

# LIFE IN A NEW LAND

*Notes on the immigrant theme in  
Canadian fiction*

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THE LIFE OF THE IMMIGRANT would seem an obvious theme for the Canadian novelist, particularly as the pioneer early became a popular and romantic figure in our native literature. Yet it was only comparatively recently that the immigrant made his appearance as a specific fictional type—a stranger in a strange land, uprooted from his native soil and struggling to adjust himself to a new world. Only, in fact, with the publication of Ralph Connor's *The Foreigner* in 1909 were the peculiar problems of the immigrant really introduced as a subject of fictional study. The purpose of this essay is to examine some of the aspects of this theme as it has been developed during the half-century since Connor's novel appeared.

As an attempt to penetrate the problems of the immigrant, *The Foreigner* is only partially successful. It centres around a Russian family, the Kalmars. They live in one of the "little black huts" that marked the "foreign" section of Winnipeg at the turn of the century, and here we are introduced to the typical Continental immigrants of that era. "With a sprinkling of Germans, Italians and Swiss, it was almost solidly Slav," Connor remarks of the Winnipeg colony, and it seems likely that he is speaking of these people from a direct acquaintance gained in real life in his rôle as Presbyterian minister C. W. Gordon.

Even in fiction Connor's approach is still that of the missionary. He wishes to convert the immigrant, not to accept him as he is. As in all his novels, one of the leading characters of *The Foreigner* is a preacher, Brown, who works among the Galicians (Ukrainians) in a remote Saskatchewan settlement. We may safely assume that Brown expresses Connor's viewpoint when he says, referring to his desire to help the Galician children, that he will "do anything to make them good

Christians and good Canadians, which is the same thing." And, even more significantly: "These people here exist as an undigested foreign mass. They must be taught our ways of thinking and living, or it will be a mighty bad thing for us in Western Canada."

In spite of Connor's evident good will towards the Russians and Galicians who people a great part of *The Foreigner*, it is clear that he is not really at home with them. He sees them as picturesque but somewhat uncouth characters, requiring Canadianisation, by which he means, apparently, a knowledge of the English language, education in British principles of democracy, and a moral code based on the Protestant Christian faith.

His lack of real understanding is evident in the portrayal of his leading character, Kalman Kalmar, son of an immigrant ex-Nihilist. Kalman does indeed develop into a romantic hero of the type familiar in Connor's novels, but he never comes alive as the Scottish-Canadian heroes do—Ranald Macdonald in *The Man from Glengarry*, for instance, or Shock MacGregor in *The Prospector*. And his eventual success in life derives far less from his own efforts than from the intervention of fate. As a boy he is rescued from the foreign colony in Winnipeg by the kindly Mrs. French ("a little lady with white hair and a face pale and chastened into sweetness"), who sends him to live on a prairie farm with her brother-in-law, Jack French. Fate steps in again when, as a young man, he discovers a mine in northern Saskatchewan, and yet again when he wins the love of a rich girl.

Indeed, while one must give Connor credit for introducing the theme of the immigrant to Canadian fiction, one has only to compare his Russians and Galicians with the Ukrainian settlers in the recent novel, *Sons of the Soil*, by Illia Kiriak, to see the difference in understanding between an author writing of his own people and from direct experience, and one who, like Connor, views the immigrant from outside without sufficient creative imagination to enter into his predicament. *Sons of the Soil* has no literary value whatever, but it has at least a documentary value which *The Foreigner* lacks; the Ukrainian-born Kiriak shows his settlers in a convincing relationship with their background and their traditions, and from his own knowledge he helps us to understand the efforts that were needed to settle their Alberta farms.

**B**UT THE IMMIGRANT THEME, first sketched by Connor in *The Foreigner*, was to be developed with surer knowledge by two writers of

European origin whose early works appeared while he was still writing the last of his popular novels. These were Frederick Philip Grove, born in Sweden, and Laura Goodman Salverson, an Icelandic Canadian. These writers combined first-hand experience of the immigrant's life, which Connor did not have, with considerable creative ability. Except that both wrote of pioneers in Manitoba, they had little else in common.

