WESTERN PANORAMA

Settings and Themes in Robert J. C. Stead

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THOUGH THE NOVELS of Robert J. C. Stead have received some notice from the historians of Canadian literature, especially in Edward McCourt's *The Canadian West in Fiction*, no study has yet examined the entire range of Stead's novels on Western themes. Yet the full import of these novels is best revealed by considering them as parts of a single body of writing on the West. Considered individually, they seem chiefly remarkable for their flaws; considered *in toto*, with special attention to their settings and themes, they reveal a breadth of achievement not obvious in the single novels and a seriousness of purpose often obscured by the too-favourable view of the prairie environment, the occasionally weak characterization of major figures, and the runaway plots of the individual novels.

Stead's difficulty with plots is nowhere more evident than in his first novel, *The Bail Jumper*. Ray Burton, a store clerk unjustly accused of robbing a safe to which only he and his employer, Mr. Gardiner, have keys, had to contend not only with Gardiner, who is secretly trying to ruin him, but also with an obvious villain, Hiram Riles, a miserly bad-tempered farmer, and with two private detectives — one a female — who are searching for the missing money. If this had been Stead's only novel, it would scarcely warrant a second look. As the first of seven, it merits some attention, especially since it takes place in Plainville, Manitoba, and the Alberta foothills, the principal settings of the later novels, and suggests most of Stead's major themes.

Plainville is not specifically located in *The Bail Jumper*, but in *The Homesteaders* is placed east of Turtle Mountain, the approximate location of Cart-

wright, Manitoba, to which Stead, at the age of two, travelled with his family in 1882, the year in which the settling of the Plainville area begins in *The Homesteaders*. In this second novel, published in 1916, two years after *The Bail Jumper*, we find references to some of the characters who appear in the first, including John Burton, the father of the hero of *The Bail Jumper*, and meet again the two villains of the earlier novel, Hiram Riles and Mr. Gardiner, who are also the villains of the second. Stead's last two novels, *The Smoking Flax* (1924) and *Grain* (1926), are also laid in the Plainville area, largely during and following the first world war. There is much more overlapping of characters and plots in this second pair of novels, but little connection with the early books, though, as reference is made to Sempter and Burton's general store, there is a slight link with Ray Burton in *The Bail Jumper*, who, in that novel's conclusion, agrees to manage the store owned by Mr. Sempter. Stead's other favourite setting, the foothills of Alberta, appears in the latter part of *The Homesteaders* and in *The Cow Puncher* and *Dennison Grant*, as well as in *The Bail Jumper*.

One can only begin to suggest the detail with which Stead presents his history of Plainville. Its beginnings are seen in *The Homesteaders* in the account of Harris's trek northward by sleigh from Emerson in 1882, his selection of a quarter-section and building of a sod hut, and the early development of the area as more settlers appear. The account to this point emphasizes the coöperation of the new community in the face of hardships. The changed attitude of the farmers as they achieve prosperity is the main theme of *The Homesteaders*; to present it, Stead, having barely established his settlers, skips twenty-five years to 1907. And, since the desire for new land and greater wealth leads John Harris westward and away from Plainville, we must turn for a fuller account of the community in these years to the story of Gander's growing up in *Grain*. Gander is born and raised in the house of poplar logs built by his father, Jackson Stake. At the age of five he goes to the country school, "a room of four walls and a ceiling, with a door in the east, windows in the north, and blackboards above the wainscoting on the west and south", where he learns to play Pom, Pom, Pull-away and "Drowndin' Out Gophers", and absorbs as little as possible of learning. Gander's real interest is in farming, so that by the time he is ten he is driving a two-horse team on a mower, not long after, a four-horse team on a binder, and soon is aspiring to operate a steam thresher.

The coming of war to Plainville is described in *Grain*. In 1914, when Gander is eighteen, his father finally builds the house he has been promising his wife for so many years.

