

THE TRANSMUTATION OF HISTORY

LANDMARKS IN
CANADIAN HISTORICAL FICTION
FOR CHILDREN

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THE CHILD has an enviable capacity to fall in love with a book. His response is total—intellect, emotion and spirit caught and held in one great involution. The outside world excluded, the adult unheeded, the clock stilled; his inner world becomes a suspended bubble (its growth as magic and as sudden) holding a universe of depths unsounded, lengths unmeasured, heights unscaled. Suspicions are necessary and right to one who gives his heart so completely, and the child is wary. He is as closed to dulness, to the inept, to the contrived dissemination of knowledge, as he is open to the play of inventive imagination and, subconsciously, to the riches of style, language and form, to the intellectual experiment and the mystical experience. He cannot analyze these things, for he is not vocal in adult terms and concepts. The very genius of childhood lies not in analysis, but in response. This unlimited capacity for instant and instinctive response is the key to children's literature; it is evoked by the integration of simplicity of expression with complexity of concept.

This integration is nowhere more necessary than in the very special field of historical fiction for children. Especially is it necessary in the presentation of Canada's history, for that is largely a hidden history, lacking in open struggle; a subtle history without decisive climactic incident. It is an unorthodox history, difficult to reduce to the simplifications of liberty opposed to tyranny, good to evil, that have developed into the strong, familiar tribal myth so popularized in the United States. The history of our southern neighbour lends itself more easily to a child's understanding; our own begs modifications and interpolations.

Considering the difficulties of a meaningful presentation to children, and remembering that only within the last thirty years have historians brought a truly exploratory understanding to Canada's past, it is not surprising that juvenile historical writing has but recently developed attitudes that may truly be considered

Canadian. Historical non-fiction for children has indeed attained a certain recognised standard in the series which Macmillan have been publishing for some years under the title, *Great Stories of Canada*. There is considerable variation among the individual books in this series, but an overall competence—and in some instances an excellence—in historical comprehension and expression is evident. Historical fiction for children in Canada, with which this article is concerned, has not yet attained the same stature. Its development has been more hesitant, and has only gained in authority in the last twenty years, dependent as it was upon the initial establishment of a national historiography.

There had been earlier attempts, of course, for growth is never a sudden and miraculous full blossoming. Marjorie Pickthall, for example, wrote three juveniles in the early 1900's, which are now comparatively scarce. Representative of these is *Dick's Desertion: a boy's adventures in Canadian forests*, a didactic and moralistic tale in the tradition of the nineteenth century. For theme it has the call of the northlands, luring a young lad from love and family to roam the forests in the manner of the *coureur-de-bois*, but it fails either to exploit its historical setting satisfactorily or to depict a convincingly Canadian atmosphere. Indeed, Miss Pickthall wishes only to teach the homely truth that selfish inclination should give way before sacred duty and responsibility. The imaginative writer is obscured by the moralist, and the result is a contrived story with little authenticity or interest.

THE APPROACH to an imaginative use in juvenile fiction of Canada's history and its physical character begins later, and it becomes evident with the publication in the 1940's of such books as Mary Weekes' *Painted Arrows*. The didactic element that was so strong in *Dick's Desertion* is still present, for *Painted Arrows* contains much instruction in camp and Indian lore, but gone is the compulsion to moralise. The plot concerns the survival on the prairie, surrounded by hostile Indian bands, of a young boy whose beloved horse is his only companion. Mrs. Weekes took *Robinson Crusoe* for her model, and she does not hesitate to interrupt her narrative on occasion to draw comparisons between her young hero and the celebrated castaway. She fails to parallel Defoe's careful detailing of the commonplace that leads, inevitably and rightly, to the uncommon disclosure of a man's soul. Yet there is an original insight in the way she shapes her character and in her understanding of the effect of the Canadian prairie on

the individual who inhabits it in solitude.

