

# WIND, SUN AND DUST

*Donald Stephens*

**T**WENTY-FOUR YEARS AGO what is perhaps the best Canadian novel was written: Sinclair Ross's *As For Me and My House*. Up to that time the only writers who could be viewed with any assurance were Morley Callaghan, Frederick Philip Grove, and probably Laura Salverson; since then only Mordecai Richler and, of course, Hugh MacLennan, have added to the store of better Canadian novels.

In his novel Ross has caught an essential part of the Canadian scene: the small midwestern town. But it is more than just the place that Ross captures; it is the time of the thirties, a time which many Canadians remember and cannot forget. It is a time, too, that younger Canadians constantly hear about: the drought and wind and dryness of that decade. Ross has recorded that time, and adds a dimension to the memories and dreams of people who cannot, and will not, forget the thirties.

Horizon, the town that is the setting for the novel, could be any place on the prairie in the thirties; yet again, it can be anywhere at any time. It is bleak, it is tired, it is horribly true; and yet there is an element of the flower blooming on the desert, and the flying of feeling that transcends all, that gives to *As For Me and My House* a prominent position in Canadian letters. This is a novel which, despite its Puritanism, its grimness, its dustiness, gives to the reader many of the elements of optimism and romanticism so often found in Canadian literature.

Writes Mr. Ross, in the words of his narrator, Mrs. Bentley:

They're sad little towns when a philosopher looks at them. Brave little mushroom heyday — new town, new world — false fronts and future, the way all Main

Streets grow—and then prolonged senility . . . They're poor, tumbledown, shabby little towns, but they persist. Even the dry years yield a little wheat; even the little means livelihood for some. I know a town where once it rained all June, and that fall the grain lay in piles outside full granaries. It's an old town now, shabby and decrepit like the others, but it too persists. It knows only two years: the year it rained all June, and next year.

This is very good writing; in fact, one is first captured by the writing in the book. There is an exact vividness, pure diction choice, observation that is accurate, and a rhythm that is controlled. Everything seems to move at its own pace, and yet the tension of the characters renders vividly the actual setting:

It's an immense night out there, wheeling and windy. The lights on the street and in the houses are helpless against the black wetness, little unilluminating glints that might be painted on it. The town seems huddled lest it topple into the wind. Close to the parsonage is the church, black even against the darkness, towering ominously up through the night and merging with it. There's a soft steady swish of rain on the roof, and a gurgle of eave troughs running over. Above, in the high cold night, the wind goes swinging past, indifferent, liplessly mournful.

The people who inhabit this landscape are described to the reader too, and they dissolve into actual highpoints within the landscape. The minister is shown in many aspects, an individual in every respect, yet typical in his pursuit to live on an inadequate salary that is never paid up. There is his wife, the main character and narrator of the novel, a sensitive woman who is bothered by the rôle of propriety that she must always play. There is the inevitable woman who is president of every organization that she can get her hands on, the perpetual president who is "austere, beyond reproach, a little grim with the responsibilities of self-assumed leadership—inevitable as broken sidewalks and rickety false fronts". There is the doctor's wife who "simply wasn't meant" for life in a small town, and the spinster choir leader who likes the old hymns, sung slowly. Yet they are not types, though they are marked by typical characteristics; rather, each has his own special and very real reality.

Such is Ross's artistry that no doubt any but the most shallow of readers is affected by his portrayal of the desolate life in a prairie town. His simplicity of style and intricacy of mood create a prairie so immense that it virtually stuns the mind. The physical limitations of existence in *Horizon* pummelled by the visitations of a cruel God—though He is never blamed for what goes on—are clearly etched in the mind by the almost unbearable monotony of wind, sun,

snow, and drought. It is a place with a past and a future, but with no real present, no rock into which to drive a spike which sanity can grasp to pull itself from the mire of despondancy. Environment plays a strong rôle in the story, an environment that is at once uncluttered and cluttered. The intellectual celibacy of the townspeople is made poignantly clear in the light of their ceaseless, numb battle against the overwhelming odds of the climate.

