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ROCKBOUND REVISITED: A REAPPRAISAL OF FRANK PARKER DAY'S NOVEL

Another resurrection of a novel that probably deserved to sink quietly into oblivion! This was my first reaction to the enthusiastic praise some of my friends were heaping upon Frank Parker Day's *Rockbound*, a novel I had never read. My suspicions were increased by the fact that Day was a Canadian writing about Canada and Canadians. Obviously such a novelist would be judged by some elastic and tolerant formula: another good *Canadian* novel, meaning a novel that was good enough for a Canadian author, but not good enough to meet wider, more exacting standards. With all the interesting books that were appearing every month, why bother to read a book that had never been popular with either readers or scholars? Then I read the novel, I read Day's other novels, I read some of the letters to and from his publishers and contemporary admirers—and I reluctantly changed my mind. *Rockbound* needs no *Canadian* qualifications; in fact it needs no concessions whatever: it is a good novel by any standards. Moreover, *John Paul's Rock*, Frank Day's last novel, is also an extremely well-written and interesting work that deserves recognition, and his *Autobiography of a Fisherman* is a delightful book, even for a reader who has never caught a fish.

Rockbound, long out of print and now hard to come by, is a novel about life in a primitive Nova Scotia fishing community. The exact date of the action is hard to determine, but it appears to have taken place in the early twentieth century, in the decade preceding World War I. The characters are so isolated from the life of the outside world that there are few external events by which to set the exact time. It is true that Caspar has once travelled to the West on a Harvesters' Excursion, but that could have taken place at almost any time during the early years of the century. Then there are signs of mechanization in the fishing industry—the boats are being equipped with motors in addition to sail, but this is a gradual process that is not located in time. Old Anapest, however, casts her ballot in a turbulent school meeting to settle the great question, can a woman vote? "This question was settled once for all on *Rockbound*, while suffragettes were still chaining themselves to the palings of the House of

Parliament and buffeting policemen in the streets of London." Day proclaimed that this is an entirely fictitious story, with no reference intended to any actual character or definite district; the fact that time is indefinite helps to create the illusion that the story could have occurred at any place and any time, specific episodes being less important than the general atmosphere created by the accumulation of events.

But if time is left indefinite, the place is set clearly, exactly, and realistically. Rockbound is an island, isolated for long stretches of time by storm and fog and winter weather. There has never been any doubt that Rockbound is Ironbound or that Outpost Islands are the Tancooks; but this is really not important. It is true that the inhabitants of Ironbound were righteously indignant when they first read the novel, and it is also true that it adds something to the enjoyment of the novel to be able to attach specific places to the fictitious place-names that Day uses. No writer of fiction, however, can create a setting that has no basis in fact. The novelist takes his locale and selects, exaggerates, orders, distorts, re-creating a setting that is based on one or more places that he actually knows well; and finally he ends with his own society, one that is essentially different from the actual world, since it has been shaped by the need of the creative process itself. (Hardy's Wessex novels illustrate this process; the novels are set in a part of England that is readily recognized, but in the process of the writing of the novels, Hardy has created his own England, one that is more exactly suited to his purpose than the actual England he used as another raw material that needed shaping.) Rockbound, although recognized by the inhabitants of Ironbound as their island, has been fashioned into something else, as well as a caricature of the original. The need to set his tough, greedy, hard-working characters in a setting that would bring out their qualities of courage and meanness, of strength and duplicity, forced the author to concentrate on certain characteristics of his actual setting, so that the society of *Rockbound* became something quite different from the original.

This difference was strongly resented by the Ironbounders, who felt compelled to point out how mistaken the author was. In the *Halifax Herald*, February 26, 1929, the following letter appeared, quoted from the *Lunenburg Progress-Enterprise*:

Mr. Day visited our Island last summer in company with three women and two other men, probably with the same moral standing as himself, collecting material for his ridiculous book. Re. Rockbound.

