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MODERN CANADIAN POETS

Articles

BY A. W. PURDY, DONALD STEPHENS, D. A. CAMERON, PETER STEVENS, JOHN ROBERT COLOMBO

Recollections

BY DOROTHY LIVESAY

Reviews

BY ROBIN SKELTON, FRED COGSWELL, LEN ANDERSON, RODERICK HAIG-BROWN, GEORGE ROBERTSON, DAVID WATMOUGH, FRANCES M. FRAZER, GEORGE WOODCOCK, M. W. STEINBERG

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Decorative linocuts by GEORGE KUTHAN

contributors

A. W. PURDY has published several books of verse over the past few years, including *Poems for All the Annettes*, and *The Crafte So Long to Lerne*. *The Cariboo Horses*, his most recent volume, is in the press with McClelland & Stewart. The advance proofs suggest that it will establish Purdy not merely as one of the most prolific, but also as one of the best poets writing in Canada today.

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editorial

SURVEYORS AND NATURAL HISTORIANS

LITERATURE IN CANADA has become like a land rising out of the sea, over which the surveyors march with rod and chain, recording their observations almost before the soil has had time to dry out. Here I do not refer to such tasks as reviewing and criticism, which are normal processes of any literary society, but rather to the vast activity which takes the form of assembling and arranging information. This publishing season in particular there is a notable influx of the kind of books that cultural surveyors produce, books which no one is likely to read for entertainment, æsthetic pleasure or moral edification, but which, standing on the right shelves, become useful tools for critics and scholars.

Two such compilations, fresh from the press, are on my desk as I write, and more, according to the publishers' announcements, will shortly arrive. Neither of the volumes which I now mention will find much of a market outside the university libraries, and both have been subsidized by the Canada Council to make their publication possible. The first is entitled *The Humanities in Canada* (University of Toronto Press, $6.00), and has been prepared by F. E. L. Priestley. It is, by confession, a restricted survey, made, as Dr. Priestley indicates, "without seeking out the humanities in the larger community." This limitation — while no doubt it may have some justification in difficulties of space — is a serious one, not only because exceptionally fine work is being done in the humanities by institutions and individuals outside the universities, but also because the kind of encystment of the universities and of university scholarship which such a division promotes is both artificial and unhealthy. It leads, *inter alia*, to the humourless over-valuation of academic trivia; for example, articles on "Place Names of Kentucky Waterways and Ponds, with a Note on Bottomless Pools" and on "An

Early Use of the Feminine Form of the Word *Heir*" are recorded in the Bibliography of Scholarly Publication which takes up two-thirds of the volume, while important books by non-university scholars — such as John Morgan Gray's recent biography of Lord Selkirk — are not mentioned. Even the coverage of the universities is incomplete; on a first quick glance through the pages I noticed the absence of three abundantly published Canadian scholars in the field of English Studies alone.

Much more directly concerned with literature *per se* than Dr. Priestley's volume is a new biographical dictionary, *Canadian Writers — Ecrivains Canadiens* (Ryerson Press, $8.50), compiled by Guy Sylvestre, Brandon Conron and Carl F. Klinck. This bilingual volume presents the essential biographical and bibliographical facts concerning those 325 writers, in English and in French, whom the authors of the dictionary regard as the most significant in our double tradition. The selection of subjects is good; almost every one of them is justified by either literary quality or historical interest. However, it was hardly wise of the compilers to go beyond the presentation of factual material if all they can offer in addition is the kind of capsule criticism which is neither epigrammatically pointed nor gnomically profound. We are not much better informed when we read of Daryl Hine, for example: "An academic poet, versatile in prosody and fluent in the language of symbol and myth, Hine presents in his vivid and haunting lyrics disparate aspects of experience", or, of Wilfred Watson, "Watson's sensitive awareness of the tragedy of existence and his warm humanity are evident in all his work."

Canadian Writers is the forerunner of that much more massive work, prepared also under Dr. Klinck's direction, the *Literary History of Canada*, which may have appeared under the University of Toronto imprint by the time this editorial is actually in print. From what we have seen of the advance proofs of this work, written by a considerable team of scholars, its publication will undoubtedly be an event of major importance in the study of letters in Canada; in our next issue we shall devote a special feature to considering the extent of its achievement.

While these native surveyors have been at their useful work, the plump, urbane figure of a famous literary natural historian has appeared on the same terrain to observe its exotic fauna. The American critic Edmund Wilson, still expressing hurt dismay that not everybody in Canada agreed unquestioningly with his judgment that Morley Callaghan was in the same league as Turgenev, has recently published in the *New Yorker* a trio of long and discursive essays entitled collectively: "O Canada: An American's Notes on Canadian Culture."

Undoubtedly the striking aspect of Wilson's look at Canada is the fact that, to this American *littérateur* with strongly social inclinations, the most interesting part of our country was obviously Quebec, and the most interesting Canadian literature that written in French. The second of his three essays is devoted entirely to a study of French-Canadian fiction; the third to an enquiry into French-Canadian nationalism and separatism in their political rather than literary aspects. Even the first essay, which has something to say about English-Canadian writing, is heavily overshadowed by Wilson's great preoccupation. *Canadian Literature* and A. J. M. Smith's *Oxford Book of Canadian Verse* are brought in as bilingual publications, and the two novelists with whom Wilson deals lengthily — and well — in this essay are Hugh MacLennan, with particular reference to his concern with the national identity of Canada and the two solitudes it contains, and John Buell, Montreal author of *The Pyx* and *Four Days*, who thinks of his own work as French in spirit and whom Wilson describes as "a good bridge for a transition to French Canada". In considering Smith's anthology, Wilson deals equally with French and English writers, and spends as much time on Emile Nelligan as he does on E. J. Pratt.

In other words, Wilson devotes about five-sixths of his space and attention to French Canada and one-sixth to English Canada. Whether this is the most informative presentation for American readers I cannot say, but it is certainly salutary for English-speaking Canadians to see the whole Quebec question through the eyes of an intelligent outsider, and also to read a group of first-rate assessments of French-Canadian writers. So far I have come across no English-Canadian study of the fiction of Anne Hébert or Marie-Claire Blais as sensitive and penetrating as Wilson's.

At the same time the whole Wilson trio raises the curious question of the difference between the internal and the external views of a country's literature. In continental Europe, for instance, Wilde, Byron and Charles Morgan have been taken far more seriously than they ever were in England, Poe was for long the great American writer, and, if one can judge from the cheap popular editions, Mazo de la Roche is still the favourite Canadian author. In the same way, to Mr. Wilson, the strange morbidities of French-Canadian fiction are, for the present at least, more piquant than anything younger English-Canadian writers have to offer, and the terrorists of Quebec are more interesting, evidently, than the terrorists of British Columbia.

In part, of course, this may be due to the accidents of travel. Most of Mr. Wilson's journeys have led him to the East, where Montreal has understandably

been more congenial, more exotic and more interesting to him than Toronto. At the same time one can observe French Canada, with its inner ferment and its rebellion against the real or imagined tyranny of the majority, taking shape in his mind as a North American symbol of the need — which he so passionately feels — to rebel against the creeping uniformity that is afflicting the modern world. In fact, he sees both Canada in general, and French Canada in particular, as examples, at different levels, of the resistance to monolithic authority, and ends in a cry of rebellious brotherhood which we may welcome even if we do not feel it to be entirely deserved:

> And all power in its recalcitrance to that still uncoördinated, unblended, and indigestible Canada that is obstructing assimilation not only abroad but within itself! The problem we all have to face is the defense of individual identity against the centralized official domination that can so easily become a faceless despotism.

Doubtless if Mr. Wilson were familiar with western Canada he would be showing the same interest in the Doukhobors as he now does in the French Canadians. What his views may teach us in social terms is to value, despite their manifest practical inconvenience, those elements within our society which prevent its congealing into a coldly efficient State; what they may teach us in literary terms is the amount of fascinating and original writing that, for most Canadians, lies concealed on the other side of the language barrier. Few English Canadians, even among academics and writers, have read all the books by Quebec writers which Wilson discusses so intelligently, and this is an excellent ground for grievance on the part of French Canadians. But how many French Canadians, faced with an equal list of books by English-Canadian writers, would make a better showing?

LEONARD COHEN

A Personal Look

A. W. Purdy

WHEN LEONARD COHEN published *Let Us Compare Mythologies*, first volume of the McGill Poetry Series, 1956, his book was of such merit as to invite comparison with Birney's *David* and Irving Layton's first book, published in 1945. Now, a little more than eight years later, he has a fairly substantial body of work behind him: two more books of poetry and a first novel. An assessment of his work is long overdue, and with the publication of *Flowers for Hitler*, 1964, it becomes possible to take a look at the contemporary writer in relation to the past.

Cohen's first two books of poetry were, I think, absolutely conventional in metre and form. They gained distinction from other people's poems through a heavy sensuality, sometimes almost cloying, integral in nearly everything he wrote. As the title of his first book implies, comparative mythology, coeval social habit and mores were also included. Most avant-garde work south of the border seemed to have escaped his attention; or if it didn't, then he paid little heed. And English poetry in this day and age apparently has nothing to teach anyone.

For the last few years in this country there has been strong emphasis placed on such things as mythology and "archetypal myths", and whether it was Humpty-Dumpty who fell first or Adam. All of which seems rather a literary game to anyone who has to live in the world of now, go to work on a streetcar, say, and

eat jam sandwiches for lunch in a quiet factory-corner away from the machines.

But Cohen makes use of the Bible and fairy tales in his myths, suburban neighbours, his own grandparents, Jewish popular customs, almost anything that will make a poem. Insecurity is a prime factor, and much of his work conveys a strong feeling that the world as presently constituted is liable to fly apart any moment:

> If your neighbour disappears
> O if your neighbour disappears
> The quiet man who raked his lawn
> The girl who always took the sun
>
> Never mention it to your wife
> Never say at dinnertime
> Whatever happened to that man
> Who used to rake his lawn
>
> Never say to your daughter
> As you're walking home from church
> Funny thing about that girl
> I haven't seen her for a month

Which is perhaps modern archetypal. Of course husbands have always disappeared occasionally, and wives too have taken it on the lam for the quiet boredom of a lover in another town or street. Cohen means something a good deal more mysterious than that. By leaving it unnamed he manages to suggest the secret police, subterranean monsters and the lemmings' baptist instinct. All with a regular metric beat that blends casual after-dinner talk with the happenchance of human fatality.

As well, Cohen writes about sex; not the adolescent fumbling with a girl's bra-strap behind the closet door type either. Cohen's is a knowledgeable sex which explores the gamey musky-smelling post-coital bedroom world. No clinical nonsense either. Nor pregnancies. Romance rules supreme, and one measure of his success is that both Cohen's first two books sold out fairly quickly. But they are also good poems.

You could say that many of them expound the philosophy of meaninglessness very convincingly: i.e., they have an initial concrete incident or feeling, which is expressed so well that its magic drives any question of such things as meaning right out of your head. Take this passage:

My lover Peterson
He named me Goldenmouth
I changed him to a bird
And he migrated south

My lover Frederick
Wrote sonnets to my breast
I changed him to a horse
And he galloped west

My lover Levite
He named me Bitterfeast
I changed him to a serpent
And he wriggled east

It's rather Sitwellish. "The King of China's Daughter", or something like that. In other words it's an attitude and way of writing a good craftsman can easily employ, though perhaps not quite at will. You adopt, for a poem's purposes, a particular way of thinking or feeling, then write the poem. And if you believe this suspension of personal identity and belief is possible and desirable, then the poet is in large degree an actor who plays many parts; but an actor so skilful you can't always tell the difference between acting and fakery. For instance, "My lover Peterson". What does it mean? Nothing. But it's magic.

Think of all the young poets who burst suddenly on the not-so-astonished world. Rimbaud, Chatterton, even the young Dylan Thomas. Is Cohen at the age of 30 one of these? I think not. Though very definitely one could compare poems in this first book with the youthful Yeatsian romanticism of "I will arise and go now to Innisfree". Or the redolent Swinburne who wrote:

There lived a singer in France of old,
By the tideless, dolorous midland sea.
In a land of sand and ruin and gold
There shone one woman, and none but she.

Which is almost Cohen plus punctuation.

But Cohen has other facets too. In one of them he creates his mythology from the Auschwitz furnaces, imbuing it with a peculiar and grotesquely modern sensitivity:

And at the hot ovens they
Cunningly managed a brief

Kiss before the soldier came
To knock out her golden teeth.

And in the furnace itself
As the flames flamed higher,
He tried to kiss her burning breasts
As she burned in the fire.

At this point I am aware of something common to much modern verse in Cohen. Not just disillusion and gamey decadence, but the present fact that all good things in life are done and past. A longing for what was, the sense of inadequacy in what is. One would think the ten-year-old yearned for his mother's breast, the adolescent for puberty, the stripling for renewed puppy love, and the only common denominator we all have is return to the womb fixations. The "fall" in other words. Once we were happy, now we are not. Rather ridiculous. Also completely ruinous for any possible present content.

Well, what does the reader want from a poem? Rather, what do I think he wants? Primarily, I suppose, to be entertained. And that involves tuning in on some emotion or feeling or discovery that is larger and more permanent than he is. Some flashing insight that adds a new perspective to living. Values also. And that is a great deal. Most of the time it's asking far too much.

Will you find any of these things in Cohen? Realities shoved from the periphery of your mind to forefront by the author. Not copy-book maxims, just real things and feelings.

Perhaps in Cohen's world the things he writes about exist, but only rarely do they touch on my personal existence. I admire the poems tremendously; they are the work of a master craftsman, who must simply be living in another time dimension than my own. I admire many of them as works of art I don't believe in. His figures swim dreamily through bedrooms, move out of Eden in slow motion, loll languorously on beaches of time. Slowly one of the inhabitants of this world lifts up, and says without much emotion: "Return to the past. Return to the past." Then he sinks back without a human grunt from the effort required to speak.

But that is one-sided, which I did not intend. There are also Cohen's magnificent incantatory effects. You can read many of his poems in your mind, and have the same bravura feeling as in Chesterton's "Lepanto". Some descriptions of unreal things are so vivid they can make you breathless with delight.

With *The Spice-Box of Earth*, 1961, Cohen brought to near perfection the techniques and rhythms of his first book. The "tone" seems a mixture of the Old Testament and, probably, other Jewish religious writings.

But I think this "tone" is important. Cohen rarely over-states or exaggerates. His emphasis is secured by under-emphasis, never finding it necessary to raise his voice. There is always a casual offhand prosody, which lends even his re-write job on the Bible the authority of someone present on the scene, and probably making notes behind his fig leaf.

> O Solomon, call away your spies.
> You remember the angels in that garden,
> After the man and woman had been expelled,
> Lying under the holy trees while their swords burnt out,
> And Eve was in some distant branches
> Calling for her lover, and doubled up in pain.

There is little intensity in this passage, or any of Cohen for that matter. The effect is achieved by a kind of remote sadness, the knowledge we all have that being human has pain for continuing counterpoint. Despite the instructions to Solomon, no positive note or clear meaning comes out of the poem. Of course you can ring in "The Fall" ad nauseam. Lost innocence, lost happiness, exhausted vitality. In fact this decadent feeling the poem generates in a reader is one of its attractions. And for Cohen to raise his voice in a shout, or to possess carefree feelings of more than momentary happiness would be the complete non sequitur.

However, what seem to be shortcomings in these poems are turned into positive virtues. Using the same tone and metre Cohen writes love poems which are probably the best ever written in this country. Image succeeds image in a flow natural as birdsong:

> Now
> I know why many men have stopped and wept
> Half-way between the loves they leave and seek,
> And wondered if travel leads them anywhere —
> Horizons keep the soft line of your cheek,
> The windy sky's a locket for your hair.

I think those last two lines are demonstrably perfect and inimitable. There are many others almost as good. Cohen subdues everything to his touch. Even

the zest and exuberance of, "Layton, when we dance our freilach" becomes something other than exuberance. The poem ends not unexpectedly on a quite different note: "we who dance so beautifully/though we know that freilachs end."

In another poem there is this wonderful passage:

> Is it the king
> who lies beside you listening?
> Is it Solomon or David
> or stuttering Charlemagne?
> Is that his crown
> in the suitcase beside your bed?

When anyone can write like that, it seems unjust to complain about anything.

The Favourite Game, a novel, appeared in 1963. As first novels go (and most of them don't stay around long), it was a decided success. This one tells the story of Laurence Breavman, Montreal poet, child voyeur, adolescent in a world without fixed values. Breavman is a child when the novel opens, and a child still when it closes — though by this time he is presumably permitted to vote. The book traces his sexual initiation all the way from Montreal to New York. At the end Breavman is still being initiated into something or other. If not, then sexual retardation lasts quite a long time.

In any formal sense the novel has no plot. Time passes, of course. Breavman becomes older, his experiment with being alive more complicated. He is passed like a basketball from girl friend to girl friend (euphemisms for bedmates), arrives finally at his Great Love, and predictably forsakes her in the end. For permanence in anything is anathema to our boy. Remember please, he is a writer.

If the above seems to indicate I disliked Cohen's novel, then appearances are misleading. I read it first last year, and again for the purposes of this review. Without a plot, without any "message" or insight into what it's like to be an ordinary human being and not Laurence Breavman, the book held me interested, if not spellbound, on both readings. The reason: reality seeps through somehow, with convincing detail and dialogue.

What Cohen's poetry lacks is found here in large measure. *The Favourite Game* is rich in humour, zest for living, the sort of febrile intensity a moth who lives less than 24 hours might have; also, the continual sense of Breavman watching himself watching himself, which is, I think, a characteristic of most writers. From every corner of the room, ceiling and floor, Breavman watches himself,

because he wants to write it all down later. He wants to say what it was like to be uniquely himself, and yet to be Everyman as well.

Coitus interruptus and a handy night light. In the case of women writers, a ballpoint pen that writes upside down. Sex for the sake of love, but it turns out to be just sex. (And what's wrong with that?) Living as an experiment, an adventure, as many separate adventures without permanence. Breavman as the iconoclast, searching for a Colossus of Rhodes he can't destroy. For if he can destroy the thing or the emotion, then it wasn't real — it never happened. Well, what did happen? As it turns out, only what was written down on paper.

Cohen has, in this book, developed the technique which will enable him to write other and better novels. This one is not a failure, but is badly flawed in that it seems to tail off at the end without saying anything very convincingly. Not that I mean a moral should be pointed or a tale adorned. But no one will care very much that Breavman will never return to his Great Love. He becomes suddenly rather a cardboard figure. He was created in the author's mind, and in some important way seems to be there still, not working very hard at getting out and being Laurence Breavman.

But *The Favourite Game* is an interesting novel, up to this point. What it says about being alive is its own parable, never stated explicitly. Much of the dialogue sounds like tape-recorder stuff. On this evidence, it can hardly be doubted that Cohen is a novelist possessing much more than mere "promise".

If Dylan Thomas had lived longer than his 39 years he would have found it necessary to change. He was at a dead end, with exaggeration piled on exaggeration. But Jeffers, with his nihilistic view of mankind, lived long into his seventies and didn't change. Neither did A. E. Housman and his hopeless view of human life.

