

FREDERICK PHILIP GROVE

A group of letters

Desmond Pacey

I HAVE IN MY possession two sets of letters from Frederick Philip Grove (1871-1948). One set consists of the letters he wrote to me in the last seven years of his life, when I was writing various critical studies of his work; the other set consists of letters written by Grove to Dr. Watson Kirkconnell over a period of some twenty-five years. Dr. Kirkconnell was good enough, some five years ago, to entrust his letters to me for safe-keeping. At some date in the future I hope to publish in book-form a complete collection of Grove's letters. In the meantime, and with the permission of Mrs. Grove, I present the letters which Grove wrote to me in the hope that they will be of interest to readers and students of Grove's work.

My first letter to Grove was written on January 15, 1941. As part of a series of radio broadcasts presented by members of the faculty of Brandon College, I had been asked to give a talk on "Manitoba in Fiction". Having read Grove's novels in my undergraduate days at Toronto, I decided to make his work the staple of my talk, and I wrote to Grove asking him a number of questions about his life, the influences to which he had been subjected, his aims as a writer, and so on. This is his reply, written from his farm at R.R. 4, Simcoe, Ontario, on January 20, 1941:

In reply to your letter of the 15th inst. I beg to say that I shall be glad to assist you. Would you care to read parts of that MS. which I originally meant to introduce by the chapter which Woodhouse and E. K. Brown printed as a separate article in the U. of T. Quarterly? I might look out a few relevant chapters. To answer your questions in a letter would take almost as long as writing that book.

A few of the specific questions you ask I might briefly answer here.

Among my Parisian friends of 1889 to 1891 were Mallarmé, Verlaine, Hérédia, Henri de Regnier, Jules Renard, André Gide. Since some of them are still living, I should, however, prefer to leave them in twilight. Among the Germans stands first Stefan George whom I consider the greatest poet of the last 60 years.

I don't think that any novelist has ever influenced me. My published novels — few of those I have written are published — are mere jottings of what I have seen and felt. But among those whom I admire most stand foremost the Russians, above all Tolstoi.

Neither do I think I have any very definite aims in writing. I try to put down what I see. I have, for two years, been working on a panoramic novel which will require another two years to finish. In it, I aim at replacing the time sequence by an extension in space, giving a whole countryside, with its towns, farms, etc., within the compass of a single year. I call it "The Seasons". If I live to finish it; and if, living, I shall find the leisure to work it out as I see it, it will be an enormous book, of course; I mean a book of probably over 1000 pages.

If you care to read parts of that unpublished autobiography of mine, I shall try to pick out some chapters which throw light on my methods; there are two or three chapters dealing with the growth of *FRUITS OF THE EARTH* which extends over forty years between conception of the central figure and publication. On the other hand, an opportunity might offer to publish the *LIFE OF A WRITER IN CANADA*; and I should have to ask you to return the MS sections shortly; I have only one copy.

I must then have asked him to send me parts of his autobiography (unfortunately I did not keep copies of my letters, and must rely on my memory), enquired whether he regarded *The Seasons* as his *magnum opus*, and asked whether the naturalistic novels of De Maupassant and Zola had had any influence upon him as a youth in Paris. On February 2, 1941 he replied to me as follows:

When I received your letter, I tried at once to do what I had said I'd do; but I found it an almost impossible task. I don't know just what would interest you. So, having to go to town yesterday, I despatched the whole of the MS. as far as it has been typed out. I don't know that it is in shape for publication as it stands; and, of course, since it was typed out over a year ago, it is already slightly out-of-date. However, I thought the best thing would be to let you browse about in it.

Now there is one thing I should not like to see done, namely to see large sections quoted. I don't object to the material being used; but please bear in mind that it is an unpublished book which may be radically altered before I publish it if I ever have a chance to do so.

As for "The Seasons" — yes, as far as fiction is concerned, I have the deliberate purpose in mind of making it my *magnum opus*, by which I mean that I shall put into it (and have already largely put into it) as much as I can of what I

have seen and thought about, not of course in the form of philosophical expatiation, but brought to life in fictional form, in the thoughts or the fates of the several scores of characters and the hundreds of background figures. It is an undertaking of the scope of a novel like "War and Peace" — though I do not mean to compare my gifts with those of Tolstoi.

Concerning the Paris episode in my life, I might perhaps add that, though both Maupassant and Zola were still living at the time, I had no contact with them except, perhaps, a social one; I don't remember. The figures that stand out in my memory were the poets. Fiction I all but despised as a half way house to journalism. I myself was dabbling in poetry at the time, now in one language, now in another. The reason why I never amounted to anything, at the time, is probably precisely the fact that I had no language of my own. In everyday life I changed over, with the greatest facility, from French to Italian, from German to English, and even from Spanish to Portuguese. But none of these languages was I rooted in. My native Swedish I had almost completely forgotten even then. The reasons for that you may run across in that manuscript.

