

VOICES IN THE WILDERNESS*

CARLETON STANLEY

HERE are two books, each of which requires more than the usual amount of attention, in the first place from reviewers, and, in the second place, and for a long time to come, from readers. They are both written by Canadians, and the scene of both is, in a way, laid in Canada, though in each case a vast background, in which perspectives are hard to follow through, lies behind.

I make no apology for dealing with them together, though each merits separate attention, because indirectly each illuminates the other. Both are critical, in the proper sense of that often misused word. Both examine, that is, with knowledge, judgment and endless human sympathy, the present stream of tendencies in Canadian life; and both are deeply apprehensive about our future. One focuses our attention on a single, yet complicated and baffling, feature in Canada, and on what some might regard as a peculiarly Canadian difficulty. The other gives one a sense of swimming, with difficulty, *im Strom der Welt*, and etches into our souls the sternness of Human Fate. Yet, once again it is Canadians who are swimming, and Human Fate seems sterner than ever from the Canadian point of view. In both we are far removed from the idle politician's prophecy of the last generation: "The twentieth century belongs to Canada."

I am told that the first named book has become extremely popular in the United States, and perhaps one of the best sellers. If so, no one grudges Mrs. Graham her success; and one notices, again, that the book is published not in Canada but in New York. But overwhelming success of a popular kind is not always a good thing for a young author, especially if the voice of criticism, whether in praise or in blame, is not heard through the din of popularity.

The second book is published in Canada, and, like most of Mr. Grove's books, has been published at his own expense or through the help of subscriptions previous to publication. Mr. Grove has had, almost from the beginning, the support of perhaps the greatest critic thrown up hitherto in North America, and to his memory he dedicates this work.

**Earth and High Heaven*, by Gwethalyn Graham, and *The Master of the Mill*, by F. P. Grove.

Analytical and critical power has been a scarce commodity not only in North America, but throughout the world for many a decade, or, rather, one should say, throughout the centuries. Who in Germany succeeded to Goethe's sure and ageless grasp of *die Leitfaden* of our European inheritance, Jewish and Greek alike? How many writers in France have been worthy successors of Sainte-Beuve? (One thinks of Georges Duhamel, especially in his *Défense des Lettres*.)

It has been said recently, though perhaps on no very good authority, that noble work has been done in Italy and Spain, unmatched by anything in the northern countries or in England. We have certainly to take into account Benedetto Croce and Madariaga, though the shape of one may be too flowing and pragmatical, offering hopes too facile; and the bones of the other are a little too brittle as a skeleton of the whole European scene. (The saying, by the way, seems to have no reference to Santayana.) In England the mantle of Matthew Arnold has not fallen squarely on any one pair of shoulders. Saintsbury and others have attempted to be more polymathic, and have instead shown more prejudice and dogmatism. I cannot speak with any real knowledge of the Russians; but, in the main, critical power and a readiness to adopt systems have not usually gone together. In Canada there is a sign or two that W. J. Alexander may have successors in the making. It is not without significance at any rate that the two books mentioned above should have originated in Canada, both of them posing extremely awkward questions.

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I do not know of any book, or even essay, that has shown Mrs. Graham's power of description of our largest city—slum-ridden, church-ridden, magnate-ridden, and yet a city which has long had a character and unique charm. A mountain overlooks it, which no one has yet attempted to dig down or to cover with human habitations. A mountain looking down on a "young river" which alternates between swift rapids and spreading lakes, and on a confluent stream generally referred to as "the back river", the only purpose of which seems to be to make an island of the city, which is insulated from the surrounding influences. Montreal looks out on the mountains of more than one American state, but is the most un-American city in Canada. As one comes into it on either railway, highway, or river, from the West, it seems quite unlike Ontario, once regarded as the most English and most imperialistic part of Canada; but, further, it should be noted that Montreal is quite unlike the rest of

Quebec. Rupert Brooke, in his hasty and often mistaken sketches of Canada, remarked how "foreign" Montreal seemed.

At first glance, it seems to be one of the large French-speaking cities of the world, though whatever the grammarians and linguistic students may say, it speaks French in its own way, just as the small English-speaking *enclave* speaks English in its own way, not as Americans or Upper Canadians speak it, at least.