With *Flowers for Hitler* (McClelland & Stewart, cloth, $4.50, paper, $2.50) Leonard Cohen recognizes the necessity to get away from his sensuous unrealistic parables and flesh fantasies. Cohen does change.

But the change has puzzled me somewhat. I've asked everyone I know who's interested in poetry what they think of *Flowers for Hitler*, and why. Some shared my own small puzzlements. The answers I got boiled down to equal approval and dislike. None thought the book outstanding, and some thought it pretty undistinguished.

Cohen quotes Carlo Levi before the poems begin: "If from the inside of the Lager, a message could have seeped out to free men, it would have been this: Take care not to suffer in your own homes what is inflicted on us here." This presages the communal guilt theme of the book.

But there are other motifs. Personal dissatisfaction with the world Cohen never made. Guilt plus erotica. Obsession with drugs. Two Cuban poems, one of which suggests the future death of Fidel Castro in chilling fashion.

Several themes. But none come through as over-riding strengths that make the book a consistent whole, as Cohen undoubtedly wished. Not that they should necessarily; for life is a pot-pourri, a grab bag of seemingly unrelated things. But lacking thematic consistency, the poems do not accurately portray reality either. They seem playful exercises, poems for the sake of poems. Hitler and the communal guilt ploy seem to me like the talk of a good conversationalist who had to say something, whether it was real or not.

Here's what Cohen says of his poems on the cover: "This book moves me from the world of the golden-boy poet into the dungpile of the front-line writer. I didn't plan it this way. I loved the tender notices *Spice-Box* got but they embarrassed me a little. *Hitler* won't get the same hospitality from the papers. My sounds are too new, therefore people will say: this is derivative, this is slight, his power has failed. Well, I say there has never been a book like this, prose or poetry, written in Canada. All I ask is that you put it in the hands of my generation and it will be recognized."

Let's assume that the claims Cohen makes for his new book are sincere, dubious as that may seem. The bit about the "golden-boy poet" and "dung pile of the front-line writer" I choose to ignore, for it seems gratuitous ego and sales come-on. But are Cohen's sounds new? (By sounds I take it he means his idioms, tone, and contemporary speech rhythms.) In other words, has Cohen effected a revolution in prosody, written something so startling that time is required before his innovations are recognized? Has he done that?

No.

I agree there has never been a book like *Flowers for Hitler* published in Canada. Cohen is an individual poet, possessing his own strong merit and equally indubitable weaknesses. But even so there are traces of other people's influence. Laurence Hope's *Indian Love Lyrics*, surprisingly enough. Some of the Elizabethans. Donne's "Sweetest love I do not go" — cf. *The Favourite Game*. Waller's "On a Girdle". Swinburne with arthritis. Dowson's "Cynara" even.

But I'm not very fond of that favourite game. Cohen has come swimming out

of all such traces of other poets, emerges as himself. And re. the dust jacket blurb, I don't want to fall into the trap of treating an author's ad agency gabblings as important. Only poems are. And pretentiousness aside, there are a few things in *Hitler* which I value:

> I once believed a single line
> in a Chinese poem could change
> forever how blossoms fell
> and that the moon itself climbed on
> the grief of concise weeping men
> to journey over cups of wine

Of course that is the "old" Cohen. Here is the guilty "new" Cohen:

> I do not know if the world has lied
> I have lied
> I do not know if the world has conspired against love
> I have conspired against love
> The atmosphere of torture is no comfort
> I have tortured
> Even without the mushroom cloud
> still I would have hated

And so on. He ends the poem: "I wait/for each one of you to confess." Well, he's gonna have to wait a long time. Liars, torturers and conspirators don't confess by reason of such poems as this one. And the life Cohen portrays in his poems has to be unreal by my personal standards.

Sure, I've done all the things he says he's done. But I'm not personally preoccupied with guilt, and I think few people are or should be. Life being lived now, and personal change more important than morbid preoccupation with past imperfections, I feel no particular urge to confess anything; though in a sense I suppose I have, in the first sentence of this paragraph. What then IS important in poetry and life?

Well, much of the time being alive at all has puzzled me. What am I going to do with my awareness, the mixed curse and blessing of sentience? Yes, live — it includes things I haven't even thought of yet. It also includes the various dictionary emotions, including a negligible amount of guilt. What then is important?

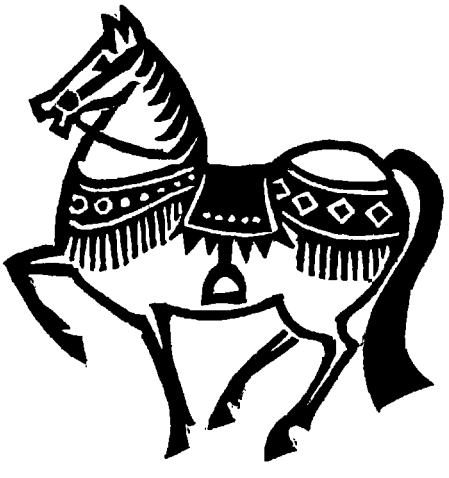
Perhaps to take a new and searching look at people, re-defining what they are as against what they were previously thought to be. Man himself is the unknown animal. We know more about nuclear physics, crop rotation and fertilizers than

we do about our own nature and potentialities. As well, we might look for a new road on which mankind can travel. The one he's on now appears to be heading straight for The Bomb. Science, politics, philosophy and something like religion are all mixed in with the new poetry.

Those are grandiose things of course. Has Cohen discovered any new roads, or should I expect him to discover them? That question too is theatric, perhaps ill-considered. Well then, is he living now, asking the questions we all ask ourselves, making discoveries about himself, explaining the scope and nature of what a human being might be? Sometimes he is.

But I'm no longer puzzled about Cohen. He has changed, veered at a sharp angle from his previous work, struck off in another direction entirely. For the "now" poet is an exploding self, whom critics cannot predict, nor can the poet himself. Where he is going he does not know exactly, and where he has been he can only remember imperfectly. He inhabits language as well as the world, infuses words with something of his own questioning stance, his own black depression and joyous life.

One can only guess where Cohen is going now. But when I see the human confusion and uncertainty of his last book, I have hope it may be terra incognita where he is going. With a ballpoint pen. And may survive there and map the territory.



WIND, SUN AND DUST

Donald Stephens

TWENTY-FOUR YEARS AGO what is perhaps the best Canadian novel was written: Sinclair Ross's *As For Me and My House*. Up to that time the only writers who could be viewed with any assurance were Morley Callaghan, Frederick Philip Grove, and probably Laura Salverson; since then only Mordecai Richler and, of course, Hugh MacLennan, have added to the store of better Canadian novels.

In his novel Ross has caught an essential part of the Canadian scene: the small midwestern town. But it is more than just the place that Ross captures; it is the time of the thirties, a time which many Canadians remember and cannot forget. It is a time, too, that younger Canadians constantly hear about: the drought and wind and dryness of that decade. Ross has recorded that time, and adds a dimension to the memories and dreams of people who cannot, and will not, forget the thirties.

Horizon, the town that is the setting for the novel, could be any place on the prairie in the thirties; yet again, it can be anywhere at any time. It is bleak, it is tired, it is horribly true; and yet there is an element of the flower blooming on the desert, and the flying of feeling that transcends all, that gives to *As For Me and My House* a prominent position in Canadian letters. This is a novel which, despite its Puritanism, its grimness, its dustiness, gives to the reader many of the elements of optimism and romanticism so often found in Canadian literature.

Writes Mr. Ross, in the words of his narrator, Mrs. Bentley:

> They're sad little towns when a philosopher looks at them. Brave little mushroom heyday — new town, new world — false fronts and future, the way all Main

> Streets grow — and then prolonged senility . . . They're poor, tumbledown, shabby little towns, but they persist. Even the dry years yield a little wheat; even the little means livelihood for some. I know a town where once it rained all June, and that fall the grain lay in piles outside full granaries. It's an old town now, shabby and decrepit like the others, but it too persists. It knows only two years: the year it rained all June, and next year.

This is very good writing; in fact, one is first captured by the writing in the book. There is an exact vividness, pure diction choice, observation that is accurate, and a rhythm that is controlled. Everything seems to move at its own pace, and yet the tension of the characters renders vividly the actual setting:

> It's an immense night out there, wheeling and windy. The lights on the street and in the houses are helpless against the black wetness, little unilluminating glints that might be painted on it. The town seems huddled lest it topple into the wind. Close to the parsonage is the church, black even against the darkness, towering ominously up through the night and merging with it. There's a soft steady swish of rain on the roof, and a gurgle of eave troughs running over. Above, in the high cold night, the wind goes swinging past, indifferent, liplessly mournful.

The people who inhabit this landscape are described to the reader too, and they dissolve into actual highpoints within the landscape. The minister is shown in many aspects, an individual in every respect, yet typical in his pursuit to live on an inadequate salary that is never paid up. There is his wife, the main character and narrator of the novel, a sensitive woman who is bothered by the rôle of propriety that she must always play. There is the inevitable woman who is president of every organization that she can get her hands on, the perpetual president who is "austere, beyond reproach, a little grim with the responsibilities of self-assumed leadership — inevitable as broken sidewalks and rickety false fronts". There is the doctor's wife who "simply wasn't meant" for life in a small town, and the spinster choir leader who likes the old hymns, sung slowly. Yet they are not types, though they are marked by typical characteristics; rather, each has his own special and very real reality.

Such is Ross's artistry that no doubt any but the most shallow of readers is affected by his portrayal of the desolate life in a prairie town. His simplicity of style and intricacy of mood create a prairie so immense that it virtually stuns the mind. The physical limitations of existence in Horizon pummelled by the visitations of a cruel God — though He is never blamed for what goes on — are clearly etched in the mind by the almost unbearable monotony of wind, sun,

snow, and drought. It is a place with a past and a future, but with no real present, no rock into which to drive a spike which sanity can grasp to pull itself from the mire of despondancy. Environment plays a strong rôle in the story, an environment that is at once uncluttered and cluttered. The intellectual celibacy of the townspeople is made poignantly clear in the light of their ceaseless, numb battle against the overwhelming odds of the climate.

The sky and the earth fuse into a huge blur, a haze which envelopes the town and its people and stills all but the faintest murmur of hope for the future. There is a vivid immobility that lies stark against the dullness of the endlessly shifting dust. The theme is of the prairies during the thirties — the unrewarded, unremitting, sluggish labour of men coupled with the loneliness and nameless terror of the women — and is the only action upon the stage that Ross presents before his reader. There is a feeling approaching claustrophobia, yet the vastness soars over the people. There is everywhere an almost unreasonable acquiescence in the inevitable, but what the inevitable is no one can foresee with any accuracy, and so they never really ask what it may be. Perhaps the new year will be better than the last, but the reader is led to wonder if fulfillment will come to those who wait. Perhaps they wait endlessly. The only tie with the outside world is the railway, and it, too, is hidden by the dust. Perhaps these people do not care for the outside world, yet the false store fronts belie their unconcern with what is outside their immediate vision. These people are not hard to imagine, but they are very difficult to understand, and consequently difficult to accept.

Roy Daniells, in his introduction to the New Canadian Library *As For Me and My House* calls the novel an exposition of the Puritan conscience. Indeed it is, for everywhere there are the unmistakable signs of Puritanism: the standards are rigidly set; the struggles, the tenacity of people in so bleak a circumstance, the horror of hypocrisy and of sexual sin. Jealousy, failure, slow realization of forgiveness, possible redemption and reconciliation after anguish and torment, all take their places in the lives of these tenacious people. The problem of fighting versus flight, and the all powerful will of God remain in the foreground; the nerves of all the people of the town remain taut to the breaking point.

INTO A TREACHEROUS ATMOSPHERE like this Ross introduces his main characters. He does not immerse them totally, but rather just dips them

into this sheep-dip of futility and sets them into a corner to let the bitter juices seep into their absorbent beings. Perhaps he has not dipped them for long enough, or again, too much, for none of the characters seem to rise out of the story as individuals of total belief. They are at once types and individuals, yet never really discernable as one or the other. Despite this vagueness, the characters can be analyzed; unfortunately, with varying degrees of accuracy.

Ross chooses a woman's point of view for this novel, and obviously has tremendous insight into a woman's mind, and this particular woman's troubles. Before a reader can understand the other characters in the novel, he must examine Mrs. Bentley. She is the narrator, and if the reader takes her at her literal worth, then all the characters become exceptionally clear. But she is a paradox, and there becomes the necessity to probe beyond what she says superficially and to make conjectures as to her real meaning. Mrs. Bentley — she has no first name in the novel — is the main character, for it is through her eyes and sensitivity that the whole story is seen and felt; and she is the one who grows with the action.

She becomes through the novel an epitome of a type of woman; she displays intelligence, responds to situations with courage and sympathy, and displays a vague hope for better times (typical of prairie women of the period: clever, hard-working, hoping). Yet she is individualistic in that she rebels against the stifling pressures of propriety imposed by the town. Though she does not want impropriety, she scoffs at the pretentious airs that the citizens of Horizon so capably put on. She lives in a semi-vacuum, drawing from her stored-up intellectual resources what her husband and the other citizens fail to give her.

However, she is not as strong a person as she would have the reader believe. And this is Ross's point. Assailed by doubts she seems to hang on by sheer stubbornness. Everything she sees before her is thin, disheartening, dull and bare. There is an inert and chilly stillness to the life she leads, and it becomes evident in her thoughts. Yet, what kind of person is she? She seems to be strong, if what she says in her diary is to be taken literally. Her strength, however, comes from the knowledge of the falseness and the sham of the life that she and her husband lead. With this strength comes a certain smugness. She is smug about the falseness of the store fronts, and she is certainly smug about her awareness that Philip is a hopeless failure, a compromise. She knows the discrepancy between the man and the little niche that holds him, but does she not also feel a trifle too satisfied with her dominant position in the family? It is, after all, she who is forced to make excuses for her husband's lapses. It is her plan to move to the bookstore

in the city and her decision to adopt Judith's baby. Though she abides by her husband, she is the one who makes the major decisions, she is the one who fights the internal battles for both of them, and it is because of her inner strength that they emerge triumphant.

She, like all the characters in the book, is hurt too easily, yet she is too enduring. She can see all things clearly and objectively because she is a stranger and cannot fit into the town and share its frustrations. This is her futility. Since she is outside of Horizon's influence, she can, for the most part, be cool, logical, and even somewhat caustic about its workings. Even at that she finds it easier to maintain face with the people of Horizon than with the cowboys at the ranch in Alberta, where they go for a brief holiday.

Her relationship with her husband is very unsatisfactory — to both of them. She appears to be constantly saying — "Poor Philip", and by virtue of this negation, enhances her own virtuous qualities of wifehood. Her theme of "poor Philip" eventually grates sharply upon the reader's nerves. She protests too much his innocence, thereby attempting to absolve herself and him of blame for their torturous predicament. That she possesses an optimism for his future and hence her own is often negated by her emphasis on his moral and spiritual degradation.

She does not reveal enough to the reader for him to deduce anything other than what she wishes him to deduce. She plays her cards too closely to her vest. When Mr. Downie, the visiting parson is there, she says that she "glanced at Philip, and wished for a moment that I were the artist with a pad and a pencil at my hand." She does not tell us, however, how Philip looked; is he rebelling against the grace, has he made a momentary reconciliation with his God, or is he once again "white and thin-lipped"? She whets the curiosity, then proceeds to another topic totally unrelated to Philip's appearance.

She almost envisions herself as a goddess, all-seeing, but fearful to tell or show the reader lest he recognize yet another flaw in either herself or her husband. Ross's stylistic brevity does not make sufficient amends for Mrs. Bentley's brevity; the reader can make only his own hypothesis concerning their deeds, motives, and the subsequent results. She says that "there is not much he keeps me in the dark about" — yet she does not know about the affair with Judith — and by chance finds out about it.

Contrasted to these ambiguities, she exhibits a good many favourable and worthy characteristics (if we are to take her account of her affairs as unassailable). She is candid and receptive. She has a capacity to see and comprehend a whole situation; she can criticize, objectify, and finally accept, even if her acceptance

is often darkened with grave doubts. Perhaps her major redeeming feature is her earnest desire for reconciliation with her husband, but even this raises the question of whether she is secure in her faith or merely in a blind alley with no other way out.

PHILIP NEVER REALLY EMERGES as a character, but then maybe that is his condition. He is contrived, far too mechanical to be other than fragmentary; he is a moody, frustrated baffled seeker of prestige, either intellectual, paternal, or sexual. He is a failure, a hypocrite caught in a web of his own weaving. The frustrations and defeats of his own life etch his mind as the windblown sands furrow the brows of toiling farmers. He flinches from any contact with the world, and a word from his wife causes him to wince, look at her, and retreat to his study. His only lifelines are his pictures, and they only reflect his morbid character. At first, sympathy and pity can be extended to Philip, but after a time irritation sets in with disbelief hard on its heels.

Is he the frustrated artist? Is he, rather, a weak, spineless hypocrite who cannot face what life puts before him? He is neurotic — far more than his wife — but do we know "why" he is? It is never solved. We tire of the statement that Philip needs only the opportunity to prove himself. He must show, eventually, that he is, if not deserving, then at least desirous of this opportunity; he does not exhibit this; as a result he is shallow, drab, partial — a skeleton of an individual.

To Philip, the only part of his life that is real is his pictures. From the rest of life he withdraws into his study, there to withdraw further within himself. Any flareup — real or imagined — results in his retirement to the study, white-faced, thin-lipped and haggard from a nameless exhaustion. He continually responds to an overture with a hurt, flayed look. So drab and colourless is his character that even the dog, El Greco, assumes more reality.

Mrs. Bentley explains his faults by saying that he expected too much, and when it was not forthcoming he was caught with his moral and intellectual fibres around his ankles. Surely in twelve years a man can make some attempt at pulling himself out or else reconcile himself to his fate. If he had been the frustrated artist, he would have found some relief, some compensation in his work. If Philip has found any of this, he does not reveal it to his wife's discerning eye. His relationship with his wife is such that it pleads the question of whether he wants a

wife or a friend. After his constant rejection of her, the answer is somewhat obvious.

He is resentful of his wife, and of Paul; their resourcefulness and his blind resentfulness and the guilt of his own hopeless inadequacy prompt him to make the accusation of a love affair between Mrs. Bentley and Paul Kirby. Beneath his futile anger lies a boy's emotion seen in the many sulking retreats to the study. He constantly shams a fit of pigue and sulks to cover any gesture of generosity. He is a puzzle, never to be solved.

Other characters serve to contrast the principals. Paul Kirby serves as a foil for both Bentleys. For a time a love interest seems to be developing, but it is foredoomed to oblivion and never gets under way. He serves Mrs. Bentley as relief from the monotony of Philip and the solidly aligned faces of Horizon. Nonetheless, his constant philological demonstrations are the only facet really revealed. He is perhaps the least faceted and least successful character in the story. He seems to have been brought in only for relief, when another page of Philip's sulkings and Mrs. Bentley's wanderings threaten a total suspension of belief.

Steve is opportunely introduced. He is the hope the Bentleys have been seeking; his exit almost extinguishes any hope that the reader and the Bentleys share. He is the simplest character in that he is typical boyhood. He is belligerent, sensitive, and frightened. His temporary importance to the plot cannot be overlooked; he is the image for what the Bentleys have wanted, but his worth to Philip is threatened by his growing disregard of him. The attachment to Mrs. Bentley further drives home to Philip his own inadequacies as a father and a man, and eventually sinks him to a new low of regard for himself and his wife.

