

Alexandra Pett

The Talking Mirror: Charles Ritchie and the Art of the Diary

Although the diary form differs substantially from the autobiography or memoir, all three modes of life writing are “the creative expression of the writer’s mind,” and, as such, have a quality of self-reflection: “The author mirrors himself, almost involuntarily, in the very way that he considers his life as an entity and discriminates between significant and unimportant elements in it” (Bottrall 9). Charles Ritchie’s four volumes of diaries, covering his early life and education in Halifax, Nova Scotia, and his years as a Canadian diplomat abroad in London, Paris, Bonn, New York, and Washington (1924 to 1971) provide much evidence of this mirroring of the self that has been identified as a key aspect of life writing. Moreover, Ritchie himself has described his diaries as a “small mirror” of international politics (*Diplomatic Passport* 74) and, at the same time, as “the talking mirror” of a person who loved solitude only when “company was round the corner” (*Diplomatic Passport* 128).

The mirror is a key image in the language of Ritchie’s writing about his private life and about his career as a diplomat. To one interviewer he explained that he saw diplomacy as a mirror of national identity: “. . . our country is based on accommodation, compromise, and conciliation—that I think is reflected, to some extent, in the manner in which we conduct our foreign policy. . . . Characteristics of foreign policy are the mirror images of the country itself” (Fetherling interview). As a diarist, Ritchie is fortunate that his career provided him with much that would interest readers seeking to define Canada’s role in international affairs. Who can forget, for instance, his patriotic endorsement of Prime Minister Pearson, severely reprimanded by President Johnson for speaking out against American involvement in Vietnam? Elsewhere in his writing he is as cautious as a sphinx. As a recent commentator remarks: “He treats the diary like a highly diplo-

matic friend. . . . There is no diarist like him in Canada" (Edinborough). Nevertheless, Ritchie is a difficult writer to assess and evaluate. Probably the biggest obstacle to determining his contribution to Canadian literature lies in his use of the diary form. In the past readers have expected that a good autobiography should be revealing not only of the author but also of his society; it should demonstrate his "connectedness to his society" and act as a "mirror of his times" (Jelinek 8). But what expectations do we now have regarding a diarist's "reflecting" of self and society? It is clear that each diarist has a different sense of audience and that diaries in general are bound to suggest reader/writer relations that are different from the traditional autobiography. Specifically, an autobiography can be defined as life writing shaped by insights of the present; a memoir, on the other hand, is likely to focus more on external events than self-insight. Unlike the style of an autobiography or memoir, a diary represents a form of stream of consciousness; it records life day by day, and the reader's assumption is that daily entries are not altered afterwards. Unlike Lucy Maud Montgomery or Anais Nin, who busily typed up sections of their diaries a day or two after each entry, Ritchie left his editing to his retirement. Although he insists that, in preparing the diary entries for publication, he added nothing, he admits that he deleted a great deal (Pett interview). Did he imagine that the diaries would ever be published as he was composing them? He has several times told the press that he did not contemplate publication until after 1972 (Galt 40). Different voices in the diaries suggest, however, that the writer dealt all along with the problem of readership by imagining himself as different people and by censoring his comments as he wrote. Just as he had to omit reference to much of the work he did as diplomat and ambassador, he also felt compelled, for fear of hurting family and friends, to omit many personal revelations. All diarists, in a sense, have an audience in mind, if only an ideal self; Ritchie becomes masterful as a diarist in letting this "other" receive and echo his message.

Although the four volumes (*An Appetite for Life*, *The Siren Years*, *Diplomatic Passport* and *Storm Signals*) are all described as diaries, they differ in format. The first two volumes suggest some fairly intimate connections with self whereas the last two contain elements of memoir, including passages of essay-type commentary. The last volume also presents some of the writer's overview of the shape of his life that almost runs contrary to the diary tradition. Although he has been termed Canada's own Pepys (*Financial Post* 1977), his use of the diary is very different from the tradition of diary writing established by

Pepys. As he has told interviewers, he regards his diaries as a series of photographs, or images of life (Pett), a form of collage (Galt), and even a kind of written mimicry (Galt).

