

# THE FIRST CANADIAN NOVEL

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THE right of Frances Brooke's *History of Emily Montague* to be regarded as the first Canadian novel might be disputed—not, I believe, on the point of its temporal primacy, but of its Canadianism. Mrs. Brooke spent, it seems, only a little over a year in Canada,<sup>1</sup> and it is highly doubtful whether her novel was written in this country. Under present conditions, these facts would constitute an almost overwhelming obstacle to calling the novel Canadian, in spite of the fact that most of it has a Canadian setting and is concerned with Canadian life. If, however, we bear in mind that at the time of its publication (1769) the English-speaking population of Canada consisted largely of officials whose residence here was more or less temporary, the opposition case loses much of its force. At any rate, not to quibble further about definitions, we are on safe ground in affirming that this was the first novel in English to be devoted predominantly to the portrayal of Canadian life.

From its portrayal of Canadian life the book derives most of its interest and value. It is not a distinguished novel, judged by strict artistic standards: it is significant that the late Professor Saintsbury, whose catholicity of taste and inclusiveness of information concerning English fiction were beyond question, does not even accord it a footnote in his book, *The English Novel*. Its artistic shortcomings are obvious: the plot is thin, conventional, repetitive, and poorly integrated with the informative sections of the book; the style is generally stilted and monotonous; the characters, with one or two exceptions, are traditional in conception and deficient in life; the whole performance is heavily didactic and sentimental. In spite of these manifest weaknesses, the novel remains of interest and value to us as a social, and to a lesser extent as a literary, document.

That a year's residence in Canada enabled Mrs. Brooke to write with such apparent authenticity of life in the infant colony is proof of her active powers of observation and of an educated literary sensibility. She was indeed a woman of high intelligence, sufficient to win her the friendship of most of the leading writers in the England of her time: Dr. Johnson and his

1. For reprints of the extant documents bearing upon the question of the residence of Mrs. Brooke and her husband in Canada, see Frederick Philip Grove's Appendix to a modern reprint of the novel, published in 1931 by Graphic Publishers, Ottawa. All page references in this article are to this edition of the novel.

circle, Samuel Richardson, and Fanny Burney.<sup>2</sup> At the age of thirty, in 1755, she was the editor of a weekly magazine, *The Old Maid*—an achievement which would be remarkable even now, and must have seemed spectacular in the eighteenth century. But she was apparently not reconciled to remaining as a spinster writing for spinsters, and in 1756 she married the Reverend John Brooke. This marriage was the means of her coming to Canada. In 1763 Mr. Brooke came to Quebec as a military chaplain, and Mrs. Brooke joined him later in the year. In the meantime Mrs. Brooke had continued to write, and she came to Canada as the author of a volume of poems, a tragedy (which Garrick had declined for Drury Lane), a translation of a French romance, and a novel (*The History of Julia Mandeville*).

In November of 1764 Mrs. Brooke returned to England, taking with her the manuscript of another book, *The Memories of the Marquis de St. Forlax*, and possibly that of the novel with which we are most concerned, *The History of Emily Montague*. The latter novel was not published until 1769, and this delay suggests that the novel was probably written after her return to England. Dr. Lawrence Burpee, however, inclines to the belief that it was written in Canada, basing his theory on the fact that "many of the descriptive passages suggest by their vividness that they must have been written with the scenes before the author's eyes."<sup>3</sup> My own guess, and it can be no more than a guess, is that Mrs. Brooke kept a diary during her Canadian residence, and that she drew heavily upon the diary when writing the novel in England. The credibility of this conjecture is increased when we recall the fashion for travel journals in the late eighteenth century—witness, for example, *The Journal of a Tour in the Hebrides*—and the practice of Smollett and Sterne of incorporating their reminiscences of foreign travel in their novels.

