

A CONFLICT OF LOYALTIES*

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THE later nineteenth century, basking delightedly in the warm appreciation of its own greatness, was inclined to dismiss the eighteenth century as a rude and barbarous age which had had the misfortune to exist before real progress began. It was an unsatisfactory era, the Victorians thought, when an artificial veneer had to take the place of the refinements of the later period; a regrettable era, with all sorts of plainness, and vulgarity, and smouldering discontents underneath, and occasional explosions, rather unpleasant ones. The twentieth century, jolted out of complacency by a succession of catastrophic events, is not so sure that the Victorians were right, either about themselves or about the eighteenth century. The twentieth century is curious about the eighteenth, about its simplicity, about its interest in nature, about its refusals to be satisfied with what the ruling classes did and with what they told it to think, about its ferment of ideas and its violence. This, the fifth decade of the twentieth century, is prepared to welcome, as previous decades, overshadowed by the teachings of the Victorians, could not, an honest and fearless investigation of one of those times of ferment in the eighteenth century.

His Majesty's Yankees, by Thomas H. Raddall, is the story of David Strang of Liverpool, Nova Scotia, who was just attaining to manhood as the American Revolution began to disturb this outpost of New England. It is a stirring tale, well told, full of adventure and hairbreadth escapes, of fighting on land and sea, of romance and intrigue; but it is more than that, it is a study of an inner conflict, a conflict of loyalties. David is attracted by the idea of liberty, and would sweep away all injustice, all privilege; he would renounce his old allegiance, forsake his home and kindred and the country he loves so well; but the "rising note of greed" sickened him; he wondered "if all the patriots had died on Bunker Hill"; and finally, after remaining unmoved by the eloquence of Michael Francklin, which had won Richard Uniacke, he was forced by the logic of events and the blunt words of his father to make his choice. That conflict of loyalties was a very real one to the in-

**His Majesty's Yankees*, by Thomas H. Raddall.

habitants of Nova Scotia at the time, and it was settled by the great majority of them, and by thousands of others in the provinces further south, in the same way and for much the same reasons as David Strang settled it.

It is a part of the masterly handling of the theme of *His Majesty's Yankees* that only after the solving of his dilemma does David Strang indulge in brief and tempestuous wooing. This is rather different from the usual "run of the mine" novel, obsessed with one aspect of man's many-sided life. Reading, on the one hand, contemporary novels, and, on the other, novels of or about the eighteenth century, may lead to the conclusion that chastity was an invention of the nineteenth century, which did not long survive its originator, and it is a joy to come upon a contemporary novel dealing with the eighteenth century which shows men and women busy with the daily duties connected with getting their living, concerned about politics and policies, as well as about gratification of sexual desires. Plain spoken those eighteenth century Yankees were, but they were no more sinners, or saints, than their descendants. As set forth, fearlessly and faithfully, by Mr. Raddall, they are real men and women.

In a very special sense, they are real men and women, for the characters in *His Majesty's Yankees* bear the names of actual people in Nova Scotia during the Revolutionary War, and they are depicted with amazing fidelity. Of the Liverpool characters I cannot speak with any assurance, but the others, from Halifax north and west, I have had occasion to investigate; and I was delighted to find how carefully their portraits were drawn, and how skilfully the author had fitted them into his story. There was only one error, and that was not the author's fault, for previous writers had jumped to the conclusion that Parson Eagleson (p. 193) was a Yorkshireman. He was, however, an Irish Presbyterian minister, who had come out from Ballymena to Philadelphia in 1765, and the next year had apparently answered the appeal of Alexander MacNutt (the Colonel MacNutt of p. 471) for ministers for Nova Scotia. At some time between 1766, when he sailed to Cumberland in Captain Hall's vessel in company with Anthony Wayne and his settlers for the Petitcodiac, and 1776, when he appears in the story, the Rev. John Eagleson had left the Presbyterian fold and become the S.P.G. missionary at Fort Cumberland.