Judith West is also shallowly drawn. She lives in a vacuum, beautiful, different, somewhat of an eternal rebel. She displays the inner torments that also rack Philip, thus giving them their common ground on which to create. To Philip she is the rebel with whom he can identify. To Mrs. Bentley she is the potential and then the real "other woman" against whom she must pit her wiles. It is strange that Mrs. Bentley, with all her astuteness, cannot see the supposed power of attraction between Philip and Judith.

Sinclair Ross gives variety in character; not all the characters are those on the racks of internal torture beaten by the overwhelming powers of nature. For variety, Ross injects the potent serum of Mrs. Bird, the rebel of Horizon, and she often successfully gives a pause to the reader; she represents the acceptance of Horizon on her own terms; though she fits into the group, she retains her own individual and special verve.

In general, the characters are made subservient to the environment of the story; the limitations of Ross's vehicle hamper the full realization of these characters. The only way the reader can realize the portent of all the characters is to let his imagination have full rein. Despite the shallowness of the characters, they are interesting, and at an intense, rather than a cursory, examination.

It is, then, the characters who make *As For Me and My House*. The place belongs to the history of Canada, the prairie town that is for the most part gone from our midst; no longer do people have to rely on the railway to communicate with the rest of civilization; the isolation is gone, through super highways, and television. The time, too, belongs to history; the thirties, the depression, are only ugly dreams which man hopes will not become another reality. But the people remain the same. We are all typed in some way, and we all, too, hope that there is something individualistic about us that separates us from the crowd. But only rarely are we separated, and only rarely do Sinclair Ross's people separate from their world. And this is the way people are; this is why the reality of Ross's fictional world elevates his novel to a lasting and prominent position.

THE MAKING OF JALNA

A Reminiscence

Dorothy Livesay

WHEN I THINK about Mazo de la Roche at Clarkson, Ontario, I cannot disassociate her from my own adolescent background. My father, J. F. B. Livesay, had relatives in Cooksville to whom he was sent as a young man, all the way from the Isle of Wight. His uncle was a retired naval officer whose home was patterned on English county life. My father was immediately taken into the family and introduced to more distant connections, the McGraths at Erindale. Mary McGrath, of Irish descent, had married into an Anglo-Indian family and settled on an estate called *Benares*, after the post in India where they had seen military service. But the countryside of Ontario must have reminded them not of India, but of England, with its rolling fields, deep pine woods alongside oak, maple and silver birch, and its potential orchards. It was my father's love of this woodland that led the owner at the time to think of parcelling her share of the estate into a subdivision. Our house, *Woodlot*, was the first to be built on it; and it must have been through the good offices of another friend of ours, Grace Fairbairn, who ran the local market and knew everybody, that Mazo de la Roche and her cousin Caroline Clements came to hear of our woods, and to buy an adjoining lot.

The first wing of our house my father had designed himself, to be used as a summer place until the permanent house could be built; and Mazo de la Roche's cottage was within easy earshot. My father's description of those woods in autumn

might be an echo of many passages in Jalna. In his diary he wrote:

> But now that the leaves are going and that the sun is breaking through and that again branch and twig are brittle, and vistas of white birch, as I say, open up across the little ravine — vivid colour of gold and scarlet, russet and dun, flame of the sumach and lemon yellow of sassafras — I am content.

Since our place was so close it is hard to explain why, in her autobiography *Ringing the Changes*, Mazo de la Roche speaks of being isolated. At any time of the day or night she might call on my mother or ask advice from my father. As well as my parents' delight in gathering mushrooms (the Jalna books abound in descriptions of mushrooms!), their knowledgeability about wild flowers and local trees was of keen interest to the novelist. It was on our property that "Fiddling Jock", mentioned in the Jalna saga, had built his cabin and planted an apple tree. Another common bond between the two households was Canadian writing. My mother and Mazo belonged, I believe, to the Heliconian Club and the Canadian Authors' Association. Young poets who came to see my mother when she was preparing a poetry anthology, men like Robert Finch and Raymond Knister, also visited Mazo. I remember, as a young girl, my curiosity and excitement in meeting such a lost young man in our woods, and directing him on to *Trail Cottage*. Truthfully though, in those early days before she was well-known, Mazo de la Roche was loath to have visitors and seemed indeed always timid about meeting strangers. Her purpose in coming to Clarkson was to find a retreat where she could write undisturbed, where there would be no telephone and no interruptions.

Mazo de la Roche was really very hard-up at that time. She and her cousin (or half-sister, as she preferred to call her) Caroline Clement, lived frugally. Miss Clement, whom we were always given to understand was related to Samuel Clemens (Mark Twain), commuted to her office job in Toronto, walking through our trail early in the morning on her way to the train. Mazo, left free to write, did so quite furiously and prodigiously. Indeed, I have never seen such self-discipline in a writer, such commitment. Only for a brief half-hour, at mid-morning, would she saunter, milk-pail in hand with her little blind Scottie, Bunty, in tow, past our garden to a farm across the ravine. Then she would return, to do, I imagine, as little housework as possible, and get on with her next chapter. In the evening, after supper with her half-sister, Mazo would read aloud what she had written that day. If Miss Clement approved, the chapter was allowed to stay in the book.

Occasionally Mazo would drop in at our cottage for a cup of tea: and I was usually somewhere in the offing, pretending not to listen but ears pricked to catch any item of literary gossip. I was very sensitive about showing anyone my own poetry; but Mazo had begged to see some of it, treating me in a most adult fashion, so my loyalty was hers. Mazo de la Roche rarely talked of her past or of her personal life and this lent her an air of mystery in my eyes. How could a spinster write books about passion? As if to explain, my mother did once confide to me that Mazo had had a love affair with a Scotsman, but she did not feel free to marry him as she was tending an invalid mother, as well as trying to launch herself on a writing career. Someone from the Lake Simcoe area had also told my mother that there was a good deal of romanticism in Mazo's hints at an aristocratic French ancestry — "I knew her when she was plain Maizie Roche." This is clarified, however, in the autobiographical account *Ringing the Changes* where the author mentions, in passing, that her grandfather de la Roche was hated by the Irish family he married into.

> Everything he did was wrong. Even when he anglicized his name — even though he allowed his children to be christened in the Protestant church. . . .

This grandfather de la Roche, become Roche, was evidently a fascinating rogue— even a rake. He left a legacy of classical books along with a trunkful of love letters which might well fascinate any beginning writer. If there was any stimulus needed, therefore, to release Mazo's innate romanticism, her own past could give it. Her childhood, almost in a sense as lonely as that of the Bronte's, was fed on tales of pioneer eccentrics — English, Irish and French. Her description, for instance, of her own Irish grandmother is very close to that of Adeline Whiteoak, in Jalna. Here it is, again from *Ringing the Changes*:

> This Irish great-grandmother was a remarkable woman. By her charm, her fiery temper, her demonstrative affection, her dominating nature, she overbore her children and her children's children. . . . My father adored her. It was he who carried me, when I was three, to her on her death-bed. It is my first recollection of childhood. The tall house that seemed so dim and somehow forbidding, the long stairway thickly carpeted, the bedroom with its fourposter bed, then — the sudden dip downwards, as though my world had given way beneath me — the two long arms held eagerly upward to take me — the strong old voice, with nothing of death in it — "My little darling — my darling!" How fearful I was, in that dark embrace — I was three years old, she ninety-four!

To such a background Mazo added the fire of her own desire to become a writer.

The characters that she created or re-created became so intensely alive to her that they dictated the development of the story.

Her long narrow face, her tawny brown eyes which even behind spectacles gave one a sense of animal, woodland life; her gaunt, thin, rather neuter frame — these trembled with intensity as she talked about her characters, seeking to forestall the local gossip which would identify the Jalna characters with those of Benares. And as I look into Jalna again I would agree that the characters of the book were certainly drawn from a personal source; but I am equally convinced that the objective setting for the novel lay between Clarkson and Erindale — the setting of Benares. Jalna, to us, meant Benares: that gracious, square brick house with the wide front porch and a long scullery at the back built of stone (part of the original house that had burned down) — that house which had fascinated me as a prairie child when my father first took me there to visit relatives. The driveway through pine and oak forest, laden in spring with periwinkle and lily-of-the-valley, the old coachhouse, the short curving drive around to the front of the house with its wide view of pasture and apple orchard; and inside, the "library" on one side of the hall where the grandmother always sat and the drawing-room on the other, with its gilt mirrors, family portraits, delicate Victorian chairs and Indian rugs; the beautifully carved stairway, and below-stairs servants' quarters and kitchen — these remain vividly in my memory. As a child, they gave me a sense of the past; that English past that drew me to my forebears. How close, in detail and atmosphere, is Mazo de la Roche's creation of Jalna:

> It was a square house of dark red brick, with a wide stone porch, a deep basement where the kitchens and servants' quarters were situated, an immense drawing-room, a library (called so, but more properly a sitting-room, since few books lived there) a dining-room, and a bedroom on the ground floor; and six large bedrooms on the floor above, topped by a long, low attic divided into two bedrooms. The wainscoting and doors were of walnut. From five fireplaces the smoke ascended through picturesque chimneys that rose among the treetops.
>
> In a burst of romantic feeling, Philip and Adeline named the place Jalna, after the military station where they had first met... Under their clustering chimneys, in the midst of their unpretentious park with its short, curving drive, with all their thousand acres spread like a green mantle around them, the Whiteoaks were as happy as the sons of man can be.

THE WRITING AND PUBLICATION of *Jalna* constituted the greatest literary excitement of my young life. We knew, in that spring of 1927, that the book had been submitted to the Atlantic Monthly Novel Competition, that Hugh Eayrs of Macmillans was also prepared to publish it but that he, aware of Mazo's financial need, was holding back until the results of the $10,000 competition were made known (in those days, that was a lot of money). Suddenly one day Mazo told my mother of the possibility: she had received a telephone call from Boston informing her that she was one of the runners-up for the prize. Her excitement, her nervous trembling, knew no bounds. She and Caroline went to Toronto, I believe, to await further news; and she was really quite nervously ill by the time the message finally came through from Editor Edward Weeks: the judges had decided in favour of *Jalna*.

We all wept for joy. It was not merely that a Canadian writer had been recognized in the United States, it was not merely that we felt that Mazo de la Roche's work deserved recognition, but it was also the fact that she who had been really poor would now be able to write without the gnawing fear of poverty. From that day on, she never turned back.

Mazo did of course return to Trail Cottage from time to time to do undisturbed work, but a certain restlessness took hold of her. Fame required (or seemed to require) that she make public appearances, which she nonetheless dreaded, and that she engage in social activity, at which she sparkled. She was able to travel back and forth from the Continent to England and North America almost at will, seeking more material for her books and a quiet spot in which to write. What astonished me, when I myself returned to Europe after the War, was to find that Mazo de la Roche was the only internationally-known Canadian author, her books translated into many languages. Indeed, some teachers I met in Dusseldorf told me that during the war *Whiteoaks* was the treasured, secret possession of anti-fascist intellectuals in the town. Together with the BBC it was English; it reminded them of a free way of life. To say that I had lived next door to its author was to be given free entry into people's hearts; it loosened tongues.

But to go back for a moment to those early years of the thirties, when we saw Mazo from time to time at Clarkson, I remember how, on her return from one European tour, I begged to prepare a luncheon for the half-sisters. Mazo strode in, more masculine and assured than I had remembered her, her wit crackling, her musical laugh ringing. Beside her as always was Caroline Clement, the perfect foil: pale, petite, with moon-coloured hair and wide blue eyes. When I had served

the *pièce de résistance*, a "Roman Casserole", Mazo charmed me by saying she had tasted no better dish in Italy. I am sure, even had the meal been burned to a crisp, she would have been thoughtful of my youth and feelings.

From that time on Mazo was a cosmopolitan, mixing with the literary great in London and New York, living in delightful, out-of-the-way houses. Miss Clement had a passion for antiques of all kinds, particularly Venetian glass, and as the Whiteoaks saga developed it was possible for the two to live as finely as they chose. They adopted dogs, and two European children orphaned in an automobile accident. Together with animals, children, nannies and furnishings they moved back and forth until the war put an end to travel.

I used to wonder how all this rather grand life would affect Mazo's writing. By this time we were, in Canada, deep in the depression and heading for the reverberations of the Spanish Civil War; and I myself was absorbed in the social and political implications of those events. Mazo's consciousness, although aware of larger issues, did not reveal outward concern. She appeared to be immersed, if one can judge by her autobiography, with every-day family doings and with the ever-proliferating problems of the Whiteoaks clan. In the writing itself one saw that her strong gift for characterization remained, her sense of drama and humour; but it had perhaps become sentimentalized. There was no *point of view* in her writing.

My last talk with Mazo de la Roche was a gentle one, on the personal family level of the early days. The war was over and I had a little girl of my own whom Mazo and her half-sister wanted to see. Miss Clement, alas, was nearly blind by then, and Mazo was the one who must read to her. We were invited to tea in their charming Toronto house, glittering throughout with coloured glass. They spoke with particular affection of my father, the erratic "Squire of Woodlot", and of the thousands of daffodils and narcissi he had planted under the white birches at Clarkson. But by now our beloved woodland had been cut up, paved, made into suburbia; and we lamented together the old days in Ontario when people did live as English landed gentry.

THE ENCHANTED HOUSES

Leacock's Irony

D. A. Cameron

CRITICAL DISCUSSIONS of Stephen Leacock's *Sunshine Sketches of a Little Town* revolve about two central questions, upon each of which the critics are sharply divided. The first of these deals with the book's distinctive flavour: is it sharply satiric, or is it composed of kind and fundamentally affectionate comedy? The second question is concerned more with characterization and structure, and with the mind and motives of Leacock himself, the issue being whether or not the book is a tentative, exploratory step in the direction of the fully articulated novel, and therefore whether Leacock achieved his full potentialities as a writer.

Obviously, the two questions are logically related. The first turns on Leacock's relation to his material, on the way in which he saw the material and the way in which he intended his reader to see it. So, essentially, does the second: the novelist's concern is with plot and character treated in terms of certain conventions for which Professor Ian Watt has suggested the term "formal realism".[1] Those who feel that Leacock could never have been a novelist commonly maintain that Leacock did not see his characters, or their actions, in terms of formal realism — which is another way of saying that Leacock's approach to his material is incompatible with the novel form. A detailed discussion of Leacock's work in relation to the novel is hardly possible here, but the view of human character and action which we shall see in Leacock's best book does not seem substantially different from that of such a comic novelist as Fielding.

Our concern, then, is with the terms in which Leacock sees both the people who inhabit his book and their actions. We may call this his vision. What is the characteristic quality of this vision?

For Desmond Pacey, the vision of *Sunshine Sketches* is fundamentally kindly; in *The Unsolved Riddle of Social Justice* (1920), modern industrial civilization is criticized from the viewpoint of a benevolent eighteenth-century country squire; and

> In his greatest book of humour, *Sunshine Sketches of a Little Town* (1912), Leacock uses gentle irony to suggest the same general outlook. Here he creates an idyll of a small community. . . .[2]

A little later in the same essay, Professor Pacey refers to the book's "genial satire", and he concludes, "The satire in *Sunshine Sketches* is . . . very mild and gentle."

Robertson Davies, on the other hand, sees the book as "ferocious and mordant". He goes on:

> What it says, if we boil it down, is that the people of Mariposa were a self-important, gullible, only moderately honest collection of provincial folk; they cooked their election, they burned down a church to get the insurance, they exaggerated the most trivial incidents into magnificent feats of bravery; the sunshine in which the little town is bathed seems very often to be the glare of the clinician's lamp, and the author's pen is as sharp as the clinician's scalpel.[3]

A third position is outlined by Malcolm Ross. After reviewing the disagreement between Davies and Pacey, Ross makes the point that their two positions may not be such uneasy bedfellows as it might at first appear. Leacock, he suggests, is not a satirist:

> Because *he loves what he hates.* And he is not *bribed* into loving what he hates . . . He just can't help it. To attack and defend, to love and hate in one breath, is not the genius of satire but the genius of irony, the subtler art, the deeper wisdom.[4]

For all this difference of opinion about Leacock's vision, no one has so far offered a close examination of specific passages in the book as a useful means of approaching the question. That is the approach I want to take now. What we will find may be clearer if we bear in mind that the satirist must distinguish sharply between himself and his characters, while the writer of pathos, in contrast, asks not that we observe and judge his characters but that we understand them and identify with them. And the ironist feels both things at once. Seeing the

character both from within and without, the ironist simultaneously observes and forgives his weaknesses; he combines the viewpoints of satire and pathos.

Moreover, the ironist's view of character implies an awareness of a leading fact about the human condition: man is at once both social and individual. As a social being, he has a relationship with his fellows, and the relationship carries responsibilities. When he fails to live up to those responsibilities, he is a legitimate object of satire. On the other hand, he is an individual; seen in terms of his own makeup and the forces acting upon it, his failings in the social sphere are understandable, and he may even take on a kind of nobility. The ironic view of character provides a means of reflecting in literature the full complexity of this dual condition.

I want to suggest that although Leacock's vision in *Sunshine Sketches* appears at first to be satiric, and although a large element of the book is in fact satiric, its overall vision is ironic, and in its best passages we are aware, however imperfectly, that we are in the presence of basic questions about the nature of truth and the nature of man. Leacock usually begins with an external view of his characters and comes gradually to suggest their inner lives as well; we begin in satire, but we end in irony.

To see how this change takes place, we may examine several passages in some detail. In the following passage, Leacock is satirizing the romantic illusions of Zena Pepperleigh:

> With hands clasped she would sit there dreaming all the beautiful day-dreams of girlhood. When you saw that far-away look in her eyes, it meant that she was dreaming that a plumed and armoured knight was rescuing her from the embattled keep of a castle beside the Danube. At other times she was being borne away by an Algerian corsair over the blue waters of the Mediterranean and was reaching out her arms towards France to say farewell to it.[5]

During several more paragraphs of roughly the same kind, Leacock broadens his satire to include the girls of Mariposa in general: ". . . all the girls in Mariposa were just like that." The edge of the satire is sharpened by contrasting the girls' dreams with their actual situation — gently at first (we see them against "a background of maple trees and the green grass of a tennis court") and then more incisively:

> And if you remember, too, that these are cultivated girls who have all been to the Mariposa high school and can do decimal fractions, you will understand that an Algerian corsair would sharpen his scimitar at the very sight of them. (p. 169)

We are seeing these girls from the outside, and we continue to do so until the last sentence of the next paragraph. Here is the paragraph:

> Don't think either that they are all dying to get married; because they are not. I don't say they wouldn't take an errant knight, or a buccaneer or a Hungarian refugee, but for the ordinary marriages of ordinary people they feel nothing but a pitying disdain. So it is that each one of them in due time marries an enchanted prince and goes to live in one of the little enchanted houses in the lower part of the town.