> First a carpet, which cost him eleven dollars . . .; then . . . a parlor suite with birch mahogany arms and brightly patterned upholstery and crimson furbelows that hung close to the carpet, and a rocking chair with springs that squeaked . . .; then a polished oak centre table on legs as spindly as those of a young calf, on which to set photographs and Minnie's copy of "Songs of a Sourdough" . . . .

This year also brings the telephone and the automobile, "that cost two cents a mile for gasoline an' the rest o' your bank roll for incidentals". Stirring as these events are, they are soon accepted in the excitement of the approaching war. On the day of its outbreak Gander and Jackson Stake drive to Plainville, to find its streets "lined with buggies and motor cars; the livery stables full; every hitching post occupied". Even the Stakes, both unused to displaying emotion, are smitten with war-fever and cheer a gang of youths parading an effigy of the Kaiser into the Roseland Emporium to demand a sauerkraut cocktail. While the Germans are forcing their way across the Yser, Gander takes over the operation of Bill Powers's steam thresher, throttling the forces impelling him to war by working fourteen hours a day on the farm. Though touched occasionally by the war on his infrequent trips to Plainville, he is more interested in the new forms of power than in world events, hanging about the grain elevators, fascinated by their gasoline engines. That year Jackson Stake buys his first Ford car, which prosperity replaces with a Dodge. *Grain* concentrates on the effect of the first World War on Gander, but we see as well its impact on the whole community: the recruiting of men, the news of the first casualties, the rise in the price of wheat, the efforts — not for money — to grow more grain, the end of the war, and the return of the veterans.

Grain pays little attention to the rural life of Manitoba following the war, but this part of Plainville's history is filled out in *The Smoking Flax*. Some elements in the picture are unchanged: the school Cal Beach's adopted son Reed attends is that to which Gander went, and the upholstered chair in Jackson Stake's parlour is the same that added glory to the new house in *Grain*; but many changes are evident. Plainville itself with its double row of cars on Main Street has changed greatly from the settlement that Ray Burton knew. It is still a makeshift community, but one with a growing social sense: "To the first generation of pioneers the farm-hand is preferred above the bank clerk; to the second, the bank clerk is preferred, a little, above the farm-hand; in the third, collars and cuffs are in the saddle."

There Plainville is left at the pinnacle of its pre-World-War-II development. We see that no strict chronological sequence is followed in the novels; indeed,

there is much leaping about in and overlapping of time. Obviously, then, Stead did not intend a connected history of more than forty years in the life of a Manitoba farming community or a saga of the people of that community. Rather, having created the setting in his first novel, he retained it as a convenience and provided only the slenderest links between the early and later pairs of novels. Nevertheless, though Stead's interest in the development of Plainville is only incidental to the telling of his stories, these four novels give a rather complete picture of the growth of a Manitoba farming community up to and following World War I.

THAT STEAD could have dealt with Plainville in the stagnant thirties is doubtful, for he gloried in expansion. He had found another scene of rapid development in the foothill country of Alberta. Again we are introduced to this setting in *The Bail Jumper*, as Burton flees from Plainville to escape punishment for the crime he has not committed. He eventually reaches the open ranges of the foothills where, hired to raise grain in ranch country, he is conscious of and sympathetic to the cowboys' conviction of their superiority to him:

> He envied them their wild free life, their rides over the limitless plains, their "leave and liking to shout," while he sharpened the binder knives and tacked new slats on the canvases, and made fly-blankets for the horses out of twine sacks.

Attracted as Stead is by the free life of the range — its spell is acknowledged in the openings of *The Cow Puncher* and *Dennison Grant* as well as in *The Bail Jumper* — he is more thrilled by the prospect of a settled and developed country. That he would prefer an orderly development is obvious from his description of the western boom in *The Cow Puncher*:

> The thing grew upon itself. It was like a fire starting slowly in the still prairie grass, which by its own heat creates a breeze that in turn gives birth to a gale that whips it forth in uncontrollable fury. Houses went up, blocks of them, streets of them, miles of them, but they could not keep pace with the demand, for every builder of a house must have a roof to sleep under. And there were streets to build; streets to grade and fill and pave; ditches to dig and sidewalks to lay and wires to string. And more houses had to be built for the men who paved streets and dug ditches and laid sidewalks and strung wires. And more stores and more hotels and more churches and more schools and more places of amusement were needed. And the fire fed on its own fury and spread to lengths undreamed by those who first set the match to the dry grass.

