

THE CANADIAN HISTORICAL NOVEL

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WHEN Michael Drayton, writing in the year 1606, hailed the New World as "Earth's only Paradise" where

the Golden Age
Still Nature's laws doth give,

he was, no doubt, availing himself of the license permitted to one who is both poet and prophet. But if, by means of a Wellsian time-machine, Drayton had been able to project himself into the future far enough and long enough to read the story of Canada as her novelists have told it, he would have found that his sole error lay in locating earth's Paradise specifically in Virginia rather than some seven hundred miles farther north. There, if our novelists are to be believed, heroes conceived in the tradition of Rider Haggard and Stanley Weyman shaped the destinies of our nation in a setting which is a pleasing mosaic of Ruritania, Arcady and the Bonnie Braes of Atholl.

The Canadian historical novel was not always thus. John Richardson, whose *Wacousta*, published in 1832, is the earliest true example of the *genre* written by a Canadian, acknowledged that the historical novelist is bound within certain limits to tell the truth as he sees it. It is to be admitted that outside these limits Richardson moves at times in dimensions since explored only by Walt Disney and Superman: thus the villain, Wacousta, climbs a flag-pole while holding a well developed young lady in his arms, climbs down again and carries off his prize in the teeth of an entire British infantry regiment. The dialogue, too, is as grotesque as much of the action, the characters talking like the young ladies and gentlemen of the novel of sensibility at its worst, rather than like the products of a military and frontier environment. The heroine, having observed a beaver (in reality a disguised Indian) swimming towards a rowboat in a remarkably purposeful manner, calls the attention of her companion to the phenomenon in the following terms:

My heart misgives me sadly, for I like not the motions of this animal, which are strange and unusually bold. But this is not all; a beaver or a rat might ruffle the mere surface of the water, yet this leaves behind it a deep and gurgling furrow, as if the element had been ploughed to its very bottom. Observe how the lake is agitated and discoloured wherever it has passed. Moreover, I dislike this sudden bustle on board the schooner, knowing, as I

do, there is not an officer present to order the movements now visibly going forward. The men are evidently getting up the anchor, and see how her sails are loosened, apparently courting the breeze, as if she would fly to avoid some threatened danger. Would to heaven this council scene were over,—for I do, as much as yourself, dearest Clara, distrust these cruel Indians.

And Lieutenant Murphy, a popular and gallant Irish officer being mortally wounded by a sniper, announces his impending death in words appropriately weighty:

His aim has been too true. The ball of the villain has found a lodgement in my breast. God bless ye all, my boys; may your fates be more lucky than mine.

But there are times when Richardson appears to be looking at life steadily, if not whole. There is, in *Wacousta*, no attempt to glorify the Noble Savage, no attempt to represent the war between the French and the English as anything other than a cruel, internecine strife in which the stakes were gold and not glory. Richardson may have been deficient in imagination and in technical skill, but his ideal of the historical novel was a worthy one.

His realism found, however, little favour with his successors, most of whom succumbed to the spell of Longfellow. Longfellow's influence on the Maritimes tourist trade has long been gratefully acknowledged: indeed it would seem only fitting that the New England bard be adopted as the patron saint of Nova Scotia, since he has created for that province a legend which has enabled the Land of Evangeline to compete on at least equal terms with Mount Vernon and the Alamo. But it is less generally recognised that Longfellow's influence on the Canadian historical novel has been equally profound. The Land of Evangeline as he conceived it (his imagination being happily unhampered by any first-hand acquaintance with his subject,) has become a type setting for Canadian novels dealing not only with the expulsion of the Acadians, but with almost every phase of the Ancient Regime.

What may we rightfully ask of our historical novelists? John Buchan has defined the historical novel with admirable succinctness as "simply a novel which attempts to reconstruct the life and recapture the spirit of an age other than that of the writer." G. M. Trevelyan requires of the historical novelist "an historical mind apt to study the records of a period, and a power of creative imagination able to reproduce the perceptions so acquired in a picture that has all the colours of life." The

task of the conscientious historical novelist is thus a twofold one; to study to the fullest extent of his means and ability the records of the period with which he proposes to deal; and to exercise his imagination in the creation of life within the authentic setting established by his research.

But even the most cursory examination of the Canadian historical novel suggests that it is scarcely the work of historical minds "apt to study the records of a period." The Ancient Regime as depicted by our novelists has little in common with Parkman's reconstruction of the same period. To the novelist, the Ancient Regime is indeed the New World's Golden Age. Over it the mellow blight of Longfellow has fallen; and in the cloak-and-sword romances of Thomas Guthrie Marquis, Sir Gilbert Parker, Frances Harrison and a score of others, gaily dressed puppets perform their antics against a backdrop as charming and unreal as a Forest of Arden in Sadler's Wells.