Mrs. Brooke continued writing almost to the end of her life, which came in 1789. The products of these last twenty years were two more novels, two operas and a play (all of which were produced at Covent Garden, the operas with considerable success), and a long elegiac poem devoted to the memory of her friend Mrs. Yates, a leading actress of the period. Mrs. Brooke,

2. *The Dictionary of National Biography* records a contemporary newspaper story to the effect that Dr. Johnson, attending the farewell party preceding Mrs. Brooke's voyage to Canada, insisted upon kissing her in a separate room since he "did not choose to do so before so much company." Fanny Burney wrote of her in her *Diary* that she was "short and fat" but "well-bred" and "a woman of known understanding."

3. See Dr. Burpee's introduction to the Graphic edition of the novel cited above.

it is clear, was a woman of spirit and of varied gifts, and a not unworthy progenitor of the Canadian novel.

To turn now from the author to the book, *The History of Emily Montague* may profitably be analyzed from two points of view: as an embodiment of the literary forces at work in the second half of the eighteenth century, particularly in the field of fiction, and as an early impression of Canadian colonial society on a sensitive and cultivated observer.

The main literary tendencies of a given period may often be more accurately detected in the mediocre work than in a masterpiece, for the masterpiece tends to be in advance of its time, to stake out a claim on the future. In any case, the novel under discussion reveals most of the tendencies of the literary age which we have come to label "pre-Romantic." The cult of sensibility, for instance, practised by such novelists as Sterne and Henry Mackenzie, has an ardent devotee in Mrs. Brooke. Here are some typical passages from her novel:

What a charm, my dear Lucy, is there in sensibility! 'Tis the magnet which attracts all to itself; virtue may command esteem, understanding and talents admiration, beauty a transient desire; but 'tis sensibility alone which can inspire love.

I love her with a tenderness of which few of my sex are capable: you have often told me, and you were right, that my heart has all the sensibility of woman.

The same dear affections, the same tender sensibility, the most precious gift of heaven, inform our minds, and make us peculiarly capable of exquisite happiness or misery.

Closely allied with this cult of sensibility is the deliberate exploitation of the sentimental aspects of experience. The Brooke novel is not quite as tearful as Mackenzie's *Man of Feeling*, but it has its abundant quota. In the very first sentence of the novel the young hero proudly recalls "dropping a tender tear at Carisbrook Castle on the memory of the unfortunate Charles the First," and when Mrs. Brooke has a genuinely affecting scene to portray, she approaches it in this manner:

I am not painter enough to describe their meeting; tho' prepared, it was with difficulty we kept my mother from fainting; she pressed him in her arms, she attempted to speak, her voice faltered, tears stole softly down her cheeks . . .

Another indication that the rational poise of the early eighteenth century was now giving way to a more impassioned

attitude towards life is provided by the emphasis laid in the novel upon "enthusiasm." Rivers, the hero of the novel, writes to his friends:

You ridicule my enthusiasm, my dear Temple, without considering there is no exertion of the human mind, no effort of the understanding, imagination, or heart, without a spark of this divine fire.

Without enthusiasm, genius, virtue, pleasure, even love itself, languishes; all that refines, adorns, softens, exalts, ennobles life has its source in this animating principle.

I glory in being an enthusiast in everything.

For most of the romantic writers and their precursors, Nature was a favourite object for this enthusiasm. To this rule, Mrs. Brooke was no exception. The Canadian landscape found in her its earliest literary celebrant. "You see here," she wrote, the *beautiful* which it has in common with Europe, but the *great sublime* to an amazing degree." The wildness of the landscape was, for her romantic taste, an especial attraction: "bold, picturesque, romantic, Nature reigns here in all her wanton luxuriance, adorned by a thousand wild graces which mock the cultivated beauties of Europe." Streaked though her writing is with romantic hyperbole of this sort, the Nature descriptions are far from contemptible, and in passages such as the following she reveals herself to have been an acute and exact observer:

The days are much hotter here than in England, but the heat is more supportable from the breezes which always spring up about noon; and the evenings are charming beyond expression. We have much thunder and lightning, but very few instances of their being fatal: the thunder is more magnificent and awful than in Europe, and the lightning brighter and more beautiful; I have even seen it of a clear pale purple, resembling the gay tints of the morning.