The sky and the earth fuse into a huge blur, a haze which envelopes the town and its people and stills all but the faintest murmur of hope for the future. There is a vivid immobility that lies stark against the dullness of the endlessly shifting dust. The theme is of the prairies during the thirties — the unrewarded, unremitting, sluggish labour of men coupled with the loneliness and nameless terror of the women — and is the only action upon the stage that Ross presents before his reader. There is a feeling approaching claustrophobia, yet the vastness soars over the people. There is everywhere an almost unreasonable acquiescence in the inevitable, but what the inevitable is no one can foresee with any accuracy, and so they never really ask what it may be. Perhaps the new year will be better than the last, but the reader is led to wonder if fulfillment will come to those who wait. Perhaps they wait endlessly. The only tie with the outside world is the railway, and it, too, is hidden by the dust. Perhaps these people do not care for the outside world, yet the false store fronts belie their unconcern with what is outside their immediate vision. These people are not hard to imagine, but they are very difficult to understand, and consequently difficult to accept.

Roy Daniells, in his introduction to the New Canadian Library *As For Me and My House* calls the novel an exposition of the Puritan conscience. Indeed it is, for everywhere there are the unmistakable signs of Puritanism: the standards are rigidly set; the struggles, the tenacity of people in so bleak a circumstance, the horror of hypocrisy and of sexual sin. Jealousy, failure, slow realization of forgiveness, possible redemption and reconciliation after anguish and torment, all take their places in the lives of these tenacious people. The problem of fighting versus flight, and the all powerful will of God remain in the foreground; the nerves of all the people of the town remain taut to the breaking point.

**I**NTO A TREACHEROUS ATMOSPHERE like this Ross introduces his main characters. He does not immerse them totally, but rather just dips them

into this sheep-dip of futility and sets them into a corner to let the bitter juices seep into their absorbent beings. Perhaps he has not dipped them for long enough, or again, too much, for none of the characters seem to rise out of the story as individuals of total belief. They are at once types and individuals, yet never really discernable as one or the other. Despite this vagueness, the characters can be analyzed; unfortunately, with varying degrees of accuracy.

Ross chooses a woman's point of view for this novel, and obviously has tremendous insight into a woman's mind, and this particular woman's troubles. Before a reader can understand the other characters in the novel, he must examine Mrs. Bentley. She is the narrator, and if the reader takes her at her literal worth, then all the characters become exceptionally clear. But she is a paradox, and there becomes the necessity to probe beyond what she says superficially and to make conjectures as to her real meaning. Mrs. Bentley — she has no first name in the novel — is the main character, for it is through her eyes and sensitivity that the whole story is seen and felt; and she is the one who grows with the action.

She becomes through the novel an epitome of a type of woman; she displays intelligence, responds to situations with courage and sympathy, and displays a vague hope for better times (typical of prairie women of the period: clever, hard-working, hoping). Yet she is individualistic in that she rebels against the stifling pressures of propriety imposed by the town. Though she does not want impropriety, she scoffs at the pretentious airs that the citizens of Horizon so capably put on. She lives in a semi-vacuum, drawing from her stored-up intellectual resources what her husband and the other citizens fail to give her.

However, she is not as strong a person as she would have the reader believe. And this is Ross's point. Assailed by doubts she seems to hang on by sheer stubbornness. Everything she sees before her is thin, disheartening, dull and bare. There is an inert and chilly stillness to the life she leads, and it becomes evident in her thoughts. Yet, what kind of person is she? She seems to be strong, if what she says in her diary is to be taken literally. Her strength, however, comes from the knowledge of the falseness and the sham of the life that she and her husband lead. With this strength comes a certain smugness. She is smug about the falseness of the store fronts, and she is certainly smug about her awareness that Philip is a hopeless failure, a compromise. She knows the discrepancy between the man and the little niche that holds him, but does she not also feel a trifle too satisfied with her dominant position in the family? It is, after all, she who is forced to make excuses for her husband's lapses. It is her plan to move to the bookstore

in the city and her decision to adopt Judith's baby. Though she abides by her husband, she is the one who makes the major decisions, she is the one who fights the internal battles for both of them, and it is because of her inner strength that they emerge triumphant.