Even Willa Cather, one of America's greatest novelists, has not been proof against the spell. Her exquisite idyll, *Shadows on the Rock*, is far superior in prose style and imaginative power to any other novel dealing with the Ancient Regime. But asceticism and hardship and death are softened and beautified in the gentle light of Miss Cather's imagination as it plays over the picture of a day long past. In *Shadows on the Rock* the ancient citadel of Quebec is conceived not in the harsh light of reality, but in some rare and lovely dream.

It is in the numerous retellings of the story of the Acadian expulsion that Longfellow's influence is most apparent. Sir Charles G.D. Roberts, Marshall Saunders, and more recently Evelyn Eaton, have repeated with only minor variations the Longfellow pattern,—

There, in the midst of its farms, reposed the Acadian village . . .
There in the tranquil evenings of summer, when brightly the
sunset

Lighted the village street and gilded the vanes on the chimneys,
Matrons and maidens sat, in snow white caps and in kirtles
Scarlet and blue and green, with distaffs spinning the golden
Flax for the gossiping looms, whose noisy shuttles within doors
Mingled their sound with the whirl of the wheels and the song
of the maidens

Thus dwelt together in love these simple Acadian farmers,
Dwelt in the love of God and of man. Alike were they free from
Fear, that reigns with the tyrant, and envy, the vice of republics:
Neither locks had they to their doors nor bars to their windows,

But their dwellings were open as day and the hearts of their owners; There the richest was poor and the poorest lived in abundance.

One feels that Mr. Thomas Raddall could tell the story of the expulsion if he chose. His incidental account of the Acadians, in *Roger Sudden*, carries conviction. But even Mr. Raddall, certainly the most promising historical novelist to appear in Canada in recent years, seems to be in some danger of self-betrayal. His first novel, *His Majesty's Yankees*, was a fine and stirring achievement; his latest, *Roger Sudden*, shows a very considerable falling away. This story of the founding of Halifax and the capture of Louisburg exhibits Mr. Raddall's characteristic attention to background and regard for the historical record. But in his personal exploits, both amatory and political, *Roger Sudden* is painfully reminiscent of the heroes of Ouida. This is a pity, because Mr. Raddall is a man of exceptional gifts.

There are, in addition to Raddall, perhaps half-a-dozen novelists who have dealt with various phases of the Ancient Regime as honestly as their talents have permitted. William Kirby, whose ponderous account of corruption in high places, *The Golden Dog*, was published in 1877, at least escaped the influence of Longfellow, although the shade of Dumas *pere* seems to have been ever present at his elbow. A more recent novelist, Franklin Davey McDowell, has told the story of the early Jesuit missions to Huronia. The background in *The Champlain Road* is admirably conceived, but McDowell has seen fit to introduce into his novel a preposterous love idyll more appropriate to Graustark than Huronia. The martyrdom of the priests is well described, but suffers by the inevitable comparison with Mr. E. J. Pratt's magnificent realisation of the same incident in *Brebeuf and His Brethren*.

It is to be regretted that Professor Phillip Child has not returned to the field which he explored in his first novel, *The Village of Souls*. A reconstruction of Canadian frontier life during the middle decades of the seventeenth century, it is one of the few imaginative works dealing with the period that bear the stamp of honest and intelligent craftsmanship.

Sir Walter Raleigh's definition of romance as "the magic of distance" may explain why our novelists have shown such a strong predilection for the Ancient Regime, to the comparative neglect of later periods. But it seems strange none the less that so few Canadian writers have found subject matter in the

migrations of the United Empire Loyalists. Thomas Raddall, in *His Majesty's Yankees*, has given an excellent account of the conflicting allegiances of the Maritimers during the Revolution, but only Kenneth Roberts, an American novelist, has made successful use of the Loyalist movement in its larger aspects. One may disagree with the point of view which Roberts expresses, but it must be acknowledged that *Oliver Wiswell* is the work of a skilled craftsman.

The War of 1812 has been touched upon by Grace Campbell in her slight but charming novel, *The Higher Hill*. Unfortunately, the intensely idyllic strain which persists throughout the book, creates an atmosphere of unreality at variance with the sombre historical background. Ralph Connor in *The Runner*, and John Elson in *The Scarlet Sash*, have also dealt with the War of 1812, but both writers have shown more concern with the construction of conventional plots than the creation of human beings within the historical framework.