One purpose in writing a diary is to come to terms with the sense of failure. In the 1924 entries, which begin *An Appetite for Life: The Education of the Young Diarist*, he introduces himself as a failed novelist. Recognizing that he will never be able to write fiction in the form of a short story or novel, he encourages himself, instead, to develop his writing talent in recording the life of his family in their home, The Bower, on the outskirts of Halifax's south end: "As I walked under the trees in the park the rain came on. I was thinking, 'I cannot invent. I shall never, never be a novelist. At the same time, I must write. Why? God knows. So that I'm left with this diary, this useless, drivelling diary. If that is all I have, I had better get on with it'" (4). Similarly, in *The Siren Years*, which covers his wartime experiences in London, writing in the diaries is a form of compensation for feeling oneself a failure in other spheres. Despite the fact that he receives an important promotion, records his own talent in sifting through refugees' applications, and senses his power in deciding who will be allowed to come to Canada ("My office is the door of escape from hell," 59), he is haunted by feelings of personal inadequacy. He sees himself as a Prufrock figure, walking alone in the foggy parks of London, solitary in his civilian clothes, and ineffectual in helping to dig out wounded Londoners after air raids. Moving from one furnished flat to another, he has no permanent home; when his latest domicile is bombed, he tells people he has narrowly escaped death, but he suspects that he was actually in little danger. Some diaries record life-threatening, traumatic experiences; some act as an account of the steps leading to premature death. In Ritchie's case, few experiences emerge with heightened intensity. Unlike Anais Nin who records in her diary that she is not interested in ordinary life but only the search for "high moments" (11), Ritchie seems a prisoner of the ordinary, not because his life is uneventful or apart from the great events of the world, but because he deflates his own potential for heroism.

Another purpose in diary writing is preservation; a diarist is by nature both solitary and retentive. The introductory sections to each volume of Ritchie's diaries bring this out. In the preface to *Diplomatic Passport*, for example, he states that writing in the diary is more than the expression of egotism and more than a confession: "... it may also be an obsession with the passing of time, a sense that life is slipping like sand through one's fingers and that before it vanishes completely one

must shore up these remains" (1). In the last volume, *Storm Signals*, he presents himself as a member of a group of people defined by their desire to remain aloof: "Diarists are by definition non-joiners; theirs is not a group activity. Our only plea in defence might be that we find Life so interesting that we are not willing to see it slip between our fingers without leaving a trace behind" (x). Although such descriptions suggest that Ritchie enjoys being alone, he is also a frantic socializer. He is fascinated by surfaces and devotes much time in his personal and career lives to the pursuit of connections with other people. Like many diary writers, he is interested in everything, however trivial. In *Diplomatic Passport*, for example, he interrupts rather ponderous comments about the disappearance of both Nazis and Jews in post-war Germany to explain the role of Popski, the dachshund, in his household; Popski's accidents on the carpet, his relationship with the German servants, and his manipulation of his owners, take up as much space in the diary as the account of Ritchie's attempts to learn to speak German and to communicate with his German colleagues.

An additional purpose in diary writing is obvious in the light of Ritchie's profession as diplomat. His double life as both writer and diplomat proves, as he says, "doubly enjoyable," and the "escape hatch" of the journal allows him the freedom which his public life seems to deny (*Diplomatic Passport* 2). The diary writing allows him to make sense of the day's experience and to connect with self. However, for the reader unaccustomed to his kind of shorthand the notations of lunch and dinner engagements, walks and talks, commentary on other diaries and books, reactions to paintings in galleries, and records of conversations may seem unrevealing. He records his world; that external environment is always a clue to his inner landscape. He tells us that the diary is not an art form: "A diary is not an artistic creation. It has—or should have—a breath of immediacy but at the expense of form or style. Life is not transmuted into art" (*Siren Years* 12). Nevertheless, despite the seeming inclusiveness of his diaries, Ritchie unifies a number of entries around two or three central ideas. Did this occur in the editing process? He denies that this was the case: "The diaries are as I wrote them save for occasional phrases which have been altered" (*Siren Years* 8). As a writer, he seems always aware of such fictional techniques as dialogue, scene, symbolism, and characterization. From the beginning the diaries show evidence of someone much given to fictionalizing and much aware of how each diary entry could become fiction, if that were the writer's purpose. Even the dog, for example, reflects the writer's repressed need to misbehave.

Ritchie's use of the diary form as fiction varies a lot from one stage of his life to another. His first book of diaries, *An Appetite for Life*, published after the award winning *Siren Years*, is the most strongly fictionalized. In part, this fictionalizing of his life occurs in the way that the young diarist describes himself. He consciously tries on a number of masks: "I have no character that I know of. I try to be the characters I read about or the people I admire, to enter into their skins and act as they would, but no one notices" (8). In such affectations he is much like his cousin Gerald who visits The Bower frequently. Half-crazy, slightly pompous, wearing ill-fitting clothes, absurd in his phony mannerisms, Gerald annoys the family by lingering over his food and speaking to people in the park nearby as if he were a celebrity. Gerald's desire to be a professional actor is mocked by Charles and his younger brother Roley; his ineptitude also annoys and amuses them. As a character in the diaries, Gerald represents a stroke of genius on Ritchie's part. As his alter-ego, Gerald allows the diarist to express his own fears of being ridiculed.