She, like all the characters in the book, is hurt too easily, yet she is too enduring. She can see all things clearly and objectively because she is a stranger and cannot fit into the town and share its frustrations. This is her futility. Since she is outside of Horizon's influence, she can, for the most part, be cool, logical, and even somewhat caustic about its workings. Even at that she finds it easier to maintain face with the people of Horizon than with the cowboys at the ranch in Alberta, where they go for a brief holiday.

Her relationship with her husband is very unsatisfactory — to both of them. She appears to be constantly saying — "Poor Philip", and by virtue of this negation, enhances her own virtuous qualities of wifhood. Her theme of "poor Philip" eventually grates sharply upon the reader's nerves. She protests too much his innocence, thereby attempting to absolve herself and him of blame for their torturous predicament. That she possesses an optimism for his future and hence her own is often negated by her emphasis on his moral and spiritual degradation.

She does not reveal enough to the reader for him to deduce anything other than what she wishes him to deduce. She plays her cards too closely to her vest. When Mr. Downie, the visiting parson is there, she says that she "glanced at Philip, and wished for a moment that I were the artist with a pad and a pencil at my hand." She does not tell us, however, how Philip looked; is he rebelling against the grace, has he made a momentary reconciliation with his God, or is he once again "white and thin-lipped"? She whets the curiosity, then proceeds to another topic totally unrelated to Philip's appearance.

She almost envisions herself as a goddess, all-seeing, but fearful to tell or show the reader lest he recognize yet another flaw in either herself or her husband. Ross's stylistic brevity does not make sufficient amends for Mrs. Bentley's brevity; the reader can make only his own hypothesis concerning their deeds, motives, and the subsequent results. She says that "there is not much he keeps me in the dark about" — yet she does not know about the affair with Judith — and by chance finds out about it.

Contrasted to these ambiguities, she exhibits a good many favourable and worthy characteristics (if we are to take her account of her affairs as unassailable). She is candid and receptive. She has a capacity to see and comprehend a whole situation; she can criticize, objectify, and finally accept, even if her acceptance

is often darkened with grave doubts. Perhaps her major redeeming feature is her earnest desire for reconciliation with her husband, but even this raises the question of whether she is secure in her faith or merely in a blind alley with no other way out.

**P**HILIP NEVER REALLY EMERGES as a character, but then maybe that is his condition. He is contrived, far too mechanical to be other than fragmentary; he is a moody, frustrated baffled seeker of prestige, either intellectual, paternal, or sexual. He is a failure, a hypocrite caught in a web of his own weaving. The frustrations and defeats of his own life etch his mind as the windblown sands furrow the brows of toiling farmers. He flinches from any contact with the world, and a word from his wife causes him to wince, look at her, and retreat to his study. His only lifelines are his pictures, and they only reflect his morbid character. At first, sympathy and pity can be extended to Philip, but after a time irritation sets in with disbelief hard on its heels.

Is he the frustrated artist? Is he, rather, a weak, spineless hypocrite who cannot face what life puts before him? He is neurotic — far more than his wife — but do we know “why” he is? It is never solved. We tire of the statement that Philip needs only the opportunity to prove himself. He must show, eventually, that he is, if not deserving, then at least desirous of this opportunity; he does not exhibit this; as a result he is shallow, drab, partial — a skeleton of an individual.