It is our humble opinion that it is impossible for Mr. Day to write a book otherwise than "Rockbound," and any one after being thoroughly acquainted with Mr. Day would form the same opinion. A man is known by the books he writes, as well as the

company he keeps. We carry our characters in our faces, we also exhibit our characters with our pens, hence *Rockbound* is a fitting tribute to the author.

In his ridiculous book he depicts us humble inhabitants of our little island, as ignorant, immoral and superstitious, which is very unjust, not alone to the county of Lunenburg, but to his native province as well.

Our Island can boast of three school teachers, and there isn't a child who cannot read and write. We earn our livelihood by honest toil, from Father Neptune and Old Mother Earth. Why Mr. Day put such a ridiculous book on the market, belittling the inhabitants of his native province, and those who befriended him, is beyond the power of our conception. Anyone who reads his book, can see that we are the chief actors in his notorious drama.

Mr. Day may accumulate quite a bit of money through his book, so did Judas Iscariot when he betrayed his Master, and in more modern times, Castelreigh [sic] who sold his country, and yet in the end cut his throat. Such is the ending of all ill-gotten gains, and to those who betray their countrymen.

In conclusion, no one but an atheist would have written and given the public a book which is unfit for the reading of any one with pure thoughts and high ideals in life.

Perhaps the "Offended Citizens of *Rockbound*," as they signed themselves, would have been less offended if they had realized the novelist's need to create a setting that suits his characters and, even more demanding, a combination of setting and characters that gives unity and meaning to events and setting and characters.

The realism of *Rockbound*, which so offended the moral sense of the Offended Citizens, was welcomed by others, notably by Dr. Archibald MacMechan, who wrote an enthusiastic letter to Day, part of which follows:

What I want to congratulate you on doing is bringing realism into Canadian fiction. You have got rid of convention and polite periphrasis. You have given us life, in the raw actuality. Motivation, character, thought, outlook are all true. Your presentation carries conviction. Your people are alive.

This is the book I have been watching for. Doubtless you will be abused. Never mind! You have given us the Real Thing.

In another letter MacMechan wrote:

Frank Parker Day has written a real Canadian story, without sugar and without rose-pink, to wit, "*Rockbound*." He has caught the life of Lunenburg. Absolutely. Enter Realism on the amateur stage of Canadian fiction.

The realist, as a creative artist, in the process of creation shapes his raw material. As MacMechan said, Day had caught the life of Lunenburg (or at least of an isolated Lunenburg County fishing community) absolutely; but it is still a life that is modified for the purposes of the writer of fiction.

Some of the contemporary reviewers objected that the strength of the

setting overshadows plot and character. There can be no doubt about the power of the description of life on Rockbound. The reviewer in the *Times Literary Supplement*, with his air of godlike omniscience increased by the usual anonymity, has a good deal of praise for the novel and in particular for its setting: "The author possesses an original power for description, and he can deal with fishing scenes, battles between men, and the deep sea as convincingly as his hero, David Jung, could haul a boat or pull a line." J. D. Robins, writing in *The Canadian Forum*, is much more specific and more graphic in his praise:

Rockbound is the turbulent epic of pioneers, of Viking pioneers, of men who would laughingly cut the spread eagle on a foe or grimly drive themselves and their wives and children to death with the taskmaster's whip. Resignation is a thing unknown, except to the feeble among them. . . . Overwhelming scenes, a few of them, especially the occasion on which the Jungs labour in the fish-shed on an unimaginably fatiguing Saturday night, and the blood and the filth and the sweat are cleansed away from the reader's mind by the old hymn of Fanny the fish-girl.

Dr. Eliza Ritchie, in *The Dalhousie Review*, devotes more than half of her brief review to the atmosphere created by the general setting:

That the scene of this novel lies on the Atlantic shore of Nova Scotia is obvious, although the province is never mentioned by name. Realistically, and without much fear of shocking the conventionally-minded reader, the author depicts the daily life of a small fishing settlement on an island off the mainland. The crass superstition, the low moral standards, the harsh condition of living, the ignorance and quarrelsomeness that are the natural consequence of an existence so shut in and restricted, are all shown; as well as the unflinching courage and intense laboriousness that belong to the Atlantic fisherman's heritage. Always as the background of the picture is the Sea, at once the giver of the livelihood and the ever-threatening destroyer of life.