Despite the shift in approach suggested by *Painted Arrows*, the didactic element in Canadian juvenile historical fiction has remained surprisingly—and often disastrously—persistent. In 1945 for instance, Mary F. Moore published her *Canadian Magic*, an extraordinarily artificial book in which an English school-girl is visited by a familiar, the Spirit of Canada, who imparts a tedious amount of information to his improbably eager pupil. There is no suggestion here of the creative imagination that is the key to historical or any other fiction; it is simply a disguised textbook in dialogue. In the same genre, ten years later, is Gladys Willison's *Land of the Chinook* (1955), a question-and-answer book on Alberta's early days in which the rôle of pedantic enlightenment is assumed by an all-knowing grandfather. Miss Willison's book has indeed a less contrived approach than *Canadian Magic*, but it is dedicated to the same false premises, that instruction for children must be cast in an "entertaining" form, and that entertainment, alone, has no positive value. An even more recent example of this out-dated approach is *The Young Surveyor* (1956) by Olive Knox. Based on the diary and field books of the C.P.R. surveyor, Edward Jarvis, it employs the obvious device of a young tenderfoot, travelling with the surveying team, who must be instructed in every detail of the work and of the countryside. The reader is not even spared the appalling irrelevancy of an explanation of the effect of altitude on the boiling point of water! On the other hand, Richard Lambert has demonstrated effectively in his *Trailmaker: the story of Alexander Mackenzie* (1957) that undidactic and really creative fiction can be constructed from an explorer's journal if it is used imaginatively. *Trailmaker* has the sharpness of pace and the authenticity of situation that *The Young Surveyor* lacks; it involves the young reader in an exciting and inspiring undertaking without allowing its techniques to become obvious, and it remains true to its intent, rigorously suppressing any temptation to instruct or to digress.

The advance towards a well-integrated historical fiction for children is shown particularly well in the work of the prolific writer, John Hayes, whose achievements have been publicly acknowledged by the granting of three Governor-General's Awards in the field of juvenile writing. Hayes' merits are evident as soon as one begins to read his books. He is a competent craftsman, concerned for the plausibility of his situations, and he is adept at an easy and assured dialogue unimpeded by the kind of tiresome deviations that halt the movement of the narrative. Most important, he has a genuine sense of the course and direction of Canadian history.

Yet Hayes has his faults, as one can see clearly from an examination of his three prize-winning novels, *A Land Divided* (1951), *Rebels Ride at Night* (1953) and *The Dangerous Cove* (1957). His books are often lacking in emotional warmth, and they do not always appeal sufficiently to the child's inborn dramatic sense. His greatest difficulty lies, however, in his inability to create an imaginative and original plot. He works to a relatively unvarying formula which carries the story forward fairly effectively and which can be fitted easily enough into any historic period. Its ingredients are the teen-aged hero, mettlesome and resourceful, opposed to the utterly base and despicable villain, and the action consists always of a series of clashes between these two basic characters primarily on a physical level—fights, captures and escapes. There is little attempt to develop the hero's inner conflicts or to resolve his personal difficulties.

I do not wish to suggest that Hayes is incapable of developing his craft; on the contrary, over the past decade he has shown a steadily growing mastery of style and content. Yet it is surprising—and indicative of the fact that an author's total artistic achievement does not necessarily keep pace with his development in technique—that the most recent of the three books I have mentioned, *The Dangerous Cove*, is at once the most closely plotted and the least historically realised. The background of this tale is the struggle between the settlers in Newfoundland and the Devon captains who came each spring to claim the island and its produce for their own. Reversing his usual approach, Hayes has produced a carefully detailed plot, and as an adventure story *The Dangerous Cove* certainly has movement and involvement, but it shows little depth of historical comprehension.

By contrast, in both of the earlier books I have mentioned, *A Land Divided* and *Rebels Ride at Night*, Hayes shows a fine sense of the ebb-and-flow of history in the making and of the pressures exercised upon those individuals who are caught in an eventful time and place. *A Land Divided* in particular reduces its central historic event—the expulsion of the Acadians—to human, understandably pathetic terms. The chief impetus of the book lies in the adventure tale of a young half-French, half-English boy who braves all dangers to rescue his father from the villainous Vaudreuil, but in the background, well rendered by the author, lie the tragedies of division between friend and friend, and, deeper, more painful still, division within a family. It is an interesting treatment for children of one of the saddest, most romantic and most easily impassioned episodes of Canada's story. True, its pathos might have been more strongly presented, but one must consider that it is intended for boys, and a boy's tolerance of any sentiment that might be termed mawkish is thin indeed.

Rebels Ride at Night is a more adult presentation of a more difficult event in Canadian history, the Rebellion of 1837. Such an event raises the problem of how an author should deal with the simplification that is inevitable when history is presented to children. In this case the actual issues at stake can be simplified to democratic movement versus autocratic rule without very serious historical distortion. The personalities involved, on the other hand, demand a deeper analysis. William Lyon Mackenzie and those who followed him to the tragicomic finale of Montgomery's Tavern are much too complex in their fatal mixture of idealism and political naivety to present in black and white. Furthermore, the culmination of their cause in a show of violence is outside the Canadian tradition. Revolution has played no really decisive part in our evolution as a nation; radicalism, where present, has usually been muted.