Something has changed; the illusion has become the reality. Leacock has gone over to the girls' point of view and is looking at the world through their eyes; the world as they find it really is the romantic place they thought it to be, and they are not disappointed in their hopes. When we were laughing at illusion, moreover, we were actually laughing at truth; the laughter now must be at our own expense, since we ourselves seem to have mistaken truth for illusion. To make it even more clear, Leacock continues:

> I don't know whether you know it, but you can rent an enchanted house in Mariposa for eight dollars a month, and some of the most completely enchanted are the cheapest. As for the enchanted princes, they find them in the strangest places, where you never expected to see them, working — under a spell, you understand — in drug-stores and printing offices, and even selling things in shops. But to be able to find them you have first to read ever so many novels about Sir Galahad and the Errant Quest and that sort of thing. (pp. 169-70)

Clearly, Leacock is giving us an inside view of the girls' world; from their viewpoint, what we have considered to be appearance has become reality. But there is a further twist of the irony here. So far, Leacock has been saying, essentially, that there is no way to say that one view of the girls' dreams is truer than the other; it is a purely subjective question. But we may recall that the passage began by discussing Zena Pepperleigh in particular, and as the story unfolds we discover that her dream of marrying an enchanted prince is *literally* true, if on a limited scale; Pupkin, the man she does eventually marry, is working as a bank clerk more or less *incognito*. His father, one of the wealthiest men in the Maritimes and a former Attorney General, is a financier who "blew companies like bubbles" and who owns Tidal Transportation Company, Fundy Fisheries Corporation and the Paspebiac Pulp and Paper Unlimited. Pupkin, the only son and heir apparent, who has been sent into the world to make his own name and fortune, is in actual fact a merchant prince.[6]

The motif of the enchanted houses reappears as we leave that part of the book which centres around Pupkin and Zena:

> So Pupkin and Zena in due course of time were married, and went to live in one of the enchanted houses on the hillside in the newer part of the town, where you may find them to this day.
>
> You may see Pupkin there at any time cutting enchanted grass on a little lawn in as gaudy a blazer as ever.
>
> But if you step up to speak to him or walk with him into the enchanted house, pray modulate your voice a little — musical though it is — for there is said to be an enchanted baby on the premises whose sleep must not lightly be disturbed. (p. 211)

It is still funny: Pupkin is still essentially a comic character, and once again the reader himself is partially the object of the fun. But the passage is irradiated with Leacock's feeling for both the outside of the house, which is comic, and the inside, the wonder and joy of marriage and family. The humour is based on a paradox: the lover as seen by other men is absurdly foolish and richly comic, but at the same time he inhabits a world which for him is utterly transformed into something fresh, golden and magnificent. That Leacock did see his lovers this way, is confirmed by a passage in his own voice:

> For you see, it is the illusion that is the real reality. I think that there are only two people who see clearly (at least as to one another), and these are two young lovers, newly fallen in love. They see one another just as they really are, namely, a Knight Errant and a Fairy. But who realizes that that old feller shuffling along in spats is a Knight Errant, too, and that other is a Fairy, that bent old woman knitting in the corner.
>
> This illusion, greater than reality, we grasp easily in the form of what we call art — our books, our plays.[7]

If we were to examine the whole book in detail, we would find that Leacock's development of character often follows the pattern we have seen in Pupkin. Pepperleigh, for instance, seems at first to be a simple caricature of the country judge: he is rabidly Conservative, ill-tempered and pompous, and his judgements are clearly dictated by his private interests — he acquits his son of an assault charge, and he forces the insurance company to pay for the burnt

church. Yet when his son is killed in South Africa, Pepperleigh's pain and the support he derives from his wife display a human being within the caricature.

Similarly, Josh Smith makes dramatic changes in his hotel in order to draw people so that his liquor license will be renewed by popular request; we know he is cynically manipulating his fellow citizens, and that he intends to close the Caff and the Rats Cooler as soon as the license is renewed. Yet the kindly, sympathetic side of the man becomes visible when, at the crucial moment, he does not close up, because to do so would be petty and ungrateful. Jeff Thorpe likewise seems to be a selfish, acquisitive little man, but we discover he intends to use his wealth for the poor and the disabled — though Leacock undercuts Jeff's generous spirit by making his arithmetic suspiciously faulty (pp. 58-59). This pattern is not a formula, nor is it invariable — nothing of the kind happens in the election chapters, for instance — but it is pervasive enough to suggest that it represents one of Leacock's chief beliefs about his characters.

Even minor actions in the book often owe their appeal to this ironic vision. When the Mariposa Belle is sinking in less than six feet of water, part of the fun turns on Leacock's awareness of the difference between the way the event looks to an outsider — the reader — and the way it looks if you are on the steamer:

> Safe! Oh, yes! Isn't it strange how safe other people's adventures seem after they happen. But you'd have been scared, too, if you'd been there just before the steamer sank, and seen them bringing up all the women on to the top deck. (p. 87)

Two paragraphs later the narrator has forgotten what he said in the first flush of excitement, and now *he* scorns the danger too:

> Really, it made one positively laugh! It sounded so queer and, anyway, if a man has a sort of natural courage, danger makes him laugh. Danger? pshaw! fiddlesticks! everybody scouted the idea. Why, it is just the little things like this that give zest to a day on the water.

Reversing his usual movement, Leacock has abandoned his position beside the narrator and is now inviting us to laugh at the latter's inconsistency.

Perhaps the best illustration of Leacock's irony is afforded by the Reverend Rupert Drone, Dean of the Anglican Church. Dean Drone at first appears to be no more than a caricature of the simple country cleric. His name suggests this; so does his first appearance in the book, just after Josh Smith has begun his flamboyant career as proprietor of the old Royal Hotel:

> When the Rev. Dean Drone led off with a sermon on the text "Lord be merciful even unto this publican Matthew Six," it was generally understood as an invitation to strike Mr. Smith dead. (p. 20)

Through the first four chapters, Dean Drone remains a figure who appears only occasionally, and then for satiric purposes. (He goes on the Marine Excursion of the Knights of Pythias, for instance, with "a trolling line in case of maskinonge, and a landing net in case of pickerel, and with his eldest daughter, Lillian Drone, in case of young men.") In the fourth chapter he becomes somewhat individualized; we discover that he loves to read Greek, though he refuses to translate any; he cannot do mathematics; he is much impressed by such mechanical contrivances as the airplane. And he has had his great dream: the building of a new church.

But now that the new church has been built, Dean Drone finds it difficult to pay for. A series of attempts to raise money all result in comic catastrophe. Some members of the congregation begin to blame Mr. Drone, and we discover that he can be hurt. Leacock records the incident with a sympathy which, though it is flecked with humour, is remarkably unequivocal:

> Once . . . the rector heard some one say: "The Church would be all right if that old mugwump was out of the pulpit." It went to his heart like a barbed thorn, and stayed there.
>
> You know, perhaps, how a remark of that sort can stay and rankle, and make you wish you could hear it again to make sure of it, because perhaps you didn't hear it right, and it was a mistake after all. Perhaps no one said it, anyway. You ought to have written it down at the time. I have seen the Dean take down the encyclopeadia in the rectory, and move his finger slowly down the pages of the letter M, looking for mugwump. But it wasn't there. I have known him, in his little study upstairs, turn over the pages of the "Animals of Palestine," looking for a mugwump. But there was none there. It must have been unknown in the greater days of Judea. (p.114)

The Dean's gentleness, his respect for scholarship and his unworldliness all unite to make us feel his pain, and Leacock's direct reference to the reader ("*You* know, perhaps . . .") is an appeal for sympathy. From this point on, Dean Drone is never again the simple figure of fun he once was.

When the term "mugwump" comes up again, its effect is terrible. The climax of the Church's fund-raising efforts is the Whirlwind Campaign, which is another financial failure, and Mullins, the chairman of the Campaign, comes to give the Dean one hundred dollars which Mullins has himself contributed. Mullins later reports that the rector has been very quiet:

> Indeed, the only time when the rector seemed animated and excited in the whole interview was when Mullins said that the campaign had been ruined by a lot of confounded mugwumps. Straight away the Dean asked if those mugwumps had really prejudiced the outcome of the campaign. Mullins said there was no doubt of it, and the Dean enquired if the presence of mugwumps was fatal in matters of endeavour, and Mullins said that it was. Then the rector asked if even one mugwump was, in the Christian sense, deleterious. Mullins said that one mugwump would kill anything. After that the Dean hardly spoke at all. (p. 134)

The serious discussion of mugwumps is comic, but we are aware that something dreadful is happening to the Dean. Soon he excuses himself on the ground that he has some letters to write, but:

> The fact is that Dean Drone was not trying to write letters, but only one letter. He was writing a letter of resignation. If you have not done that for forty years it is extremely difficult to get the words. (p. 135)

The flat simplicity and the understatement of those sentences are heartbreaking. They are succeeded by a passage equally heartbreaking, in which Leacock's irony reaches perhaps its peak in the whole book; only the "Envoi" can compare with it. The Dean's efforts to write the letter lead him into some hilarious thickets of syntax and meaning. The sense of the letter keeps changing; each draft contradicts the previous one, and finally the letter looks like this:

> "There are times, gentlemen, in the life of a parish, when it comes to an epoch which bring it to a moment when it reaches a point . . . where the circumstances of the moment make the epoch such as to focus the life of the parish in that time." (pp. 137-38)

Yet the context in which this comedy occurs is the moment of final defeat for a good old man who has given his whole life to the charge he is now resigning; who has striven to serve both his gentle God and the community of which he is a devoted member; who has tried, in his humble, unworldly, rather bumbling way to leave the world a better place than he found it. Leacock snaps this essentially bitter moment into perspective by showing us that the Dean has met defeat even on the ground of his pride in his use of language. It has always been an ill-founded pride, and it has given us considerable amusement; now the Dean, too, sees the truth:

> Then the Dean saw that he was beaten, and he knew that he not only couldn't

> manage the parish but couldn't say so in proper English, and of the two the last was the bitterer discovery. (p. 138)

concludes the scene:

> He raised his head, and looked for a moment through the window at the shadow of the church against the night, so outlined that you could almost fancy that the light of the New Jerusalem was beyond it. Then he wrote, and this time not to the world at large but only to Mullins:
>
> "My dear Harry, I want to resign my charge. Will you come over and help me?"

In that last passage, the irony twists again. First, of course, we notice that the church is seen through the rector's eyes: "the light of the New Jerusalem" is an example of the comically elaborate religious terms and images through which he sees the world. But the deeper irony arises from the fact that there really *is* a light behind the church, though it is not the light of the New Jerusalem. It is the light of flames: the church is burning at the hands of an arsonist who we are later led to believe is Josh Smith. In order to solve its financial problems, the congregation fires its church; and the irony of this act is complex. It defeats the moral, the religious and the unworldly virtues which Dean Drone stands for — and for what? To solve a problem which is financial and worldly: men, Leacock seems to be saying, do not even understand, let alone obey, religious codes of conduct. The fire destroys all the Dean's illusions about the instruction he has given his flock in moral and ethical matters. Not only does the fire destroy the substance of the Dean's achievement, however, a substance which was rooted in his effectiveness as a Christian leader, but also it destroys the physical church which was the symbol of his achievement. By a further irony, the Dean himself has caused the fire, however inadvertently, through his own mismanagement. And, in a final ironic thrust, we discover that the destruction of this church, which is heavily over-insured, will completely finance a new church. The Dean's symbol is retained, but the fire which allows Mariposa to retain it obliterates its meaning and spirit.

It seems the Dean realizes something of what the burning of the church implies — or perhaps his reaction is simply one of shock:

> So stood the Dean, and as the church broke thus into a very beacon kindled upon a hill — sank forward without a sign, his face against the table, stricken. (p. 139)[8]

The Dean recovers from his stroke, but he is never fully sane again; still a

gentle old man, but now remote from the world, he suffers from hallucinations, and Leacock takes leave of him in a passage which, though coloured with humour, is suffused with compassion:

> So you will understand that the Dean's mind, [sic] is, if anything, even keener, and his head even clearer than before. And if you want proof of it, notice him there beneath the plum blossoms reading in the Greek: he has told me that he finds he can read, with the greatest ease, works in the Greek that seemed difficult before. Because his head is so clear now.
>
> And sometimes — when his head is very clear — as he sits there reading beneath the plum blossoms, he can hear them singing beyond, and his wife's voice. (pp. 147-48)

Once again there is direct reference to the reader, too: "you will understand." Looking back over the passages we have examined, you are struck by the number of such references, and by the fact that there are two extra characters in each scene: the narrator and the reader. As we have seen, neither is exempt from Leacock's humourous scrutiny. In fact, much of the humour of the book is based on the interplay among the inhabitants of Mariposa, the narrator (who is evidently not Leacock), and the reader.

THE NARRATOR is naïve, unsophisticated, baffled by such abstractions as election issues; a Mariposan to the core, he is something of a Booster and he usually seems quite unaware of moral issues. Like Gulliver at the court of Brobdingnag, he often tells a true story which he expects will display the glories of his home, but which instead exposes its hypocrisy, immorality and pettiness. Such a character is an ideal vehicle of satire, and indeed the narrator does quite unconsciously direct a good deal of the book's satiric thrust. But he is balanced by the reader, and possession of the "real" truth constantly passes back and forth between the two.

This reader-narrator interplay begins the book: the narrator, who knows what Mariposa is "really" like, shows the reader around the town, demonstrating that the surface impression is not the actual truth. ("But this quiet is mere appearance. In reality, and to those who know it, the place is a perfect hive of activity.") Is the narrator right in this and in his other comments on Mariposa? Perhaps —

and perhaps not. In the first and last chapters, Leacock's equivocating irony is brought to bear on both the city and the little town. Each has virtues which the other cannot share; each has shortcomings to which the other is immune. The wider scope which the city offers is necessarily accompanied by cold impersonality, while the small town, which provides warmth and community, lacks privacy and tends to stifle initiative. The Mariposan view of the city is instructive here. The town usually sees the city as treacherous and malign: for instance, Mullins reflects, after the Whirlwind Campaign has failed, that there are "so many skunks in Mariposa that a man might as well be in the Head Office in the city" (p. 131), and similar remarks are made throughout the book. Yet, as Desmond Pacey has pointed out, Mariposa spends a great deal of energy in trying to become a metropolis, and the narrator's comment that the town is "a hive of activity" is further evidence of this desire. There is irony, then, in Mariposa's view of the city, an irony which reflects the town's simultaneous rejection of, and longing for, city values. The overall effect of *Sunshine Sketches* is to leave us with a similarly complex awareness of the way of life symbolized by Mariposa.

To a considerable extent, the relation between reader and narrator is responsible for this awareness. That relation begins the book and it carries the same theme throughout. It emerges most clearly in the last chapter, where once again the difference between the outsider's view (this time of the whole town) and the insider's view forms the basis of an ironic coda which comments on a whole rural way of life.

Here the irony turns, to a considerable extent, on our new knowledge that both the reader and the narrator are, like the rest of the members of the Mausoleum Club, originally from Mariposa, and on their inability really to go back: we leave them, after our "mad career" on the train to Mariposa, sitting in their armchairs in their club in the city. They have accepted sophisticated city values, and they have done well there; the reader owns a "vast palace of sandstone . . . in the costlier part of the city." And they can never fully be part of Mariposa again; they notice such things as Mariposa's out-of-style clothing. Both reader and narrator see the town from the outside.

Yet as the train thunders north through the woods, we come to identify with Mariposa, with the way of life represented by the people on the train. The excitement of homecoming mounts; the train becomes the fastest, finest and most sociable train in the world; and finally we arrive at the station, while brakemen and porters cry "MARIPOSA! MARIPOSA!"

At that climactic moment Leacock ends the book by pulling us back again to

our actual positions, outside the town, smiling at it a little, and yet filled with a sense of lost youth and innocence. The reader and the narrator have paid a heavy price for their success. Though Mariposa has more than its share of stupidity and hypocrisy, it also has simplicity and vigour.

And yet life in Mariposa is more complicated, more equivocal than it seems. The narrator has discovered this as he has matured, and the ironic vision rests partly on his recognition both that Mariposa was a good place to be a child and that it would be a bad place to be an adult. He is nostalgic for Mariposa, but he does not leave the Mausoleum Club.

This recognition, however, seems to imply a contradiction in the narrator. Throughout the book, as we have seen, he has appeared to be a naïve, rather unintelligent Mariposan. Yet in the "Envoi" he is evidently a city dweller of considerable penetration and insight. Does this indicate a flaw in Leacock's conception of him? Probably not: it is more likely that Leacock conceived of the narrator as an intelligent man feigning simplicity. This would explain a good deal: the speed with which the narrator moves from cowardice to courage when the steamer sinks for instance, is more credible if the narrator is only pretending to be unaware of the inconsistency. Similarly, the intellectual sparks which glow here and there through the book — the sharp quips on college men and education, for instance, or the occasional satire on jargon and on modern business[9] — have indicated all along that the narrator's mind was more sharply honed than he would have us believe. His apparent inconsistency, then, supports the view of Mariposa we have been suggesting: he cannot go back because he cannot quite fit into the Mariposan framework, however hard he tries; he cannot accept Mariposa's people and events at their face value, though he can recognize that he may have been happier when he could. The same recognition made another boy from Mariposa build a summer home back in the small town he remembered with such affection; but the larger part of the year he spent as a professor at McGill.

All this should give us pause. For if the narrator is not as simple as he looks, what of Leacock? Is he suggesting more than he is saying?

I think he is, or more accurately, I think his book is based on a view of the human condition which is profoundly ironic. We value the truth, but we can

never know what is true; *Sunshine Sketches* is, among other things, a demonstration of the subjective way in which individuals are doomed to see the world. What is the difference between appearance and reality? How may an individual, limited as his vision must be, tell the difference between them? What is truth, said jesting Leacock, and could not supply an answer — because he could see none, or at least no way to recognize one.

Similarly, though we value our fellow men, we can never really know them either: if we are all condemned to see the world through personal, individual spectacles, then we cannot really communicate with each other; isolation is our fate, and we live and die alone. As E. M. Forster puts it, "we cannot understand each other, except in a rough and ready way; we cannot reveal ourselves, even when we want to; what we call intimacy is only a makeshift; perfect knowledge is an illusion." This sense of isolation is common enough in modern literature; Ernest Hemingway and Forster's own fiction come immediately to mind. In *Sunshine Sketches* it is mainly evident in the ironic treatment of character and in the demonstration that each man inhabits a private world. It is also visible in a negative way: three responses which attempt to counteract isolation meet in *Sunshine Sketches* and, I suspect, account for part of its appeal — laughter, romantic love, and membership in a small community.

Leacock's attitude to his material, then, is ironic in a way that is based on a deep apprehension of what it means to be human, and his humour is both a vehicle for this apprehension and a defence against the pain it necessarily involves. One always hesitates to say that humour is basically a very serious business, and Leacock himself found a good deal of fun in just that concept. Nevertheless, he saw humour as a way of thinking seriously about life; in *Humour: Its Theory and Technique* (1935), he comments:

> . . . humour in its highest meaning and its furthest reach . . . does not depend on verbal inconguities, or on tricks of sight and hearing. It finds its basis in the incongruity of life itself, the contrast between the fretting cares and the petty sorrows of the day and the long mystery of the to-morrow. Here laughter and tears become one, and humour becomes the contemplation and interpretation of our life.[10]

The contemplation and interpretation of our life. At its best, Leacock's irony leads to no less than that.

