

*M. G. Parks*

## **Review Article**

### **The Letters of Frederick Philip Grove**

*The Letters of Frederick Philip Grove.* Edited with an introduction and notes by Desmond Pacey. Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1976. Pp. xxix, 584. \$25.00.

The first thing to say about this stout and handsome volume is that it is the only specimen of its kind to be found in Canada — an edition of all the known letters of a Canadian author. This startling fact may not be readily accepted until one goes through the roster of deceased Canadian writers, major and minor, looking for published collections of their letters, only to find, for example, that none exists for McCulloch, Haliburton, Susanna Moodie, De Mille, C.G.D. Roberts, Carman, Isabella Crawford, Sara Duncan, Lampman, D.C. Scott, Ralph Connor, Pratt, Leacock, Klein. Grove is indeed the sole exception to what must be seen as a serious deficiency in Canadian literary scholarship. The event is therefore so important that it is sad that Desmond Pacey, who accomplished this “first”, did not live to see the volume that is the product of many years of intermittent research and writing. When he died on July 4, 1975, his book was still in production.

It is appropriate that he should have been the pioneer in this particular uncharted region, for his book proves conclusively that he practised what he preached. More than once in recent years he had warned his colleagues and fellow specialists in Canadian literature that they were creating a heavy imbalance in their field by turning out a spate of articles, books, and theses of critical opinion, and mainly on living writers, while literary scholarship based on “genuine scholarly research” lay neglected. The gist of his repeated admonition may be seen in these few sentences from an address he delivered in 1973: “So, far we have done the easy things—the impressionistic critical essays, the tracing image patterns, the exploration of dominant themes. Virtually all the hard scholarly labour—biographical and bibliographical research, the editing of texts, manuscripts and letters — remains to be done. The last two decades have seen a great upsurge in interest in Canadian literature, but so far

this interest has not drawn forth anything like an appropriate measure of scholarly response. Perhaps Canadian literature has come of age in this post-War period, but Canadian literary scholarship is still in a state of juvenility." That last sentence in particular may sound unduly harsh, but the evidence for its accuracy is abundant, as Pacey well knew. He was also very much aware of the inherent folly of the tendency he was criticizing, that of building an edifice of literary criticism without solid scholarly foundations. His case is substantiated each time one of our respectable journals publishes a critical and interpretative article made fatuous by its author's unawareness of the scholarly knowledge that would laugh it out of existence.

The pitfalls of editing manuscripts are many, and much more is required of a successful editor than the dogged persistence that the uninitiated may think is the only requirement of his trade. The good editor, however, is no mere hack. He must have persistence, of course, but also knowledge, intelligence, and imagination if his work is to be above the ordinary. The lofty condescension that has been known to infect the attitudes of literary critics to their supposedly inferior editorial brethren and is commonly summed up in the phrase "Oh, he's only an editor" is not only unwarranted but, one suspects, is rooted in ignorance—or, to put it more kindly, in an inadequate awareness of what Pacey's "hard scholarly labour" is all about. One even wonders whether one cause of the imbalance Pacey saw in the study of Canadian literature is not this same unfounded condescension, perhaps intensified by the local fact that most specialists in Canadian literature are young, and, in the current fashion, eager to get into print with articles of critical and interpretative opinion on works hitherto neglected or hitherto misunderstood. Perhaps scholarship has also been adversely affected by a sophisticated form of a more "widespread cultural malaise that an American academic has called "pop Deweyism", a distrust of objective reality, the view that "since nothing is known with assured finality, there are no facts, only opinions, and therefore that one opinion is as good as another." Although this crude form of the attitude may seem to have little bearing on the prevalence of criticism over scholarship in Canadian letters, the conviction at its core that what is really important is one's individual response, one's personal re-creation, may be at work. If so, the new romanticism may be seen as an obstacle to progress in Canadian literary scholarship.

