbol of all that is lacking in our spiritual life. "'We're a people without anything to pass on to the next generation,'" he says. "'Not a book or a picture or a symphony. Or a faith!'" Only indoor plumbing.

In *Home is the Stranger* McCourt brings together several familiar themes to form a new synthesis. Cultural traditions — the coming of the gods — are made the moral good; North American materialism is detrimental to this process because it concentrates on bodily comfort rather than intellectual creativity; therefore the house as a physical structure is of doubtful value in society. On the other hand, the house as representative of a family heritage, of a continuing blood line, contributes to the stability and traditionalism of society, and is therefore of prime importance to the cultural maturation of the West.

TWO WESTERN NOVELS of the past decade, Sheila Watson's *The Double Hook*<sup>1</sup> and Margaret Laurence's *The Stone Angel*, carry this process one step further by analyzing relations between successive generations within a family in terms of the houses they occupy. The struggle between generations expresses itself in a fight for possession of the house, a fight embittered by the reluctance of the older generation to give way to the newer one.

In the novels referred to so far, the house has had both a realistic and a symbolic role; for that matter, the symbolic role has often been merely to suggest a readily-recognizable pattern of life, as when Nellie McClung, Stead and Grove question the rewards of material success. In *The Double Hook* the house, as we might expect, takes on a predominantly symbolic value. The control of the house and its inhabitants lies at the root of the Potters' "trouble". For one thing, control of the house means privacy, protection from Mrs. Potter's prying eyes. Greta snaps at Ara, "You've got your own house. I want this house to myself. Every living being has a right to something."

For Greta the house also represents the thin rope of power she wields over James. Greta announces their mother's death by claiming possession of the house: "Get out, she said. Go way. This is my house. Now Ma's lying dead in her bed I give the orders here." But it is a "rebellious house", doomed to destruction. To James, the house is a curse, as he dwells under the successive tyranny of his mother and his sister. Knowing that her rope of power over James has been broken by Lenchen, Greta burns the house with herself inside, and when James sees the charred ruins, his relief is instantaneous:

He felt as he stood with his eyes closed on the destruction of what his heart had wished destroyed that by some generous gesture he had been turned once more into the first pasture of things.

I will build the new house further down the creek, he thought. All on one floor.



In the new house will live the new generation, born of Lenchen and James.

Margaret Laurence's use of the house as symbol in *The Stone Angel* is frequent and expressive. Hagar's house comes at last to represent as does no other object the spiritual revelations of the dying woman. Hagar recounts her life in terms of the houses in which she has lived: the Currie place, solid and pretentious, as befits the town's leading merchant; the Shipley place, gray, unpainted, the scene of her greatest pleasures and her greatest sorrows; the Oatley place, "like a stone barn", where she worked as a housekeeper, although as a girl she had pitied her Aunt Doll, thinking, "how sad to spend one's life caring for the houses of others."

The first half of the narrative is given the nominal setting of Hagar's own house in Vancouver. That it is more than just another house to Hagar is made clear when she realizes that her son and daughter-in-law want to sell it. "You'll never sell this house, Marvin. It's my house. It's my house, Doris. Mine." Thinking of her house and of the "shreds and remnants of years . . . scattered through it visibly" in the form of furniture and personal possessions, she tells the reader, "If I am not somehow contained in them and in this house, something of all change caught and fixed here, eternal enough for my purposes, then I do not know where I am to be found at all." The house and its contents become the external manifestation of all that her experience has made her. She declares that she is "unreconciled to this question of the house, my house, mine"; however, she bows to the inevitable, saying, "We drive . . . back to Marvin and Doris's house."

Shorn of the home she feels she has earned, Hagar hides in an old cannery with an adjacent house. Remembering the Shipley farmhouse, she notes, "This house of mine is gray, too. . . . I find a certain reassurance in this fact, and think I'll feel quite at home here." Her reaction to her new dwelling contains the same intention of starting over which James had felt in *The Double Hook*, but with sadly ironic overtones:

To move to a new place — that's the greatest excitement. For a while you believe you carry nothing with you — all is cancelled from before, or cauterized, and you begin again and nothing will go wrong this time.

The house as symbol has been effectively used by a number of major writers of English and American fiction: one thinks of Dickens, Poe, Hawthorne, Henry James and Virginia Woolf among others. However, these writers have used the physical structure of the house to express highly individual themes. Poe's import and technique, in "The Fall of the House of Usher", for example, can be readily

distinguished from Virginia Woolf's in *To the Lighthouse*; the houses in *Bleak House*, *Great Expectations* and *David Copperfield* represent a variety of themes. The unanimity with which prairie writers interpret this symbol is one element of the "regionalism" of their fiction, inasmuch as the house seems to represent inevitable associations in the minds of both Western writers and Western readers. To them the house stands first for material security and later for cultural security, in a land where both have been hard won. In two writers of the past decade, however, there has been an extension of previous symbolic patterns: both Sheila Watson and Margaret Laurence associate the New House with the unknown future rather than with the social realities of the past and present. Hagar Shipley's consciousness that we are never "turned once more into the first pasture of things" exhibits Mrs. Laurence's more conservative and (for this reader) more satisfying attitude to life.

## NOTE

- <sup>1</sup> Because the setting for this novel originated in Mrs. Watson's experiences in the Cariboo District of British Columbia, this cannot properly be called a prairie novel; nor, since it is, by the author's own definition, an anti-regional novel, should it be classified under the slightly vaguer heading of Western novels. (See John Grube's introduction to the NCL edition.) In atmosphere, however, it is closer to the prairie provinces during the drought years than to the mountains, forest or sea-coast more typical of British Columbia; and if parody of the regional novel was intended, it is offset by the naturalistic details on which Mrs. Watson insists of creek, hill and drought-parched land.