Not all of the reviewers were so serious in their approach. A.B.C. in the *Knickerbocker Press Sunday Magazine* begins his review by telling us that

the author writes about way down east where men are men and smell like fishes, and women and humour are robust. . . . Rockbound people have primitive passions and primitive faults and virtues. Their lives are shut in by the sea and civilization advances slowly. The pleasures of the fisherman, like those of the cowboy, are the pleasures of the flesh. Home from the banks he goes carousing, taking his fun where he finds it. In the old fashioned Way Down East the knave who betrayed our Nell was a villain, but seduction is no novelty to these fisher folks and its results are not so disastrous.

Day has placed his rugged characters in a suitably rugged setting, a setting that is narrowly restricted to the primitive violence of Rockbound and its neighboring islands and the malevolent, treacherous sea that anthropomorphically seems to play with the brave men who use it, but

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writing from the point of view of the omniscient author, gives the reader at some length the ideas that floated through his hero's mind as the power of the sea exerted its hypnotic effect:

He was vaguely conscious of a force beating beneath him, perhaps the rhythmic impulse of the sea at the cliff's foot, and of the unending restlessness of the sea. It seemed to him that God and the devil were in a gigantic struggle, the one building up islands and continents for men to live on, and the other personified by the sea, growling, roaring, and gnawing away what God had made. . . . Yes, the devil was in the sea destroying islands and mainland. Sometimes he seemed asleep on a sunny, windless day, but you had to watch him, for he sprang at you treacherously out of a fog bank, or in a dead calm sent a sudden roller against you to swamp your boat, low down with fish. And the devil seemed stronger than God! How could that be? . . .

But what a long time it must have taken to make even as much soil as there was on Rockbound. Jennie Run-over, when maudlin with drink, had sometimes talked to him of God, the great lover of men. Why, he wondered, if men were His children and He truly loved them, had He made things so rough and hard? Why had He made sharks, dogfish and albacore, which played havoc with the nets, and in one night sometimes destroyed more than a man could earn in a month? Why didn't He stop that treacherous devil in the sea that sent stout boats to the bottom and forever ate up the land He had made? On the Outposts there were many widows whose little children ran wild, ill-clad, and half fed. Why was the God-fearing Uriah so grasping, and why did the Rockbound Jungs kill themselves with labour to get money when they had plenty already?

David's experiences are limited to Rockbound and its immediate area, and his mind is not cluttered up with worries over national or international events (none of the Rockbounders ever appears to think of life beyond his own particular little world). Face to face with nature in the form of the sea and the rocky island and humanity as represented by himself and his fellows, David's problems are those of Everyman, presented in a simple and naive manner that seems to focus attention on the essentially timeless and still-unsolved questions that have bothered those who have, like David, taken time to ponder the mystery of life.

David is the central character, the hero whose life acts as the pivot around which almost all of the action circles. At eighteen he invades the kingdom of Uriah, demanding his rightful inheritance, a tumbledown shack (reputed to be haunted) and a fragment of land. Uriah, ruthless and cunning, accepts him as a sharesman on a month's probation, fully expecting that young David will fail to meet his rigid standards. When David stands the test, he is reluctantly and ungraciously accepted by the Jungs, although not as one of the ruling, property-owning Jungs of Rockbound. He is always an outsider, even after his shotgun marriage to Tamar, old Uriah's daughter, has served to open the magic door of partnership. He is always more at home with the pleasure-seeking Gershom Born and the amoral, generous Fanny than with Jungs or Krauses, and it is with