If you go to Caledonia in summer, yes, do not hesitate calling, preferably after having given us notice so we shall be at home. We have a large house. If you are married, bring your wife; if you have children, bring them as well; we have put up as many as five grown-ups at a time; and we have all sorts of make-shift ways of putting up youngsters (acrobatic mats make a good improvised bed for young bones), and we have a 10 yr. old boy ourselves. Our house is always open to friends, especially in summer; and occasionally the company is quite international and interesting. Though, since the war, less so, of course. We are poor; but we like to share what we have.

I returned the manuscript of his autobiography (subsequently published, of course, as *In Search of Myself*), and he acknowledged its safe arrival on March 11, 1941:

The MS. arrived safely a few days ago. I have been very ill for a month or so and unable to look after anything, so I have not missed it.

If I can find the time, I hope to re-read it slowly, with a view to determining whether I think it fit for publication.

Yes, if you wish it, I shall be glad to read the script.

Meanwhile I have used the last few days to re-read the first part of my new novel "The Seasons" — the part entitled "Summer". I am not so sure that I really like it — but, I believe, it is by far the best thing I have done, as it is certainly the most ambitious. That first part is in itself the length of a full-sized novel (ca. 80,000 words); and it contains scores of characters; what the completed work will be like, in length and compass, it staggers me to think of. But it is most unlikely that it will ever be finished, though about half of the remainder is written or sketched.

Meanwhile, I had prepared the script of my radio talk, and sent him a copy for his approval. He acknowledged its receipt on April 2, 1941, and went on to make some interesting comments on his novel *Fruits of the Earth*:

I received your script; and, though I do not agree with every statement, far be it from me to interfere. The mere fact that you mention nobody else seems undeserved honour.

I regret that you could not read *SETTLERS OF THE MARSH*. I should gladly have loaned it to you, though I believe I have only a single copy. I consider it the most important of my prairie novels.

I am not sure that I know what dial-number taps CKX or CKY, is it 990? At any rate, I shall try to get the broadcast. Reception is rarely good from the west, I am sorry to say.

May I say that *FRUITS OF THE EARTH* was never intended to figure as a novel? I meant it to be taken as a piece of pioneer history. Its original title was *CHRONICLES OF SPALDING DISTRICT*. What I wished to bring out in the book is the slow decay of a great potentiality. The cards are stacked against Spalding, of course. He is slowly being bent into taking the 'slings and arrows' personally. See his reflections on the decay of man's work: the brick dust from his house, etc. However, it is your perfect right to dislike it or to find fault with it. Recently somebody, in discussing with me some of my books, suddenly exclaimed, "Ah, but *FRUITS OF THE EARTH*! There is a book which will begin to live 100 years from now." I merely smiled. Let's wait and see.

At any rate, many thanks.

THERE WAS then an interval of almost two years in our correspondence. Early in 1943 I was asked by the editors of the *Manitoba Arts Review* to write an article for that magazine, and I decided to expand the radio script on Grove for that purpose. I sent the biographical section of the article to Grove in order that he might check its accuracy, asked him if he was doing any new writing, and recommended that he read Sinclair Ross's *As For Me and My House* (1941), a prairie novel which I felt sure he would greatly enjoy. This was his brief reply, dated February 16, 1943:

I think the biographical sketch is all right — I have added one name.

I shall look forward to seeing the complete article.

No, I have not been doing much. It seems all so futile.

I read your short story "The Hired Man", if I remember the title correctly. I liked it very much. It is very true indeed.

Please excuse my brevity. I am hunting the dollars to keep the wolf from the door.

P.S. No, I have not come across "As For Me & My House."

When, that May, I sent Grove the *Manitoba Arts Review* containing my article, it provoked from him a most interesting letter about his novels. Dated June 1, 1943, the letter reads as follows:

Thank you very much for sending me the essay in the *Manitoba Arts Review* which I enjoyed reading. Not, of course, that I agreed with everything. How could that be? But I feel in it a sincere attempt to come to grips with matters, which I appreciate very much indeed.

May I point out some one or two trifles?

(1) Page 34, the quotation from *Settlers*. Now the intention of that passage was to convey the intoxicating speed of things. I myself when I read it, involuntarily fall into a chant. Any word added could, to me, break that chant.