Hitherto, it has often been described as bilingual and biracial, and the French themselves think that what the English-speaking people lack in numbers they make up in local economic power and in affiliation with American and European economic powers. What Mrs. Graham sees so clearly is that it is tri-racial, tri-religious, and that, whatever the balance of power may be, one has here a meeting-place of three powerful inferiority complexes. I think that those who have lived in Montreal, winter and summer, over a period of years, would agree that Mrs. Graham has not only caught the natural beauty of the landscape, marred as it is in many ways, but has also caught with great analytic power, and with a certain tolerance, the disturbing and triangular inferiority complex. She shows this not in general or theoretic terms, but by a clever analysis of individuals who rise above their own immediate *milieu* and who are, at the same time, baffled and uncertain in the face of conflicting views held by the other two groups. The scene is laid in the time of the present war. Superficially the city is prosperous and even gay, but the pull of the war on the English-speaking minority, numerically the smallest of the three, is described in some detail. The hero of the book, a young Austrian Jew, born in Ontario, and a graduate of the McGill Law School, is overtopped in some ways by a brother, who has removed from the Montreal scene to devote himself, largely in a gratuitous way, to the medical needs of French-Canadians on the marginal lands of Northern Ontario. The doctor has a strength which comes to him because he is not continually tortured or made continually to doubt what the resultant of forces will be.

In twenty minutes' conversation, the young Jewish lawyer powerfully attracts the heroine of the book, who is twenty-eight, and, though the daughter of a wealthy Westmount family, has remained unmarried and for some years has been earning her living on an English daily newspaper. A younger brother, having married a French-speaking Catholic, has gone

to the war. A younger sister has been shaken out of the groove by an unfortunate marriage, divorce, and more than one subsequent affair. The mother of this family is a confused conventionalist; the father, subscribing to all the conventions and prejudices of his class, is at heart both radical and skeptic, and mentally leads a double life, which makes him lean selfishly on the heroine. There ensues a tragic development because the hero is unwilling that his lover should suffer by being connected with him, and suffer even more poignantly if children should be born to them. At the end there is a certain patching up, when the French daughter-in-law bears a grandchild and her husband is killed, and chiefly because the undeterred elder brother of the hero takes the matter in hand. But one feels that it is a superficial patching up: that the knot remains really unravelled, and that worse tragedies lie ahead. The conversations, even the minor conversations, in the editorial offices of the newspaper, are brilliantly done, and the delineation of character is as skilful as the pictorial descriptions of Montreal, the Laurentians, Northern Ontario. Mrs. Graham has deserved her success.

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The other book, however, is infinitely the greater and more philosophic of the two. In a long series of books, Mr. Grove has described the Canadian scene in cities and on the bald prairie, not merely artistically but with a scientific grasp of geology, meteorology, and an amazing knowledge of the flora and fauna. For him, the human species are only part of the teeming life of the country. They may disfigure or destroy forest, soil, water powers and the beauties of nature, and do this with terrific energy and speed. But this does not mean that they are masters of Canada, or in control of its destiny. They are caught up in forces and tendencies which are world wide and a part of eternal impulses.

A long while ago Samuel Butler, who had posed the gravest questions in his youthful book, *Erewhon*, about machinery, lay on Montreal mountain and wrote one of the few purple patches in all his books, and perhaps his greatest book, *Life and Habit*. He had made a small fortune and won his independence in New Zealand, and then been caught up in the economic web of Canada. He was not only emancipated from convention, he had begun to fear the results of human energy, as seen in machines, on humanity itself, and, to the end of his life, felt that the disastrous thing for the individual was to become "the tool of his own idea".

Cosmopolitanism, reinforced by private economic loss and by a Scandinavian pessimism, long ago opened Mr. Grove's eyes to the speed of the destruction of values in our western countries. One of his early books—a publishers' success, though it brought no gain to its author—was significantly called *The Search for America*. It may have been the Scandinavian in him that soon drove Grove to the northern fringes of American energy, and there he seemed to see that humanity had a smaller base, a shorter history, and that its energy was more devastating and faster than in the older and more securely based country to the South. The English and the Scottish might seem to be at the control of the levers and the throttle, but they had flung an empty empire open not merely to two races but to a polyglot horde. Each group might have a long established European or Asiatic pattern, but the patterns were all being torn up, and no questions were being asked about the future. Half-Scot and half-Scandinavian, Mr. Grove never gave up his belief in education. And there is no more touching description of schoolmaster and pupil than in the opening pages of his book, *The Yoke of Life*. But could education make head against the disruptive forces? Could it keep up with the breath-taking speed of energies purely material?