Not content to present the mere physical evidence of the West's explosive growth, Stead is also interested in the psychological effects of the boom. John Harris, in *The Homesteaders*, is a conservative all his life, but in the heady atmosphere of Alberta, "where the successful man was the man who dared to throw discretion to the winds and take the chance", he eagerly surrenders to the gambling spirit of the new land. He is not alone in his consequent sufferings. Dave Elden, in *The Cow Puncher*, a man of some principles who has risen from cowboy to millionaire real estate promoter, finds himself involved in "the thing" and helpless to extricate himself or his victims. Yet, in these accounts of an empty land filling with settlers, of cow towns exploding into cities, Stead finds satisfaction in the many who are not mere speculators. Ray Burton, viewing an orderly crowd assembled to file on homesteads that will be open for entry in two days' time, finds men "gathered from the corners of the globe and waiting patiently through night and day, through heat and cold, through wind and rain, through any trial and any hazard for the God-sent privilege, born of a new country, of calling the land beneath their feet their own." These hopeful settlers, whose household goods and effects were piled in great heaps in the railroad yards, represented the real promise of the West to come.

A major interest in Stead's novels, then, is their account of the West's development in the years between 1882 and the middle twenties. The novels laid in the foothills cover a shorter interval than the four Plainville novels, but they concentrate on the exciting period of the boom preceding the first world war — the years, incidentally, when Stead was living in High River and Calgary. The remaining novel, *Neighbours* (1922), laid in Saskatchewan north of Regina just after the beginning of the century, describes the efforts of two Eastern couples to establish themselves on homesteads, and serves to amplify the account of the settlers in the opening chapters of *The Homesteaders*.

Although Stead has been praised by all his critics for his realism, a reading of his seven novels proves that it is a limited realism. The details are accurate, but carefully selected, and despite occasional references to the hardship of life on the prairies, the privations of the settlers are submerged in a generally buoyant tone:

> It was a life of hard, persistent work — of loneliness, privation, and hardship. But it was also a life of courage, of health, of resourcefulness, of a wild, exhilarating freedom found only in God's open spaces.

Neighbours, to take an extreme example, presents a Saskatchewan prairie almost devoid of wind, dust, drought, hail, grasshoppers, mosquitoes, blazing heat and

freezing cold, yet this is the book in which the idyllic strain which runs throughout the novels finds its most lyrical expression.

> My earliest recollection links back to a grey stone house by a road entering a little Ontario town. Across the road was a mill-pond, and across the mill-pond was a mill. . . . Beside the mill was a water-wheel, . . . which, on sunshiny days, sprayed a mist of jewels into the river beneath with the prodigality of a fairy prince.
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> My father['s] . . . days were full of the labor of the mill, but his evenings and the early, sun-bright summer mornings belonged to his tiny farm at the border of the town. We had two cows, a pig or two, some apple and cherry trees, and little fields of corn and clover.

These opening words of the narrator, Frank Hall, in *Neighbours*, set the tone maintained throughout the novel as Frank with his sister, Marjorie, and Jack Lane with his sister, Jean, locate their homesteads, sharing a treed coulee watered by a running stream; turn the first sod on the boundless prairie, and work out their obvious destinies under the equally boundless sky. Jean becomes a prairie Lucy, whose idealism contrasts with the practicality of Marjorie, who recognizes from the outset the necessity of marriage between the pairs of brother and sister. Stead achieves a triumph in his handling of the relations between the two couples in love living in isolation in neighbouring shacks on the Saskatchewan prairie; the reader is left convinced that the couples are as innocent in their thoughts as Keats's Madeline. The plot, chiefly concerned with the difficulties preventing the marriage of Frank and Jean, reaches its conclusion as Jean emerges from the prairie pool, clad in a bathing suit, to accept her lover. The level prairie, unrolling to the horizon on all sides of the lonely shacks, supplies the isolation necessary to the idyll.