However one may view the causes of our deficiencies, Pacey's edition is a demonstration of how to overcome them. The faithfulness of textual reproduction one takes for granted, not simply on trust but because details of spelling, paragraphing, punctuation, and Grove's inadvertent errors are so carefully attended to — though of course only a comparison with the manuscripts would prove the point. The dating of undated letters, which can be a difficult task, was here a very minor chore, but on the few occasions when the problem does arise it is handled very well. What must have taken much time

and effort is the full annotation. This, one of the crucial tests of editing, certainly passes muster. Nearly all of the hundreds of persons Grove mentions in these letters are identified, often with considerable detail, and oblique or puzzling remarks are unravelled in the notes. Naturally the editor's success is not total, but his approach is admirable—to exhaust every avenue before giving up the pursuit of an elusive reference. One curious example of unavailing effort is mentioned in the editor's introduction. Grove's casual reference to "an old German cow-boy by name of Lipke," whom he had met in Govenlock, Saskatchewan, and whom had impressed him as "the only man with an 'education' " in that part of the province in 1928, sent the editor on a hunt aided by the Provincial Archives of Saskatchewan, the Govenlock Post Office, the RCMP, and a resident of Govenlock, but to no avail. Grove's cowboy could not be identified. Fortunately, few such failures have to be recorded in the notes. Even most of the persons whom Grove met on his lecture tours, some of them for only a few moments, have been traced and identified.

The letters come from over twenty sources, with major collections (the University of Manitoba Grove Collection, the Lorne Pierce Collection at Queen's) and Grove's publishers supplying a large number. Of the forty or so correspondents to whom letters are addressed, a few bulk large in the collection — Grove's wife, to whom he wrote frequently while on his extensive lecture tours in 1928 and 1929; W.J. Alexander, Professor of English in University College, Toronto; Lorne Pierce of the Ryerson Press; Watson Kirkconnell, who in those years was teaching in Wesley College, Winnipeg, and then later was Professor of English at McMaster University. There are also many letters to the editors and assistants of the several publishing houses with which Grove dealt — McClelland and Stewart, Graphic Publishers, Ryerson Press, Macmillan of Canada, and J.M. Dent.

Grove's years in Canada, from 1912 to his death in 1948, are fairly well represented by these letters, with one major exception: there is an unfortunate gap from 1914 to 1925. As a result, we hear nothing of his activities as a high-school teacher, as an extra-mural student in the University of Manitoba, and as a school principal, or of his prolonged illness in 1920, or, above all, of his first successes as an author with the publication of *Over Prairie Trails* in 1922 and *The Turn of the Year* in 1923. Some letters of this period may still exist, but others certainly do not. It is possible, for example, that Grove's early correspondence with his first publisher, McClelland and Stewart, may be extant in the unsorted papers of the company stored in a Toronto warehouse. One source of information, however, can never be recovered: Grove's early letters to Arthur L. Phelps were destroyed by the recipient not long before he died in 1970. No explanation of Phelps' action is offered by the editor. Unless it was accidental, it seems strangely irresponsible for a scholar and critic with such a lively interest in Canadian writing.

The intriguing business of Grove's European background and the probability that Grove was really Felix Paul Greve are facets of his biography which these letters do nothing to elucidate or even confirm. If Grove was Greve, he takes care in his letters, as in his autobiography and elsewhere, to hide that fact. On the few occasions when he is questioned by correspondents about dates and exact details of his life in Europe — by Carleton Stanley, Watson Kirkconnell, and Desmond Pacey himself — Grove takes refuge in adroit evasion, attributing inconsistencies to his bad memory or modestly declining to comment upon his humble acquaintance with the great writers he had claimed to know in Paris in the 1890's — when, of course, if he were Greve, he was still a schoolboy in Hamburg. Pacey's introduction takes full account of D.O. Spettigue's discoveries as revealed in *FPG: The European Years* (1973) and succinctly explains how Spettigue's highly probable identification of Grove as Greve is relevant to these letters. His appendix consisting of fifteen of F.P. Greve's letters, in the original German or French, and also translated into English, is yet another interesting contribution to the Grove-Greve hypothesis.

Pacey sees Grove as a man with secrets he had no intention of revealing, as a man who very seldom lowered his guard, and then only to raise it again at the first threat. His speculation on Grove's motives for creating a new identity and so carefully disguising his true past is convincing: "One almost certain motive is that Felix Paul Greve was arrested for fraud in Bonn in 1903, and spent several months in jail — presumably Grove wished to dissociate himself from this criminal record. As for the pretence that he was Anglo-Swedish rather than German, this is not hard to understand in one who was attempting to start a new life in Canada immediately prior to World War I, when anti-German feeling was running high."