In this latest book, *The Master of the Mill*, upon which Mr. Grove says he has been working many years, the ugliness; the negation of humanity, and the powerlessness of mankind to keep control of the machines and economic forces which itself has invented, are most powerfully described.

George Santayana, in Volume II of his autobiography, records that the robust sentimentalist "Billy" Phelps, of Yale, complained that there was no one *good* character in Santayana's novel, *The Last Puritan*. Santayana, a Spanish Catholic, there describes the dissolution of the old securities and values in New England. He is a Latin and not a Scandinavian, or a Scot. And his partly Yankee connections and upbringing never really got into his bloodstream, which is irritable rather than pessimistic. There is one unmistakably *good* character in *The Master of the Mill*—the extremely radical politician, whom many Canadians will think they recognize—and there are several very clever, intelligent characters, not without conscience, though with no very certain purpose:

Most men eddy about. . . .

Striving blindly, achieving

Nothing;

I found *The Master of the Mill* difficult reading. At first I attributed the difficulty to my own conservatism, and dislike of the "flashback" method of the "movies". I did not guess, all at once, that the book had been laboured over for long years, touched up here, and touched down there, until important and character-making episodes were dealt with by a mere innuendo. It is not a novelty, on the part of dramatists or novelists, to ask us to trace a development through three generations of a family. But it is something of a novelty to make us see these three generations through the dazed and nearly insane mind of a man of eighty-three, who has long outlived the third generation as well as the first. This man is greatly influenced by three women who all bear the name of Maud—one his secretary, one his wife, one his daughter-in-law. At the end, in his mind, the two latter Mauds are extremely confused: he thinks he is talking to one when he is really talking to the other. The footman closes the door of the limousine, driven swiftly by a capable chauffeur, but immediately we realize that we are in an open horse-drawn vehicle, driven by the character himself, at a period exactly forty years earlier. One realized long ago that Mr. Grove was extremely well-read in the French novelists, but has any French novelist been as subtle as Mr. Grove?

It is the story of a flour mill, in North-Western Ontario, close to the Manitoba prairie, which has been partly modernized by its owner, Rudyard Clark, who sucks the brains of his son, Sam, but gives him no credit for the ideas behind the changes; and which finally passes to the grandson, Sir Edmund Clark, whose ruthlessness appals his father. Late in the book (p. 241), Sam asks his son: "And what will the new order consist of?"

The young man answers:

I can't so far tell. But it will be the dictatorship of mind over matter. Already I control, or a company which I control in turn controls, two-thirds of the industries of this country. Many of these industries are not yet aware of it; the government of this country is not yet aware of it; it still thinks it is carrying out the wishes of the majority of the vested interests; but the moment I care to show my hand, the new power will be revealed as a state within the state, ready to replace that state as it stands to-day. It will then appear that the state is an economic organism, and has always been so, not a political one. The word freedom will become meaningless.

Now Sam, of the second generation, has always wanted to use money to pay better prices for wheat to the farmers, better wages for the millers, and to lower the price of bread for the consumers. But his father's rather mysterious will ties him to plans for the mill, plans which he later realizes are his own, rather than his father's, and the outcome of which, so cynically described by the grandson, are realized neither by his father nor by himself.

The mill, once a humble, ramshackle tool to serve the farmers of the neighbourhood, improved into a modern machine by Sam, who has studied engineering, becomes an instrument of imperialistic war, and finally spells the crucifixion of society, without anyone positively willing that these things should be so. It becomes a cog in an economic process, so soon as its motive is profit, instead of service; it murders towns and agricultural communities, and enslaves not merely the thousands thrown out of employment, but the three or four opulent individuals who are supposed to own and control it. *The mill is the master*; the brains which continue the economic process are the "tool of their own ideas". In this "process" all sorts of "codes" go under. Not only private lives are affected, but methods of business, municipal government, Canadian government at large. We hear nothing of agricultural improvement, schools, churches, music, but much of the wolves and sharks of real estate, and complacent bankers.