The verdure is equal to that of England, and in the evening acquires an unspeakable beauty from the lucid splendor of the fire-flies sparkling like a thousand little stars on the trees and on the grass.

There are two very noble falls of water near Quebec, la Chaudiere and Montmorenci: the former is a prodigious sheet of water, rushing over the wildest rocks, and forming a scene grotesque, irregular, astonishing: the latter, less wild, less irregular, but more pleasing and more majestic, falls from an immense height, down the side of a romantic mountain, into the river St. Lawrence, opposite the most smiling part of the islands of Orleans, to the cultivated charms of which it forms the most striking and agreeable contrast.

And she seized upon what is the essence of the Canadian landscape, as contrasted with that of Europe: its magnitude of scale. "Sublimity," she writes, "is the characteristic of the western world; the loftiness of the mountains, the grandeur of the lakes and rivers, the majesty of the rocks shaded with a picturesque variety of beautiful trees and shrubs, and crowned with the noblest of the offspring of the forest, . . . are as much beyond the power of fancy as that of description."

In the place which it gives to the description of natural scenery this novel is, as far as my knowledge extends, unique among English novels of its period. In most other respects, however, it is a typical manifestation of the chief methods and purposes then in vogue in fiction. It owes most, perhaps, to Mrs. Brooke's friend, Samuel Richardson. It employs the epistolary method of exposition which he had introduced and in which he had been followed by Smollett and Burney; its theme is love and its main substance the detailed and slightly repetitive analysis of the psychological accompaniments and consequences of that emotion; and it is, like Richardson's novels, dominated by a bourgeois moral system in which prudence, caution, and respectability rank very high among the virtues.

As is the case in most eighteenth century novels, the plot of *Emily Montague* is its weakest feature. Heavy reliance is placed upon chance in general and coincidence in particular, and even the hoary device of the long-lost child intrudes itself. The plot for Mrs. Brooke was obviously little more than a convenient thread upon which to hang natural description, social comment, and moral preachment. The last feature is especially prominent. "I am afraid you will be growing weary of my sermonizing," exclaims one of the characters, and the modern reader promptly echoes a profound Amen. Mrs. Brooke's favourite topic for moral discussion is the institution of marriage. Over and over again we are assured that true love alone is the basis upon which a successful marriage can be founded, and that premarital chastity is a rule binding upon both sexes. She was obviously a determined feminist, out to abolish the "double standard" however many words it might cost her. Indeed her ambitions for her sex went far beyond that, and we find her noting with approval that the Indian squaws have a vote in electing the tribal rulers. "I should be extremely pleased to see it adopted in England," writes her hero, young

Rivers, "canvassing for elections would then be the most agreeable thing in the world, and I am sure the ladies would give their votes on much more generous principles than we do."

For the general reader, the most interesting parts of *Emily Montague* are those in which Mrs. Brooke describes and analyzes Canadian society as it existed in the early days after the Conquest. On the subject she is refreshingly frank. Quebec City, she writes, "is like a third or fourth rate country town in England; much hospitality, little society; cards, scandal, dancing, and good cheer; all excellent things to pass away a winter evening, and peculiarly adapted to what I am told, and what I begin to feel, of the severity of this climate." What she missed especially was any semblance of cultural interest such as she had been accustomed to in the Johnson circle, and she advances certainly the simplest and one of the most convincing explanations of our cultural poverty: "I no longer wonder the elegant arts are unknown here; the rigour of the climate suspends the very powers of the understanding; what then must become of those of the imagination?" And feminine readers will be interested in this further suggestion as to the degrading influence of the severe climate. One young lady writes thus to her friend in England: "A propos to age, I am resolved to go home, Lucy; I have found three gray hairs this morning; they tell me 'tis common; this vile climate is at war with beauty, makes one's hair gray, and one's hands red."