FOOTNOTES

[1] *The Rise of the Novel* (Berkeley and Los Angeles, 1957), p. 32.

[2] "Leacock as a Satirist," *Queen's Quarterly 58* (1951), p. 213.

[3] "On Stephen Leacock" in C. T. Bissell, ed., *Our Living Tradition* (First Series) (Toronto, 1957), p. 147.

[4] Preface to the New Canadian Library edition of *Sunshine Sketches of a Little Town* (Toronto, 1960), p. xi.

[5] Stephen Leacock, *Sunshine Sketches of a Little Town* (John Lane, London, 1912), p. 167. All further references to *Sunshine Sketches* are to this first edition, and subsequent references are inserted in parentheses in the text.

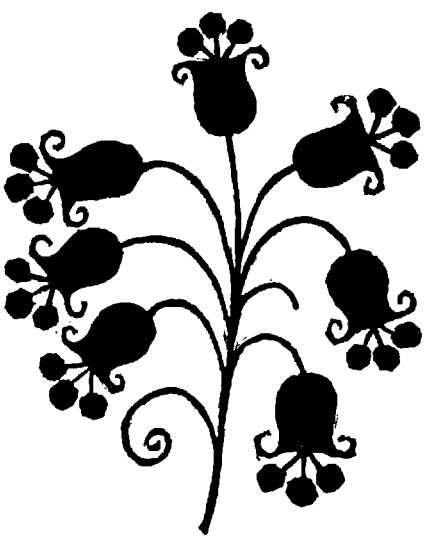
[6] A further irony, which I think a little strained: Pupkin has been sent to Mariposa at the suggestion of a friend of his father, a friend who ignores Pupkin in Mariposa. The friend turns out to be Judge Pepperleigh, Pupkin's future father-in-law, who has been a rather terrifying figure to the young man.

[7] *Last Leaves* (Toronto, 1945), p. 89.

[8] "A very beacon kindled on a hill" is another case in which a metaphor — i.e., an apparent unreality — becomes the literal truth, just as the metaphor of the enchanted prince did.

[9] On education, see pp. 18, 42, 58, 79, 123, 126, 232; on jargon, pp. 15, 81, 86, 88; on business, pp. 39, 106.

[10] *Humour: Its Theory and Technique*, (New York, 1935), p. 17.



THE OLD FUTILITY OF ART

Knister's Poetry

Peter Stevens

MOST CRITICAL STATEMENTS about Raymond Knister's verse insist upon the vividness of his portrayal of Ontario farm life and the imagist nature of many of his poems. Early in his career Robert Finch "thought highly of these bare unmusical imagist verses" (*Memoir* by Dorothy Livesay) and in *Canadian Literature No. 6* (Autumn 1960) Milton Wilson presents him as a "writer of pastorals and herald of imagism". There is no doubt that many of Knister's poems comply with what the imagists decreed in their famous manifesto was the best kind of verse, "hard and clear, never blurred and indefinite". In that key document of the imagist movement, *Speculations*, T. E. Hulme defined the new classicism in revolt against the sloppy romanticism of the verse of his day. This new verse had to be "strictly confined to the earthly and the definite", it had to be a poetry of "the light of ordinary day, never the light that never was on land or sea". Knister uses this hard precise manner in much of his poetry, which, as Leo Kennedy pointed out in *Canadian Forum* (September 1932), is a "bald expression of events" achieving its effects "without benefit of spangles". He singled out "Feed" as a good example; other poems using this straightforward objective imagist manner well are "The Hawk", "In The Rain

Sowing Oats" and this passage from "After Exile":

> The corn like drunken grenadiers
> Topples tarnished
> Whispering
> At the hooting train.

Knister in his reviews of some long-forgotten volumes of poetry showed his concern for accuracy of observation and spare lean expression. He commended a poet for a "Spartan plainness which in itself is at least never a liability" (*Poetry*, October 1924), and he was suitably amazed when he found "nothing lush" in some poems about Hawaii (*Poetry*, May 1925).

In articles for various periodicals in the nineteen twenties Knister applied these ideas about poetry to some Canadian poets. He shows a keen appreciation of Lampman's poetry, but he complains that he (Lampman) did not always "keep his eye accurately on the object" (*Dalhousie Review*, October 1927). In reading this review, one can sense how Knister must have felt a certain affinity to some elements in Lampman's poetry. In particular, he insists on the importance of nature and the natural scene in Lampman's work:

> Man was to turn to nature not because he was so much man that he was kin to all creation, but because he was tired, sick with being man, and desirous of rest and a forgetting within a serene impersonality, a soothing power to which he could moreover assign his own tempers.

Although Knister was not really a descriptive poet of Lampman's kind, there is a suggestion that Knister feels in the other poet the sense of a separation between man and nature. Knister's verse itself often suggests this lack of kinship between man and the natural creation. Man wrestles with the seemingly insurmountable problems set by nature, whereas the creatures of nature are undismayed and unperturbed by them. This is what creates the tension in Knister's best poetry, the poems in which he allows the details to speak for themselves, not those poems in which he brings in a more or less overt moral comment. It is a lack of tension, according to Knister, that kept Lampman from greatness; there was "lack of tension between the poet and his environment". Thus, Knister complains that, although Lampman intuitively felt the alienation of nature from man, that feeling remained external. The conflict is between rather abstract concepts of Man and Nature and Lampman himself never becomes a part of the tension.

In an article in *Queen's Quarterly* (May 1924), Knister makes the same kind

of statement about Wilfred Campbell. Here he complains of Campbell's "reluctance to concern himself with the personal and the immediate". This reluctance, in Knister's estimation, leads to a failure of imagination, and Campbell is categorized as an occasional poet interested in ornament and not truth:

> We find Wilfred Campbell, unable to find a subject within himself, and compelled to take one from exterior nature and decorate it as best he might.

The true poet, then, according to Knister, looks into himself. As he says in the same article, "the subject is already within him, so that he merely allows this or that external circumstance to annotate it."

FROM THESE CRITICAL WRITINGS we can see that the element Knister admired in poetry, the element that he would try to reproduce in his own verse, was the subject within annotated by external circumstance, with a tension, explicit or implied, holding the poem in equilibrium.

There is this kind of felt tension in Knister's best poetry, often suggested by the conflict between man and nature. In "Cross-bred Colt" the colt with its "fierceness of expression" faces the hired boy who "swung a clip to its muzzle". The poem ends with a sudden tense awareness:

> It turned away and stood awhile,
> Ears pricked,
> Considering — the first contact with man —
> Or was it pure surprise?

The young colt in "The Colt" has more freedom and grace of movement than man, and the farmer's comment at the end of the poem, "Idle Colts! /Somehow nohow of any use!" emphasizes the world of difference between man and nature.

Horses often become symbols of the stoic pattern of nature. They always show an acceptance of their lives; there is no effort on their parts to change, but they nearly always emerge with character, as in the series of poems, "A Row of Stalls", and with a sense of victory, as in "A Road", where in the deadness of winter all that shows above the ridges is "the breathmist of a horse", and man's dwellings are reduced to something "infinitely tiny, inappraisably lonely". Knister applies the word "patient" to the horses in "The Plowman" and "Lake Harvest" and in both these poems, the horse's calm acceptance is contrasted to man's labour,

which often seems so futile in most of Knister's poetry. The horses seek no meaning beyond themselves, beyond their own existence:

> We are not done with toil:
> Let rain work in these hours,
> Wind in night's hours,
> We with the sun together
> Tomorrow.
>
> ("Stable Talk".)

Is their patience a lesson for man? Must man merely accept his labour and not be troubled by extraneous thought? In "In The Rain, Sowing Oats" the horses accept the pain and suffering of their labour without any comment, whereas the man, bothered by the bad weather and the hard work, plagues himself with thoughts about the horses eating too much grain and thoughts of his own supper.

This implied acceptance of life by the horses does not mean that their world is still, calm and lifeless. Nature is constantly on the move in Knister's verse. Indeed, this is one of man's great burdens: he can never fix nature, make something permanent. Knister's vision of nature is one of constant change; man has a very precarious grasp of the world. There is almost an element of the menace of natural objects in many of Knister's poems. Mud slithers, trees wait expectant, winds are not to be trusted for they are gentle and strong, "erratically so steady" ("Night Walk"), the hawk moves "against a grimy and tattered/Sky" coming from "trembling tiny forests/With the steel of your wings".

By the motion and menace man is almost overwhelmed and submerged. The succession of bleak details of continuance in "Reverie: The Orchard on the Slope" suggests no place for man. The snow in "Snowfall" almost obliterates the desire for life, lulling "the fever/with pale bright sleep", and the succumbing to these natural forces becomes more explicit in "October Stars".

So far, much of what has been said about Knister could be applied to other poets who see nature as being alien to man. Other poets have suggested man's impermanence and transitory stay in the natural scheme. Poetry has often been used to suggest man's futile attempts to impose order on a constantly shifting landscape and to state that this futility arises because man does not have the patience or stoicism to accept the fact that he is working with, trying to arrange a pattern in his life with recalcitrant material. Looked at in this way, Knister's poetry does not seem very individual, apart from an occasional exactness of

observation. Is this all there is in Knister's meagre collected poetry? What has happened to "the subject within himself"? Does Knister fail in his own poetry to apply the rigorous demands he makes of Campbell, to make the external circumstances annotate "the subject within himself"?

The answer lies, I think, in the poem, "Moments When I'm Feeling Poems". In this poem there is a conflict between the poet's vision and the inadequacy of language to express that vision. This is the "old futility of art." Words always distort the poet's vision; the people who accept this inadequacy of language are "the ladies and the lords/Of life", for they "feel/No call to blight that sense with words".

Doesn't this lead us back to the essential problem of Imagism? The Imagists believed that an image is, in Pound's definition, "that which presents an intellectual and emotional complex in an instant of time". This dictum led to their insistence on the short poem as the only valid kind of poetry. A poem, in these terms, is a short but weighty summary of a compelling experience, an attempt to impose order on a vast disorder of material. Poets, whose concern is with this kind of reduction to essentials, are often too petrified to make the attempt. Imagism lost its force almost as soon as imagistic poetry was committed to paper. All those connected with imagism who have continued to write have left behind the rigorous demands of the movement. Emily Dickinson, attempting much the same kind of crystallization of experience in images, recognized the problem in one of her letters: "What a hazard an accent is! When I think of the hearts it has scuttled and sunk, I almost fear to lift my hand to so much as punctuation." She seems to substantiate what Knister is driving at in "Moments When I am Feeling Poems", for, if a poet's vision is to be crystallized, it may ultimately mean that silence is the best poetry, or in Emily Dickinson's words:

> The words the happy say
> Are paltry melody
> But those the silent feel
> Are beautiful.

Is poetry, then, "the subject within" that the external circumstance of nature and farming annotates in Knister's poetry? Does Knister recognize within himself the impossibility of communicating his vision? Are the voices of nature urging the poet to discover the ultimate language or are they merely teasing him with the limitations of language? In "Reply to August", the night speaks:

> The room does not know it has heard

But I know,
My heart listening, wild with the word
Murmured too low.

If he had the freedom of nature (and by the analogy I have suggested) the real freedom of language, he would be able to sing joyously, as he suggests in "Wind's Way". In "March Wind," a poem included as a footnote in Dorothy Livesay's memoir, it seems that the trees are crying to be unchained by the wind. By analogy, although the poem is not a very good one, as Knister himself recognized, the plea is for an unchaining of the poetic vision by the force of language.

This analogy is further emphasized by the fact that all these poems are much more regular. There is rhyme and a much more consistent metrical arrangement in them. It is as if Knister is denying the validity of the imagist techniques and has had to revert to more traditional forms to express his personal vision of the recalcitrant nature of language. It is also significant that this group of poems is written from the personal point of view. They are all in the first person in order to emphasize that this is the real "subject within" of his poetry.

Thus, in the poem, "Boy Remembers in the Field", there is the usual, rather bleak landscape. Here, then, is the barrenness of language, but its final treachery may be that it seems to offer eventual success:

If any voice called, I would hear?
It has been the same before.
Soil glistens, the furrow rolls, sleet shifts, brightens.

Again, although there is no regular metre, the "I" intrudes again. The promise of success pushes the poet on, makes him continue his "scrabbling in soil/And mean sorrows and satisfactions." ("A Road").

ONLY ONCE OR TWICE does Knister speak explicitly about the problems of poetic expression and the discrepancy between the felt experience and what eventually finds its way on to the page. He suggests in the foreword he originally intended for his selected poems, *Windfall for Cider*, that poetry should attempt to set the world before people, even though the poet recognizes the essential separation between emotion and actual expression:

> Birds and flowers and dreams are real as sweating men and swilling pigs. But the feeling about them is not always so real, any more, when it gets into words.

He suggests this idea in "After Exile". The comment comes after he has given an objective view of the passing landscape seen from a train, and it is at this point that the "I" first occurs:

> (It is not at no cost I see it all,
> See a simple and quaint pattern
> Like the water-mark in this paper,
> There if you like, or if you forget,
> Not there,
>
> It is the same)

The farmer imposing order on his land is the poet imposing order on his materials, but always the material is unwieldy. It cannot be expressed, because language is inadequate. Yet the farmer continually cultivates, hoping by ploughing to gain new growth from his land and to bury his old unfulfilled desires, as Knister implies by the metrical, rhymed, first person "Plowman's Song":

> Turn under, plow
> My trouble;
> Turn under griefs
> And stubble.

If my analogy is correct, "The Plowman", like Pratt's "Seagulls", is a poem about the poetic process. The poet's "unappeased" quest is for the expression of reality, for the complete harmony of felt experience and poetic expression, "the ultimate unflawed turning". The image of the plowman surely is the image of the poet, always returning, always expectant, trying something new, never looking backward.

Is this the reason that ultimately long before his death Knister gave up poetry? Did he believe that all his attempts at poetry would necessarily be flawed? Does this explain the concentration on short stories and novels in the last few years of his life?

In her memoir about Knister, Dorothy Livesay mentions that just before his death Knister was reading Rilke and she quotes one of Knister's favourite passages from that poet:

> Verses are not sensations, as people think — they are experiences. For the sake

> of a single verse one must see many towns, men and things, one must know the animals, one must feel how the birds fly, and in what way the little flowers open in the morning.

Rilke was also a poet who was constantly aware of the limitations of language and the separation of the external circumstance to be used to annotate "the subject within". Knister, I feel sure, would have approved wholeheartedly of another passage from the same book by Rilke. This is Rilke's description of a poet's work:

> Then you set about that unexampled act of violence; your work, more and impatiently, more and more despairingly, sought among visible things equivalent for the vision within.

It is only in the light of this kind of description and in the parallels between poetry and farming that I have suggested in this article that the true value of Knister's poetry can be appreciated. And it is only in this sense that Dorothy Livesay's remark about Knister's farm country and his intense experience of it can be understood. Poetry/farming is "the central column of his thought".

chronicle

LETTER FROM TORONTO

John Robert Colombo

ALTHOUGH THE FACT stares me down every time I read some early Canadian history, I really don't believe that Toronto was ever called Muddy York. As a Torontonian of eight years standing, I find it only slightly more credible that the synonym for Toronto in other parts of the country was Hogtown. (In Toronto the word is still used, but only to describe a specific run-down section of the city.) I realize Toronto was not always a thriving metropolis with nearly two million inhabitants, and that the old Torontonians were (and are) fairly priggish, but things are different today. Both Muddy York and Hogtown, I like to think, hark back to past prejudices rather than present-day realities. To me, more than any other city in Canada, Toronto has more of everything, from crime to culture. But I am ignoring Montreal, possibly, when I say this; in this letter I will speak about English Canada only.

Toronto is a transitional city, half Canadian and half American. There is an internal clash between the Old Torontonians (the natives) and the New Torontonians (those who were dissatisfied with things in other cities before they came here). But both, curiously, are in favour of change. The spiritual shape of the new city will not be difficult to surmise. Toronto is prosperous because it is the importer of things American. Any cultural trends that Toronto sets will be set for Toronto in that city to the south, New York. Just as Toronto is spearheading the branch-plant mentality into Ontario's protectionist business world, so is the city introducing cost-accountancy into the obscure operations of playhouses and general-readership magazines. There is something bloated about the city, like the column (sixteen and one half inches in length) in the Yellow Pages of the Toronto Telephone Directory that lists the Toronto book publishers. Everyone knows there are fewer than half a dozen reputable publishers in Toronto; the rest, about fifteen inches in fact, are agents in the book- and encyclopædia-importing business.

Art has always been a mixing of the amateur and the professional. The New Torontonians, who came to Toronto to find culture, now find that Toronto cannot create the kind of culture they want. Since money follows mood, it is my opinion that we are witnessing the death of Toronto as a cultural unit; nobody wants what is indigenous to Toronto. The New City Hall in Nathan Philips Square will be its beautiful epitaph. Therefore, let the mood of cultural despair be the mood of this letter. Let me lighten it somewhat with the light-hearted use of a pompous phrase: professional conceit. Let me follow the mood through to its monetary conclusion: cultural cramp. Let's see this conceit and its consequent cramp in action in two specific areas, theatre and newspapers.

KILDARE DOBBS noted (in a recently published picture book *Canada*) that Toronto was both "multicultural" and "the hub of English Canada". In perhaps less-apt terms, this means internationalism and cash, both of which Toronto has. One would expect these would generate a healthy climate for the most social of the arts — theatre. But the truth of the matter is that there is no professional theatre in Toronto. There are, however, numerous theatrical groups like the Red Barn, Canadian Players, Coach House Theatre, Hart House and Workshop Productions. And judging by the amount of show-business gossip in the three Toronto dailies, the Toronto public is vitally concerned with all the crises that talented but out-of-work performers face. For all the worry and words, there is simply nowhere for the playgoer to go if he wants to see regular and responsible productions of recent or classical plays. In America the neighbourhood movie-house is disappearing and being replaced by the long-run downtown houses; in Toronto indigenous theatrical activity is being smoked out by a combination of its own incompetence and the slightly superior fare being booked into town by the O'Keefe Centre and the Royal Alexandra Theatre. The situation would be salutary, in a perverse way, if these houses (they are not theatres: they have no players) were doing well, but the truth is both are doing poorly.

When I listed the Toronto theatres, I purposely left out the Crest Theatre, because its plight illustrates very well my theme of professional conceit resulting in cultural cramp. As I write this (the second week in January) the Crest is still alive, having mounted an indifferent production of an indifferent play, "A Severed Head", by Iris Murdoch and J. B. Priestley. Unless I am mistaken —

and I sincerely hope I am — this will be the Crest's last season, and the Crest is the last permanent theatre in Toronto. Its demise will be followed by a decade or so during which no one will dare risk investing capital into another playhouse.

The Crest Theatre Company was a grafting that didn't take. From the first it represented the thinnest of White Anglo-Saxon Protestant theatrical traditions in a city increasingly Italian, Jewish, Hungarian, German, Chinese and American. Yet for ten years it muddled along. It was started in 1954 by a theatrical family, Murray and Donald Davis and their sister Barbara Chilcott, who invested their private fortune into the venture. They opened their doors in a badly located section of Toronto but with a responsible administrative staff. During the first season the Davises actually made money. But bad box office, public apathy, unimaginative promotion, and poor productions caught up with them. A debt appeared and doubled each year.