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Rockbounders; Mary, despite the book learning that sets her apart from her kin, is still a woman whose instincts are those of her fisherfolk. The elimination of Caspar and Gershom, by means of Gershom's contrived "accident," leaves the field open for David, and Day's happy ending seems to me to be quite consistent with the rest of the book. There is no twisting of character, no disturbing change in either David or Mary, at the end of the book. Neither is a tragic figure, although David is of heroic mould, so that the happy ending, although not the only possible one, comes as no surprise to the reader, requiring no violent re-adjustment of mood or tone. It is certainly less out of gear with the rest of the novel than the epilogue Thomas Hardy felt obliged to add to his great tragic novel, *The Return of the Native*, and less surprising than the transformation of the survivors of *Wuthering Heights* from snarling, bickering oafs to cooing lovers. (*Rockbound* has no dominating Heathcliff to cast his diabolical spell over the other characters, but it does have its lesser figure, Uriah Jung, whose departure from the scene removes most of the atmosphere of evil from the island's inhabitants.)

Some of Day's critics found his book smacking too much of the academic, objecting particularly to his pleasantly surprising habit of introducing each chapter with an appropriate quotation from Chaucer. This academic handicap (as it was called by the Kansas City reviewer) serves to expand the vision and add a timeless quality to a realistic novel with a very specific and restricted setting. Day seems to be implying something of what Dryden meant when he wrote about Chaucer in 1700: "We have our forefathers and great-granddames all before us, as they were in Chaucer's days: the general characters are still remaining in mankind, and even in England, though they are still called by other names than those of Monks, and Friars, and Canons, and Lady Abbesses, and Nuns; for mankind is ever the same, and nothing lost out of Nature, though everything is altered." It might be noted in passing that Chaucer's fourteenth-century world is a much more sophisticated society than the one described by Day, although the passions of love and fear and hate and jealousy are the same.

Henry Fielding, in *Tom Jones*, one of the world's greatest novels, makes great use of pairs of contrasting figures to set each other off and to represent some aspect of man's nature. The character of the handsome, virile young hero, Tom Jones, is seen most clearly when set beside the scheming, hypocritical young Blifil, who always provides his meanest and most selfish actions with the noblest of motives. Tom, impetuous, passionate and full-blooded, is always generous and unselfish, full of love for his fellow wanderers among the pitfalls of life. His deviations from the

conventional paths of morality, his spontaneous and unpremeditated acts of kindness and of love, are the results of an overflow of emotion. He is never mean, malicious, scheming, or hypocritical; although he is at times a foolish young man, he is never an evil one. Frank Parker Day uses the same method of pairing to present a similar standard of morality. Gershom and the young David are hard-drinking, hard-fighting, disreputable "hellians fur women." Gershom's reputation is far worse than that of the more moderate David, so bad in fact that Mary's father warns her about the dangers of becoming too fond of the impetuous giant: "Onct," he says in the dialect of the Rockbounders, "he had to swim half a mile to de Outposts an' landed wid one foot froze, an' de women was afeerd to let him in dere houses wid de men away, so bad was de fame o' him." But David and Gershom are big-hearted and generous, frank and honest. Like Tom Jones, they act foolishly and unconventionally, but they are free from meanness and hypocrisy. In contrast, Uriah never acts impulsively, but is always scheming, cheating, lying, and sneaking. Whereas David is warm-blooded and all too human, like Gershom basing his actions on a very humanistic set of beliefs, Uriah is as cold as the Atlantic and as ruthless as its denizens.

David, trying to work out for himself a world with some direction and some core of meaning, has his already shaky belief in God further disturbed by the fact that he can see no correlation between Uriah's openly-expressed religious beliefs and his everyday standards of morality.

There is a passage in Day's *Autobiography of a Fisherman* that illustrates something of his attitude to religious hypocrites. Day's father, a Methodist minister who had a great love of good horses, had left his three-year-old colt in the care of a farmer "noted for long prayers, who promised to feed and care for her but who, instead, worked her on the plough, half starved her, and abused her shamefully." Her indignant owner's only recorded comment could apply very well to the characters of some of the Rockbounders: "I might have known better than to leave a good horse with a professional Christian." Uriah, the professional Christian of Rockbound, is the least honest and the most unreliable of the characters, whereas the sceptical David and the openly atheistic Gershom are essentially honest men.