Hayes, then, was faced with a certain hazard when he decided that his young hero, for good reasons, should support Mackenzie. Faint-heartedness, or worse, a faltering and turning from a losing cause still held to be true, will not be tolerated in a hero by juvenile readers. To solve his difficulty, Hayes subtly plants an uneasiness in his young protagonist's mind as he listens to Mackenzie's frenzied oratory and his urgings to ill-considered action. Thus the denouement—the fiasco of Montgomery's Tavern—is anticipated throughout the tale. This is skilfully done, and, if the plot is once again trite, hinging on stolen tax receipts and the forfeiture of Frank's farm, the re-creation of historical atmosphere is excellent. Hayes depicts convincingly the air of conspiracy among the discontented farmers of Upper Canada and among the labourers and longshoremen of the towns, and in this, perhaps more than in any of his other books, he realizes a total picture of the times—the social conditions, the political dilemmas, the corruption and speculation which are concretely represented in the impassable roads and the church reserves cutting across the fertile land.

It is interesting to compare *Rebels Ride at Night* with another story of the Mackenzie rebellion, Lyn Cook's *Rebel on the Trail*. Through the eyes of an eleven years' old girl Miss Cook portrays the dissension and the precarious balance within a pioneer family of Upper Canada, caught between the eldest son's radical, pro-Mackenzie ideas and the grandfather's religious justification of the *status quo*. Neither the situation nor the ideas that emerge from it are easy to express through the mind of a little girl, and the author's failure to do so convincingly is the book's weakness. The literary convention of straining complexities of plot and personality through a child's interpretation has some value in adult books, where it is used to heighten the poignancy of the drama, hidden from the child but evident to

the reader. It is manifestly more difficult to use such a device in a child's book where the reader is more dependent on the point of view of the protagonist and to a great extent shares it. *Rebel on the Trail* seems to be written for readers between nine and twelve, which brings the added limitation that few children of this age are equipped to take the larger view of a historical period.

Basically, the difficulty lies therefore in achieving a meaningful integration of story and character with the particular historical situation. Hayes had the same problem, but he was helped by being able to utilise actual events more fully. His heroes participate directly in the actions of the time; they fight in the battle of Montgomery's Tavern or aid the Acadians to board the exile ships. But Deborah, Miss Cook's heroine, is barred by age and sex from such participation; she must remain an observer. It is left to the reader to make the intellectual effort to identify with the times and to generate an emotional interest in the historic event. This is not the way of children. They absorb atmosphere almost, it would seem, by osmosis, but not by a conscious intellectual process. Miss Cook's book is at once too adult in concept, too young in presentation to accomplish her larger intent and give a composite view of Upper Canada during "the troubles".

TWO OTHER WAYS of handling this problem of integration of plot and character with event are offered in Marion Greene's *Canal Boy* and Wilma Pitchford Hays' *Drummer Boy for Montcalm*, both published in 1959. The first of these, *Canal Boy*, is really a pseudo-historical novel, using the past incidentally, as the setting for what is essentially a timeless mystery story. A pair of pistols are stolen, suspicions are aroused against a teen-aged boy, and he is finally vindicated. It all happens in Ottawa and Montreal of the 1820's and historical characters like Colonel By play their parts, but the time might just as easily be the 1950's and Colonel By any one of a dozen prominent men, the leading citizens of modern Ottawa, Winnipeg or Vancouver. I am not suggesting that *Canal Boy* is an inferior book; its language is attractive, its plot is closely woven, it provokes excitement. Yet it is not in any true sense a historical novel, and it represents an evasion rather than a solution of the problem of integration. The plot is simply imposed on the historic time; it does not evolve out of it, nor, indeed, does it have any logical or vital connection with it. The historical insight the book affords is negligible.

Drummer Boy for Montcalm exploits its historical event, the battle for Quebec, to the full. The story is the event, and the event the story, so close is the integration. It opens with the young French hero, Peter Demo, coming to a Quebec already threatened by the English, and it closes with the city's fall. Peter serves under Montcalm as a drummer boy, and the whole interest of the book is concentrated on the defence of Quebec and Peter's part in it. Despite this singleness of intent, the story is deepened by the fact that Quebec is shown as a city threatened not only from without her walls, but also from within by the greed and corruption of the Intendant Bigot and his accomplice, Cadet. *Drummer Boy for Montcalm* is not so stylistically pleasing as *Canal Boy*—the lyrical phrase is wanting—but it is a competent piece of writing and it is, unquestionably, a true and well-integrated historical novel.