But what the young colony lacked in culture and grace it seems to have made up in gaiety:

I begin not to disrelish the winter here; now I am used to the cold, I don't feel it so much: as there is no business done here in the winter, 'tis the season of general dissipation; amusement is the study of everybody, and the pains people take to please themselves contribute to the general pleasure . . . Both our houses and our carriages are uncommonly warm; the clear serene sky, the dry pure air, the little parties of dancing and cards, the good tables we all keep, the driving about on the ice, the abundance of people we see there, for everybody has a carriage, the variety of objects new to a European, keep the spirits in a continual agreeable hurry, that is difficult to describe but very pleasant to feel."

Accounts of social life in the cities of Quebec and Montreal are supplemented by quite detailed discussions of the French peasantry and the Indian natives. Her opinion of the *habitant* was a mixed one: she recognized their virtues of hospitality and

devotion, but found them ignorant and lazy. Here are some representative passages embodying her views:

The peasants are ignorant, lazy, dirty, and stupid beyond all belief; but hospitable, courteous, civil; and, what is particularly agreeable, they leave their wives and daughters to do the honours of the house: in which obliging office they acquit themselves with an attention which, amidst every inconvenience apparent (tho' I am told not real) poverty can cause, must please every guest who has a soul inclined to be pleased: for my part I was charmed with them, and eat my homely fare with as much pleasure as if I had been feasting on ortolans in a palace. Their conversation is lively and amusing; all the little knowledge of Canada is confined to the sex; very few, even of the seigneurs, being able to write their own names.

The peasants are in general tall and robust, notwithstanding their excessive indolence; they love war, and hate labour; are brave, hardy, alert in the field, but lazy and inactive at home, in which they resemble the savages, whose manners they seem strongly to have imbibed. The government appears to have encouraged a military spirit all over the colony; though ignorant and stupid to a great degree, these peasants have a strong sense of honour; and though they serve, as I have said, without pay, are never so happy as when called to the field.

Your Lordship asks me what is the general moral character of the Canadians; they are simple and hospitable, yet extremely attentive to interest, where it does not interfere with that laziness which is their governing passion. They are rather devout than virtuous; have religion without morality, and a sense of honour without very strict honesty.

It is evident that thus early in our national development the smug Anglo-Saxon sense of superiority was operating with characteristic efficiency.

This condescension is somewhat modified in Mrs. Brooke's treatment of the Indians by a tendency to regard them as examples of the romantic "noble savage." Early in the novel, she writes of them thus:

I have told you the labours of savage life, but I should observe that they are only temporary, and when urged by the sharp tooth of necessity: their lives are, upon the whole, idle beyond anything we can conceive. If the Epicurean definition of happiness is just, that it consists in indolence of body and tranquillity of mind, the Indians of both sexes are the happiest people on earth; free from all care, they enjoy the present moment, forget the past, and are without solicitude for the future: in summer, stretched out on the verdant turf, they sing, they laugh,

they play, they relate stories of their ancient heroes to warm the youth to war; in winter, wrapped in the furs which bounteous nature provides them, they dance, they feast, and despise the rigors of the season, at which the more effeminate Europeans tremble.

Later, however, she seems to have grown rather disillusioned over the Indians, and towards the end of the book, after detailing their treatment of some English captives, she explicitly rejects the noble savage theory in these terms:

Rousseau has taken great pains to prove that the most uncultivated nations are the most virtuous: I have all due respect for this philosopher, of whose writings I am an enthusiastic admirer; but I have a still greater respect for truth, which I believe in this instance is not on his side. There is little reason to boast of the virtues of a people who are such brutal slaves to their appetites as to be unable to avoid drinking brandy to an excess scarce to be conceived, whenever it falls in their way, though eternally lamenting the murders and other atrocious crimes of which they are so perpetually guilty when under its influence.

The transparent honesty of such passages as the above constitutes one of Mrs. Brooke's main attractions, and gives added value to her record of early Canadian society. Though her novel had no immediate successors in Canada, and had no discernible influence upon our subsequent fiction, I think that it deserves to be remembered. In spite of its weaknesses, which for the most part are those of its time, it is an effort to deal honestly in fiction with the contemporary Canadian scene. Such efforts have been all too rare in the history of the Canadian novel.