There is one other error, which it might be as well to mention here. The lukewarmness of the Maugerville settlers, (p. 344), was due not to the visit of rebel privateers—that was a later

stage in their conversion to His Majesty's cause, as it was in David Strang's case also—but to a visit from Colonel Arthur Gould in a British warship during the month of May, 1777, at which time, after several exchanges of letters, the "inhabitants of St. John's River in the province of Nova Scotia" took the oath of allegiance and were given certificates entitling them to protection of "all his Majesty's officers both civil and military". Abiel Peck's toryism (p. 225) is a moot point—Charles Dixon, the leading magistrate among the Yorkshire settlers, declared that the neighborhood was a nest of rebels and he dared not risk going among them—and Peck's property, and probably his house, lay some distance from St. Mary's Point, across the Shepody marshes and river. The comment about Moses Delesdernier (p. 238) is misleading, for his own immediate family remained loyal; Louis and Frederic were his uncle's sons. Incidentally, the Frederic who "had gone to Massachusetts to act as John Allan's aide" signed himself Lewis Frederick, and his Brother Frederick was on the *Miramichi* after the Revolution, along with two other brothers, John and John Mark Crank. (The Delesdernier habit of repeating names in a family is confusing.)

Not only in the presentation of a pertinent problem and the faithful drawing of numberless characters, great and small, but also in the vivid telling of incidents and the delightful sketching of the background against which the drama unfolds, Mr. Raddall has "set a new high" in historical novel writing. The pictures remain, long after the reading,—the moose hunt, the press gang operating in Halifax, the robbing of the King's messenger at the thirty-mile inn, the meeting with Jonathan Eddy and with Mark on the bay, the storming of Fort Cumberland, the finding of John, the trial in Halifax, the marriage of Mark and Joanna and their reconciliation, the digging of the clams, these are only a few of them. There may be anachronisms, but they did not reveal themselves to one who has been reading eighteenth century documents by the hundreds; instead there were noticed the careful little details which bespoke a real understanding of the times, the white stockings "all spattered with the black slush outside St. Paul's", "the homespun clad men and boys squatting over a fire. . . and playing knuckle bones".

There are no long descriptive passages, but the background is described briefly, effectively, and with great charm, in connection with each bit of action. David Strang is not writing about the Nova Scotia of his day, he is living in it; he is hunting in its

woods, he is fishing in its streams and its seas, he is picking wild strawberries— and kissing his companion—; he is journeying through the woods to Halifax or sailing up the coast, he is watching the coaches struggle through the mud of the Great West Road or riding himself to Windsor to take the ferry shallop for Partridge Island, walking over the Boar's Back to Hebert River and then wrestling with the tide in a hollowed-out pine; he is exploring the marshes around Fort Cumberland in order to find ways of getting into the fort, or he is feeling his way up creeks and bays on a foggy night in order to take a vessel by surprise; he is fleeing up the St. John River after the defeat at the mouth of the river, and eventually following the Indian routes to Machias. Tides and fogs, rocks and swift water, the new green of spring, the berries and fruits of summer and autumn, the fish and animals that could be caught, cold winds and snow, melting ice and slush, dawn and sunset, moon and stars, are a part of his journeyings, and he loves "this rocky homeland on the sea's edge, where life is a struggle that demands a man's utmost and will take no less, where beauty alone is bountiful, and only death comes easily; where courage springs from the eternal rock like the clear singing rivers, like the deep-rooted forest itself."

Several years ago, Lord Tweedsmuir passed on to the Honourable Norman Rogers an earlier book by Thomas H. Raddall, with the remark that here was a Canadian writer whose work would be worth watching. The promise that Lord Tweedsmuir's keen eye detected has been abundantly fulfilled in *His Majesty's Yankees*, and will, let us hope, find further fulfilment. There has been an occasional lament that the great Canadian novel has not yet appeared. The comment is, if not stupid, at least unthinking, for how could so vast a country be confined within the limits of a single volume? In *His Majesty's Yankees*, we have one of the great Canadian novels, one dealing with a great theme, treating of an important epoch, and bringing to life men and women of the provinces by the sea.