Even as a teenager, the young diarist has a sense of how life can be shaped as myth. His call to adventure and the beginning of the story is the point at which he prepares himself to go to Oxford. He feels superior to the other students at King's College in Halifax because he has a personal destiny, as yet unclear. His mother, a talented mimic, has decided that he must do something special. "Sometimes Mother paints such pictures of my future, saying I should get out of this place and live in the great world and meet interesting people, and then in the next breath she says it is all impossible. . . . She wants me to have what I want but we cannot afford it. When I stagger up to my room after one of these sessions about my future I fall into bed and sleep as if I were drugged" (20). As mistress of The Bower, his mother fills her house with friends and relatives, entertaining them sympathetically until her impulse to ridicule can no longer be contained. The young Ritchie is much entertained by her ability to imitate the words and gestures of even the dead. It is difficult for him to measure up to her expectations, however, when he sees himself in the mirror: "I want to be handsome and dashing and self-assured, but I am angular, beak-nosed, narrow-chested and wear glasses. I am quite tall, but what is the good of that?" (9). He has difficulty passing geometry and must have a private gymn teacher set up special exercises to develop his thin chest. Always fearful of his masculinity and frequently attracted to homosexuals, he is afraid of being mocked by the other students at Dalhousie University as he rides the family horse to school through the snow.

The amusing part of *An Appetite for Life* involves the young diarist in a jaunt to Newfoundland as a farmer and carpenter. The effete young Haligonian crosses to the island in poor weather; at last, after a journey by boat and train, he arrives at Port-aux-Basques and then Black Duck where the English couple Colonel and Mrs. du Plat Taylor are enjoying a Spartan camp. The diarist does not feel at home in the bush; as one commentator has stated, much of the humor of these episodes emerges from Ritchie's placing of himself in a wilderness environment that contrasts with the "citadel" world of the garrison city of Halifax (Vintcent). Roughing it in the bush does not suit him: "Spent the day shovelling manure and then cut down trees, dragging up roots etc. I am getting a bit handier with an ax but it rather worries me that I don't believe Colonel du Plat Taylor thinks I am as useful about the place as he had hoped. Probably he expected me to be a Canadian woodsman, and that I am not. He never says anything critical about my work but looks at the results silently and sighs, which makes me nervous. I do try hard" (86). Sent home in ignominy, Ritchie is obviously resolved never to try the life of the woodsman again, but the experience has allowed him as diarist to mock himself.

Cynical, hedonistic, precocious, and literary, the young Ritchie as diarist is much like the young Buffy in Glassco's *Memoirs of Montparnasse*. Both want to escape the boredom of colonial Canada in search of unrestrained life experience. There is a marked difference, however, in the way the two writers view their youthful selves. In the preface to *Memoirs*, Glassco provides a strange rejection of his younger self: "This young man is no longer myself: I hardly recognize him, even less from his photographs and handwriting, and in my memory he is less like someone I have been than a character in a novel I have read" (xiii). On the other hand, Ritchie is intrigued by himself as a young man: "The youthful diarist would have to stand on his own two feet. Yet in the end I could not resist giving him a chance. It seemed callous to leave him to rot in the cellar when he was plainly longing to get out and tell all" (ix). Glassco's presentation of Buffy editing his diary on the eve of a serious operation for tuberculosis also contrasts with the light-hearted account of Ritchie's days in Oxford and subsequent return to Halifax for the summer; the infamous Mrs. Quayle threatens to destroy Buffy whereas Ritchie's affair with Margo at Oxford is less intense. Overall, the journal entries for the years 1924 to 1927 form a unit because they present aspects of Ritchie's personality that are partly buried in the adult diaries. In *The Siren Years* (1937 to 1945) the diarist speaks much less in the voice of someone trying to get

attention from the world than from the vantage of a person trying to survive several shocks to a self that is already well formed.