To Philip, the only part of his life that is real is his pictures. From the rest of life he withdraws into his study, there to withdraw further within himself. Any flareup — real or imagined — results in his retirement to the study, white-faced, thin-lipped and haggard from a nameless exhaustion. He continually responds to an overture with a hurt, flayed look. So drab and colourless is his character that even the dog, El Greco, assumes more reality.

Mrs. Bentley explains his faults by saying that he expected too much, and when it was not forthcoming he was caught with his moral and intellectual fibres around his ankles. Surely in twelve years a man can make some attempt at pulling himself out or else reconcile himself to his fate. If he had been the frustrated artist, he would have found some relief, some compensation in his work. If Philip has found any of this, he does not reveal it to his wife’s discerning eye. His relationship with his wife is such that it pleads the question of whether he wants a

wife or a friend. After his constant rejection of her, the answer is somewhat obvious.

He is resentful of his wife, and of Paul; their resourcefulness and his blind resentment and the guilt of his own hopeless inadequacy prompt him to make the accusation of a love affair between Mrs. Bentley and Paul Kirby. Beneath his futile anger lies a boy's emotion seen in the many sulking retreats to the study. He constantly shams a fit of pique and sulks to cover any gesture of generosity. He is a puzzle, never to be solved.

Other characters serve to contrast the principals. Paul Kirby serves as a foil for both Bentleys. For a time a love interest seems to be developing, but it is foredoomed to oblivion and never gets under way. He serves Mrs. Bentley as relief from the monotony of Philip and the solidly aligned faces of Horizon. Nonetheless, his constant philological demonstrations are the only facet really revealed. He is perhaps the least faceted and least successful character in the story. He seems to have been brought in only for relief, when another page of Philip's sulkings and Mrs. Bentley's wanderings threaten a total suspension of belief.

Steve is opportunely introduced. He is the hope the Bentleys have been seeking; his exit almost extinguishes any hope that the reader and the Bentleys share. He is the simplest character in that he is typical boyhood. He is belligerent, sensitive, and frightened. His temporary importance to the plot cannot be overlooked; he is the image for what the Bentleys have wanted, but his worth to Philip is threatened by his growing disregard of him. The attachment to Mrs. Bentley further drives home to Philip his own inadequacies as a father and a man, and eventually sinks him to a new low of regard for himself and his wife.

Judith West is also shallowly drawn. She lives in a vacuum, beautiful, different, somewhat of an eternal rebel. She displays the inner torments that also rack Philip, thus giving them their common ground on which to create. To Philip she is the rebel with whom he can identify. To Mrs. Bentley she is the potential and then the real "other woman" against whom she must pit her wiles. It is strange that Mrs. Bentley, with all her astuteness, cannot see the supposed power of attraction between Philip and Judith.

Sinclair Ross gives variety in character; not all the characters are those on the racks of internal torture beaten by the overwhelming powers of nature. For variety, Ross injects the potent serum of Mrs. Bird, the rebel of Horizon, and she often successfully gives a pause to the reader; she represents the acceptance of Horizon on her own terms; though she fits into the group, she retains her own individual and special verve.

In general, the characters are made subservient to the environment of the story; the limitations of Ross's vehicle hamper the full realization of these characters. The only way the reader can realize the portent of all the characters is to let his imagination have full rein. Despite the shallowness of the characters, they are interesting, and at an intense, rather than a cursory, examination.

It is, then, the characters who make *As For Me and My House*. The place belongs to the history of Canada, the prairie town that is for the most part gone from our midst; no longer do people have to rely on the railway to communicate with the rest of civilization; the isolation is gone, through super highways, and television. The time, too, belongs to history; the thirties, the depression, are only ugly dreams which man hopes will not become another reality. But the people remain the same. We are all typed in some way, and we all, too, hope that there is something individualistic about us that separates us from the crowd. But only rarely are we separated, and only rarely do Sinclair Ross's people separate from their world. And this is the way people are; this is why the reality of Ross's fictional world elevates his novel to a lasting and prominent position.