Grove, who reached Canada in 1892, was fascinated by both the idea and the experience of pioneering, and he saw his work as having a peculiar relation to this social phenomenon. "I, the cosmopolitan," he says in his autobiography, *In Search of Myself*, "had fitted myself to be the spokesman of a race—not necessarily a race in the ethnographic sense; in fact not at all in that sense; rather in the sense of a stratum of society which cross-sectioned all races, consisting of those who, in no matter what climate, at no matter what time, feel the impulse of starting anew, from the ground up, to fashion a new world which might serve as the breeding-place of a civilization to come . . . Order must arise out of chaos; the wilderness must be tamed."

Most of Grove's novels are in fact concerned in one way or another with taming the wilderness, and two of them—not counting the autobiographical *A Search for America*—are concerned with immigrants. Both of these novels—*Settlers of the Marsh* (1925) and *The Yoke of Life* (1930)—are set in the wilderness to the west of Lake Manitoba where Grove taught school and which he describes so vividly in *Over Prairie Trails* (1922); their characters are settlers of many nationalities—German, Russian, Swedish, Icelandic and Canadian—and the pioneer environment is the setting for the drama of love, ambition and frustration which emerges.

Grove's approach to literature was very different from Connor's. Grove "abhorred" romanticism which, in his view, "means essentially a view of life in which circumstance is conquered by endeavour only if endeavour is aided by the *deus ex machina*."<sup>1</sup> And, unlike Connor's heroes, Grove's are often thwarted in ambition and defeated in life by combinations of circumstances which they have neither the strength nor the wisdom to overcome.

This process is evident in the fate of Niels Lindstedt, the central figure of *Settlers in the Marsh*, who brings about his own tragedy by his very simplicity and his awkwardness in human relationships. Niels is a Swedish immigrant who takes up land in Canada to escape from the poverty and humiliation his mother

<sup>1</sup> *In Search of Myself*, Toronto, 1946.

had endured. "In this country," he feels, "there was a way out for him who was young and strong." He cherished a "longing for the land that would be his; with a house of his own and a wife that would go through it like an inspiration."

Materially, Niels succeeds. The farm he clears is one of the best in the district, and the house he builds is the largest. But this man, so strong physically, so shrewd in planning his farm operations, is naïvely inept in his relations with other people. When Ellen, reserved, repressed and unable to forget her mother's sufferings, tells him that she cannot marry him, he is overcome with despair, and falls easily into the hands of the gay widow, Mrs. Vogel. But he is incapable of making the adjustments that might render his marriage with her reasonably happy, and so he becomes more isolated and withdrawn. When the blinkers are suddenly removed from his eyes, and he sees his wife as the prostitute she is, he becomes violent and shoots her.

Yet *Settlers in the Marsh* does not end pessimistically. Niels escapes hanging, serves his time, and returns to his farm, where he and Ellen, ten years older, resume the pursuit of the dream which previously he had followed alone.

A more complete and final tragedy destroys Len Sterner, the hero of *The Yoke of Life*. Len's ambition is frustrated in boyhood by the lack of a school, and later by the demands made on him by his hard-working and poverty-stricken step-father. And his desire for love is thwarted because he fixes his affections on a girl who wants more of the material pleasures and comforts than he can give her. The girl, Lydia, is also a product of pioneer farm life; shallow and vain by nature, she longs to escape from the hard and barren existence she sees all around her, and she uses her feminine attractions to this end.

Len is in fact a kind of frontier Jude Fawley, and the author says of him, as Hardy might have said of Jude, "All things had come to him ill-adjusted in point of time." When Lydia eventually turns towards him, he cannot forgive the destruction of his idealised boyhood image of her, and when he takes her on the long and fateful trip up the lake the atmosphere is heavy with impending doom. The possibility of happiness has come too late for Len, and he makes his fatal decision. "A thought had flashed through his brain, and lamed him like a hemorrhage. No. Life was not for him. That thought decided all things. His road lay clear ahead and led into death."

Len exemplifies the poetic temperament that is crushed by the exigencies and the practical necessities of pioneer life. He has no worldly ambition and he can work hard only as long as he has a dream possible of fulfilment. But when the dream is extinguished, life loses its meaning. His inadequacy is emphasized by

the contrasting temperament of his young brother Charlie, a man happily attuned to his environment. "Charlie was clean-limbed and strong: the beginning and starting-point of a race of farmers." Appropriately, in terms of Grove's attitude, it is Charlie who is fortunate in his choice of a wife and who takes over the home farm when his stepfather is forced through debt to abandon it.