The Rebellion of 1837 forms the background of a typical novel by Sir Gilbert Parker, *The Pomp of the Lavilletes*. In *The Pomp of the Lavilletes* Parker exploits his favourite plot situation—the intrusion into a French-Canadian village (the perfect replica of Grand-Pre) of a disturbing stranger from the outside world, who in the end dies gracefully and well as the only means of resolving the difficulties which his presence has created. The characters are types rather than individuals—The Curé, the Notary, the Bad Girl Who is Good at Heart, the Fascinating Stranger, and so on. Considered as a pastoral idyll, *The Pomp of the Lavilletes*, like *The Right of Way* and *When Valmond Came To Pontiac*, has some merits; but of all our novelists, Parker has been the most cavalier in his treatment of the historical record.

Oddly enough, the opening of the West forms the background of relatively few Canadian novels. Agnes Laut's *Lords of the North*, an exciting account of the struggle between the Hudson's Bay Company and the Nor-Westers, is probably the best of an indifferent group. This comparative neglect of the story of the West is all the more surprising in view of the wealth of material available in the records of the early explorers, missionaries and fur-traders—men like Thompson, Fraser, Father Lacombe, Robertson, and John MacDougall. The material thus provided is at least as rich as that from which Willa Cather fashioned her superb romance of missionary enterprise in the South-West—*Death Comes For the Archbishop*. But so far nearly all our novelists have ignored it.

There is one notable exception. Frederick Niven, a Scottish novelist who settled in British Columbia in 1920, undertook to tell, in the guise of fiction, the story of the Canadian West. Thirty years ago Niven was considered one of the most promising novelists of his generation. His *Justice of the Peace*, a magnificent re-creation of the Glasgow of Niven's boyhood, had earned the enthusiastic praise of such discerning critics as Rebecca West, W. L. George, Hugh Walpole and William McFee. But in spite of his genuine talents—which included the ability to create living people—Niven failed almost completely in the task which he set himself. The first novel of his trilogy, *The Flying Years*, covers the development of Alberta from 1870 to 1920; *Mine Inheritance* goes back half a century or more to the time of the first Red River settlements; *The Transplanted*, unfinished at the time of Niven's death, deals with the opening up of British Columbia. In all three Niven displays the most meticulous regard for the historical record, and there are traces of the earlier excellent prose style; but the trilogy is lacking the breath of life. The plots are slow-moving and laboured; the settings authentic enough, but without vividness; nor, what is much more serious, does the author create a single memorable character. Niven loved the Canadian West, but the new environment, unlike the old, was not a part of him. Perhaps it is true that before a writer can capture the spirit of a region and interpret it to the world his roots must have struck deep.

The significance of the historical novel has often been questioned. Miss Gwethelyn Graham, no doubt pardonably exalted by the popularity of *Earth and High Heaven*, has even gone so far as to call upon young Canadian authors to "write about our national problems of today and get rid of the impulse to turn out historical novels about grandma chopping down the virgin forest in her crinoline." But G. M. Trevelyan, certainly one of the most brilliant of living historians, views the contribution of the historical novelist, as exemplified in the work of Sir Walter Scott, with profound respect. Scott, he says, "did more than any professional historian to make mankind advance towards a true conception of history, for it was he who first perceived that the history of mankind is not simple but complex, that history never repeats itself, but ever creates new forms according to time and place. The great antiquarian and novelist showed historians that history must be living, many coloured and romantic if it is to be a true mirror of the past."

In recent years many American novelists, including Willa

Cather, Howard Fast, Hervey Allen and Neil Swanson, have proved themselves not unworthy disciples of Scott in the sense that they have shared his ideals if not his achievement. They have brought to the writing of the historical novel a high degree of competence and a strong sense of responsibility. In their pages the men of Plymouth and Valley Forge and Gettysburg and the embattled frontiers live as recognisable human beings—men who fought the enemies of the flesh and the spirit, not always wisely, not always successfully, not always with a clear sense of the issue at stake, but always with an unquenchable faith in their own strength. And because they are recognisable human beings rather than romantic puppets they have provided for many an individual distracted by a world gone mad, not escape but reassurance.

But in Canada the function of the historical novel has always been escapist, and except in one or two instances continues to be so. And so long as Canadian novelists continue in the traditional mode, established by Longfellow and his immediate successors, so long will the Canadian historical novel be no more than an idle tale written to while away an idle hour.