The Siren Years, covering the war years in London, shows Ritchie participating in the largest public event of his generation and responding to the changes it will bring. He knows that the war will pose a threat to the sheltered world of his youth and to the old city of Halifax, the place which has meant most to him. He feels himself living through an obliteration of the traditions of the past that have sustained him and many others of British origin. Reading *Barometer Rising*, he is struck by the authenticity of MacLennan's depiction of Halifax. In the midst of war anxiety he dreams of returning to the Bower, that edenic place of his childhood. Knowing that the war is changing English society, that he is dining out with the remnants of a dying social aristocracy, he is reminded of Halifax and in particular, of three old women, the Miss Odells, who personify the values of the garrison city. He can recognize the insularity and snobbery of certain families in Halifax; even so, he often writes of them with tolerance and sympathy. The Miss Odells become a touchstone of old Halifax, a symbol of the link between the stability and enclosure of the past and the decadence of the present. Writing in August, 1938, the diarist feels nostalgia for the city: "The clammy air comes in through the windows. There is fog in that air, and at intervals there is the melancholy mooring of the foghorn. A tram goes by in the quiet street. As it recedes its sad monotonous chant grows thin upon the air. When it stops at the corner it puffs like a stout woman with too many parcels. All sounds are in a minor key, all colors dimmed by a slight disparaging mist" (24). He remembers the "miasma of the small town" with the fear that people are repeating what he has said the night before, that he has somehow hurt people's feelings. He recalls the death of old Miss Odell, whose house and possessions have been recently auctioned. He concludes his diary entry with an essay on transience, anticipating what will happen to the Odells' home: "It is hard to open the heavy front door—there are so many polished brass bolts and bars—enough perhaps they thought to keep out time and change. As one walks away down the street the grave, pillared portico and the elms beside the stables disappear in mist. When the fog dissolves the house may have gone and in its place will be an ugly shadow that haunts all private homes. There will be a boarding-house leering and shabby with an ingratiating grin and frowsty smell" (25). His memories of visits to Halifax blend with his feelings about approaching war; in universalizing his daily thoughts in this way he uses the diary as a form of rationalization.

The diary is also important in preserving individualism against the rising tide of mobilization for war. He documents the tension as war inevitably moves toward him. As he listens to Hitler, he recognizes the power of oratory: “. . . it was that voice, those whiplash snarls, those iron-hammer blows of speech. What a technique! The Germans get their money's worth all right—the long drawn sentences with the piled up climax upon climax until the nerves are quivering—shudders of hate and fear and exaltation going through the audience. This cock-teasing oratory drives its victims frantic. If they do not have their grand orgasm of war soon they will burst” (25). Caught up in war fever, he begins to feel part of the anti-Hitler war machine. And, as the reader can guess, his own sex life becomes a desperate search for release.

Against this background, he becomes acquainted with a person who, more than anyone else described in the diaries, will create a new persona. Although he does not record a spiritual conversion or a personal change of a drastic nature, he provides enough details to suggest that Elizabeth Bowen's presence in his life acts as a personal awakening, as if he is brought to consciousness of his own humanity through the stages of a love affair. Because of her, the war years are filled with moments of ecstasy and intimacy. When he meets her for the first time he is entranced: “The first time I saw Elizabeth Bowen I thought she looked more like a bridgeplayer than a poet. Yet without having read a word of her writing would not one have felt that something mysterious, passionate and poetic was behind that worldly exterior?” (115) She becomes the siren of London, and he worships at her shrine, visiting her wherever she is, going to church with her on Christmas morning, walking in the parks of London, eating delicious meals in her presence, listening to her comments on fiction writing, and finally admitting that she is reshaping his sense of self. In May 1942 he writes: “Elizabeth and I went to Kew. It is hardly worth my while to describe the scene or dwell upon the dreamlike state in which we drifted among the ravines of rhododendrons and azaleas. It was a day like a page from one of her books” (142). A month later, held by her spell, he concludes that he will always love her: “Of what is her magic made? At first I was wary of her—I feared that I should expose my small shifts and stratagems to her eye which misses nothing. Her uncanny intuitions, her flashes of insight like summer lightning at once fascinated and disturbed me. Now day by day I have been discovering more and more of her generous nature, her wit and funniness, the stammering flow of her enthralling talk, the idiosyncrasies, vagaries of her temperament. I now know that this attachment is nothing transient

but will bind me as long as I live" (143). He decides that he "owes her everything" (148).