When the Canada Council was formed, and the Province of Ontario Council for the Arts came along, it looked as if the Crest could meet day-by-day expenses and carry its debt until better days. But late in September of 1964, the hard-pressed Canada Council rejected an application for an operational grant of $20,000 on the basis of the books. These showed an accumulative deficit of $127,000, and the virtual absence of sizeable contributions from the community. As Blair Frazer wrote in *Maclean's* on October 3, 1964: "The strongest point against the Crest, according to people in Ottawa who have some acquaintance with the Toronto theatre, was the very urgency and desperation of its need." Apparently citizens of Metropolitan Toronto contributed only $7,500 to the Crest last year, compared with Greater Winnipeg's $20,000 for The Manitoba Theatre Centre.

After a heart-in-hand campaign, the Crest barely managed to raise $70,000 to continue into 1965 with an abbreviated season. The fate of the Crest will be the fate of every theatre and every community in Canada. The national significance of the Crest's problem can be seen by the fact that theatrical men and women from across Canada came when an emergency summit meeting "to discuss the Crest" was sponsored by Milton S. Carman of the Provincial Arts Council. Even the establishment was stymied when it came to supporting — in the wealthiest city in the country — Canada's only professional, year-round English-language theatre.

The professionals must have reasoned like this: "If the establishment backs theatrical productions in Toronto, minimum standards must be maintained." (This is the professional conceit.) "We want to be associated with what is

artistically excellent." But has there ever been a theatre in Toronto that could maintain the standards of, say, The Stratford Shakespearian Festival? "Spending mainly public funds, the Crest failed to mount competent productions, therefore the Crest must go." Therefore, to meet the alleged demand for professional productions, Torontonians will go to see imported second-company road shows or first-company pre-New York try-outs. The non-sequitur here is, of course, that touring companies have no stake in the community, but come and go. Even more important, an entire generation will grow up knowing only uninspired amateur theatres and super-professional Broadway attractions. Finally, actors will emigrate to New York or starve, and local playwrights who don't already write for radio will do so full time. Healthy appreciation and acceptance of theatre as a civic responsibility will be ploughed back into the Toronto earth. The professional conceit paralyzes one part of the public that might some day support theatre — the cultural cramp. I suppose this argument turns the Turks into the Tories, continentalists into nationalists, professionals into amateurs. But who wants to see Toronto, "the hub of English Canada," merely another American city?

From the foregoing, one would think the professional-minded establishment was not concerned with theatre in Toronto. *But the contrary is true!* This is the curious corollary to the cultural cramp. The establishment wants to be a winner, both artistically and practically, so it finds itself constructing buildings for theatres rather than subsidizing repertoires. At the very moment the Crest began to fail, an over-lapping directorate had conceived and catapulted into being (on paper at least) the much-vaunted and long-awaited cultural complex for Toronto, the St. Lawrence Centre for the Arts. This would be a multi-million-dollar home for cultural organizations in Toronto, with the Crest as the resident theatre, should the Crest manage to survive until 1967, the ideal opening date. No one on the board of the Toronto Arts Foundation was concerned with the Crest's financial or artistic problems — just with supplying suitable quarters.

It is difficult to deal briefly or exactly with this monumental project because, like Proteus, it keeps squirming into new shapes and sizes to meet new emergencies. Examining a pile of press clippings and various official reports, I have come to the conclusion that there is no single St. Lawrence Centre, but a Centre for everyone involved. One thing is certain: the site chosen is the least suitable triangular piece of land in a grim area of the city. But in order to start, the Toronto Arts Foundation will have to raise $4,800,000 by public subscription;

this will then be matched by various other bodies and will go towards a "cultural focus" for Toronto.

In the preliminary stages, the plan (or plans) calls for a Festival Hall and an Arts Building. No money will go towards the Art Gallery of Toronto, which is cramped and miles away from the proposed site for the Centre, or to Massey Hall, which is badly in need of repairs. So far the whole project might have been sparked by the building trade, for as far as I can see only the architects and the construction companies will reap any immediate benefit.

The cultural cramp dampens spirits as it puts the damper on public and private money. I wonder how Tom Patterson would have made out proposing a Stratford Festival in Toronto. A magazine like *Exchange* proved it was editorially possible to publish a national journal of intellectual calibre, but *Exchange* would never have found backers (even for three issues) in Toronto; luckily the enterprising editor, Stephen Vizinczey, lived in less-professional Montreal at the time. Young film-makers like Don Owen have to find film and equipment in Montreal to make a feature like *Nobody Waved Goodbye* in Toronto. The only Torontonian in the last few years to emerge as a positive patron, with a pocketbook and a sense of purpose, was Edwin Mirvish. Instead of letting the owners of the Royal Alexandra Theatre turn it into a parking lot, Mr. Mirvish didn't chair a committee; he actually parted with some cash. It was the professionals who did nothing. The professional pose in Toronto today is pseudo; the critical, a commonplace.

To my mind, the cheap professionalism so characteristic of Toronto comes out more clearly in the rich newspaper world rather than in the thin theatrical productions Toronto generates. Culture is now part of the "conspicuous consumption" newspaper advertising encourages. The three Toronto dailies spend a fair amount of money covering the arts, and I wish the publishers spent more, but the coverage is generally incompetent.

For many years the Saturday edition of *The Globe and Mail* gave a stately, dignified and somewhat detailed national coverage to the arts in Canada. Not only was William Arthur Deacon in his day one of the few good book reviewers in the country, but a favourable review on his weekly book page would actually sell a few copies of the book. Pearl McCarthy, who at the beginning wrote her art reviews for next to nothing — to convince the publishers of the *Globe* that

readers (and advertisers) would be interested in informal comment on painting — could enhance a reputation, and her column was read religiously by many in all walks of life. Mr. Deacon and Miss McCarthy were, in their own way, high-water marks, and they probably did much to create a climate of acceptance (if not cultivation) of the fine arts in Canada today. In my opinion they have not been matched, either as critical successes or commercial endorsements, by the brass-and-bash columnists writing today.

Well-meaning as they were, both Mr. Deacon and Miss McCarthy failed in one major respect. They were unable to legitimize their functions (so to speak) and leave trained staffs behind them. The result is that today their successors are columnists rather than editors. The Entertainment Editor of the *Globe* is someone mysterious, behind the scenes and not — during the last few years at least — an active journalist.

By way of entrance into the bizarre weekend sections of the three Metro dailies, here is an excursus into painting. Bear in mind that the fine arts are no longer fine — they are lively. One of the finest painters of all time — but certainly not one of the liveliest — is Giovanni Antonio de Canal, Canaletto, the painter of watery Venice. Under its former Curator Jean Sutherland Boggs, the Art Gallery of Toronto mounted the first major showing of Canaletto's drawings and paintings since the artist's death in 1768, and issued a superb catalogue to accompany the show. Everyone (with one or two exceptions) paid homage to the historic importance of the show, but when it came to accepting the artistic achievements of the past gracefully, as untimely as they might be, the future-oriented critics balked: this was asking too much.

Kay Kritzwiser, Miss McCarthy's successor on the *Globe*, and a former women's feature writer, kept her eye on the social festivities that accompanied the opening. As well, she noted (on October 17, 1964):

> The Canaletto collection represents a long look back in time, let the message fall where it may. It is important, obviously, because it is the first time Canalettos have been assembled in such quantity anywhere in the world. And perhaps even more important because Queen Elizabeth graciously sent two oils and 21 drawings from her collection at Windsor Castle.

On the same day the urbane and competent Henry Malcolmson, a non-staff columnist for the *Telegram*, under the heading "Canaletto: an absorbing (but not stimulating) show," had this to say:

> But he never overcame the deadening effect of producing much the same scene

over and over again; he produced a set formula, so that in Canaletto's painting life, as reviewed in this exhibition, there is little variety and few fresh turns.

But it was the *Star*'s art critic Arnold Rockman who took the critical cake. On the same day, he too wrote:

> This exhibition, and the magnificent catalogue written by Mr. [W. G.] Constable and designed by Frank Newfeld, will undoubtedly advance our knowledge of a minor painter's work, but I doubt whether it could fairly be called the wisest way of spending the limited funds available to the Art Gallery of Toronto. It is as if Stratford decided to present all the plays of Thomas Heywood, a minor contemporary of Shakespeare, in one season. It would also probably be a first.

This *hubris* (not uncommon in contemporary *kitsch* criticism) was answered by Miss Boggs herself, in a letter to the editor of the *Star* on October 29, 1964:

> The assumption I find most disturbing is that Canaletto is a minor painter. I should be curious to know by what absolute standards Mr. Rockman reached this decision? Canaletto has always been considered an artist of importance and one who has given a lot of pleasure to a large number of people. (Even his commercial value is high) . . . Since he never mentioned a single picture in his review I suspect him of being more concerned with ideas than with works of art.

The *Star* had its revenge, however. Some of the printers were on strike, and typographical errors were proliferating right and left. The name beneath the letter appeared: JEAN SUTHERLAND BLOGGS.

This sort of unintelligent criticism is not confined to the dailies. Elizabeth Kilbourn is, in my opinion, the most sensitive critic of painting in Canada. A former reviewer for the *Star*, on October 25, over the programme "Views on Shows," Mrs. Kilbourn had this to say:

> The exhibition at the Art Gallery of Toronto seems almost ludicrously irrelevant to the electronic age. The catalogue for the show is a masterpiece of antiquarianism. Only the four major canvases from the National Gallery of Canada . . . seem relevant to twentieth-century society.

(I am quoting the review as it was published in the December 1964, issue of *The Canadian Forum* which now reprints the occasional radio talk like *The Listener.*) Newspaper criticism must be contemporary-minded, I suppose, but its weaknesses are particularly apparent: its need for social relevancy, its cultivation of the avant-garde, its basic exhibitionism, its playing up of personality (both the reviewer's and the reviewed's) — what a field day for contemporary artists, and their managers who advertise!

The literary side of things is scarcely better; indeed it is worse, because book publishers advertise less than gallery owners. When the *Globe*'s William French — the journalist and Nieman Fellow who succeeded Mr. Deacon — was asked to move his book reviews from the newspaper proper and into *The Globe Magazine*, a glossy weekend supplement, it meant a four-week rather than a four-day deadline, with little comment on recent events in the book world and, subsequently, fewer and shorter reviews. Books are now assigned to reviewers who are usually young academics, specialists in the subject of the book. There are very few cross-cultural reviews — studies of Canadian history by novelists; poetry reviews by historians rather than professors of English. Here is an extreme example of the *Globe*'s nitpicking. Is it specialist reviewing or special pleading? Anyway it was written by Arthur Hammond (on November 14, 1964) about a series of bad juveniles:

> The very least the publishers can do before the next batch of books in the series is published is bone up on the spelling of "okay" (or "O.K."), spelled "OKay", with two capitals, throughout all four books: the spelling of "come on" (or "c'mon"), spelt "common" throughout; and the use of the nominative and accusative cases of the personal pronoun (e.g. not "gave Jason and I", but "gave Jason and me"). The correction of the multitude of other errors might prove an interesting exercise for the Longmans school book department.

Fair enough, but this takes up one-third of the review. Criticism of this kind belongs in academic quarterlies, not on the pages of the leading review medium for books in Canada.

The Toronto Telegram's Entertainment Editor is Jeremy Brown, a pipe-smoking, mumbling ex-Vancouverite who oversaw the appearance of "Showcase," the tabloid-sized supplement which consolidates the Saturday art coverage of the *Telegram*. The *Tely* is "Canada's most quoted paper" and the newspaper "the bright ones read." The publisher is John Bassett. The *Telegram*'s book editor is Percy Rowe, a self-conscious low-brow. In one of his assigned reviews, Ann Swann has this to say (December 26, 1964):

> *The Colour of the Times* by Raymond Souster, because of his honest colloquial verse touches every mood. His unpretentious style reminds me, in parts, of Eliot and in others, of Whitman. Of course we rarely appreciate what is on our own doorstep, but Souster is a further proof of our burgeoning Canadian poetical talent.

John Robson, Assistant Professor of English at Trinity College, also reviews books for the *Telegram*. He writes what is half-way between a personal column and a

critical consideration, but all too often he excuses his real reactions to the semi-serious titles he reviews by playing the pedantic and crotchety professor, an outdated stereotype surely.

The Toronto Star, well informed and fairly intellectual, uses the services of Robert Weaver as a bland reviewer who enjoys a good mystery story now and then, and the talents of the amazing Robert Fulford. Mr. Fulford can turn his hand to a feature, an interview, a review, a "think" piece or a personal column. There is no space here to go into detail about his often curious views (his championing of *Time*; his praise of Pearson but condemnation of Pearson's Parliament). Mr. Fulford is an outstanding example of the intelligent working journalist, writing a flexible and forceful prose, who finds discussing the social issues raised by authors and artists slightly more challenging than literature and art themselves: the book reviewer as social commentator. Discussing the work of Wyndham Lewis, on December 5, 1964, Mr. Fulford writes knowingly and accurately, scoring here a point for Lewis, there a point against Toronto:

> "I feel," Lewis once wrote of life in Toronto, "that someone is sitting on my chest." If he came here now, I think he would experience a similar feeling. He might notice that much has changed. But he would still be a stranger, he would still be alien to our central beliefs in progress and democracy. If he came here now his status as a celebrity would be recognized, as it was not in 1941, but Toronto would still have little real sympathy for a prickly and persistent Outsider.

With Nathan Cohen, the Entertainment Editor of *The Toronto Star*, we come upon a writer with an awkward style but a thinker with a sharp acidic temperament. Maritime-born, Mr. Cohen is a personality in his own right, and much better known to his readers than the Canadian actors and actresses he writes about. He was the excellent and genial moderator of "Fighting Words," and is a man of much charm and competence. When his daily column discusses drama or ballet, it shows a certain sense of theatre and a cultural knowledgeability second to none. I haven't the space or the scope to show where Mr. Cohen shines (when discussing his pet ideas, group theatre, the incompetence of the Crest, internationalism, continentalism, etc.) or where he sends shivers up and down my spine (like his firmly held opinion that Elizabeth Taylor Burton is a great actress), but for the suggestive figure he cuts in Toronto, the interested reader might turn to the slightly oblique character study in *The Incomparable Atuk* by Mordecai Richler.

But it is as an editor that Mr. Cohen falters. He runs the entertainment pages of the *Star* personally, but from one day to the next it is impossible to predict

what the *Star* will cover, what it will condemn or what it feels it should ignore. This might make for good journalism, but the coverage is hardly critical, or in keeping with the calibre of the staff. The television, movie, music reviewers all write well but hardly memorably. Most of *Maclean's* staff moved to the *Star*, and I presume they too will be turning out the same kind of stuff. Here is one instance. Joan Irwin's column "This Week in Montreal" is potentially the most informative and challenging in the three Toronto papers. But there is no budget to send Mrs. Irwin to Montreal, so the column is compiled from the pages of the French-language Montreal newspapers. Again, when a third of a page (on December 26, 1964) is devoted to informing the reader that this year *Esquire* is in but *The New Yorker* is out; *Cavalier* is in, *Playboy* is out; *Canada Month* in, *Maclean's* out; etc., something is seriously wrong. Or, nitpicking in another way, when a fine piece on Toronto by Mordecai Richler is reprinted verbatim from *The New Statesman* with two small factual errors that would mean nothing to a Londoner but a lot to a Torontonian are left standing, then it is the editorial ability, the informing intelligence, that is on holiday.

If trying to piece together an entertainment policy for *The Toronto Star* fails, the attempt wouldn't even be tried with the other two papers. The *Globe* always seems to have something else on its mind, and the *Telegram* is too busy being "bright." Journalism is by nature fleeting, and perhaps it is too much to ask practising newspapermen to acquire taste. During the last federal election, it surprised many in Toronto to find the three Toronto dailies in total agreement. Editorial policies as different as Old Conservative and New Liberal were suddenly merged to recommend "majority government." It suggests that, in professionalized Toronto, it doesn't matter any more what is being said as long as the message is expediency.

review articles

THE PERSONAL HERESY

Robin Skelton

IRVING LAYTON, *The Laughing Rooster.* McClelland & Stewart. $4.50 cloth, $2.50 paper.

AT THE CLOSE of an interesting preface to his new collection Irving Layton remarks that it is fun to see

> shocked reviewers point out my weakness for plain speech and honest feeling to their innocent readers; to learn from them with the publication of each book of mine how once again I have offended their Victorian notions of decency and good taste. I wouldn't miss that thrill for anything in the world.

This, of course, is calculated to enrage critics into announcing shrilly their absolutely undisturbed equanimity, or into ponderously discussing the amorality of Mr. Layton's viewpoint. It causes me, however, merely to feel depressed at the childishness of the manœuvre and at the attitudes towards poetry which underly it.

These attitudes are not easy to define, but can perhaps be summed up under the heading of "The Personal Heresy"; by this phrase I mean to indicate an egocentricity which assumes that the poet's personality is more important than the poems, that any expression of personal idiosyncracy has poetic potential, and that self-dramatization is an adequate substitute for structural control.

There are a number of such heretics about today. Many of the so-called "Beat" poets are of this kind, and there appear to be a growing number of young Canadian poets who believe that sincerity is essentially formless, and that egotism is a form of poetic afflatus. For this Irving Layton, who is not uninfluential, must bear some responsibility. Too often in this book he appears to confuse nervous excitement with inspiration, and estimate a poem's worth in terms of the feelings which caused it rather than of the feelings it displays.

This is most obvious in some of the more fragmentary erotic poems, where the reader, if excited at all, must be excited by what the poem refers to rather than by what the poem embodies. References to breasts and penises are frequently productive of a kind of excitement, for there is a voyeur lurking in most of us, and few male readers, at least, can honestly deny that they remain totally unmoved by descriptions of sexual athleticism. Nevertheless, this kind of excitement is often destructive of the connotative richnesses that can be found in less outspoken work; the complexities of human relationship are denied by the concentration upon sensual simplicities, and the result is degrading to both poetry

and man.

On the other hand, Layton has, in this collection as in his others, expressed sexual exuberance with delightful directness; this candour itself is life-enhancing, and sometimes suggests an almost primal innocence. Innocence may seem an odd word to use of such poems as *The Worm*, *Portrait of Nolady*, *Coal*, or *Wrong End of a Telescope* which deal with promiscuity and lust rather than love, and are gross in both imagination and expression; nevertheless, they are essentially simple-minded poems dealing only with the most basic emotions, and their gaze is as direct and unsophisticated as that of a Medieval Dance of Death or portrait of the Seven Deadly Sins.

It is the contrast between this simple vision and the language in which it is expressed which troubles me. The language of these poems is often awkwardly "literary", and poetic clichés abound. I find it hard to accept such fragments as: "they shovelled me into the cold earth", "the brown buds hanging from the bough", "to feel the sun in his bones" and "I shall rejoice when you are cold dead clay". There are often extraordinary lapses of diction, as in *Diversion*:

> Whenever I'm angry with her
> and hold up my hand to slap or hit
> my darling recites some lines I've writ.

The "or hit" is unnecessary for the sense, and "writ" is a very clumsy archaism. Rhythmically, too, many of these poems combine flat free-verse rhythms with dully conventional iambic cadences. Abstractions are often used in such a way as to destroy the poem's force, as in *Lust* where we read:

> Once the arms
> that held you
> held glory,
> held love and delight;
> now when I leave
> your embrace
> small vipers
> fall from my moist armpits,
> vermin,
> and I am sick with hate.

