FREDERICK PHILIP GROVE: AN IMPRESSION

W. B. Holliday

ONE DAY IN THE FALL of 1939 I was wandering among the book stacks in Eaton's Toronto store. A novel, *Two Generations,* by Frederick Philip Grove, caught my eye. Grove's picture was on the dust cover with a brief account of his life. I noted that he owned a farm near Simcoe. The photograph was of a thoughtful man in his forties wearing a high, old-fashioned collar. He was looking away from the photographer with a detached expression. In his eyes a certain kindliness and modesty seemed to mingle with a suggestion of tragedy. He appeared to be somehow vulnerable, approachable. I decided to write to him and ask for work on his farm. I had literary ambitions.

He replied to my letter four days later. He acknowledged that he owned a farm, but a tenant worked it. "Still", he wrote, "if you were here, I might, in the long run, be able to do something for you. We have, for a year or so, had a young man in the house to act as a sort of janitor in return for his board; and we have not yet filled the position for this winter. We conduct a private school here . . ." He named a meeting-place in Brantford which he would be visiting a few days hence.

His tone was cordial but I had misgivings and I allowed the day of the suggested meeting to pass. The following week-end I took the bus to Simcoe and walked the mile from the town to Grove's house. He was in his garden kneeling among the vegetables. He looked up from his weeding. I identified myself. "Oh, yes", he said without surprise. "I thought you'd changed your mind". He pointed out that he would be unable to pay me. I expressed indifference to money. He said nothing.

I studied him closely. His head was massive and well-shaped; I noticed particularly the impressive distance from the top of his head to his ears.

His sandy, cropped hair gave him a youthful appearance and I judged him to be in his fifties. (I learned later that he was sixty-seven.) The day was raw and a drop of moisture clung to the tip of his long nose. His eyes were pale and framed by heavy pouches. He was polite and receptive, but there was something in his manner which made me wonder if he was indifferent to my presence.

I watched his thick fingers expertly grasp the weeds and pull them from the black soil. But it was disillusioning to see the man whose picture I had observed on the jacket of a novel crouching thus upon the earth and performing such a lowly task. I began to question him about books and authors. He offered his views pleasantly but with authority, even with finality. When he expressed esteem for D. H. Lawrence I was reassured.

Presently we went to the house for tea. Mrs. Grove, a business-like person, questioned me discreetly about my intentions. She seemed faintly incredulous that I was prepared to leave a job in Toronto in order to live with them. Grove, smoking a cigarette in a holder, sat with his long legs crossed, occasionally interjecting a remark.

When the time came for me to catch the bus, Grove rose and shook my hand, looking down at me in a friendly way. "I'd like to come", I said. Both appeared to welcome my words yet plainly they wished the decision to be made solely by me. I returned to Toronto, resigned my office position and within three weeks I was living with the Groves.

Life in the household ran a simple, Spartan course. There were four of us, including Leonard the son. We rose early and by seven-thirty we were at breakfast. Everyone ate oatmeal porridge, soaked overnight. By eight o'clock Grove had sharpened his pencils in a school room and was on his way upstairs to his study. He was typing the final draft of *In Search of Myself* and the rattle of his typewriter was heard until noon. After lunch he returned to his study to read or he worked in the garden; on two afternoons a week he taught French to the dozen or so pupils attending the school. (Teaching the students bored him). After supper he and I walked together or he spent some time with Leonard; frequently he went to his study and played solitaire while solving the problems his writing posed him; he rarely made social calls though occasionally friends visited the house; he never went to a motion picture. By ten o'clock the house was quiet.