Despite the seeming openness of these accounts, we are left feeling mystified by Ritchie's relationship with Elizabeth Bowen. Obviously, he is affected by the sense of life as art; this desire to live each day as if it were a chapter in a novel is reflected in the style of the diary, and she seems also to have been affected by his personality in her depiction of wartime London in the novel dedicated to him, *The Heat of the Day*. Through her, he becomes aware of the mysterious personality of Virginia Woolf and of the Bloomsbury circle. We have a picture of him lying on Elizabeth's chesterfield looking at the sky through the windows or contemplating a vase of dying flowers left by her in his flat, but we do not know at what point they ceased to be lovers, if, in fact, they ever slept together. Did she ever contemplate leaving her husband to be with him? Was she one of the only people in his life with whom he felt he could be utterly himself? The diary entries are more suggestive than revealing, as if the writer could not face what was happening to him. We get the impression in the end that Elizabeth became bored with him and that he is experiencing a devastating blow to his self-esteem: "Elizabeth has borne with all my attempt to play-act my life, although she has so little patience with histrionic characters, without ever making me feel like a fool. She has shown me up to myself—good money to some extent has driven out bad" (156). By the end of January, 1943, the affair appears to be over: "I asked Elizabeth last night whether it was possible to regard oneself—not with violent disgust but with a steady cold distaste as one might feel towards an unattractive acquaintance whose character one knew all too well. She thought, 'Yes, if one had been over-praised for the wrong reasons'" (157). She allows him to see himself in a mirror but to be revolted by what he sees. In a sense, he appears to open up only to close again. In this contrast between what the diarist can admit to himself and what the reader decides must surely be true lies the fascination of the account of his relationship with Elizabeth. It is clear that although his friendship with her continues, intimacy has ceased. What does this imply about Ritchie's relationships with other people? Often he seems to withdraw into the official shell of his profession.

At the same time as the diarist is coming to terms with his life as an individual, he is also composing his public self. By 1942 the entries reveal a growing preoccupation with his identity as a Canadian in the post-war world. He begins to use the diary as an opportunity to write a political essay and to assess his political views. Using the editorial "we"

the diarist seems to imagine readers who want an orator to speak on their behalf: "What is going to happen to Canada after the war? Then what is a Canadian? We are a new type among the nations of the world. As the British Empire becomes less able to protect us our future will need more statesmanship. . . . Our greatest enemy is the parish pump. How are we Anglo-Canadians and the French-Canadians to get on together in the future?" (148) With the arrival of American servicemen in London, he seems to feel out of place. He relies on his reading to sum up his emotions: "Am I like the man in Henry James's story 'The Beast in the Jungle' who found in the end that it was his singular fate to be the man to whom nothing happened?" (179) The speaking voice here lacks an echo from within.

When Ritchie's public self takes over, the diaries seem to have been written by an entirely different person. As if aware of this, in the introduction to *Diplomatic Passport*, published after *The Siren Years*, he explains the process involved in becoming an ambassador: "In this career the representational role tends to take over. The man sometimes merges into the ambassador. The result is not so much pomposity as a smoothness from which all angles and irregularities of temperament have been ironed out" (2). Diary writing is, of course, self-conscious in the sense that the writer keeps rereading his own materials, commenting on diaries in general, and protesting to himself that writing in a diary at all is a sort of private vice. At times Ritchie seems to use the diary as a way of warning himself against the self-indulgence of longing to recover his lost youth. As an ambassador in postwar Germany he feels the constraint of his role but reveals this in the diary only by assuming the impersonal tone of "you" and "one": "Today is windy, sunny, lilacs blowing in the wind, everything in bloom, a feeling of exhilaration like a morning in one's youth, a restless mood, up one minute, down the next. Yet one must be wary of the dreams and projects which swarm in one's mind as the sun plays on lilacs and chestnuts as you walk quickly past the neat white houses of the English suburbs of Cologne to buy the Sunday papers" (100-1). In other entries this voice is replaced by the interplay of his older self looking back at his younger self:

I was after Experience. I lived in the private conviction that intense, strongly poetic, dramatic Experience lay in wait for me. I longed for a condition in which reality lived up to literature. Meanwhile I did little to bring this state about. I was a "mirror dawdling down a lane," but I was a talking mirror. . . . As I was thinking of those days a scene swam into my mind. It is Paris, some time in the twenties. (128)

He goes on to describe a bar scene. In this way, he writes yet another script of his life and seems to suggest that it was the decadence and selfishness of his generation that led him away from greater self fulfilment.

Other passages reveal that he has matured as a stylist. His prose has become sensitive, thought-provoking, and mellow:

Sitting at the table on the terrace by the Rhine. I was overcome by a sentimental mood, no doubt inspired by the red champagne but also by the Rhineland atmosphere. The pressure of intimate talk about feelings, about life, a kind of nostalgia for romantic happiness (for you are looking into the eyes of the other)—it is a return of the mood of youth that talks more than it does and dreams more than either. . . ." (74)

The expression of "looking into the eyes of the other" suggests the presence of his wife Sylvia, but it is typical also of the way Ritchie talks to himself. What does the "other" mean to him? In the light of his difficulty with intimacy, it is likely that his opposite is intuition. Elizabeth Bowen's intimate sense of intuitive knowledge drew him to her.

