

THE MAKING OF JALNA

A Reminiscence

Dorothy Livesay

WHEN I THINK about Mazo de la Roche at Clarkson, Ontario, I cannot disassociate her from my own adolescent background. My father, J. F. B. Livesay, had relatives in Cooksville to whom he was sent as a young man, all the way from the Isle of Wight. His uncle was a retired naval officer whose home was patterned on English county life. My father was immediately taken into the family and introduced to more distant connections, the McGraths at Erindale. Mary McGrath, of Irish descent, had married into an Anglo-Indian family and settled on an estate called *Benares*, after the post in India where they had seen military service. But the countryside of Ontario must have reminded them not of India, but of England, with its rolling fields, deep pine woods alongside oak, maple and silver birch, and its potential orchards. It was my father's love of this woodland that led the owner at the time to think of parcelling her share of the estate into a subdivision. Our house, *Woodlot*, was the first to be built on it; and it must have been through the good offices of another friend of ours, Grace Fairbairn, who ran the local market and knew everybody, that Mazo de la Roche and her cousin Caroline Clements came to hear of our woods, and to buy an adjoining lot.

The first wing of our house my father had designed himself, to be used as a summer place until the permanent house could be built; and Mazo de la Roche's cottage was within easy earshot. My father's description of those woods in autumn

might be an echo of many passages in *Jalna*. In his diary he wrote:

But now that the leaves are going and that the sun is breaking through and that again branch and twig are brittle, and vistas of white birch, as I say, open up across the little ravine — vivid colour of gold and scarlet, russet and dun, flame of the sumach and lemon yellow of sassafras — I am content.

Since our place was so close it is hard to explain why, in her autobiography *Ringing the Changes*, Mazo de la Roche speaks of being isolated. At any time of the day or night she might call on my mother or ask advice from my father. As well as my parents' delight in gathering mushrooms (the *Jalna* books abound in descriptions of mushrooms!), their knowledgeable ability about wild flowers and local trees was of keen interest to the novelist. It was on our property that "Fiddling Jock", mentioned in the *Jalna* saga, had built his cabin and planted an apple tree. Another common bond between the two households was Canadian writing. My mother and Mazo belonged, I believe, to the Heliconian Club and the Canadian Authors' Association. Young poets who came to see my mother when she was preparing a poetry anthology, men like Robert Finch and Raymond Knister, also visited Mazo. I remember, as a young girl, my curiosity and excitement in meeting such a lost young man in our woods, and directing him on to *Trail Cottage*. Truthfully though, in those early days before she was well-known, Mazo de la Roche was loath to have visitors and seemed indeed always timid about meeting strangers. Her purpose in coming to Clarkson was to find a retreat where she could write undisturbed, where there would be no telephone and no interruptions.

Mazo de la Roche was really very hard-up at that time. She and her cousin (or half-sister, as she preferred to call her) Caroline Clement, lived frugally. Miss Clement, whom we were always given to understand was related to Samuel Clemens (Mark Twain), commuted to her office job in Toronto, walking through our trail early in the morning on her way to the train. Mazo, left free to write, did so quite furiously and prodigiously. Indeed, I have never seen such self-discipline in a writer, such commitment. Only for a brief half-hour, at mid-morning, would she saunter, milk-pail in hand with her little blind Scottie, Bunty, in tow, past our garden to a farm across the ravine. Then she would return, to do, I imagine, as little housework as possible, and get on with her next chapter. In the evening, after supper with her half-sister, Mazo would read aloud what she had written that day. If Miss Clement approved, the chapter was allowed to stay in the book.