Grove was essentially a European. He was, one critic has stated, the

Canadian Thomas Hardy. To him life was complex, full of tortuous depths, hidden motives, inevitable suffering; a struggle against a blind, impersonal fate. One must have patience, endurance; these brought resignation and with resignation might come wisdom. His opposition to Magna Charta — it replaced the tyranny of the king with the tyranny of the masses — together with his admiration for Goethe, the enemy of the French Revolution, baffled me at first; his views seemed perverse, at war with the bland assumptions, the facile optimism of the North American. I concluded that he must have reflected with wonder during his years in Canada upon the strange twist of fortune which had placed him as a youth in an environment so alien to all that was congenial to him.

In 1941 he wrote to me: "You will probably see through the papers . . . that I have been elected a fellow of the Royal Society, the highest honour which can come to a Canadian man of letters; so be sure to put the 'FRSC' behind my name henceforth. It's as good as a title they tell me." Obviously, under the banter, he was deeply touched by the distinction. Nevertheless, apart from a few discerning critics and a small but growing audience, popular acclaim never came to him. He told me that the works of George Meredith met with indifference until the author's death; afterwards Meredith's heirs reaped the rewards of posthumous fame. In cheerfully dismissing the public he ascribed its inattention to distaste for his forthright message. "I am hard at work", he wrote to me in December, 1940, "on another of those novels which I shall never publish; I have half a dozen such on my shelves. If I published them the people of Canada would have *me* stoned or call *them* pornography. You see, publication means nothing. What matters is solely that the work be done, the book be written, the beauty created. The rest of my work counts for little. But I once published the least "objectionable" of those novels which comprise my real work (*Settlers of the Marsh*) and the libraries barred me; and my friends cut me in the street. So why should I even try to publish. Quite apart from the fact that I can't. But that is no reason for not writing those books, to me". He declared his independence of the reader again in a letter of November, 1941. "Work on a long book makes the rest of life seem irrelevant. What difference does it make whether, from day to day, you are dissatisfied with what you are doing, whether, perhaps, you are almost starving; even whether your book progresses satisfactorily; so long as it either is alive or is coming to life; gestation is not

a fast process; it demands time, and you can't hurry it. But when the book is born, it is a miracle to you, like every birth".

Grove's words betrayed a certain gnawing contrariness of which I was to see other examples. On the one hand he is pleased with the few honours that have come his way — honours, though, which only the appearance of his books could bring him; on the other hand publication means "nothing". He was contemptuous of politicians, inferring that, in the main, they act out of self interest; yet he showed me, with some satisfaction, a letter he had received from Mackenzie King thanking him for the copy of *Two Generations* Grove had sent him. To my doubts that I was sufficiently independent of public opinion to write as my heart willed he encouraged me: "As far as that normality of which you speak, naturally we are anything but 'normal people'; and we hold those that are a bit in horror; at least I do; my wife certainly to a less extent." He affected to despise cities; they were monuments to a soulless materialism. Yet as an affluent youth astir with dreams of great accomplishments he had moved with ease in the great cities of Europe. I suspected that his professed dislike was based on the knowledge that when among the inhabitants of those places he was unknown, anonymous like themselves; their indifference to him was the measure of his failure as a writer. And he was ready to overturn my pride as a Torontonian in the Canadian National Exhibition by dismissing it briefly in 1941: "The exhibition was a disaappointment to everyone of us. We went home about 3 p.m."

From a perspective of twenty years I believe Grove was disappointed that his pen had failed to earn him a decent livelihood. He was a patrician by nature as well as by birth and wealth would have allowed him to live in style. During my stay he was earning a modest sum as a reader for Macmillan's. His own works were paying him little; he told me with amusement that once he received a royalty cheque amounting to sixty cents.

Yet Grove would have spurned the suggestion that he debase his talent for money although, on one occasion, when his wife needed a refrigerator, he wrote a pot boiler to get it. But this deliberate act must have been a rare perversion of his muse for deep within him burned a constant flame that was his integrity. He knew what he had to say and he knew the only way in which he could in all honesty say it. As an impressionable youth I found this almost stubborn probity an impressive and exhilarating in-

fluence. Doubtless never very far from Grove's thoughts were his models, the great writers of the past, and I believe that their example was supported ultimately by a strong belief in his own worth as a novelist of importance.