In the last volume, *Storm Signals*, this elegiac mood prevails. Because the diary entries give few details of Sylvia, other than statements of appreciation for her loyal presence, we can only guess at what marriage comes to mean for him. It is clear, however, that the last political appointments to Washington and London bring a certain frustration. As he approaches retirement, he is haunted by a longing for what he has not had. He tries to come to terms with what he has achieved and what he has not achieved, deciding that he is a perpetual adolescent: "Oh, how have my contemporaries attained their self-esteem, how have they added, brick on brick, to the stable structure of personality that can be turned inside out, public and private. And look the same? Oh, to have principles, to have faith, to have grandchildren, to grow up before you grow old" (22). He escapes in the diary to the realm of private myth to consider living in an "isolated autumnal chateau in France with high walls round it, with books, a fire in the library, the smell of leaf mould in the garden outside" (27). He goes on to compose the persona of old man.

As a diarist, Ritchie seems to exit in the last portion of *Storm Signals*. Walking around London, taking stock of his world with the knowledge that his role as ambassador to Great Britain will end his political career, he contemplates the editing of his diaries. He begins to introduce himself as a new character. He and his brother

Roley, now a Supreme Court judge, with their wives, are described living in a simple cottage by the sea in Chester, Nova Scotia:

King Street runs down to the sea, quite a steep hill at the top which descends gradually to the sea. On the right hand side of the street stands this small shingle house in which we four people live—Roley and Bunny and ourselves. I love the house as if it were my own, especially my bedroom, which I would change for no other. It is absolutely as plain as an anchorite's cell, with white painted table and dresser, a chair of unpainted wood, a square mirror hanging on the wall which faintly distorts the features, a hard square bed, and that is all, and I am happier here than anywhere. (110)

This passage reveals a lot about the art of diary writing as Ritchie has practised it. In the first place, the writer uses his favorite image of the mirror to suggest the distortions of reflection. Secondly, by implicating his brother, he links the cottage to The Bower, that childhood home in Halifax where he lived with his mother. Thirdly, in imagining himself as an old man, almost an anchorite, he drops the role of hedonist and strips away the worldly garments of his profession. Finally, he uses Chester as the destination of his life's journey, thus completing the personal myth he has enacted consciously or unconsciously for many years; the Haligonian, after achieving great success in the larger world, returns to his native province and prepares to live simply. Actually, Chester is very much the "right" sort of place for a retired diplomat; it is a favorite haunt of retired admirals and wealthy Haligonians, and, as such, an excellent place for continuous socializing. Despite the descriptions of Chester as a garden paradise (wild roses, for example), and the obvious suggestions of return, the final stage in the mythical journey, the diarist knows he is keeping up social appearances. Other descriptions in *Storm Signals* give the reader a sense of Ritchie as politely bored with himself. On the verge of retirement he uses two key images to describe his emotional state:

St. James's Park on a fine autumn morning. The pelicans flapping their great wings in the sun and yawning at each other (at least it looks like a yawn—it may be part of a courtship ritual for all I know). I have been rereading those diaries written when I was eighteen. . . . Now I cannot get away from that adolescent that was—and is—myself. How silly he is, and how sharp; how early the twig was bent into the worldly posture. (119)

The yawning pelican and the bent twig sum up the writer's awareness that he is in need of change and renewal. Elsewhere he gives intriguing hints of spiritual development, such as his obsession with studying the

images of Christ in art galleries in Ottawa and Washington (21-43). Pondering the question of human freedom, he wonders if he has been an existentialist without knowing it (28). He feels remorse about the way he has treated the people in his life: "I have looked at my loved ones with an eye, and listened to them with a ear, from the outside. I have had at such times a sense of moral irresponsibility, a sort of self-induced, drugged state, intensification of vision, dissociation from the human element" (141). Always an aesthete, he seems here to reject some part of his early self in favor of a measured morality. As in the entries from the early war days, with the sirens blaring, he has moments of terror deflated with an ironic tone: "The menacing wail of the vacuum cleaner wielded in the inept hands of our cleaning woman comes nearer and nearer up the passage to my closed bedroom door, seeking what it can devour. The rain has peed itself out and on the still-wet streets the last leaves are falling (152)."