It was, by the way, *Settlers* which was so ruthlessly cut down, from 3 long volumes to one short one. Hence the dots.

(2) Re *Fruits of the Earth*. This book did end with a tragic climax when first written. I remember talking to a publisher who particularly admired and liked that ending; and it occurred to me *during* that conversation that, considering the conditions in the West, this ending was not true. I told the publisher of my thought. He exclaimed. "No," I said, "Abe Spalding, hero though he is in one way, *lies down* under that blow. I shall have to rewrite the ending." The publisher told me right then and there, "If you do, you will have to count me out." "All right," I said. "Let the book lie." It waited five years; but I assert that the ending is true.

However, page 36, bottom: that is a bad sentence, very bad indeed.

It is a disadvantage to let books lie through years and years; one gets used to one's own mannerisms; one does not even notice them in proof-reading.

Does not "a trap" (pge 39) presuppose a trapper? I know of none.

It goes without saying that I did not know Dreiser's *American Tragedy* when I wrote *The Yoke of Life*. The end was suggested by the actual sight of the chattering rocks in Lake Winnipegosis. But the meaning of that ending is, of course, that Len wants something so much that all else falls away (education, etc.); that he will pay *any* price to get it. There is no intention of pessimism there.

However, those are trifles; and I appreciate the intention of the article.

On December 29, 1943 I sent a copy of the *Manitoba Arts Review* article to Dr. Lorne Pierce, then editor-in-chief of Ryerson Press, suggesting that the article might be expanded into a book on Grove. After some hesitation, Dr. Pierce eventually commissioned me to write the book, and it was published in 1945. Meanwhile, at about the same time that I first wrote to Dr. Pierce, I had written

to Grove to ask him whether he would approve of such a book being undertaken. His reply, mistakenly dated January 18, 1943 (I am sure the correct date was 1944), indicates that Grove had more modesty than he is usually given credit for, and that he was ready to help a young and quite unknown author:

I received your enquiry yesterday and will answer at once.

I believe, on the one hand, that such a book would be timely and fear, on the other, that there is not enough of my work published to warrant it. It is perhaps natural that the writer should always consider his later work as the more important; and to me it sometimes seems that nothing of any great importance has yet been published. Our purveyors of printed matter are too timid; and not one of them is willing to invest in a future.

However, I am willing to assist you in any way I can; and I shall, therefore, first of all try to find the MS. of that autobiography. This was not meant to be published till after my death; there are things in it which might hurt people still living. I trust that you will not touch on them.

As for my magazine publications, I have no list; but, apart from early work — before 1928 or 1929 — I can, I believe, put together such a list and shall try to do so.

Miss English¹ I do not remember except as a little girl whom I started on her study of French. But Ernest Birkinshaw² — I still call him Ernest — is very vivid in my memory. I have sometimes wished that an opportunity should come my way to go west once more, to lecture or something. I should like to meet him again. Naturally, I often meet former pupils of mine; and a fine lot of young men and women they are.

I am sorry to say that my physical condition is not too good; and my economic condition is wretched.

When, in late January of 1944, I asked Grove to give me a list of his contributions to the periodical press, he replied on February 3 as follows:

I have been laid up with the flu; so please excuse the delay in sending you the list of my magazine contributeions as far as I can [lay] my hand on them.

U. of T. Quarterly: Jan. 1932 A Writer's Classification of Writers.

July 1932 Thomas Hardy

July 1938 The Plight of Canadian Fiction

Oct. 1940 In Search of Myself

July 1943 Democracy & Education

Dalhousie Review July 1931 The Flat Prairie

¹ Mary Ann English, who had moved with her father, Colonel S. S. English, from Simcoe to Brandon, where she was a student of mine at Brandon College.

² Professor E. H. Birkinshaw of Brandon College, who had been a pupil of Grove's at Rapid City, Manitoba.

Queen's Quarterly Feb. 1932 Snow
Aug. 1941 The Desert
Autumn 1942 Postscript to A Search for America.

I seem to have overestimated the number. But there were occasional contributions to Macleans (1928), The Winnipeg Tribune (1926 or 1927), Saturday Night (1932?), The London Free Press. That's all I can think of; and I seem to have none of the latter group.