The contrast between worn-out abstractions and vivid (if crude) imagery could have worked here if the images had not themselves been later explained into nullity.

All this appears to deny Layton's Prefatory statement that "I have as much respect for good workmanship and painful revision as the next conscientious poet." It also, perhaps, like the Preface, points to a lack of confidence; Layton cannot trust the images to do his work for him, but has to comment upon them, to tell us what he is doing rather than simply do it.

The same artistic clumsiness is evident in many poems in which the first person

intrudes unnecessarily. In *The Cactus* the first three words, "I can imagine", only serve to remove immediacy from the following image; without these words the poem would derive much more drama from the personal reference in the penultimate line. The "Personal Heresy" is also responsible for the embarrassing nature of *For My Former Students* in which Layton indulges in a little typical self-congratulation, referring to his "words so fierce" and their powerful effect upon his audience.

The whole book is marred by such defects as these, and while there are a number of almost successful poems, and many powerful and passionate fragments, the general impression is one of slapdash egocentricity, fumbled metaphors, and sagging concentration. Perhaps the most astonishing, and most symptomatic, piece of all is *Success*, which reads:

I've always wanted
to write
a poem
with the word
"zeugma"
in it.

Now I've done it!

You haven't, you know, you haven't!

IMPRISONED GALAXIES

Fred Cogswell

PHYLLIS GOTLIEB, *Within the Zodiac*. McClelland & Stewart. Paper $1.50, cloth, $4.50.

THE TITLE, *Within the Zodiac*, is exasperatingly effective in its combined suggestiveness and vagueness. The zodiac is rich in meaning to astrologers, who see in it a visible evidence of the power of an all-pervading order that regulates the motion of the universe from the smallest atom to the largest star. To the devotee of oriental religion and the orphic philosopher, the zodiac typifies the four aspects of divinity and the four stages in the unfolding of human history — creation, preservation, destruction, and renovation. To others less erudite, the zodiac (the word itself means "little animal") is the bestiary of the absurd folklore of the heavens.

Stimulated by the possibilities inherent in its title, the reader opens the book to discover that what Phyllis Gotlieb really means by the phrase "within the zodiac" is the interrelatedness of all the material things that comprise the universe in space and time. At least half the poems in the volume are devoted to the synthesizing by mental association of scattered fragments of the physical universe. In "Latitude" the unfolding of Mercator's map is linked

to the development of an embryo; in "Small World" the sparkle of empty whisky bottles caught in a net bag suggests the gleam of "imprisoned galaxies".

In her poems of this *genre*, Phyllis Gotlieb does not rely for her readers' interest upon any previous structure of traditional association or upon the tug and pull of feeling that a more meaningful human situation might involve. She is content to record her insights in free verse lines made up of language that is hard and dry, relying upon the initial pleasure of the surprised recognition of congruity in the midst of incongruity for the impact of the individual poem, and upon the total impression of a number of poems for the development of a cumulative philosophy. This philosophy, I believe, is in essence that expressed in the following lines of Francis Thompson's "In No Strange Land":

> The drift of pinions, would we harken,
> Beats at our own clay-shuttered doors.

As a result of relative failure to exploit other resources of poetry, these poems are almost exclusively cerebral, and at the same time much too clear. They exhaust themselves at first reading. The meaning they convey needs to be supported either by the kind of rhythmic harmony that makes Francis Thompson's poem demonstrate the beauty it proclaims, or by the addition of an extra dimension of myth or feeling.

There are rhythms in *Within the Zodiac*, but they are mainly visual. An endless experimenter in the impact of words and lines upon the eye, Phyllis Gotlieb in dealing with sound-patterns seems mainly intent upon producing a "common smoothness". A notable exception, however, is "A Bestiary of the Garden for Children Who Should Know Better." In this poem, she exploits the rhythmic possibilities of the language so effectively that it becomes one of the few poems in the volume to which the reader returns again and again.

In a few poems, Phyllis Gotlieb has added a dimension of myth, either tradition or personal. Among these are notable: "Who Knows One?", which certainly gains in stature from its relationship to the Jewish religious symbolism; "The Young Dionysus", which makes the death of a Canadian rabbit correspond to the murder of the god of vegetation and of creative imagination; and "Day Falcon", a poem in which Phyllis Gotlieb embodies in brilliant and accurate naturalistic description her own personal myth of the nature of the energy which underlies and sustains the universe. "Day Falcon" is one of the most ambitious and altogether successful short poems ever written by a Canadian poet.

The poems in *Within the Zodiac* which deal with human beings attempt to do with respect to time what the other poems do with respect to space. They may be classified into two groups. The first involves historical characters (Archimedes, Pliny, Da Vinci, Brueghel, Rembrandt), about whom the author comments with the same dry logic which she applies elsewhere to bottles, marbles, hopscotch, and the stars; the second group, dealing with Phyllis Gotlieb's own personal memories ("This One's On Me", "Lost Unfound", "Seventh Seal", "Late Gothic", "Memento") is, in my opinion, the most sustained and satisfactory section of the entire book. Here the author's intelligent perception of congruity and incongruity is supplemented to the fullest extent by personal involvement. Phyllis Gotlieb is in these poems

as elsewhere a god dominating her creative universe, but she is no longer one who dwells on remote, but hard, clear peaks of intellect; here she moves and feels no less clearly but at one with the creatures of her creation, as these lines from "Late Gothic" will demonstrate:

> . . . and we smelled the stench
> of the furs the old man had made his
> shapeless coats of
> and went down the narrow walled stair
> for the last time
> into the bright street between the wall up-
> flung
> against the howling chimney of the mad-
> woman's throat
> on the one side
> and the redbrick rampart of shoddy stores
> against the
> reaching blackened arms of the chimneys
> on the other

In Phyllis Gotlieb's poetry at its best, not only is one continually conscious of the merging of the fragments of life towards unity; one is haunted by the memory that just behind the surface of one's mind he has experienced it all before.

FAITHFUL OR BEAUTIFUL?

Len Anderson

The Poetical Works of Taras Shevchenko, C. H. Andrusyshen and Watson Kirkconnell. University of Toronto, $8.00.

"TRANSLATIONS ARE LIKE WOMEN", a French critic once said, "when they are beautiful they are not faithful, and when they are faithful they are not beautiful." I cannot attest to the fidelity of the translation of *The Poetical Works of Taras Shevchenko* by C. H. Andrusyshen and Watson Kirkconnell (my Ukrainian being more comprehensible to my English-speaking friends than my Ukrainian-speaking ones), but I will have something to say about its beauty.

The occasion for the appearance of this translation is the 150th celebration of Taras Shevchenko's birth. The Ukrainian Canadian Committee approached Dr. Kirkconnell in 1961 and asked him to produce a complete translation of all the poetical works that Shevchenko had written in Ukrainian. He reluctantly agreed with the stipulation that he be helped by C. H. Andrusyshen of the University of Saskatchewan, a former pupil. Dr. Andrusyshen was "to guarantee the accuracy of the rendering in phrase and spirit" and Dr. Kirkconnell's contribution was to be, as he himself says, " a dexterity in prosody that was the result of forty years of practice and four thousand pages of published verse." Thus

Dr. Andrusyshen is responsible for the translation's "fidelity" and Dr. Kirkconnell for its "beauty".

Canadians as a whole must by now be a little curious about Ukrainians and their passionate concern over this little known poet. Who, precisely, are these people? And is this Shevchenko as good as they say he is? Neither question is at all easy to answer. For example, many western scholars refuse to accept the existence of the Ukraine as a separate entity apart from Russia, except as a kind of vague geographical area in which the inhabitants speak an obscure Russian dialect. Until comparatively recently Ukrainians were known as Malorusy or Little Russians. The word Ukraine means borderland and this sense of the word remains vestigially even in English when we talk about *the* Ukraine in much the same way that we talk about the Maritimes.

Ukrainian scholars of course reject this interpretation of history with a fury born of a deep frustration. The Ukraine they argue is a nation and has been one since the Dark Ages. And if sometimes this irrefragable fact has been obscured, it is only because the Ukraine has been the envy of her rapacious neighbours who attempted to, pseudomorphically, recreate her in their own image, the neighbours being the Poles, Turks, Russians and Germans.

The point of contention is really the idea of nationhood, and its meaning. Nationalism in the strict sense of the term is a western, late eighteenth-century notion, the spark being kindled in the minds of certain French and German philosophers, fanned into flames by the French Revolution and spreading in the nineteenth century like a prairie fire throughout the entire western world and, in some cases, beyond. Nationalism is a seductive, insidious, and debilitating disease that enervates even the most serene of peoples, but when it is introduced into a cultural, political and religious hotbed like the Ukraine the results are maniacal. One example should make this clear: When the Nazis marched into the Ukraine in 1941 they were not only welcomed by a substantial number of Ukrainian nationalists, but some of the latter actually joined the SS to help the man who once told Martin Bormann that all Ukrainian children who could count over a hundred were to be liquidated.

In any event it is in the context of nationalism that the immense popularity of Taras Shevchenko is to be understood. The cult of nationalism demands its national poet: England has its Shakespeare, Germany its Goethe and Italy its Dante. The function of the national poet is quite specific; he is (in terms of this nationalist mystique) the myth maker. He purifies the dialect of the tribe and gives it a vision; he redeems a hostile and an alien world and makes it not only habitable but human. In other words one becomes aware, in the mirror of his poetry, of one's own psychic topography. He not only tells you who you are; he also tells you what you are. But in point of historical fact the great national poet does not do this consciously. He is first and foremost an artist who writes because he must write, because it is an indefinable but compulsive obsession. It is for later generations to turn him into a monument. When a poet begins to write with the express purpose of creating a national consciousness he is not a national poet but a nationalist

poet, a polemic, a propagandist, a didactic versifier. And this unfortunately is what Taras Shevchenko is, one who happens to use poetry to grind his own axe; one who uses art as an abrasive to make keen the edge of his own idiosyncratic concerns. Nikolai Gogol is without doubt a great writer and one who happens to be Ukrainian, but he is rejected by Ukrainian nationalists because he wrote in Russian, a little like rejecting Sir Thomas More as an English literary figure because he wrote *his* Utopia in Latin. It is no criterion of Shevchenko's greatness to say that his poetry moves Ukrainians; I have seen people weep over the verse of Edgar Guest.

A truly great poet has no nation; he has a culture through which he expresses his universality. The land in which he is born and the tongue through which he expresses himself, are mere accidents and this the world well knows. Dante is a great poet who happened to be Italian but he is not great because he was Italian. Ukrainian nationalists, it seems to me, are a little like Madison Avenue hucksters who are trying to sell a product in a highly competitive market. But poetical genius, unlike a toothbrush, can be neither bought nor sold.

Shevchenko's poetry as it is refracted through the prism of Dr. Kirkconnell's sensibility and Dr. Andrusyshen's erudition is dreadful to an extreme. The poems are chiefly narrative, and can be roughly divided into two main groups, those dealing with love and those dealing with politics. Of the first group we have a prototypal plot in which a maiden gives her heart to a low-born serf, usually a bastard, the parents oppose the match

and the youth leaves to earn his fortune invariably by joining the Cossacks, while she, heavy with child, faithfully awaits his return. They marry, and live happily etc. The second group is made up of mainly historical poems dealing with the Ukraine's Cossack past, which is seen as a golden age contrasted to the bondage of the present day.

But perhaps I should let the poetry speak for itself so that you can be the

I am your Sweetheart, Katie, see!
  Why do you spur your steed?"
And while he urged his charger on
  As if he knew her not —
"O stay, my darling!" still she cried.
"I'll weep no more, God wot.
Do you not know me, Ivan dear?
  Do you not Katie know?
I swear to God I am your Kate!"
  Quote he: "You fool let go!
Come pull the crazy woman off!"
  — "Dear God! Ivan, my dear!
And would you now abandon me?
  Your love, you swore, was sheer."

judge. The poem "Katerina" deals with an innocent young Ukrainian girl who falls in love with a callous Russian soldier. He makes her pregnant and then leaves for war. She in turn is cast out by her parents and, child in arms, sets out to find him which after many trials she finally does. When she meets him she says:

Perhaps in view of all this you will allow me a little doggerel of my own which, if somewhat inelegant, has the virtue of sincerity and sums up at least one Ukrainian's position vis à vis "The Ukrainian national poet".

Dostoevsky can do more than Shevchenko
  can
To justify God's Ways to the Ukrainian.

books in review

ARTLESS CHRONICLE

M. ALLERDALE GRAINGER, *Woodsmen of the West*. McClelland & Stewart. $1.50.

THIS BOOK was well worth re-printing, and not merely for its historical value. It is loose, awkward, rambling and disorganized. The author has a poor ear for dialogue and seldom gets hold of a character in a very convincing way. But he is telling of a time and place and people that have been very little explored. In doing so he manages considerably more than a mere historical record or a superficial account of surface detail; he has preserved at least some of the ways of hope and thought that went into the life of the small upcoast logging camps almost sixty years ago. Some of those ways are still recognizable today and perhaps will be in British Columbians two or three generations from now.

Grainger writes chiefly of Carter, a small-time logging operator, a dark, angry, power-loving, ruthless man. He seems to respect, even to admire Carter, as an able and successful logger in good times, yet he ends up hating and despising him in his failure in bad times. The fact is that Carter, even in Grainger's account of him, was never a good logger. He had picked a poor logging show, in excessively remote country for that time. He ran a poor camp with haywire rigging and broken-down machinery and ran it clumsily. His failure was inevitable and excites neither surprise nor sympathy, merely some doubt as to whether he has been accurately recorded.

Grainger is writing of what, in the late twenties, we used to call the "bad old days", before the I.W.W. brought decent living conditions into the camps after the first world war. But even in those days there were quiet, frugal, efficient small operators out in the islands and inlets, versatile and ingenious men who nursed their simple machinery, kept their rigging in shape, survived the depressions and made money in the booms. There were even men who could boast in later years that their camps had never known a serious accident and that their logging methods left a sound crop of second-growth behind. It seems a pity that some echo of them did not find its way into this book, if only to set Carter in proper prespective.

But it remains important that Grainger was there, a sensitive and reasonably articulate man. He has recorded the feel of the country when it was new, any man's, and when any and every man had his own pet money-making scheme and dream that made him sizeable and significant. He is splendidly accurate in describing the drains that swallowed the schemes and drew off the dreams as well as the casual courage with which ill-equipped men accepted the enormous hazards of weather and tide and country. Grainger is at his best in this. His first-hand experience speaks clearly and simply of the violent wet-cold of the coast in a way that gains in power precisely because the dramatic values are ignored. The fantastic struggle of a seventy-mile row in a waterlogged boat in the depths of winter comes through with compelling power because its real

hazards are nowhere acknowledged; the awesome business of guiding a rackety steamboat through a narrow, tide-riven passage is breathless and clear because the unspoken fear is not of death, but of incompetence revealed.

In these and many other scenes Grainger's artless book carries a weight of conviction that is beyond the reach of fiction. If Grainger were around today he would find many things changed, in degree if not in kind. He would find the small operator still, in all his shapes and sizes. Conceivably he might even find another Carter, hidden somewhere among the inlets, though I doubt it. I feel there was both more and less to Carter than Grainger's skill could perceive or convey.

RODERICK HAIG-BROWN

GUILT AND COUNTER-GUILT

HENRY KREISEL, *The Betrayal.* McClelland & Stewart. $4.95.

"NOW, WHEN I LOOK BACK, it seems strange that I should have got involved with Theodore Stappler at all." Now read on.... The fact is, first sentences have a way of telling us almost more than we can bear to know of a novel, and this one, with its suggestion of carpentry and its deadly accurate hint of a wordy and pedestrian narrator, sent my anticipation skidding. Very well, I said (making a mental note of a possibly too-hasty judgement,) this book will not escape us, crackling with surprise, it is a *written* book, it has a pleasing feeling of a promised suspense. We know that a few phrases on the dust cover ("what at first appears to be merely a thrilling suspense story of one man's relentless search to avenge a wrong, a tale that culminates in dramatic events in Edmonton and a haunting epilogue in the Canadian north, becomes a penetrating study of guilt in our society") suggest the application of the modern adventure story to a universal moral dilemma. And universal moral dilemmas, seen in a Canadian landscape, are something we could use more of. Short of the first-best (and the confidence-trick one hoped to catch a hint of in the opening sentences) such an adventure, a search, a chase, promised to be a very good second-best. And therein, as I read on, came my second disappointment.

For *The Betrayal* does not quite live up to its promise, and the reason for this seems to lie in Mr. Kreisel's unwillingness to seize his story and its ironies directly by the throat. The complexities of the moral issue lie wrapped in speculation and conversation: they are too much talked about. The physical action, which alone gives a skeleton to the theme, is surprisingly unexciting. Meetings, partings, long anguished conversations take the place of what might have been the inexorable tracking down of a prey and its aftermath.

The story is thus: the narrator, a professor of history at a university in Edmonton, takes note of an attractive girl student when she begins to slip behind in her work. The girl has met a man from her father's past, a man whom her father dislikes — and she is attracted to him. The narrator is introduced to the man, Stappler, and before long, Stappler is pouring out the story of his long search for the enemy who betrayed him in the Europe of 1939, the man who, it is apparent long before it dawns on the

narrator, is the girl's father. The author has chosen not to prolong this mystery: that particular revelation comes about a fifth of the way through the book. What remains is first of all a detailed account of the original betrayal, seen at third-hand and through Stappler's telling and the professor's description of that telling and his own reactions to it; and the worrying and teasing of the moral problems involved in that betrayal and its effect on Stappler. Here the narrative is too oblique, and encumbered with exaggerated emphasis on the emotional postures of the two characters: "I thought at first I had not heard right, and though I was too surprised, stunned even, to say anything...." "All at once, the tension between us eased...." "The tension in the room had become palpable...." "The silence became ominous and impressive...." "Now an odd thing happened. I felt suddenly a sense of relief, a slackening of a nearly unbearable tension...." "I closed my eyes and felt the room swaying before me. I tried to understand him, tried to grasp the tangled web of his motives...." A little of this goes a long way, and it is hard to escape the conclusion that the author is trying to build his emotional temperature into the narrative by talking about it rather than by creating it.

The novel is two-thirds over before it regains a forward momentum, and it is here that it seems to me Mr. Kreisel has lost the opportunity to resolve the conundrums of the past with a conclusion worthy of the central issue. The ironies never seem to be achieved, and meanwhile the narrator, pedantic and boring both as a character and, I'm afraid, as a narrator, begins to claim some part of the story for himself, and the epilogue seems futile rather than moving and significant, as it ought to have been.

This is a pity, because the central issue of guilt and counter-guilt, which I am sure was the original seed of the novel, is a fascinating one, and one which Mr. Kreisel is worthy of exploring. I understand this novel was a long time in writing: early references to the Korean war and an epilogue dated 1960 and 1964 attest to this. Could it be that as the story unfolded, the characters diminished in size, became duller and more real — and yet less true to the implications of the story Mr. Kreisel wanted to tell?