In both these novels Grove presents, as a background to the individual dramas of frustration and maladjustment, a picture of pioneer life painted in naturalistic detail. The back-breaking labour of clearing stumps and rocks from the land, the calamities brought by flood and hail, the harsh life of the women—all these are vividly described. And over the whole scene Grove creates an atmosphere of elemental struggle which intensifies the grimness of the human drama and which, in *Settlers of the Marsh* particularly, recalls Knut Hamsun's Norwegian classic, *Growth of the Soil*.

In order to judge the extent of Grove's creative imaginativeness in *Settlers in the Marsh* and *The Yoke of Life*, it is helpful to compare them with *A Search for America*, the autobiographical novel which ironically remains his most romantic work. Grove started writing *A Search for America* in 1893, a year after he reached Canada; he did not succeed in getting it published until 1927. To all intents and purpose, it is the story of his own experiences as an immigrant condensed and re-arranged so that what happened to Grove in about twenty years occupies in the novel a year in the life of the hero, Philip Branden.

Branden is the son of a wealthy Swede. He has been brought up to a life of luxury and travel, but this ends abruptly when his father loses his fortune. He then sails to Montreal, hoping, like so many immigrants of his day, to make a modest fortune. To his consternation, he finds that he is completely unadapted to earn his living. "I had stepped," he says, "from what I could not help regarding as a well-ordered, comfortable environment into what had upon me the effect of utter chaos. For the moment all human contact was non-existent. I felt that not only had I to learn a great many things, the social connections of a world entirely different from the world I knew, for instance; but I also had laboriously to tear down or at least to submerge what I had built up before—my tastes, inclinations, interests." Branden is in turn a waiter in Toronto, a book agent in New York, a hobo, a factory worker and an itinerant harvester; he returns to Canada where, like Grove, he remains and becomes a teacher.

*A Search for America* is interesting for the light it throws on Grove himself, but its value does not go far beyond the documentary. It is not a novel in the strict sense of the term, since its actions and its characters have not been conceived

imaginatively; it is always, at best, fictionalised autobiography. *Settlers of the Marsh* and *The Yoke of Life*, on the other hand, present their own convincing imaginary worlds, and for this reason they are better works of literary art; they also—and perhaps for the same reason—contribute much more to our understanding of the immigrant, his problems, and his psychology.

AS WE HAVE SEEN, nationality in the ordinary sense counted for little in Grove's mind; he was concerned with men whose distinctions of race and nation had been submerged in the common struggle to tame the wilderness. Laura Goodman Salverson, on the other hand, deliberately set out in her first novel, *The Viking Heart* (1923) to offer an interpretation of her own people, the Icelanders. "I wanted," she remembered sixteen years later, "to write a story which would define the price any foreign group must pay for its place in the national life of the country of its adoption."<sup>2</sup>

The Icelandic immigrants of *The Viking Heart* live in a remote community of Manitoba, and, like Grove's pioneers, they must endure privation and hard toil. But they have one advantage; where men like Niels Lindstedt and Len Sterner fight their battles in isolation, the Icelanders gain support and strength from the feeling of kinship which binds the community together and which arises from a common background and common traditions. In the new land the children are nurtured, like their parents, on the old sagas, and the older generation never lose their faith in education. "There is but one hope, one liberation for the poor. It is education," says the preacher Sjera Bjarni.

As the children grow up, a rift appears between the generations in *The Viking Heart*, and Mrs. Salverson is more successful in depicting the first generation than the second. Her portrayal of the parents, the real immigrants, is based at least partly on actual people and episodes in the Manitoba Icelandic settlements, and it attains an authenticity of feeling which is not always present when she comes to describe the sons and daughters and their withdrawal from the traditional pattern of life.