As a diarist, Ritchie does not dwell on painful experience; this is true of all four volumes covering a long life. In the tradition of diary writing, he conceals rather than reveals the most intimate aspects of self. What readers then confront probably reflects a final process of editing; we read an expurgated version of a diary that is itself expurgated. How, then, do we measure the success of diary writing? If the writer writes only for himself, then the diary may be successful if it provides psychotherapy. If it records key events in a life story, then it may prove satisfactory in allowing the writer to perceive a pattern. But it is false if it becomes a record in retrospect. As Karl Weintraub states in an essay "Autobiography and Historical Consciousness," "A long diary will indeed reveal the development of the person of the writer but will do so in a totally different manner from an autobiography. Just as it is a sin against the spirit and nature of chronicle to alter it in the light of subsequent insight, it is a sin against a diary to impose the order of the next day on the record of the previous one" (827). In Ritchie's case, the diaries seem intended for publication. Although he has stated frequently that it was Elizabeth Bowen who first suggested to him that he should publish them, it seems obvious that he had an audience in mind as he wrote.

Ritchie is a better diarist than autobiographer. Having published four volumes of diaries, the next step was to write an autobiography. What emerged is *My Grandfather's House: Scenes of Childhood and Youth*, an account of his memories of his grandfather's death, childhood in Halifax, and wanderings in Europe with his mother. This book gives us many more details about his mother, her brothers and

the effect they had on the development of Ritchie's personality, her friends, and other family members such as the half-mad Gerald (who ended his days in a mental institution). In Proustian fashion, his memories seem to emerge from one core recollection of the night his grandfather died: "The dense night silence reverberated around me; then there swept over me the tide of the past rising from the sleeping house below me. A constriction choked my throat. Had I heard a muffled sigh like a warning? What was it? Some signal from the frontier between childhood and old age where my grandfather and I had shared those timeless hours?" This is the autobiographical writing of old age; as such it has a different pace from the instantaneous flashes of the diaries.

In an interesting way, Ritchie succeeds in a genre dominated by women. Emily Carr, for example, as painter and writer, has established the style of modern diary writing in Canada as painterly and spiritual. Because women diarists focus more on themselves and less on success in careers, even using the diary as a substitute for more assertive statements to the world, they are likely to find a ready audience of other women who see in them representatives of their own struggle for identity. Anais Nin, for example, tells her reader that she speaks as a woman on behalf of other women. Ritchie would scarcely write, "It is the man who has to speak," because he takes for granted that his reader will view him in a certain way. He takes care to provide enough details of his background to suggest that he is born into a culture that will sustain his ambitions. His mirroring is, thus, of a patriarchal establishment. But in his relationship with his mother, and in the descriptions of the single-parent home, we can detect elements that would cause him to worry about his place in a male-dominated world. Who but Ritchie would describe Margot Asquith as a "surrealist witch in a modern fairy tale" (*Siren Years* 161)? The "other" is, in fact, a talking witch, the image of his mother.

At his best, Ritchie is amusing, urbane, literate and self-aware without being sentimental; at his worst, he can bore us with an endless stream of dinner parties, reunions, and diplomatic poses. As one of his colleagues has stated, the diaries are anything but undiplomatic and follow a period in Canadian diplomatic history that is already well documented (Rae 43). Only rarely does Ritchie achieve the easy intimacy with self and reader that seems to come naturally to the painter and poet P.K. Page in *Brazilian Journal*. He often breaks up the flow of diary entries with introductions, essays, and passages of pompous explanation. However, his work adds up to a significant contribution

to Canadian autobiographical writing because it provides an extended account of an individual's life against the background of changing national identities. Unimpressed by Mackenzie King, respectful of Saint Laurent, exasperated by Diefenbaker, sympathetic to Pearson, and finally, puzzled by Trudeau, he records his impressions of Canadian prime ministers. President Kennedy is a television star wearing a death mask; President Johnson a bully; the Soviet Foreign Minister Molotov an old monster, "a weather-beaten Easter Island monument" (*Diplomatic Passport* II). Ritchie's strength is that he does not take himself too seriously; his weakness is that he lacks the force of separate identity that would sustain intense self-scrutiny. When his personal life reaches a climax matched by events in the external world, as in *The Siren Years*, his writing demonstrates the vitality of the diary as an art form.

ADDENDUM

In July 1986, I interviewed Charles Ritchie in a summer home he was renting on the back harbor of Chester, Nova Scotia. It took some persistence on my part to find him. A restless man, he seemed to be in constant motion, talking, walking, and moving from one social gathering to another.