Shortly afterwards I became confused, on reading Grove's manuscript autobiography, about the date of his birth. This date had always been given as 1872, but the chronology of events recorded in the autobiography suggested that it must have been 1871. I wrote to ask him about this matter, and this is his reply, dated February 8, 1944:

You can readily imagine that, in a life in which over 20 years are, as it were, taken out and thrown away, chronology gets confused. I am not even sure any longer that I know in what year I was born. The only thing I have to go by is that my mother said to me, in a conversation I remember very distinctly, that the great event happened a year after the Franco-Prussian war. But whether she meant by that 1870 or 1871, I can't tell. I have given my age as if I were born anywhere between 1871 and 1873. I believe that the sequence of events as given in my "Life" is essentially correct; but . . .? For nearly 22 years no birthday was ever celebrated (1892 or 1893 to 1914 when I married); from then on the years are as it were certified; before that everything is guess work.

So, if you will kindly try to bring some order into the sequences, I will promise to accept it and to govern myself accordingly from now on.

I might add that I am going to Toronto tomorrow, to try to get some arrangement made to publish *THE MASTER OF THE MILL* which I consider as the most important book I have written. I shall try to have it followed by what I call the *ANT* book. There are some 4 or 5 volumes awaiting publication; probably the last I shall finish, at least if the state of my health is any indication.

THERE FOLLOWED an interval of almost a year, during which Grove was very ill. Mrs. Grove wrote to me on June 4, 1944 to say that her husband "had a stroke on April 14 and had had quite a trying time though he is able to walk by now. But his right hand remains paralyzed." The next letter from Grove himself was not written until January 4, 1945, and was a reply to my enquiry about the expected appearance of *The Master of the Mill*:

Work on *THE MASTER OF THE MILL* started on Feb. 8, 1944, and the printing was finished in August, after many intolerable delays, due to government interference

(priorities). Then started the fight for binding cloth which, I have just heard, has at last been won. I believe the book will be out inside of a week.

You, too, will have to be patient.

May I say that W. J. Alexander, in one of his last discussions of my work (with Carleton Stanley, Pres. of Dalhousie U.) called the book "ultimate and enduring", as Stanley wrote my wife. Since I thought the world of Alexander, I was proud of that verdict.

I have half a dozen books in the stocks, but my health is improving so very slowly that I am quite despondent. My doctor says it may take five years to get back to something like normal.

I can type about 1/3 of a page a day; nothing when I write a letter.

His next letter, dated January 20, 1945, invited me to read the manuscript of what he then called *The Ant-book* (it was published as *Consider Her Ways* in 1947), an invitation which I was happy to accept:

I trust that by this time you will have received the copy of *THE MASTER*. I had to leave the distribution to Macmillans, being unable to do anything myself.

I am getting ready for the long rest and looking over my shelves of mss. Most of them I discard and use for fuel. But I had, 40 years ago, 3 mss. which I wished to finish. One is *THE MASTER*. Another, which I have just reread, cancelling the 23-page preface, is the *Ant-book*; and I am much impressed. It was finished in 1920, and I found only one word which I wished other. I am planning to bring it out. Would you care to read the typescript? If so, I should try to ship it to you as soon as I can. I should like you to answer one question: is it interesting? Otherwise I shall discard it, too. Please let me know as soon as possible.

In his letter of January 30, 1945, he had more to say of the novels which were still in manuscript form. Having in the autumn of 1944 moved to the University of New Brunswick, which has in the Hathaway Collection a fine group of Canadian books and manuscripts, I had suggested to him that his manuscripts might be added to the collection. His reply to that suggestion again reveals his modesty.

I have yours of Jan. 24 and shall, therefore, at the first opportunity, when someone goes to town, send a ms. of the *Ant-book* along. It is a carbon copy; but a good one, and the only one which still contains the preface. I hope you'll enjoy its "envergure".

As for other mss., my boy and I weighed what there is: 135 lbs., without duplications. I have reread three complete novels: one which my wife hates . . . ; no. 2, one which struck me as important, *Art vs. Life*. with art conquering; decades ago I put it aside because a friend, the only person who has read the ms. called it "cocoon spinning", but I think it good; no. 3, another prairie novel, not bad, but unimportant. Years ago, the U. of Toronto made me the same offer that you (Hathaway Collection) make now. I can't make up my mind. Certain things, no

doubt, are so weak, though I haven't met with them yet, that I'd rather see them done away with. Hardly any bear a date. But, in fifty years, one is bound to produce a lot of piffle. The Ant-book, however, was, after 20 yrs. of study, written in 1920.³

Grove went on re-reading his unpublished manuscripts through the month of February, writing me on February 28, 1945 as follows:

I have the ms. of the ant-book (which is hardly a title, is it?), still unopened, but . . .

I shall make an attempt to place it. Macmillans are afraid of it.