Occasionally Mazo would drop in at our cottage for a cup of tea: and I was usually somewhere in the offing, pretending not to listen but ears pricked to catch any item of literary gossip. I was very sensitive about showing anyone my own poetry; but Mazo had begged to see some of it, treating me in a most adult fashion, so my loyalty was hers. Mazo de la Roche rarely talked of her past or of her personal life and this lent her an air of mystery in my eyes. How could a spinster write books about passion? As if to explain, my mother did once confide to me that Mazo had had a love affair with a Scotsman, but she did not feel free to marry him as she was tending an invalid mother, as well as trying to launch herself on a writing career. Someone from the Lake Simcoe area had also told my mother that there was a good deal of romanticism in Mazo's hints at an aristocratic French ancestry — "I knew her when she was plain Maizie Roche." This is clarified, however, in the autobiographical account *Ringing the Changes* where the author mentions, in passing, that her grandfather de la Roche was hated by the Irish family he married into.

Everything he did was wrong. Even when he anglicized his name — even though he allowed his children to be christened in the Protestant church. . . .

This grandfather de la Roche, become Roche, was evidently a fascinating rogue—even a rake. He left a legacy of classical books along with a trunkful of love letters which might well fascinate any beginning writer. If there was any stimulus needed, therefore, to release Mazo's innate romanticism, her own past could give it. Her childhood, almost in a sense as lonely as that of the Brontë's, was fed on tales of pioneer eccentrics — English, Irish and French. Her description, for instance, of her own Irish grandmother is very close to that of Adeline Whiteoak, in Jalna. Here it is, again from *Ringing the Changes*:

This Irish great-grandmother was a remarkable woman. By her charm, her fiery temper, her demonstrative affection, her dominating nature, she overbore her children and her children's children. . . . My father adored her. It was he who carried me, when I was three, to her on her death-bed. It is my first recollection of childhood. The tall house that seemed so dim and somehow forbidding, the long stairway thickly carpeted, the bedroom with its fourposter bed, then — the sudden dip downwards, as though my world had given way beneath me — the two long arms held eagerly upward to take me — the strong old voice, with nothing of death in it — "My little darling — my darling!" How fearful I was, in that dark embrace — I was three years old, she ninety-four!

To such a background Mazo added the fire of her own desire to become a writer.

The characters that she created or re-created became so intensely alive to her that they dictated the development of the story.

Her long narrow face, her tawny brown eyes which even behind spectacles gave one a sense of animal, woodland life; her gaunt, thin, rather neuter frame — these trembled with intensity as she talked about her characters, seeking to forestall the local gossip which would identify the Jalna characters with those of Benares. And as I look into Jalna again I would agree that the characters of the book were certainly drawn from a personal source; but I am equally convinced that the objective setting for the novel lay between Clarkson and Erindale — the setting of Benares. Jalna, to us, meant Benares: that gracious, square brick house with the wide front porch and a long scullery at the back built of stone (part of the original house that had burned down) — that house which had fascinated me as a prairie child when my father first took me there to visit relatives. The driveway through pine and oak forest, laden in spring with periwinkle and lily-of-the-valley, the old coachhouse, the short curving drive around to the front of the house with its wide view of pasture and apple orchard; and inside, the “library” on one side of the hall where the grandmother always sat and the drawing-room on the other, with its gilt mirrors, family portraits, delicate Victorian chairs and Indian rugs; the beautifully carved stairway, and below-stairs servants’ quarters and kitchen — these remain vividly in my memory. As a child, they gave me a sense of the past; that English past that drew me to my forebears. How close, in detail and atmosphere, is Mazo de la Roche’s creation of Jalna:

It was a square house of dark red brick, with a wide stone porch, a deep basement where the kitchens and servants’ quarters were situated, an immense drawing-room, a library (called so, but more properly a sitting-room, since few books lived there) a dining-room, and a bedroom on the ground floor; and six large bedrooms on the floor above, topped by a long, low attic divided into two bedrooms. The wainscoting and doors were of walnut. From five fireplaces the smoke ascended through picturesque chimneys that rose among the treetops.

In a burst of romantic feeling, Philip and Adeline named the place Jalna, after the military station where they had first met . . . Under their clustering chimneys, in the midst of their unpretentious park with its short, curving drive, with all their thousand acres spread like a green mantle around them, the Whiteoaks were as happy as the sons of man can be.