Unlike the heroes of Grove's novels, the young people of *The Viking Heart* achieve astonishing material success. A violinist of international fame, a well-known surgeon, a successful dress designer—these are produced by a single pioneer community. But the success has its tragic side, and here Mrs. Salverson

<sup>2</sup> *Confessions of an Immigrant's Daughter*, Toronto, 1939.

reveals a sharp insight into the effects of immigration even on a closely knit community. The parents find a tendency in the children to turn against them and all they stand for; this, along with their severe hardships, is the price they pay for seeking a new home in a strange land. The children, on their side, cannot any longer accept the old values without question, but they are tempted to grasp at the most superficial and least worthy aspects of the new environment in order to gain a sense of belonging.

However, not all the children react extremely; most of them, indeed, are level-headed enough to be able to adjust to the new country without discarding everything their parents have taught them. As Thor, one of the second generation, says to his mother, "I am not likely to forget the heritage of my fathers, but I can best prove my Norse blood by honouring this country which is mine." And so the Canadian-born sons and daughters of the immigrants are unmistakably Canadian, and even the parents become so, imperceptibly. After Thor dies, it dawns on his mother that she, too, is Canadian. "This Canada, which has demanded much of them—it was her country."

Yet, despite the capability with which Mrs. Salverson has observed the phenomena of immigrant integration, the most convincing aspect of *The Viking Heart* remains its success in portraying the original immigrant community, in evoking the integrity, the courage and the power to endure of the people who came from Iceland to the prairies. Chiefly because of this, it remains the best of Mrs. Salverson's several novels.

At least one other of these, *The Dark Weaver* (1937), also develops the immigrant theme. It differs from *The Viking Heart* in that its characters are town-dwellers of mixed Scandinavian origins, but it resembles the earlier book in revealing the clash of the generations, and the propensity of the sons and daughters to go their own way to the chagrin of their European-born parents. But this intent is almost submerged in the profusion of plot and in the author's efforts to develop the rather artificial secondary theme suggested by the title—that each of us is a shuttle in the hands of Fate (the Weaver) which forms a pattern out of our lives that for us has little meaning.

UNDOUBTEDLY the best novels written about a particular group of immigrants are those by such Jewish writers as Mordecai Richler and Adele Wiseman. But here a distinction should be made. These writers do not set

out deliberately to expound an idea about the effects of immigration on a particular group as Mrs. Salverson did in *The Viking Heart*, nor do they see themselves, like Grove, as the spokesmen of some race of pioneers. Furthermore, they write about Jews, not with the deliberate intention of interpreting Jews to others, but because these are the people of their *milieu*, because the conflict between foreign-born and Canadian Jews, between orthodox and non-orthodox, and between the generations, has been part of the fabric of their lives.

Conflict forms the essence of two of the best of these Canadian Jewish novels, *Son of a Smaller Hero* (1955) by Mordecai Richler, and *The Sacrifice* (1956) by Adele Wiseman, the former set in Montreal and the latter in an unnamed city presumed to be Winnipeg. The Jewish immigrants and their children who figure in these novels experience some of the same problems of adjustment as the characters in Grove's and Salverson's novels, but their situation is further complicated by the underlying fear of anti-semitism and, even more, by the distinctive character of their religious beliefs and practices.

In *The Sacrifice* even the names of the characters have a religious significance. The dominating figure is Abraham, a butcher who believes implicitly in the orthodox tenets of his forefathers and who looks to his son Isaac and later to his grandson Moses to fulfil his frustrated ambitions of scholarship and to carry on the Jewish faith. These hopes are intensified by the fact that Abraham and his wife Sarah are never able to adjust completely to the new world in which they live. They are always looking back, their memories held by the episode which impelled them to flee from their homeland—the hanging of their two sons in a Ukrainian pogrom. Isaac too looks back, remembering his gay and intelligent brothers and knowing that somehow he must make up to his parents for their loss.

But although Isaac can never forget the past in Europe, his eyes turn more and more towards the future in Canada, and so he is caught in the conflict between the past and the future, the old and the new. He marries a Canadian girl; he finds that he cannot accept his father's orthodoxy without question; he yields to the necessity of working on the Sabbath. And when in the end he rushes into the synagogue to save the Torah from fire he does so impulsively, and not out of a deep religious urge, as his father prefers to believe.