When I began our conversation by remarking that it was a Woolfian day (dark blue waves curling on the shore, masts from the yachts in the back harbor clanking in the stiff breeze, little boats chugging out to the islands), his response was enthusiastic. He talked of his interest in Virginia Woolf and the Bloomsbury group, of reading autobiographies by English aesthetes, and of his admiration of Evelyn Waugh. That summer he was reading Ruskin and P.G. Wodehouse, and planning to write his memoirs, later published as *My Grandfather's House*. He did not mention the writing of any more diaries, but he expressed his feeling of excitement in discovering forgotten ones as if the diary is the revelation of a secret world: "I've always been interested in the diary form," he said. "It's exciting to think of opening a drawer and finding an unpublished diary." He went on to say that diary writing appealed to him because he believed that he did not have the ability to sustain artistic creation; he saw diaries as a series of flashes or photographs. He believed that it was false to see people's lives as shaped

around one key event or turning point; instead, he said, "Lives are composed of a series of climaxes."

One aspect of diary writing that he stressed was that of seeing yourself from the outside. "Writing a diary is like being a voyeur of your own life," he said. In preparing the diary entries for publication he admitted that he had deleted a great deal but denied that he had added anything. He also stressed the solitary nature of the diarist. I asked him if he considered that one of the preoccupations of his own diary was the expression of loneliness: "I suppose," he said, "that you would not write a diary unless you were interested in the solitary experience." I noted that in his diaries we have the sense of a man who alternates between communion with self and communion with the world. Writing in the diary provides the writer with necessary distance from contact with others. He seemed to agree with my comments.

I concluded that Ritchie was a highly disciplined man, both as diplomat and writer, and that he had acquired over the years an ability to stand back and look objectively at people and events. This habit of distancing, however, had a disconcerting quality; his objectivity seemed dehumanizing. As well, he appeared to have a suspicion of relaxation or of revelations of an intimate kind. His anecdote about driving seemed telling. He has never had a driver's license. Once, in Paris, they told him to relax more while learning to drive. "I did," he said, "and then drove off a cliff!" As a raconteur, he tended to exaggerate, but never without intending to make a point. I left through the back garden just as he and his wife Sylvia were preparing for a luncheon engagement.

WORKS CITED

- Bottral, Margaret. *Every Man a Phoenix*. London: Murray, 1958.
- Culley, Margo. *A Day at a Time: Diary Literature of American Women from 1964 to the Present*. New York: The Feminist Press, 1985.
- Edinborough, Arnold. "Ritchie's Diaries Pull Back the Diplomatic Curtain," *Financial Post* 81 (March 16, 1987) 43.
- Fetherling, Doug. "Diplomatic Revelations" (interview), *MacLean's* 96 (December 5, 1983) 14.
- Galt, George. "Interview with Charles Ritchie," *Books in Canada*, March, 1985, 40.
- Glassco, John. *Memoirs of Montparnasse*. Introduction by Leon Edel. Toronto: Oxford UP, 1970.
- Jelinek, Estelle. *Women's Autobiography: Essays in Criticism*. Bloomington: Indiana UP, 1980.
- Macfarlane, David. "Charles Ritchie: An Intimate Portrait of the Diplomat, Diarist, and Lover," *Saturday Night*, September, 1986, 24.
- Nin, Anais. *The Journals of Anais Nin: 1931-1934*. London: Quartet, 1973.
- Olney, James. *Metaphors of Self: The Meaning of Autobiography*. Princeton UP, 1972.

- Pett, Alexandra. Unpublished interview with Charles Ritchie, July, 1986, in Chester, Nova Scotia.
- Rac, Saul. "Review of *The Siren Years*" in *International Perspectives: A Journal of the Department of External Affairs*, May/June, 1975, 41.
- Raikes, J.M. "Charles Ritchie: The Obsessive Diarist Writes On," *Atlantic Insight* 3 (June, 1981), 48.
- Review of *An Appetite for Life*, *Financial Post*, December 3, 1977.
- Ritchie, Charles. *An Appetite for Life: The Education of a Young Diarist (1924-1927)*. Toronto: Macmillan, 1981.
- . "The Day the President of the United States Struck Fear and Trembling into the Heart of our Prime Minister," *MacLean's* 87 (January 1974), 40.
- . *Diplomatic Passport: More Undiplomatic Diaries (1946-1962)*. Toronto: Macmillan, 1981.
- . *My Grandfather's House: Scenes of Childhood and Youth*. Toronto: Macmillan, 1987.
- . *The Siren Years: A Canadian Diplomat Abroad (1937-1945)*. Toronto: Macmillan, 1983.
- . *Storm Signals: More Undiplomatic Diaries (1962-1971)*. Toronto: Macmillan, 1983.
- Vintcent, Brian. "Review of *An Appetite for Life*," *Quill and Quire* 43, no. 13 (1977).
- Weintraub, Karl. "Autobiography and Historical Consciousness," *Critical Inquiry*, Vol. 1 (June, 1975), 821-848.