

BALLANTYNE AND THE FUR TRADERS

Joan Selby

A BOY'S CANADA, or, Recollections of a Company Man in Retirement, might be the facetious title of an essay on that "young fur-trader" turned writer, R. M. Ballantyne. But, amusing and tempting as it is to dismiss Ballantyne with a shrug, there was something more to him than a hack writer cutting a great and exciting land down to a boy's size, or a thorough-going "company man" bringing an unthinking loyalty to the service of an empire-building enterprise. An author of boys' books he was, and a Hudson's Bay man he was also, but a fool he was not. It is easy to read his stories on one level only; to mark the seeming unsophistication of his prose, of his plots and denouements; to point to his mannered sentences, his adherence to the conventions of his day, and, then, to dismiss him as a literary curiosity. He calls for a much fuller appraisal as a writer with limitations, but also with potentiality, with a power to express not only the trite and the expected, but also the fresh and unexpected.

To bring the expected and the unexpected in Ballantyne into perspective, it is helpful to know something of the man himself. He came of a family with connections in literary and intellectual circles. His uncle James was Walter Scott's printer, and his eldest brother, another James, was a distinguished Orientalist. A certain literary competence and expressiveness (perhaps more genteel than lively) might well be expected of a younger member of such a family. And, according to the style and idiom of his day, Ballantyne displays precisely such competence. But he generates also the occasional intensity and excitement which ensure that even today his *Coral Island* is read and enjoyed by a generation that thinks in terms of jets and light years.

Perhaps this other element in Ballantyne was engendered by the adventures he

undertook at the age of sixteen when he came to a virgin land under the auspices and tutelage of the Hudson's Bay Company. From sixteen to twenty-two he worked as a Company clerk and finally assumed a position of enough authority to be able to refer lightly to a veteran woodsman — his companion and guide, undoubtedly many years his senior — as "my man". In such a position he cannot have been entirely ignorant that his was not a common fate, but his view was not much broader than that. There is little indication that he was aware in any historical sense of his time and place in Canada's development. In the early nineteenth century it would have taken a visionary to see beyond the circle of the Company's activities, and, while Ballantyne may afford us the unexpected, he never affords us the insights of deep vision. Yet it is inconceivable that a sense of power entirely passed him by; from his own writings one realizes how much Ballantyne and his fellow clerks and bourgeois of the Company saw themselves as lords of the earth.

During his six years in Canada, Ballantyne kept a diary of his journeyings and sojourns at Norway House, York Factory, and Tadousac. This diary formed the basis of his first published book, *Hudson's Bay* (1848). Purely autobiographical, and not intended entirely for boys, *Hudson's Bay* projects a certain robust charm and joy-in-life that presage Ballantyne's later writings. Humour is an important element, as it remains through his works; it is the leaven to his rather heavy prose. It is the humour of youthful high spirits, sometimes used merely as relief, but at times taking on a life and an artistic purpose of its own, as in the strange, compelling mixture of humour and brutality in the description of the seal-killing in *Hudson's Bay*. A little tailor, new to such slaughter, falls down and, thinking all the seals in the herd are upon him, rolls over and over, striking in terror at his imaginary adversaries. His utter incompetence is balanced by the fearful competence of his companion, a veteran of the deadly game, who kills with every stroke of his club. In this passage Ballantyne demonstrates admirably his ability to combine the horrible with the comic, the expected with the unexpected.

In *Hudson's Bay* Ballantyne writes in the conventional style of his age. Nineteenth century conventions permeate every aspect of the book — diction, sentence construction, characterization, feeling. The sentences meander like midsummer streams, and their meaning is often obscured by their grandiose construction.

So, under the influence of these favourable circumstances, my spirits began to rise, and, when the cry arose on deck that the steamer containing the committee of

the Honourable Hudson's Bay Company was in sight, I sprang up the companion-ladder in a state of mind, if not happy, at least as nearly so as, in the circumstances, could be expected.

This is the long way round to making the rather inconsequential observation that his mind was settled. But a closer look at Ballantyne's involuted writing suggests that its complexities do not always cover such banalities:

My future companion and fellow-clerk, Mr. W---, was parading the deck near me. This turned my thoughts into another channel, and set me speculating upon his probable temper, qualities, and age; whether or not he was strong enough to thrash me, and if we were likely to be good friends.

Here there are no wasted words; the construction is economical and the meaning evident. The sentence reveals the many-sidedness of a boy's mind: his need to measure and compete, his defensiveness and self-doubt, and his tentative gropings towards a new friendship. It is small wonder that Ballantyne became a writer for boys; he understood them so thoroughly.

Ballantyne's descriptions are most effective when he is least conscious of what seemed to him the serious task of imparting information to his young readers. At the moment when the unexpected takes over, and he is no longer "on guard", his descriptions capture a fleeting spontaneity, as when he portrays the solemn gracelessness of Indian women at the Christmas dance.