THE WRITING AND PUBLICATION of *Jalna* constituted the greatest literary excitement of my young life. We knew, in that spring of 1927, that the book had been submitted to the Atlantic Monthly Novel Competition, that Hugh Eayrs of Macmillans was also prepared to publish it but that he, aware of Mazo's financial need, was holding back until the results of the \$10,000 competition were made known (in those days, that was a lot of money). Suddenly one day Mazo told my mother of the possibility: she had received a telephone call from Boston informing her that she was one of the runners-up for the prize. Her excitement, her nervous trembling, knew no bounds. She and Caroline went to Toronto, I believe, to await further news; and she was really quite nervously ill by the time the message finally came through from Editor Edward Weeks: the judges had decided in favour of *Jalna*.

We all wept for joy. It was not merely that a Canadian writer had been recognized in the United States, it was not merely that we felt that Mazo de la Roche's work deserved recognition, but it was also the fact that she who had been really poor would now be able to write without the gnawing fear of poverty. From that day on, she never turned back.

Mazo did of course return to Trail Cottage from time to time to do undisturbed work, but a certain restlessness took hold of her. Fame required (or seemed to require) that she make public appearances, which she nonetheless dreaded, and that she engage in social activity, at which she sparkled. She was able to travel back and forth from the Continent to England and North America almost at will, seeking more material for her books and a quiet spot in which to write. What astonished me, when I myself returned to Europe after the War, was to find that Mazo de la Roche was the only internationally-known Canadian author, her books translated into many languages. Indeed, some teachers I met in Dusseldorf told me that during the war *Whiteoaks* was the treasured, secret possession of anti-fascist intellectuals in the town. Together with the BBC it was English; it reminded them of a free way of life. To say that I had lived next door to its author was to be given free entry into people's hearts; it loosened tongues.

But to go back for a moment to those early years of the thirties, when we saw Mazo from time to time at Clarkson, I remember how, on her return from one European tour, I begged to prepare a luncheon for the half-sisters. Mazo strode in, more masculine and assured than I had remembered her, her wit crackling, her musical laugh ringing. Beside her as always was Caroline Clement, the perfect foil: pale, petite, with moon-coloured hair and wide blue eyes. When I had served

the *pièce de résistance*, a “Roman Casserole”, Mazo charmed me by saying she had tasted no better dish in Italy. I am sure, even had the meal been burned to a crisp, she would have been thoughtful of my youth and feelings.

From that time on Mazo was a cosmopolitan, mixing with the literary great in London and New York, living in delightful, out-of-the-way houses. Miss Clement had a passion for antiques of all kinds, particularly Venetian glass, and as the Whiteoaks saga developed it was possible for the two to live as finely as they chose. They adopted dogs, and two European children orphaned in an automobile accident. Together with animals, children, nannies and furnishings they moved back and forth until the war put an end to travel.

I used to wonder how all this rather grand life would affect Mazo’s writing. By this time we were, in Canada, deep in the depression and heading for the reverberations of the Spanish Civil War; and I myself was absorbed in the social and political implications of those events. Mazo’s consciousness, although aware of larger issues, did not reveal outward concern. She appeared to be immersed, if one can judge by her autobiography, with every-day family doings and with the ever-proliferating problems of the Whiteoaks clan. In the writing itself one saw that her strong gift for characterization remained, her sense of drama and humour; but it had perhaps become sentimentalized. There was no *point of view* in her writing.

My last talk with Mazo de la Roche was a gentle one, on the personal family level of the early days. The war was over and I had a little girl of my own whom Mazo and her half-sister wanted to see. Miss Clement, alas, was nearly blind by then, and Mazo was the one who must read to her. We were invited to tea in their charming Toronto house, glittering throughout with coloured glass. They spoke with particular affection of my father, the erratic “Squire of Woodlot”, and of the thousands of daffodils and narcissi he had planted under the white birches at Clarkson. But by now our beloved woodland had been cut up, paved, made into suburbia; and we lamented together the old days in Ontario when people did live as English landed gentry.