Is this just a nightmare of Mr. Grove? Or does it fit, tidily, or untidily, the last two spasmodic generations of "Canadian development"? Are men so blind? Is human life so hateful; is *Speed* so terrible an enemy to the human race? Mr. Henry Ford, in one of his many pontifical moments, said: "The world is on wheels and doesn't know how to get off them." Can we filch any wisdom from one of the chief architects of our measureless and misguided "eddying about"?

Most of us will require much more thought to catch up with the profound thinking of Philip Grove, on the whole aimless tendency of the human species, than with the dazzling concentration of light which Mrs. Graham has poured upon the scene in Montreal. But Montreal, the Canadian North-west, London, Wall Street, are all connected, and are all part of the "economic process" which Mr. Grove describes.

Homo sum: humani nil a me alienum puto. That was said by an African slave, to amuse his Roman masters. Emerson

said: "Things are in the saddle, and ride mankind." From Imperial Rome to the seemingly comfortable, but occasionally penetrating, thinker in New England—is there any common thread? None: unless "homo" and "mankind" are one and the same thing. In 1917, Spengler was plentifully laughed at, for saying, in a downright way, that West-Europe was dead, and that the only sign of vitality lay in Russia, and in the East. The individual human being, like Sam Clark in Mr. Grove's book, may be very clever, and guess the future ten years ahead. But humanity, in the mass, is incredibly stupid, and neither guesses nor cares to guess what the future of a half-century will bring.

A contemporary American writer, learned and profoundly thoughtful, has described in some detail the guesses made in their time by Jefferson and Hamilton, about the "spread" of the American people from the Atlantic seaboard to the Mississippi and the Pacific shore. He has shown that, on the available knowledge open to them of human accomplishments, Jefferson's guess was sober, well-founded, and philosophic; and that Hamilton's was exactly the opposite. Yet the whirligig of Time and the actual outcome made it appear that Hamilton was the better prophet.

I do not know any mind in the nineteenth century as *fresh* as Walter Bagehot's. Because of religious tests he could not go to either Oxford or Cambridge, and like Robert Browning he had to shift for himself, in feeding his own mind. Both of them, in conventional circles, were once considered rather undisciplined. But is there anything more worth pondering, in our day, than Bagehot's saying that society had to grow itself a crust, and cook and ferment underneath? Such things require *time*: at all events they do not prescribe *Speed* as the *primum mobile*.

Bagehot said many kind things about the Americans, and especially about New England. But it was a Southerner who read him most attentively: there is nothing better about Bagehot than Woodrow Wilson's essays on him in the *Atlantic Monthly* of 1893. Perhaps the Federal Reserve Board grew out of the admiration. A competent judge, connected with that Board, once expressed to me this opinion.

But when will North Americans catch up with Philip Grove? In particular, will an adequate number of Canadians be shaken out of complacency by Mr. Grove's grave warning, or by any other means, in time to avert a measureless disintegration?

In the last twelve months, within my own knowledge, three brilliant young men, two of them, indeed, of extraordinary promise, who were brought up in this country, have turned their backs upon it; each of the three expressing, in language far too mature and measured to allow a suspicion of personal disappointment or spleen, the belief that Canada is spiritually bankrupt, and that all the precious human effort which has gone to its making is now more than ever thwarted by illiberal and unimaginative control. These young men will not listen to the miraculous tale of what human effort has achieved in untoward places, and in untoward times. Iceland, Denmark, Norway, Bohemia, Attica, they say, were impossibly difficult little areas, *and for that very reason* the impossible was achieved in them. But Canada is, and has been, a rich and vacant empire, in which a true community of human effort had always to be localized, and could not withstand the dangers of the various absolutisms. Mention Siberia, and they tell you what is true: that Siberia has been developing, all through its great areas, very, very slowly, for three hundred years, and in some parts much longer.

Such views, thoughtful as they are, I do not share, in any complete way. Nor do I think that Mr. Grove joins in the cynicism of his own terrifying creation, Sir Edmund Clark. But the signs of the times, in Canada—in Quebec, and in all parts of it—are not comfortable signs. Law and decency, reason and tolerance, the application of science to our material problems, do not adequately hold sway among us.