The idyllic note so evident in *Neighbours* is associated in the other novels with characters either close to nature or living in the simple economy of the pioneer settler or rancher. It touches the description of ranch life in *The Cow Puncher* and *Dennison Grant* and appears also in the account of the early settling of the Harrises in the Plainville area and Beulah Harris's retreat to the Arthur's ranch in *The Homesteaders*. It appears, too, in the carefree, roving life of Cal Beach and his sister's son in *The Smoking Flax* and in the lakeside retreat to which Cal retires to write articles on sociology after his marriage to Minnie Stake. It is present as well in *The Bail Jumper* in Burton's flight to the McKay ranch.

Although Stead views with evident nostalgia the arduous but uncomplicated life of the pioner, he is interested as well in the stresses that develop in the settler's

life when his days are no longer filled by necessary labour and when he becomes more dependent on the services of others. The appearance of these stresses accompanies a thread of social criticism which runs through Stead's novels. In *The Bail Jumper*, it is limited to passing comment on the sharp practices of merchants and their equally resourceful customers, on the advantages taken of farmers by grain companies, on the weaknesses of the law, and on the timidity of churches faced with a question of conscience. It is more central to *The Homesteaders* and *The Cow Puncher* as Stead attacks man's greed in his treatment of the Western boom. It is very prominent in *Dennison Grant*, involving an exposition of unorthodox economic doctrine, but in the later novels the evils of society are seen from a sociological rather than an economic point of view.

Stead's concern about these evils is first clearly revealed in a minor theme of *The Homesteaders* that explores the discontent of women on the farm. Mary Harris, willing to labour long hours to establish the farm, finds that even after she and her husband have become prosperous life remains for her a wearing grind. She complains to her daughter, Beulah:

> Here I've slaved and saved until I'm an — an old woman, and what better are we for it? We've better things to eat and more things to wear and a bigger house to keep clean, and your father thinks we ought to be satisfied. But he isn't satisfied himself. . . . He knows our life isn't complete, and he thinks more money will complete it. All the experience of twenty years hasn't taught him any better.

Mrs. Stake, in *Grain*, does not get her long-promised new house until she is about forty-five — "and farmers' wives are sometimes old at forty-five" — and even then, after Minnie has left her to attend high school and business college, she carries on alone her multitudinous duties. Only an outsider, Cal Beach, a graduate in sociology, realizes her crushing burden and sets out to help her by using gasoline power to run the cream separator and the washing machine and to pump water.

Cal Beach becomes concerned as well about the problems of the farm labourer and of children leaving the farm. Earlier, in *The Homesteaders*, Stead lays the blame for the exodus from the farm in part on the farmer himself, who desires "something better" for his children.

> It is a peculiarity of the agriculturist that, among all professions, he holds his own in the worst repute. As a class he has educated himself to believe that everybody else makes an easy living off the farmer, and, much as he may revile the present generation for doing so, he is anxious that his children should join the good picking.

The problem of the farmer's son is treated both in *The Smoking Flax* and *Grain*, largely through Jackson Stake Jr., who leaves because his father refuses to agree that his son, as much as the hired man, is entitled to a wage. The problem of the farm labourer is faced by Cal Beach when he wishes to marry Minnie Stake and realizes that though he is working hard and earning what is called "good wages" he cannot afford to marry.

The problems of the farmer's son and the hired man are at least in part economic, but the farm wife faces a broader problem that concerns Stead in almost all his novels: the need in farm life for an expanded horizon.