When Abraham loses Sarah and then Isaac, his last bonds with the old world are gone. His hopes for the future become concentrated on Moses, Isaac's child. But here he comes into conflict with Isaac's Canadian wife Ruth, a product of the new world. And the quarrel between Abraham and Ruth leads to the final disaster in which the unbalanced old man commits a murder, with the implica-



tion that he believes he is atoning by blood sacrifice for the death of his sons.

It is the young Moses, of the second, Canadian generation, who is left to carry the burden of memories and guilt. Only after he has become reconciled with his grandfather and has found it possible to forgive him and accept the past, can he face the future with confidence. "It was as though he stood suddenly within the threshold of a different kind of understanding, no longer crouching behind locked doors, but standing upright, with his grandfather leading him, as he always had."

*The Sacrifice* is an ample novel, warm and rich in feeling. By contrast, Mordecai Richler's *Son of a Smaller Hero* is terse and satirical, yet the conflicts which the two novels portray are basically similar. Richler's hero, Noah Adler, is the grandson of a family which has gone much farther towards adaptation to the new land than Abraham in *The Sacrifice*. Melech Adler, the head of the family, has worked his way up from a scrap-collector to a coal merchant; some of his sons have become prosperous and have moved out of the ghetto; they and their kind deplore the influx of the "greeners", the post-war immigrants. "They speak with accents two miles long . . . Wives who still wear wigs! After all we did here to improve conditions they'd like to put us back into the middle ages." But Melech Adler has the patriarchal desire to dominate; his grown-up sons do not please him, and he turns to his grandson Noah, whom he hopes will "be a somebody. Something. Something not like them. All there is for them is money." Noah, however, wants to lead his own life. He wants to think things through for himself. He resents the domination of his family and he does not believe in their orthodox religious practices. So he asserts his independence by leaving home.

Yet Noah finds that he cannot make a complete break with the past. His love affair with a Gentile girl peters out, and he is drawn back into the family circle after the death of his father. But only temporarily, only to escape again, this time by going to Europe. The ending is inconclusive, tentative, yet, in fictional terms, the problems that lead up to it are made real and convincing enough, and so one feels that departure is forced upon Noah Adler as the consequence of conflicts that are both pressing and—for the present, insoluble.

The foregoing notes on the immigrant theme in Canadian fiction are not exhaustive, but I have endeavoured to deal with what seem to me the best novels and the most interesting authors in this genre. They are novels which, insofar as they truly portray the immigrants' condition, are marked by a peculiar intensity of conflict, conflict between man and an unfamiliar and harsh environment, conflict between generations at different stages of adaptation to that environment.

One of the most striking conclusions that emerges from this study is that the

problems of the immigrant have rarely been successfully observed and interpreted from outside; quite apart from its literary merits or demerits, Connor's *The Foreigner* fails because the author cannot enter fully into the real problems of his characters. The authors who have produced more or less successful novels on this interesting theme have either themselves been immigrants, like Grove, or they have grown up in communities where they know immigrants intimately, like Laura Salverson, Adele Wiseman and Mordecai Richler.

The major native-born Canadian novelists have, indeed, ignored the immigrant to a striking degree. It is true that Mazo de la Roche occasionally brings in an American, English or Irish immigrant to marry one of her characters, and in *The Building of Jalna* (1944) she describes the original Whiteoaks settlers, but her attitude towards them is almost entirely romantic and has little to do with the problems of real immigrants. Similarly, while Hugh MacLennan writes with great sympathy of the Highland settlers on Cape Breton in the Prologue to *Each Man's Son*, this serves only as a background to the novel proper, with its Canadian-born characters. And, while immigrants have appeared in some of Morley Callaghan's stories, such as *Last Spring They Came Over*, he has never been concerned with the special problems of immigrants as a social group.

Thus there appears to be a direct connection between the time an author or his forebears have been in Canada and his interest in the immigrant theme. By the third generation it appears to recede and become inactive. But this does not mean that the theme is likely to disappear quickly from Canadian fiction. Indeed, when we consider that some two million people have entered Canada from abroad since the last war, it seems likely that some outstanding Canadian novels on this theme may even now be in the making.<sup>3</sup>

<sup>3</sup> Since these words were written an important new immigrant novel, Brian Moore's *The Luck of Ginger Coffey*, has indeed appeared. —ED.