There is no rapid motion of the feet, no lively expression of the countenance; but with a slow, regular, up-and-down motion, they stalk through the figure with extreme gravity. They seemed to enjoy it amazingly, however, and scarcely afford the poor fiddler a moment's rest during the whole evening.

These Indian women are realized instantaneously — unsmiling and awkwardly bobbing. On the other hand, and in the same *Hudson's Bay*, Ballantyne's informative chapter on the Indian, dutifully presented, is a set piece with little life and no sparkle: a painstaking account of customs, ways, food and clothing, but with only a summary insight into the social organization or the spiritual aspects of Indian life. This is hardly surprising when one remembers that Ballantyne was after all a "company man", and, with rare individual exceptions, the contact of company men with the Indians was primarily commercial.

Ballantyne is at his best when he describes with a boy's glee some mishap at campsite or on the trail. He tells, for instance, of gathering gulls' eggs with eager anticipation at the end of a long day's journey and popping them into the cooking

pot. The first sign of impending disaster was a "loud whistling sound" and then, upon the breaking of one of the eggs, the appearance of a "young gull with a monstrous head and no feathers, squeaking and chirping in a most indefatigable manner!" He continues:

We did not despair, nevertheless, of finding a few good ones amongst them; so, after they were well cooked, we all sat around the kettle and commenced operations . . . [but] the greater part contained boiled birds. The Indians were not nice, however, and we managed to make a good dinner off them after all.

Once again Ballantyne balances a rather unattractive incident with skill and perception upon the point of a true, wry humour.

IT WAS NOT UNTIL SEVEN YEARS after his first book, *Hudson's Bay*, was published — years spent by Ballantyne working for the printing and publishing firm of Thomas Constable of Edinburgh — that Thomas Nelson, the publisher, suggested to him that he write for boys, embodying his experiences in the "great lone land". In 1856 Ballantyne wrote his first book for boys, *Snowflakes and Sunbeams, Or, The Young Fur-Traders*, and, thereafter, managed to turn out upwards of eighty novels. The settings vary — Canada, Norway, Algiers, and Cape Colony to mention only a few — but, basically, in character and incident, the novels are similar. It would be repetitive to scrutinize closely and separately even all those which concern Canada. It is enough to glance at three of them, *The Young Fur-Traders*, *Ungava*, and *The Wild Man of the West*. The first two, along with the still popular *Coral Island*, are possibly his best-known works and are associated with his name when many of his other works cannot be recalled. *The Wild Man* is, in some ways, less vital and less real than the other two, but it does attempt the complexities of a developed plot. *The Young Fur-Traders* and *Ungava* are completely and unashamedly innocent of such a device.

Hudson's Bay, his book of reminiscences, is the archetype of Ballantyne's later novels: the incidents they tell are similar, but heightened by a certain romanticism and a considerable sense of drama. In essence, these books are not novels at all, but accounts of journeyings in the wilderness forming a simple framework in which to set a series of happenings calculated to hold a boy's interest. Fights with Indians, bear and buffalo hunts, shooting dangerous rapids, are common ingredients. *Ungava* attempts to hold suspense on a higher level by recounting the dis-

appearance of the little girl, Edith, but the reader is in no doubt that she will be found and returned to her mother's arms. This book also attempts the complications of a sub-plot with the parallel separation of the giant Eskimo, Maximus, and his bride, but once again the happy outcome is obvious from the beginning. *The Wild Man of the West* makes use of a slight mystery in the search for the identity of the Wild Man. It remains a poor attempt, however, and for critical purposes it can be said that Ballantyne does not attempt any but the most simple structure in his novels.

One of Ballantyne's very real strengths — and one that has already been mentioned in the analysis of *Hudson's Bay* — is his knowledge of the mentality of boys. In his first book this asset brought depth to a charming self-portrait; in his novels, it brings authenticity to quick, deft characterizations of the juvenile heroes. The mercurial personalities of Charley and Harry in *The Young Fur-Traders* are a delight throughout the book. They laugh, joke, tussle, romp and gambol like game dogs. They are ruled by the spirit of adventure. Charley daubs his face with paint — blue nose and red chin — before going to the Indian feast, and his action is entirely boyish and entirely right. He leaps upon a half-broken horse and revels in the wild dangerous ride that ends in a head-first somersault into a snowdrift. March Marston, hero of *The Wild Man of the West*, is declared by his trapper friends to be as mad "as a grisly bear with whooping-cough." His madness takes the form of displaying "an insane tendency, at all times and in all manners, to break his own neck."