In Day's last novel, *John Paul's Rock*, the central character is a Micmac Indian who has fled the white man's law to live completely alone. In his solitude John Paul becomes increasingly dependent upon the merry, mischievous god of the Indians, Glooscap, as he half remembers and half creates the mythology and morality that are appropriate to his own race and his own circumstances. As John, through long days and

nights of solitary communing with Nature, looks at the white man's God through his Indian eyes he sees many shortcomings, some of which are implicit in *Rockbound*:

He began to compare what he had learned from the priests with what he had learned from his fathers. The religion of white men made them sour, sad, and long-faced, nor did they practise what they preached. They said give, give, but they themselves gave only a little, after they had got much. Surely they did not think the Indians their equals before their God though they pretended to say so. They were too sad and solemn; John remembered how he and Joe had been sent from school for laughing at the story of Noah. Surely any man could see that that was but a merry jest No, the gods of the Christians were hard, revengeful gods that locked you up in a burning Hell if you disobeyed their orders. But Glooscap had always been gracious and helpful to the Indians, and even the malicious Lon had been a merry god.

Jesus, the white man's God, was on the side of white man's law; the gods of the whites were perhaps suited to people who dwelt in towns and villages, but Muntu loved better the folk in deep forests and frozen wildernesses. How could the God of the whites understand an Indian's necessities? He knew nothing of hunting and fishing, or great hunger and strong cold. . . .

Glooscap had been a stronger and merrier God, who loved feats of strength and delighted in laughter and merry jests. When old Glooscap laughed you could hear him all the way from Chebogue to Cape North. He had always been on the side of the Indians, a guiding light to them in days of distress and trouble. . . . It was a great thing to have a God always on your side, and certainly the white man's God could never be on the side of the Indians. What did it matter? The Micmacs were dying or mixed with the French.

In his first novel *Day* had expressed a similar belief through the words of his hero, a self-exiled doctor from Cape Breton. As a terrifying blizzard rages outside the flimsy tent that provides an inadequate protection, Alex MacDonald turns to the missionary he is accompanying and the following conversation takes place:

'How do you like it, Parson?' he called out to Sedding.

'We are in the hands of God.'

'Ay, but what god?'

'There is but one great God.'

'The gentle myths of Greece and Palestine don't hold here.'

'Even the hairs of our head are numbered. We shall get through safely, you shall see.'

'Tornasuk, hateful god of the Indians and Eskimo, rides the wind to-day. If this tent blows down, he will have us in an hour.' Roxy [the Eskimo guide] nodded approval.

'But it will not blow down. My God never fails me.'

'Could you have put up the tent without Roxy and me?'

'No, you, too, are the instruments of God sent to protect me.'

Alex was puzzled at the man's strange egotism.

In the novels, of course, the characters are expressing beliefs that are appropriate to themselves. In the *Autobiography of a Fisherman*, however,

Day explicitly states some of his own opinions, similar to those implicit in *Rockbound* and the other novels mentioned. Describing his minister father who frequently outraged his strait-laced flock by his love of horses and his passion for fishing, Day presents a portrait of a man worthy of admiration:

My father was not a great success as a minister, though the poorest people always loved him: he was a good man, but restraint and enforced inhibitions irked him. He might have made a jolly old monk in some monastery of the Middle Ages, for along with his religious and humanitarian instinct he loved eating, drinking, good stories, and hearty laughter. He was Rabelaisian. Preaching, making sermons and prayers bored him; he loved fishing, trotting horses, and full-blooded people. Socially, he never made friends with the right people; Jews he fraternized with because he thought them a race endowed with a genius for religion and worthy of respect; the livery-stable keeper of the village was always his first crony, for, no matter how poor we were, he always kept a good trotting horse In winter, he used to race his horse against others on the ice of the harbours, and in summer on the hard-pounded sand beaches that, banked with the curve of the shore, made perfect race tracks. For these misdemeanours, some old Christian frump was always up in arms against him and running with tales to my mother, who led a worried life He had been taught nothing of literature, music, or pictures, or the marvellously beautiful things men have made, though he had every capacity for their appreciation and enjoyment. He had been taught that it was wasteful of time and well-nigh wicked to read novels and poetry. He sought a drought of the sweet juices of life and found his mouth full of bitterness. Neither precisian nor puritan, loving life vigorously, like his Master, he sought, loved, and made friends with the poor and lowly. He was a good fisherman and a good fellow, and I am mighty glad I had him for a father.