As Pacey points out, however, no matter how fascinating and intriguing the Grove-Greve mystery happens to be, one's main interest in Grove's letters must be in what they tell us of his Canadian years. They reveal much about Grove — his broad intellectual interests and considerable erudition in a variety of subjects, his methods and attitudes as a writer, his critical judgments on other writers, his dealings with publishers, his friendships, and, above all, his curious personality. Desmond Pacey writes at some length on this last subject, and the letters themselves are rich in psychological suggestion and implication. It is sufficient to mention here that they present an odd mixture of blatant arrogance and insistent humility, of sexual vanity and prudishness, of anti-materialism and a lurking respect for wealth and luxury — even a streak of self-indulgence, according to Marcus Adeney's report of a closet filled by "a row of Harris tweeds — a multi-coloured array of costumes suited to an exclusively country gentleman."

Probably the chief emotional impact they have upon the reader is a sense of Grove's grim and often bitter view of life. As Pacey says, "The mask which

Grove wears most frequently is that of the tragedian, who sees the world as a bitter and frustrating place". The only sustained exception to this dominant tone occurs in the numerous letters Grove wrote to his wife from the various stopping-places on his lecture tours of 1928 and 1929. In them he is so gratified by his popularity as a speaker — and, one must add, so smugly self-congratulatory over his immense superiority to most of the people he addresses or meets — that the more customary tragic role disappears in visions of his fame as a novelist and seer. Otherwise, Grove typically appears as a frustrated, unhappy, and even deeply despondent man. When he reaches the nadir of his depression and is in the midst of what he sees as cruel neglect and what is unmistakably real poverty, the letters make painful reading. Grim despair is clear enough in passages such as these: "If I were to follow my own inclination, I'd go on the road, in spite of desperately ill health; for most of the time I feel that, if I were my dog, I'd sit down on my haunches and howl with my pains." . . . "Personally, I don't think any longer that it matters much. If, through actual death of starvation, I could secure a minimum of safety for wife and child, I should not hesitate. I begin to feel that I am just a dead burden on this earth which, to me, is barren."

Such expressions of hopelessness were not, it seems, merely exaggerated dramatizations of mildly depressing reality. The sad truth is that Grove was indeed consistently unfortunate in crucial aspects of his life. Though he may have been partly responsible for his own ill fortune, his meagre financial return from novels that are undoubtedly important works of art in the Canadian context would have been enough to daunt a much nobler spirit. Moreover, Grove had every right to expect that he might earn a decent living as a lecturer in a Canadian college or university, a position for which his genuine erudition and talent as a speaker admirably fitted him. But no such appointment ever came his way, not even the civil service job which at one point seemed about to bring relief from his severe penury. For one short period of over a year he appeared at last to have gained the financial security he needed, but, as his luck would have it, his position with Graphic Publishers of Ottawa coincided with the onset of the Depression, the company floundered, and Grove had to leave. For Grove, that happy coincidence of opportunity and personal qualifications which often settles many a lesser talent in congenial employment never occurred.

The man who emerges from the five hundred pages of his letters is, on the whole, not particularly attractive. When he is at the height of his arrogance, condescension, or self-pity, one is apt to feel that he deserved the strokes of the malignant fate that pursued him. It was probably no act of fate which decreed that Grove should always have a falling-out with his publishers after an initial period of congeniality, and that his letters to them should finally turn waspish or peevish or abrasively rude. The undeniably unpleasant side of Grove,

however, was balanced, if not overshadowed, by his more admirable traits. In addressing those friends and acquaintances whom he respected, he is not only pleasant and urbane but even genuinely modest. Then what Pacey accurately calls his "indomitable will" is very much in evidence throughout his life. He may indulge in self-pity, but he does not give up. Finally, the letters reveal, amid all the frailties of the man, the unmistakable intellectual stature of Grove — indeed, one is tempted to say genius. That it does not always sweep aside his lesser self in his powerful but flawed novels is a cliché of criticism. Yet it is fitting that this awkward giant of our literature should be the first to have his strengths and weaknesses made plain in his collected letters, and it is fortunate that they appear in an edition which in every way may serve as an excellent model for those editors and publishers who will eventually bring out the letters of other Canadian writers. The scholarship of Desmond Pacey and the solicitude and finesse of his publisher have produced a book that deserves more than casual interest and praise.