There is another side to Ballantyne's portrayal of boys; they are not all entirely mad in spirit and in action. Hamilton in *The Young Fur-Traders* is a gentle, unassuming boy in sharp contrast to Charley and Harry. His only response to their wild ways and practical jokes is a quiet smile. Though "soft" by the others, Hamilton does prove his courage and resourcefulness in a crisis. Despite the fact that Ballantyne too often indulges, as he does here, in the trite and the expected in terms of action, his sense of contrast and balance in the initial characterizations must be recognized. His novels are not one-dimensional adventure stories only.

Ballantyne's keen ability to characterize is at its best when he is portraying men and boys, rather than women and girls. The former are always vigorously created (almost "splashed on") but the latter are mainly lifeless stereotypes of nineteenth-century idealized womanhood. Relationships between men, friend and friend, father and son, are particularly well treated. Charley in *The Young Fur-Traders* and his father, Frank Kennedy, present an excellent example of Ballantyne's ability to render the mutual competitiveness, coercion on the one side and

rebellion on the other, and the underlying tenderness implicit in the father-son relationship. Indeed, Frank Kennedy, the "old fur-trader", is skilfully drawn with his irascibility, his human misjudgments, his perplexities over his son. There is no doubt that here Ballantyne is portraying a common and authentic type among the Hudson's Bay men; Kennedy is the company man who has maintained the independence of mind and personality which have suited him to the country and ensured his success. He has acquired a half-breed wife and a family of quarter-breed children and he shows true devotion to them. The inherent pathos and emotional complications of mesalliance and cross-breeding is not touched upon. Ballantyne was writing adventure stories for boys, not problem novels. Such themes were beyond his scope and intent, and even, one suspects, beyond his comprehension and literary ability.

In contrast to his happy handling of relationships between fathers and sons, and in line with his inability to portray women convincingly, Ballantyne over-sentimentalizes the tie between a mother and a son. In *The Wild Man of the West* March Marston and his mother mutually suffer (and the reader with them) through some particularly coy passages. The ultimate in lack of realism is reached in an exchange between the child Edith and her mother in *Ungava*. When Edith expresses hatred for a man who has hit her dog, her mother remonstrates with her. "I wish I didn't hate him, but it *won't* go away," says the child. "Well, my pet, you must pray for him, and speak kindly to him when you meet, and that will perhaps put it away," she is told. Unreal and false as this is, it is no worse than much of the writing of the same decade. The 1850's brought a heavily moralistic and, often, rankly sentimental note to children's books, and Ballantyne was very much a man of his age in this respect.

Indeed, individualistic in many respects as his men characters are, they have one trait in common. They are all homespun philosophers and moralists. Ballantyne was quite unable to deny his didactic tendencies, and his young heroes are always supplied with companions who are guides in both the physical and the spiritual sense. Yet he managed to bring a surprising variety into these mentors; Irishmen, Indians, French-Canadians, Americans—in short, all the many kinds and types that were employed by the Company. There is no doubt that these were derived from men with whom Ballantyne had hunted and trapped, whom he had known and liked. Their talk is authentic, their camaraderie real. The banter around the campfire, the give-and-take of personal relationships, the unstinted sharing of both danger and laughter are fully realized and sustained. These characters are not simply types. Bounce with his quiet, well-defined humour, or

Baptiste, quick in word and deed, or Jacques, struggling with the philosophical argument of means and ends, are certainly individual.

Ballantyne's characterization breaks, however, in his portrayal of the Indians, who are apt to be the stereotyped "noble redskins" of his century's misconception. This fault is curious, since it is obvious from Ballantyne's own reminiscences that his attitude towards the Indians was both perceptive and realistic. Presumably the literary convention demanded this sublimation and Ballantyne bowed. Consequently the Indians who travel with Ballantyne's young heroes are benign and noble, while those whose sole function in the story is to chase and attack are satisfyingly horrible. At curious variance with his treatment of the Indian, Ballantyne gives a rounded characterization of the Eskimo, Maximus, in *Ungava*. Noble Maximus undoubtedly is, but he has also a disarming naturalness and flexibility. Ballantyne summarizes perhaps rather revealingly the difference between the Indian and the Eskimo, the former being much more withdrawn and less open in his contacts with the white men. This difference, and the projection of it in his novels, as much as the literary convention, may account for Ballantyne's greater success in portraying the Eskimo.

In his own day, Ballantyne was a writer of boys' adventure stories of enough force and character to hold his own against such popular contemporaries as Verne, Henty and Kingston. In our day, he appears dated and rather pompous, but one is still aware of his vigour, of his ability to deal with the complexities of boys' characters, and of a touch of the fey, even of the macabre. As a writer concerned with Canada, his greatest contribution is his portrayal of Hudson's Bay Company life in the 1840's, and of the adventure of being young when Canada was also young. On this level we can still read him with nostalgia, mixed with the regret that he was not a better writer, that despite his vivid re-creation of the buffalo hunter and the woodsman, of camp fire and camaraderie, he was not able to afford us a completely convincing picture of the Canada he knew a generation before Confederation.