I have listened with Grove to the Ninth Symphony, observing how Beethoven's hammer blows seemed to parallel his own searching views on the human condition. And watching his studying a folio of the frescoes in the Sistine Chapel, I have marked his love for the eternally beautiful. But it was Grove's opinions as a writer that I wished to know. And he gave his views willingly. *War and Peace* was the greatest novel ever written; *Anna Karenina* was next in importance. When I surmised that Galsworthy had little sympathy for Irene Forsyte, he said: "You must have read the book with little understanding; he pleads her cause on every page." He denied that Dickens was merely a caricaturist; he was a "great psychologist", a novelist with few peers; "he is underrated just now". Grove appeared to have little interest in American writers, though he admired Thoreau deeply possibly because of Thoreau's rejection of the superfluous in life. Several times during my stay he repeated with thoughtful amusement Thoreau's dictum that it is wise to avoid the beginnings of evil. He said: "A novel is essentially the road pursued from an idea to an act that bears it out." He told me that once, during a short illness, he had read the complete works of Shakespeare. He referred to Stefan George, André Gide and Rainer Maria Rilke admiringly. He told me that one day, in his youth, he had brashly called upon Swinburne.

But I doubted, as I listened to him day after day, that he felt for the mass of human kind that high regard which he had for his intellectual peers. He was kind and magnanimous in his daily relationships but he was inclined to scoff at the pretensions of little men and at the weaknesses of those in public life. I think that, to him, mankind on the whole made a poor showing; indeed, the life of many men was scarcely justifiable. In his novel *The Master of the Mill,* a copy of which he gave me, his preoccupation with the forces that impel mankind rather than a feeling for the individual is apparent; his characters are at the mercy of the novel's preconceived design; they lack an inner life of their own; they are shadowy pawns. Thus the book is curiously lacking in warmth. I readily identified the author as the man whose personality I was beginning to know.

When the war began Grove followed events closely. He listened regularly to the dry, factual reporting of Elmer Davis. Subsequently when I left the household and had joined the service he commended my action: "Were I younger, I should no longer hesitate. We live in a world of insanity. I recommend to you *Out of the Night* to allay any lingering scruples. I have no sympathy with the author; but essentially what he says is the truth."

From this time my life took a new direction. But I often thought of Grove; from a distance of two thousand miles the recollection of my stay with him became increasingly precious. In 1943 he sent a short note which proved to be his last letter to me. As usual it was typewritten and signed F. P. G. He was still writing "but it is next to impossible to publish my sort of thing". And he added gloomily: "Life runs its humdrum course; and only Leonard has so much before him that he still looks for great things." His words were dispiriting, but I was heartened to know that in spite of the distractions of a world conflict as well as the realization that he could not expect the acclaim which he may secretly have continued to expect, he was still at his desk. One day, while on leave, I journeyed to Simcoe. Grove had suffered from one of the strokes which ultimately killed him. His right side had been paralysed and he had made an incomplete recovery. He spoke with difficulty. He had received an honorary doctorate from the University of Manitoba, but he seemed more amused than grateful; perhaps the recognition had come too late. His manner was remote, passive. Mrs. Grove told me that he wanted to die. I understood, for he could no longer write: his usefulness, he doubtless believed, was at an end. When I left Grove that day I knew I should never see him again.

No one who knew Grove could fail to be conscious of his profound integrity. It is this attribute to which I return again and again when I think of him. To the end he retained an admiration for that which is excellent; and excellence as a writer was ever his goal. As an interpreter of his adopted country, he never veered from his resolve to portray her with all the honesty of which he was capable. His death was marked with deep regret by a few; but one day Canadians will become aware that no man understood so well the forces shaping their character as the gentle European novelist who dwelt so long unnoticed in their midst.