Nowhere is the growth of artistic conception in Canada's juvenile historical fiction more evident than in the changing presentation of the Indian. From Peter Many-Names of *Dick's Desertion*, who is but a symbol, through innumerable Indian companions to young heroes—mere shadowy, inarticulate copies of their white friends—to Edith Lambert Sharp's vital realization of an Indian youth in *Nkwala* (1958), there is a fundamental advance in historical and psychological insight.

A glance at some of the more ambitious books in this field will help to chart the progress. In *Black Falcon* (1954) Olive Knox took as her basic material the narrative of John Tanner, who was captured by the Shawnees at the age of eight. Such true-life accounts are obvious and legitimate sources for children's fiction, but they are too often told in a flat, laconic style and show little understanding of the ways and impulses of the Indians. John Tanner's narrative is no exception; it is an account more curious for the things it does not say than for the things it does.

No such limitation should hinder the creative transmutation of fiction, yet Miss Knox's re-creation in *Black Falcon* retains much of the flat, elliptical, honed-down approach of the original. Her attempts to bring life to the narrative are confined to inventing a rival, Cut-nose, who crosses John's path on the hunt, on the war trail, and in the courtship of a girl. What she does not do—and here the real interest of the narrative lies—is to develop what was left unsaid in the original, to explore those areas closed to Tanner but open to the creative investigator. As in her reconstruction from the Jervis journals in *The Young Surveyor*, Miss Knox shows that she lacks, not ordinary inventiveness, but certainly imaginative penetration.

A far better realisation of Indian captivity is given in John Craig's *The Long Return*. By not basing his account directly on any of the captivity narratives, Craig liberates himself from their limitations, and for this reason he is able to apprehend much more fully the essential conflict between captive and captors, between the white and the Indian world. This conflict is given strength when we see the captive hero's predicament becoming steadily more involved as his determination to return to his white parents is continually threatened by his growing affection for his Indian foster-parents. The resolve that rises above this conflict and motivates Thad's constant efforts to escape gives *The Long Return* a sense of purposeful continuity, and within the simple framework of capture, escape and flight, there is plenty of latitude for the detailing of Indian life without losing the tension of the main problem.

But the book that most surely reveals the inner meaning of Indian life in its psychological and its ceremonial aspects—and also one of the very best of Canadian books for children—is Edith Lambert Sharp's *Nkwala*. In structure it is a simple book; its complexities lie in language and imagery and an imaginative penetration of Indian life. Nkwala, a boy exceptionally gifted with an awareness of the hidden rhythms and impulses of life, makes the long journey with his people, the Spokane band of the Salish, from famine and death on the coast to life in the Okanagan. The reconstruction of the inner life of the Indian, so alien from our own, requires a perceptive and probing imagination, and Miss Sharp demonstrates that she has this rare gift. Following the emergence of the youth from the child into a growing awareness and acceptance of the obligations of manhood, she brings us into the very centre of the ceremonial drama of Salish life as it revolves around the initiation rites. Miss Sharp has a true feeling for the importance and solemnity of her theme, and she enhances it with a cadenced prose that unifies style with intent: “. . . the boy went alone into the mountains to search for his guardian spirit, his song, and his name. This was as his father, his father's father, and his father's father before him, had gone. He went alone, but always and forever with him went the law.”

THE EVOLUTION of Canadian historical fiction for children has been steady rather than brilliant. From its beginnings in an already outmoded tradition, the didactic tale, it has progressed towards a deeper realisation of the nature and the possibilities of Canadian history as well as acquiring a growing

technical competence. There is, indeed, a far greater distance between Marjorie Pickthall's *Dick's Desertion* and Edith Lambert Sharp's *Nkwala* than the mere passage of years or the changes in literary convention alone can explain. The advance has been in many directions—in historical truth, in psychological interpretation, in poetic intensity. But of course there is more unevenness in the overall development represented by this evolution than can be assessed through a comparison of one of the least and one of the best of Canadian juvenile historical novels, of the beginning and the end. The example of John Hayes, Canada's most prolific and—judging from the recognition accorded him—most successful juvenile writer, cannot be ignored. The lag in his novels between a keen historical insight and a chronic deficiency in such a basic element of the novelist's art as the construction of plot, suggests a lack of full maturity. There are several writers in this field who, like Hayes, have shown their general competence, and Edith Lambert Sharp has revealed a great deal more than competence. But enough imperfection remains to show that Canada's difficult history still presents a challenge that requires an unusual combination of complexity in concept and simplicity in form to meet it imaginatively and with truth to spirit as well as to fact.