As with most of Stead's themes, we first encounter this, somewhat crudely expressed, in *The Bail Jumper*. It appears in the opening chapter as Ray Burton, at the supper break in the square dance, recites "The Nautilis", to which only Myrtle Vane, a cultured Eastern visitor, responds. Myrtle Vane is an apostle of broader horizons; her text, the masterpieces of English literature; her principal convert, the Barnardo boy. To him, after exposure to her influence, "there were greater things in life than cows, and gardens, and fields of wheat; and in a dim way these things of which he had not so much as guessed were opening to his astonished vision."

Myrtle Vane is only the first of a number of cultured Easterners who help to raise the eyes of Westerners beyond the boundaries of their farms. However, the Western women are more conscious than the men of the need for something in life beyond acres and barns. Beulah Harris, in *The Homesteaders*, frequently feels a gap in her existence: "She was not unhappy, but a dull sense of loss oppressed her — a sense that the world was very rich and very beautiful, and that she was feasting neither on its richness nor its beauty." This sense of a defect in farm life is shared by Jean Lane in *Neighbours* and Minnie Stake in *The Smoking Flax*. Jean's need to have something beyond farm life is an integral part of the plot as her search leads her to imagine herself in love with Spoof, the remittance man, and to refuse to marry her lover from childhood, Frank Hall, until he remedies his defects. Not until Jean refuses him, however, does Frank turn to Byron, Gibbon, Shakespeare, Whitman, Burke, and Burns:

> At first I had to drive myself to it, but presently I began to be carried away in the spirit in the new world which was opening before me. With joy I noted, suddenly, that I had forced my boundaries far beyond the corner stakes of Fourteen, beyond even the prairies, the continent, the times in which we live. My mind, from sluggishly hibernating for the winter, became a dynamo of activity. . . . I was so filled with thoughts that I threatened to burst.

Though Jean is at first suspicious of Frank's demonstrations of his new breadth of outlook, as the reader may well be, she is finally satisfied. Minnie Stake, more fortunate than Jean, falls in love with Cal Beach who recognizes the farmers' lack of vision. Minnie does not, however, share his hope of bringing about a permanent change in the Western way of life: "They haven't a glimpse, and so they're content. I had a glimpse, and it drove me from the farm. You have a glimpse, and it's making you do wonderful things - . . . if only they'd last!" Beach's purpose is nothing less than to "bring order into the chaos of farm labor, . . . [to] touch with one glimpse of beauty the sordidness which was expressed by 'forty dollars a month and found', . . . [to] awaken to spiritual consciousness the physical life of which the Stake farmstead was typical. . . ."

Stead's belief in the farmer's need for an expanded horizon helps to account for the ending of *Grain*, which Professor McCourt is unable to accept. Gander's decision to go East may not be consistent with his character as it is presented up to this point, but his awakening to the need for a broader life is something that Stead believes ought to come to every Western farmer. Indeed, the ending is not so inconsistent as it seems at first glance, since Gander's second love, next to farming, is machines. More difficult to explain, is the interest taken by Jerry Chansley, the Eastern girl, in making Gander's escape possible. Jerry, in fact, remains little more than a mouthpiece for Stead's ideas: "That is what you lack here, Gander. You don't see enough people. New people give you new ideas, and make life more worth living. . . . They draw you out." Her effect upon Gander, prior to this speech, has been precisely of the kind she has described, though not precisely in a way that she would welcome, since Gander has been busily imagining how he would rescue her if the car turned over.

The little we learn of Jerry Chansley suggests that if Stead had developed her character she would have turned out to hold unconventional, but by no means loose, opinions. It is Polly Lester, the girl detective in *The Bail Jumper*, who suggests the basic attitude of Stead's heroines: ". . . I am not a woman as other women are. I defy traditions; I defy conventions. I claim the right God gave me to live my life as I will, where I will, how I will, with whom I will." Though Stead's heroines usually observe the moral conventions, Zen Transley in *Dennison Grant* is willing to break with them to the extent of taking up her romance with Grant after she is married. The others do not go so far. Beulah Harris, the runaway daughter in *The Homesteaders*, quits her family to seek freedom with the Arthurs family in the foothills. Minnie Stake, in *The Smoking Flax* and *Grain*, insists on staying alone with Cal Beach on a Saskatchewan homestead while she