Frank Parker Day's own beliefs appear to have been naturalistic and humanistic. In another passage from his *Autobiography* we find these words:

Nature always wins or takes her revenge because we refuse to face the fact that we are animals—fine animals to be sure—in a world of nature. When we get over the extravagant fantasies about our souls that have arisen from man's own naive egotism and are willing to face the facts of life, we shall get on much better. Hunger, the yearning to be a distinct individual seeking perfection, the desire for warmth and shelter, and the sex craving are the great urges in human life, try to blink the subject as we may.

And finally there is the passage in which he presents most clearly his humanistic creed:

Malicious tongues are, perhaps, the greatest evil in the world and are often wagged most foully by those who consider themselves virtuous because they have inhibited that which is natural. Good and evil, I am sure, have nothing to do with the great force that animates all things, the great force that I feel throbbing beneath me as I lie stretched out on Boni's Meadow. This great force that drives nature of which we are a part, just as that hawk hovering about the pool for an unwary trout, is beneficent for

the most part but quite indifferent to us and to what we call good and evil. Good and evil only exist between Smith and Jones, between you and me; they are abstractions of our own making. The theologians have confused and befogged us; they have identified good with the life-impelling force, called it God, and made it entirely beneficent and omnipotent. Logic therefore compelled them to create the devil, a power responsible for all wickedness and disease. Here they fell into a hopeless dilemma from which they have never extricated themselves. Why had not the beneficent force God, if omnipotent, destroyed the evil that relentlessly fastens upon innocent children? No, the great life force of nature booms along, regardless of us, regardless of good or evil, which are purely of our own invention. God is not a wrathful old man upon a mountain desiring endless praise and foolish adoration, but rather the sum total of all human idealism, aesthetic and moral desires, and the craving for perfection. Whence these desires arise in the wondrous creatures we call men and women, neither you nor I can say.

It is apparent from the passages quoted from Day's other works that the implicit morality of *Rockbound* is made explicit elsewhere in the writings of Frank Parker Day. David Jung, for example, is like his creator as he lies watching the sea and feeling the power surging beneath him. Like the author, David recognizes this power as that of the force of nature, with him personified by the sea. As a part of nature, David is true to himself and to nature when he follows his natural instincts that lead to his development as an individual and as a member of a society of human beings, each one of whom is himself a part of nature. The evil that appears in the novel develops from the perversion of the natural in man, from greed and avarice and hatred and intolerance; and the worst of the offenders is that professional Christian Uriah Jung, whose God is a narrow-minded, law-giving personification of Uriah's own warped personality. Day's beliefs as expressed in his writing are positive and consistent; whether or not they are beliefs by which most of us attempt to fashion our lives does not really matter. It is enough to see that for Day life is something to be cherished, something wonderful and mysterious; man is an animal, but a magnificent animal, a wondrous creature that within his natural and human limitations is continually striving for perfection. This love of man and faith in man's essentially good instincts permeates all of Day's works and acts as the central moral theme of *Rockbound*.

Frank Parker Day's literary output, although limited to the four books I have mentioned, is worth reading. Of Day's four books (three novels and an autobiography), *Rockbound* is the one that most clearly deserves recognition. As I have pointed out, the contemporary reviewers were, with few exceptions, enthusiastic in their praises. The first edition, however, sold rather slowly, and there never was a second, so that now *Rockbound* is not easy to find. Perhaps some enterprising Canadian publishing house will give us a new edition, thus making this admirable book available to a new generation of readers.