I have now reread some 50 or 60 essays and short stories, condemning some, putting the others back into their drawers. Also 8 novels, of which I have fed 4 into the fire, leaving

THE CANYON

JANE ATKINSON (western stories)

TWO LIVES (Ontario, good in the skeleton, doubtful in the flesh)

FELIX POWEL'S CAREER (college youth; ms. belonging to my wife, to do with as she pleases; the extreme of sex)

apart from the ant-book, and autobiography which I may destroy, at least partly, for I don't think anybody would be interested in the European part; I am not.

There are still two drawers unexplored, in my desk. Since you are my biographer, apart from Eaton's THESIS, I thought it well to let you know these facts. The above novels I do not intend to offer.

Re ant-book: do you think I should leave the introduction (24 pages) or start with Wawa-quee's narrative? There is also 4-vol. novel: THE SEASONS (Ontario) which I have not yet run across.

A brief note on March 18 merely gave me the particulars about Charles E. Eaton's thesis on Grove. Then followed an interval of several months, during which Grove suffered a second stroke. When he wrote on August 26, 1945, it was to acknowledge the receipt of my book on him:

I had recently a second stroke which, for the time being, deprived me of my speech and generally set me back.

I know my wife wrote to you, but don't know what. She is not at home just now; so I can't ask her. I should like to say a few things; so I struggle with the typewriter.

Suppose I had had your criticisms while writing my books and had adopted them all; then my books would have been your books, not mine. I therefore welcome your criticisms, with some of which I agree; with others, not. Occasionally I feel that out of my strength you have made my weakness; but that does not

³ I should say that, for reasons of discretion, I have omitted two passages of this letter of January 30, 1945. All the other letters are printed in their entirety.

matter. On the whole I feel rather flattered that you should have felt the books to be of sufficient importance to discuss them, for I feel somehow that your book is very honest; though I also feel occasionally that you over-estimate my importance, flatteringly. But I wish to thank you. I hope the book will find many readers. I hear that something is being translated into French (*GANTS DU CIEL*). My wife, feels 'bucked'. Poor girl. I shall likely have to give up my fellowship in the Royal Society, for I can't afford the fees. However . . . Will you be in our neighbourhood? It is over a year since I have seen any visitor. The last one, strange, was a Swede; the last but one, a German Professor of English (1938) who told me that all my works were in the libraries of Berlin and Munich. No Canadian has come since W. J. Alexander (1932).

This was the last letter of any length that Grove wrote me. His health quickly deteriorated and after 1945 all communications were through his wife. There were however three brief notes from Grove himself in the late months of 1945. The first, dated September 3, 1945, reads:

Just a word in answer to yours of Aug. 29. *THE MASTER* sold out within two months, in 1000 copies; that was all Macmillans would risk. I had a limited edition of 400 copies most of which remain on my hands. As usual, to me the book is a loss. Perhaps it is lucky that I have nothing that can be taken from me.

What they are translating into French, I don't know, except that they asked me, through Ed Collin, for *FRUITS OF THE EARTH*.

"Who is there?" Well, there is E. J. Pratt.

As for the Ant book, I intend to offer it to Reg Saunders. Macmillans don't want it.

Sorry, that's all I can write.

The second note, dated November 24, makes apparent the exhausted state of his health:

Thanks for the off-print.

I am getting worse. I don't believe any longer that I'll recover. But . . .

I've been wanting to tell you that Carleton Stanley applauds your book, though he disagrees with your criticism. He (as did W. J. Alexander) places *THE YOKE OF LIFE* first, as a novel and calls it "great". As for the philosophy, he says, "When will North-Americans begin to catch up with the thought of F. P. Grove?" I believe he would like to write another book; he announces his prospective visit. Since I am fond of him, I look forward to it (probably in Jan.)

I am sorry; this exhausts me,

The last note was dated December 14, 1945, and is a moving combination of hope and apprehension:

We cannot afford Christmas cards, So here are our best wishes of the season.

No, I am not aware of a new printing of the MASTER. As for FRUITS OF THE EARTH. Ryersons bought the remainder in 1938. I get nothing out of it. Someone sent me the *Saturday Night* of Nov. 24. Stanley is reviewing your book in the Jan. *Dalhousie Review*, so he writes me. My total royalty on the MASTER was \$109 for 14 yrs. work. But I have sold the ANTS. That's something. Macmillans want the autobiography. I don't know.

However . . .

I had yesterday the most painful day since my illness: hands and mouth. Horrible. Do you know that my boy won a scholarship for a year at St. Andrew's. I expect him home next Wednesday. First in Latin, French, and Greek, so far.

Frederick Philip Grove died on August 19, 1948. There are still some who belittle him; most Canadians ignore him; but I believe that his work will endure.