nurses Reed Beach, who is ill with typhoid. Reenie Hardy, a refined Eastern girl in *The Cow Puncher*, finds on the Elden ranch a world where "conventions had been swept away, and it was correct to live, and to live!" On returning East, she disposes of her mother's choice of suitor in an unusual way. Having gone with him to the theatre, she returns with dishevelled hair and flushed checks to walk unsteadily across her mother's room. When her mother anxiously inquires if she is ill, Irene replies that she is drunk and angrily rejects the soothing suggestion that she has only had too much champagne:

> Mother! I have had too much champagne, but not as much as that precious Carlton of yours had planned for. I just wanted to see how despicable he was, and I floated down the stream with him as far as I dared. But just as the current got too swift I struck for shore. Oh, we made a scene, all right, but nobody knew me there, so the family name is safe, and you can rest in peace. I called a taxi and when he tried to follow me in I slapped him and kicked him. Kicked him, mother. Dreadfully undignified, wasn't it? . . . And that's what you want me to marry, in place of a man!

Though Stead's heroines often express themselves melodramatically, one ought not to ignore their "thrust for freedom".

IT IS A PARADOX in Stead's novels that the Easterners who seek so earnestly to open the minds of Westerners are contemptuous of the conventions of the East that has produced them, and all find in the West a freedom that attracts them. Dennison Grant is foremost among these refugees from the staid East, and the book in which he appears provides the largest gallery of unconventional people. Zen Transley is only one of these, for Phyllis Bruce, Grant's secretary in the East, in her first conversation with her new employer, immediately wins his respect with a statement that marks her as the Stella to his Swift:

> The position I want to make clear is this: I don't admit that because I work for you I belong to a lower order of the human family. . . , and . . that, aside from the giving of faithful service, I am under any obligation to you. I give you my labor, worth so much; you pay me; we're square. If we can accept that as an understanding I'm ready to begin work now; if not, I'm going out to look for another job.

Grant himself, upon his return to the West after the war, is "happy in his escape from the tragic routine of being decently civilized. . . ." His primary function in

the novel is to expound his economic doctrines, which he does to Zen — as Professor McCourt complains — even under the blaze of a full moon on the open prairie after he has rescued her from death in a prairie fire. He then explains why he had left his father's prosperous firm, founded on the profits of a lucky investment in land, to come West:

> I told him that I didn't believe that any man had a right to money unless he earned it in return for service given to society, and I said that as society had to supply the money, society should determine the amount. I confessed that I was a little hazy about how that was to be carried out, but I insisted that the principle was right.

Notwithstanding his view of wealth, when his father and brother are killed in an accident, Grant accepts the duty of returning East to carry on the family business until with the outbreak of war he winds up the concern in order to fight. In spite of the emotional scene in which Grant informs his staff of his intentions, painful reading for one acquainted with the aftermath of the war, his actions and words are in keeping with his character and beliefs. Upon returning to find that his riches have increased in the interval, he determines to put the money to work in a utopian scheme for settling returned soldiers on the land. Grant summarizes his "Big Idea" in this way:

> I propose to form a company and buy a large block of land, cut it up into farms, build houses and community centres, and put returned men and their families on these farms, under the direction of specialists in agriculture. I shall break up the rectangular survey of the West for something with humanizing possibilities; I mean to supplant it with a system of survey which will permit of settlement in groups . . . where I shall instal all the modern conveniences of the city . . . . Our statesmen are never done lamenting that population continues to flow from the country to the city, but the only way to stop that flow is to make the country the more attractive of the two.