GEORGE ROBERTSON

HUMOUR IN AFFLICTION

AUSTIN C. CLARKE, *The Survivors of the Crossing*. McClelland & Stewart. $5.00.

IN HIS FIRST NOVEL, *The Survivors of the Crossing*, the West Indian writer Austin C. Clarke has provided himself with some high standards of a technical nature, and some severe problems in terms of communication. For this novel is set, moreover, amongst the poverty-haunted villagers whose fate it is to labour amongst the sugar canes for an exploiting plantation owner. And thus, from the outset, the author has to win and hold our attention as he tells a tale of a very simple people, many of whom are illiterate, including the book's hero, and for most of whom this gruelling existence amid appalling rural poverty suggests all that life can possibly offer.

One enormous advantage, and one which Clarke indulges to the hilt, is the mid-century freedom of expression that fiction has won for itself. This book would have been intolerable had it been

written with the niceties of another era informing both the speech of its protagonists and concealing their attitudes and gestures. As it is, we are able to see how sex alleviates boredom, mitigates the burdens of the indigent and provides solace for yesterday, comfort tonight and hope for tomorrow — when there are hardly enough alternative experiences these villagers can afford.

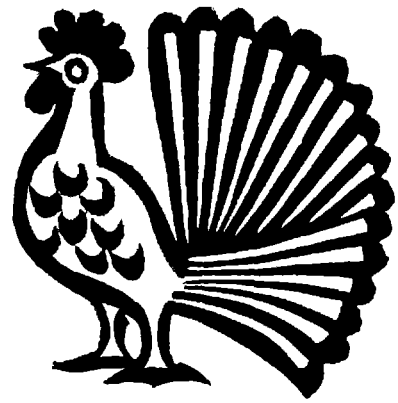
There is then a quality of realism injected into the narrative that allows us to enter fully and with sympathy into a situation: a situation with social, economic, even political overtones; one, moreover, that is radical in temper and has strikes and labor unrest as its terms of reference.

But that is only the beginning. *The Survivors of the Crossing* is a novel — not a piece of well-documented socialist reporting from the British West Indies. How, then, has Clarke made the transition from one to the other and with what measure of success?

Very largely, I think, he has brought off on his own terms precisely what he set out to accomplish. He tells a tragicomic story of Rufus, the ageing partisan of socialist progress, his friends and his foes as he sets about organizing a strike against the managers of the sugar cane plantation.

Drawing freely on a dialect resplendent with vivid images, many of them riotously improper, the author is able to provide us with characterization that is rounded and seemingly instinct with authenticity.

The portraits of the people of this village — from labourers and Rufus's cuckolder, the rum store owner, to the priest and school teacher — all have memorable traits. And such women as



Rufus's common-law wife, Stella, and the fundamentalist preacher, Clementina, bring a further distinction to these pages.

It is true, I think, that the author's gift for a tell-tale expression, or a tiny but accurate detail, sometimes is purchased at the expense of personal profundity. Indeed, this novel is not a depth analysis of people. No character, not even that of Rufus, suggests an informing psychology in its creation. And perhaps this gives a rather old-fashioned flavour to *The Survivors of the Crossing.*

But if so, that is equally part of its charm; that and the undoubted humour that irrepressibly bursts through the narrative every now and then. This is the humour of a people in affliction, for whom to laugh is a vital safety valve. It is also the humour of the author, who sees the sacred and profane, the highest ideals and the most lowly whims, inextricably cohabiting in such a milieu as he depicts for us.

As part of that "new" literature of the English speaking world that the postwar period has vouchsafed us, Austin Clarke's novel has its own special niche.

It is not as polished as some of the West Indian fiction to have appeared, though it is free of the sort of Hindu prudery that sometimes blemishes V. S. Naipaul's novels.

Personally I should like to see Clarke writing in a little more heightened prose (if he wishes to address a readership for whom the Caribbean is an unknown book, climatically as well as socially and politically). A little poetry of place, in other words, would not have come amiss. And a "situation" novel such as this, is no sure indicator of the novels that might or might not issue from the same pen.

But if the honesty and the often rueful humour continue to walk hand in hand with the Negro experience that forms the burden of this book, the future can hardly prove less than interesting. *The Survivors of the Crossing* already suggests the preoccupations of a man who is a novelist first, with all the other things a subordinate and artistically viable second.

DAVID WATMOUGH

ORANGE BLOSSOM HONEY

ANNE MONTROSE, *The Winter Flower and Other Fairy Stories.* Macmillan. $3.75.

JAMES MCNEILL, *The Double Knights: More Tales from Round the World.* Oxford. $3.50.

ONCE UPON A TIME, surely, there must have been a splendid collection of fairy tales without a single pettish step-sister, or a king offering his daughter and half his kingdom for a completely impossible feat (executioner on call; no triflers need apply), or a single sentence of intentional edification. What a relief it must have been. But then I suppose huffing, puffing parents and teachers discovered that this was not at all the sort of thing *they* had read as children. So they banished it. Off to moulder on the dusty top shelf went the book, and children have been putting up with the beastly step-sisters, the obsessed kings, and the presumptuous "improvement" ever after.

Well, maybe not. Perhaps they like them. According to stock beliefs, they like repetition, love to recognize a situation, and absorb "morals" unconsciously if they don't consciously approve them. But if, as I sometimes fear, they are simply more polite and resigned than we think, and keep on listening and reading in the valiant hope that the old collection will reappear in some form, Anne Montrose's *The Winter Flower* will be a mild disappointment to them. For although the book has decided strengths — its style is graceful, its dialogue is plentiful and unstilted, and its descriptive passages are evocative and pretty without often being trite, the castles and woods are full of familiar situations and characters. In thirteen stories no less than seven royal hands are offered to the enterprising (only three, it is true, by impulsive papas), and the boudoirs and drawing-rooms of three stories boast six doomed but gamely nasty step-sisters. "... I like being horrid!" says one of them, "smiling wickedly." Fortunately there are also some redeemingly vital minor characters, like the gloriously bad-tempered but frivolous Grand Dame of the Kitchens, who produces an unrelieved diet of burnt porridge for her impoverished employer and hurls pots, when she isn't off at the

fair enjoying herself on the merry-go-round and swings. And some of the kings' dilemmas are whimsically original: Princess Magnolia is available to anyone who can revive the fire of the royal dragon, guardian of the realm; Princess Mirabel must marry the tailor who can contrive a supremely elegant waistcoat, decides her sybaritic parent, gorging secretly on orange-blossom honey and chocolate peppermint cake with his Grand Marshall; and Princess Ambrosine is conceded to a brash young pedlar on condition that he imprison an obnoxious cuckoo for her bird-and-clock-loving sire.

The edification is here too, lightly handled but unmistakably present. Where it concerns sympathetic characters, it is perfectly orthodox; they are consistently rewarded for being virtuous. Concerning the undeserving it is more subtle. Princess Mirabel's father gets his exquisite waistcoat and wears it to his rash wedding with a queen whose twelve hungry daughters put *finis* to private gorges. Unlike Cinderella's tormentors, Princess Linnet's three selfish step-sisters get what they want and learn to lament it. But only two of the three stories free from conventional messages are seriously wise in a refreshing way. Both "A Tale of Two Mandarins" and "The Eagle and the Lark" are cool, appealing parables on the theme that sometimes the beautiful and the civilized survive only by virtue of a precarious balance of amoralities.

Mircea Vasilu's quirky, curlicued black-and-white drawings match Anne Montrose's stories. They are delicate, lively, and cleverly pretty.

Beside Miss Montrose, James McNeill is a rather pedestrian writer. But what his *Double Knights* lacks of *The Winter Flower*'s surface originality and vivacious, artful narration it makes up for in varied incidents and strange settings and conventions. For this book, like Mr. McNeill's earlier *The Sunken City*, is a collection of folk tales from round the world, and some of the seventeen are very powerful. The book does contain a couple of the old "fail and you lose your head" monarchs, and several stories are national variants of universally known tales, but at least half of them are newcomers to North America's common stock. And even the variants of well-known stories differ enough from the popular versions to command some startled attention. For instance, unlike the seven dancing princesses who wear out their slippers in many a book cavorting with decorous partners, Portugal's naughty princess goes through seven sets of iron soles a night with a ghastly crew of ghostly pirates sporting broken necks or gaping wounds, and "strange hollow eyes." And whereas the fastidious heroine of "The Princess and the Pea" simply proves herself royal by being shockingly pernickety, Hungary's student hero, similarly tested, passes by accident and is taken for a prince by mistake.

If *The Double Knights* version of a Russian tale, "The Seven Simeons Simeonovich", is representative of Mr. McNeill's way with a story, some of the folk tales here may be short a bit of their old intricacy and fun. For Boris Artzybasheff's version of this tale, admittedly much longer, is funnier, more exciting, and better integrated. Mr. McNeill is a lucid, economical story-teller rather than a creative one. However, the bones of the stories are here, and they are good bones. Theo Dimson's bold, strong-lined

drawings, formalized yet lively, contribute some of the articulation.

As for moralizing, *The Double Knights* is blessedly lacking in it. An upstart French shepherd wins a king's suitor contest with magic and some blatant blackmail. Finland's Ollie, though not cannibalistic like his troll enemy, is scarcely more virtuous than the troll; he robs him blind, roasts his wife, tricks him to death, and lives happily, with his relatives and friends, on the poor monster's treasure. Irish John Shea spends a frustrating old age trying to repeat a coup that should have won him riches but didn't, while a German thief becomes a duke and finance minister for proving himself a peerless second-storey man.

> Never again did any of the King's subjects grumble about their taxes, for the clever thief took their money with so much skill that they scarcely knew it was gone.

How appalling. And what a pleasant change.

F. M. FRAZER

SUEZ AND EAST

JAMES EAYRS, *The Commonwealth and Suez.* Oxford. $11.50.

TERENCE ROBERTSON, *Crisis: The Inside Story of the Suez Conspiracy.* McClelland & Stewart, $7.50.

MICHAEL BREGHER, *The New States of Asia.* Oxford.

ISABEL WILSON, *Indian Excursion.* Longmans. $5.50.

ONE OF THE SIGNS of growing maturity in a nation is the tendency for its people to think less of themselves and more of the world outside. The self-consciousness of youth begins to diminish; the basic tasks of establishing a viable economy, a working political system, have been completed. The stage of self-assertion which followed dependence is coming to an end, and now the need to explore and establish relations with other nations and cultures, to find an equilibrium in a world where distance is politically meaningless, becomes gradually paramount.

In Canada this process has been shown particularly in a steadily increased interest in countries where we have little immediate political or economic concern. The United States, Britain and France, and in another sense Russia and China, perhaps inevitably still inhabit the centre of our international vision, but over the last decade we have been demonstrating a growing concern over countries east of Suez.

Suez itself, of course, marks a boundary in historical as well as geographical terms. The Suez crisis of 1956 may well have been the last foray of the old imperialist powers of western Europe, but it also showed Canada playing a sharply independent role in the Commonwealth and the United Nations, and taking the initiative towards the effective solution of an extraordinarily perilous situation. Perhaps because up to the present this feat has not been repeated, it remains in the minds of many Canadians as an isolated peak of achievement in positive diplomacy, and the kind of fascination it holds for historians is shown in the appearance, eight years after the event, of two Canadian books dealing with the crisis.

The first is a documentary survey compiled by James Eayrs and entitled *The Commonwealth and Suez.* Dividing the

incident into five phases, beginning with the nationalization by Egypt of the Suez Canal Company, and ending with the "Reckonings" when the crisis was safely over, Mr. Eayrs presents extracts from political speeches and documents illustrating the attitudes of Britain, Canada and the other Commonwealth countries towards the rapidly changing situation. Like all compilations which draw copiously on the words of politicians and civil servants in moments of crisis, *The Commonwealth and Suez* combines undoubted usefulness to students of history with an impenetrability — so far as the more general reader is concerned — which is compounded partly of an excessive repetitive schematization and partly of the very nature of the material presented. For, now that the false glow of crisis has long faded, one is appalled by the bad logic and the intellectual and moral dishonesty displayed by so many of the world's leaders on this occasion, not to mention their concerted mayhem of English as a language of effective or graceful communication. Fortunately, Dr. Eayrs has prefaced each of his five sections of extracts with a lucid introduction, and one hopes that some day he will expand and unite these passages into a more attractive book in which the verbal atrocities of politicians will be thoroughly controlled within the narrative.

Mr. Terence Robertson, a writer of contemporary history who in the past has specialized in incidents of war, now takes up the semi-war of Suez in his *Crisis: the Inside Story of the Suez Conspiracy*, and complements the documentary collection of Dr. Eayrs with a highly readable and well-researched narrative. Mr. Robertson had interviewed almost all the surviving political leaders and officials in France, Israel, Canada and the United States who played important parts in the crisis. Those of Britain and Egypt appear to have been pointedly reticent, but Mr. Robertson has made judicious use of secondary sources where the primary were not available to him, and he presents a clear and reasonable account whose basic accuracy one cannot doubt.

One of the most distinguished Canadian experts on Asian affairs is Michael Brecher, author of an able biography of Nehru. Professor Brecher's latest book, *The New States of Asia*, is a series of essays on the political development of the nations which emerged in Asia as a result of the breakup of the British, French and Dutch empires. It is a rather abstract study, lacking the kind of personal content which made the Nehru biography so interesting, and presenting the problems of Asia in a curiously cold and dehumanized way. Informative without being attractive, it is a book mainly of interest to the political specialist.

Indian Excursion by Isabel Wilson is the reverse of specialist in any way whatever. Mrs. Wilson went to India for a month with her geophysicist husband. They travelled widely over the country, but were fairly strictly confined within an itinerary based on a series of those widely scattered conferences to which Indians have become extraordinarily addicted since liberation. Mrs. Wilson has a sharp eye for the detail of scenery, a descriptive flair which she does not use sufficiently, and an ear for turns of speech that reveal character, but the very nature of her journey insulated her from Indian life and tempted her to fill long, long stretches of her book with

chat about the conferences and the people she met at them. There might have been material here for a couple of interesting articles on the Indian impressions of an academic's wife, but there is certainly not enough for a book. It reminds one of the fluttery silver leaf that is beaten out in Indian bazaars for covering sweetmeats; bright, but extraordinarily thin.

GEORGE WOODCOCK

JEWISH CANADIANA

DAVID ROME, *A Selected Bibliography of Jewish Canadiana.* Canadian Jewish Congress and the Jewish Public Library.

DAVID ROME, *Jews in Canadian Literature: A Bibliography.* The Canadian Jewish Congress and the Jewish Public Library.

THESE TWO MIMEOGRAPHED VOLUMES, the product of many years of devoted labour by David Rome, the Director of the Jewish Public Library in Montreal, and Curator of the Bronfman Collection of Jewish Canadiana, constitute a significant contribution to Canadian letters. Research tools such as these specialized bibliographies are almost essential for the serious student who is concerned with the nature of Jewish experience in Canada, with the scope and quality of the achievements of Jews in nearly all phases of Canadian life, and with the varied responses of non-Jews to the Jews in their midst.

The Selected Bibliography of Jewish Canadiana, which was published on the occasion of the bicentenary of Canadian Jewry, lists major books and pamphlets in various fields of effort, but it does not list periodical articles — an unfortunate omission, as much scholarly material is to be found here. The bibliographer might well have been more selective regarding the material he does present. One questions, for example, the pertinence of such a listing as " 'Grace after meals' Montreal, Epstein's restaurant", or the presence of books by non-Canadians, Jewish or otherwise, simply because they were re-printed in Canada.

The second volume, *Jews in Canadian Literature: a Bibliography,* which develops substantially the section on literature in the earlier book, lists the literary works of Canadian Jews and the writings of non-Jewish Canadians which refer to Jews. Mr. Rome has increased the usefulness of this compilation by summarizing many of the major items of criticism and by providing some brief editorial commentary on the literary works and the criticism. It is regrettable that both bibliographies should be marred by many misspellings and other minor errors. A task that is so well worth doing and which indeed was so carefully carried out in most respects, should not suffer from these avoidable defects. This criticism, however, should not detract unduly from Mr. Rome's achievement, for these bibliographies will undoubtedly prompt much research and make easier the task of the scholar and critic.

M. W. STEINBERG

CANADIAN LITERATURE - 1964

A CHECKLIST EDITED BY RITA BUTTERFIELD

ENGLISH-CANADIAN LITERATURE

compiled by Rita Butterfield

COLLECTIONS

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PENNER, PHILIP and MCGECHAEN, JOHN, eds. *Canadian reflections: an anthology of Canadian prose.* Toronto, Macmillan of Canada [c1964]. 329 p.

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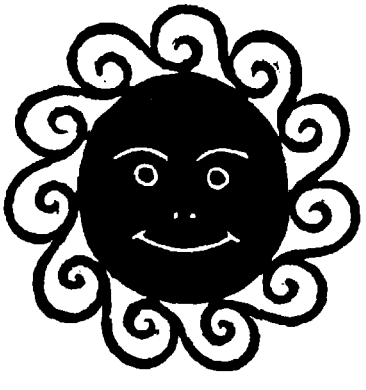

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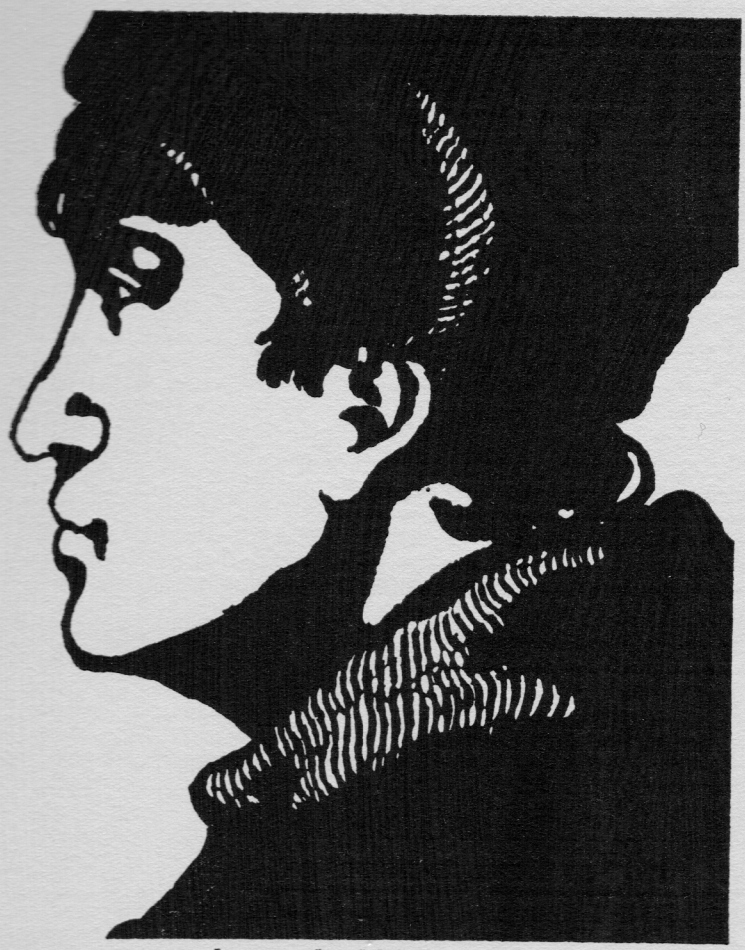

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