Though Professor McCourt objects to the mixture of "social doctrine with romantic adventure" in *Dennison Grant*, it is the social doctrine, along with Grant's unconventionality, that makes the book something better than popular romance. The weakness lies less in the mixture than in Stead's failure to make Grant a convincing figure and to make the economic theme intrinsic to the plot. Grant's speeches are invariably stodgy, and he is at times merely eccentric, as when with rough lumber he converts the living room of his city apartment in the East into a replica of the interior of his ranchland shack. However, those

who object to *Dennison Grant* may read a version called *Zen of the Y.D.*, published in England by Hodder and Stoughton, from which all economic theory and eccentricity have been cut. This version, by manipulation of the plot, makes possible the marriage of Grant and Zen Transley. The changed ending provides a more satisfactory tying up of events in the novel, but I am convinced that anyone who reads the two versions will prefer the uncut, for the second is popular romance and nothing more.

The outcome of the plot of *Dennison Grant* is determined not by Grant's unorthodox economic theories but by a moral principle that could be basic to Grant's thinking in economics, though this connection is not made by the author. Towards the end of the novel, when Grant and Zen Transley are on the verge of destroying her marriage, Zen leaves her son with Grant for the night while she sees her husband off on a trip. When a tremendous thunderstorm sweeps out of the mountains and the boy wakes, Grant soothes him and, comforting the boy, recognizes the wrongness of his intention of destroying Zen's marriage and the necessity of renouncing her for the boy's sake. Soon after Grant has made this decision, Zen arrives, having driven through the storm from town, to announce that she had reached the same conclusion.

This theme of self-sacrifice receives its most elaborate development in the preceding novel, *The Cow Puncher*. Lack of space forbids a full explanation of its working out in the novel, but Elden, in the course of events, is persuaded that forgiveness and service should be part of his creed. His service takes the form of serving his country, and his dying words, uttered in Flanders, reflect both his earlier belief that the innocent always suffer and his later that one must be ready to sacrifice oneself:

> . . . I said it was the innocent thing that got caught. Perhaps I was right. But perhaps it's best to get caught. Not for the getting caught, but for the — the compensations. It's the innocent men that are getting killed. And perhaps it's best. Perhaps there are compensations worth while.

Stead pursues the same theme in *The Smoking Flax* and *Grain*. In the first of these, it is once more associated with the need for forgiveness implicit in the text from which the title comes: " bruised reed shall he not break, and the smoking flax shall he not quench." In this novel Cal Beach gives up his chance for happiness married to Minnie Stake in order to protect Reed, illegitimate son of his sister and Minnie's elder brother. These events, which appear again in the later novel *Grain*, help to account for Gander's rather improbable decision to go East.

When Minnie explains to Gander that Cal ran away to protect Reed, Gander, on the verge of winning the love of Jo Klaus, the wife of an invalid war veteran, perceives that to preserve the honour of the Stake family he too must run away. Thus the working out of this theme in *Grain*, complicated somewhat by the inclusion of events from *The Smoking Flax* that help to lead to his decision, serves to explain in part the otherwise unlikely flight of Gander from the farm.

The reader of any single novel by Stead, with the possible exception of *Grain*, may not perceive through the multiplicity of incident the seriousness of the author's intention. Or, having learned that Stead was a publicity agent for colonization during the years in which his novels were being written, he may conclude that the author, in presenting so favourable a view of Western life, was merely fulfilling his other role in society. Yet such a judgment would be extremely unfair, for though the books were written by a publicity man and seem to have been directed at the popular taste, they are not invariably optimistic. Indeed, they frequently have rather unhappy endings: John Harris in *The Homesteaders* suffers a serious financial loss, Dave Elden dies in battle, Dennison Grant is not allowed to win romantic Zen, and Gander is forced to forego the pursuit of his childhood sweetheart. What is more, the major figures in the novels, whatever the weaknesses in their characterizations, are by no means the conventional heroes and heroines of popular fiction. In addition, though Steed may moderate the physical harshness of the prairie environment, he stresses in all his novels the intellectual dearth in and the aesthetic drabness of prairie life. And, in spite of the limitations already noted, the novels still succeed very well in imparting the atmosphere of the times about which they are written. Above all, however, Stead's themes are usually critical of society and consistently serious.