

THE LITTLE WHITE SCHOOLHOUSE

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ACCORDING to the orthodox terminology, The Little White Schoolhouse should no doubt be red; but the fathers of the hamlet preferred white paint, and white it stands unto this day. It is not a glaring white, nor a sepulchral white, nor a dainty white; it is a *dingy* white, and the memory of some generations of school children runneth not to a time when it was of any other colour. So the first impression that the casual traveller receives is of this dingy and placid whiteness of a little building upon a little barren knoll.

The school-yard is enclosed on three sides by a fence, south and west of unpainted boards, and east of brush and poles. Hereabout lie pastures, and on the north side runs the highway, separated from the yard by a ditch which becomes negligible on the west where lies a path up the little knoll for pupils from that quarter. Immediately fronting the schoolhouse the ditch is several feet deep, and is crossed by a stout bridge of planks. The bridge must be stout, for it has at times to bear the weight of the team that comes to bring wood to the school. In the yard a stubbly, scrawny grass grows in summer, and in the winter there are banks of snow where-with—in time of thaw—fierce snowfights may be waged. The yard contains a quarter of an acre, more or less, and one large granite rock that, though often compassed round with turbulent sound, stands the random shock of battle and is never confounded by the hugest waves of snow and children. The schoolhouse is very near to the eastern boundary of the yard—so near that there is only a narrow path between; enterprising cattle may, if they will, crane their necks across fence and path and almost into the open windows. But they have no more taste for learning than children or adult persons, and are not in this respect subject to parental or magisterial constraint.

Eastward the road slopes upward for a half mile or so, then down again, and so onward to the village of Fox Brook, three miles distant. Westward it is nearly level for rather more than a quarter of a mile, except for two slight hillocks on the nearer of which stands the Union Hall, a newcomer of no such antiquity as the schoolhouse.

Further west rises a short and very steep hill near which, as tradition relates, a learned judge was foully done to death a hundred years or more ago. The tale seems true, and we need not pry too deeply into tradition. Pilate's question has not yet been answered by men; and the memories of earth are inarticulate, conveying little to mortals until human associations are established, save of vague uneasy longings never satisfied and never comprehended. One concrete historical event is worth an aeon of geology in arousing human interest. Even a fictitious or doubtful murder is better than none; and after all, the judge was murdered, for the hill stands in witness unto this day.

Across the road from the schoolhouse is a farm, in these days rather neglected, and occupied contrary to local custom by tenants. The tenant of a farm is usually regarded as an unfortunate man, or why should he not own a place of his own? He will be treated well if he deserves it, but he can never be quite the same as the man who tills his own soil. For a man to mortgage his property is a great calamity, to be spoken of with bated breath, a joy to gossips. And the rented farm suffers at least moderate neglect. Across from the schoolhouse the early apples are scarcely worth the stealing, though it is not stealing for school-boys to take apples wherever they find them. But there are certain conventions to be observed. One may pick up all the windfalls one wants for immediate consumption; only a churl would refuse that. One must not carry apples away in a basket or pick them from a tree; and in particular one must not break the tree's limbs.

There is a little pond in this field, lying along the road west of the schoolhouse, largely overgrown with tall rushes and weeds, but offering a small clear space whereon in winter one may laboriously skate; and the art, once learned, may be employed on the largest lake. This pond empties its waters across the road, and spreads out into a swamp in the pasture that lies between the hall and the schoolhouse. The swamp produces, without cultivation, a crop of inferior hay, so that the owner keeps it fenced. Beyond the swamp and behind the Union Hall rises a steep hill, sloping rather smoothly on all sides, and resembling the half of a huge and rather battered egg. The hill is covered with scattered brush, and in the season boxberries, so called, grow there, so that in school parlance it is known as The Boxberry Hill. It is so near the school that it is easily accessible during the short recess, and the bell often calls youngsters running from its seductive wilderness.

The ditch in front of the schoolhouse is dry in summer, and in winter it is clogged with snow; but during spring and autumn it

contains a running stream, and the stream may be dammed at various points, furnishing little ponds for sailing boats and for tumbling into. Further down the road, past the hall, runs a real brook—Brown's Brook,—that finds its way somehow towards the sea, but wearies out into a swamp before it reaches any destination, and comes to no definite end;—typical of the ill-directed life of a brook that has no energy to impel or purpose to guide it in its course.

The schoolhouse itself, as observed, is of a dingy white; and the roof looks heavy, with a certain solidity about the eaves. If the concept of the builder had been translated into ancient architecture, it would be of Doric design; now it resembles rather an amiable toadstool, altered into rectangular form, with a stock nearly as large as the top. It stands end to the road, facing north, with two windows on the east side and three on the west; and as one looks from the door across the cultivated field, pasture and woodland, one is sure to notice a little pile of firewood in the immediate foreground to the right; the ash-barrel, too, is there or thereabouts. Someone puts in a tender at each annual school-meeting to supply the wood for the ensuing year, and must—if successful—continually replenish the woodpile. The wise provider stores wood within the building to keep dry against the storms. Some ambitious pupil builds the fire for a princely *honorarium*—sometimes three dollars per annum; and he must find kindling where he may.

On entering, one finds a dark and cheerless room without windows, lighted dimly by a pane of glass over the door and by whatever light comes from the room beyond. One door somewhat to the left opens into the school-room, and the other to the right into a little room reserved for the lady teacher and the girls, and known as the girls' ante-room. The larger room is known as the boys' ante-room. It contains nothing except some pegs and hooks on which wearing apparel is hung, and in the season a pile of dry wood. Some careful souls store the ash-barrel inside during rain storms, as wood ashes are valuable fertilizer and are not improved by rain; but live coals are sometimes discovered in the ashes. On one occasion they burned a hole through the barrel, and barely charred a spot on the wall. After that the ash-barrel seldom appeared as part of the furniture of the boys' ante-room. The girls' ante-room is furnished with a window, thus accounting for the fact that there is an extra window on the west.

As one enters the school-room itself from the boys' ante-room one finds the teacher's platform, desk, and chair of state immediately to the right. Behind platform, desk and chair rises a formidable

blackboard, and above the blackboard is suspended a solemn eight-day clock. Among its uses, the clock often records the approximate time; but its main value is as a focus for contemplation. Directly opposite the teacher's desk at the other end of the room stands the stove. How many feet of pipe it possesses might be ascertained by measurement, but could not be conjectured without exaggeration. It looks a mile long. This pipe rises many feet above the stove, hooks itself into a wire support depending from the ceiling, and turns northward. Thither it sweeps in unimpeded majesty above the middle row of seats, and triumphantly pierces the wall into the chimney somewhere near the clock. Here and there in the journey it receives additional support from the ceiling.

There are three rows of seats, those nearest the windows containing seven seats each, and the middle one five. This diminution of number is accounted for by the teacher's desk at one end of the room and the stove at the other. Each seat accommodates two pupils. The eastern row is occupied by boys and the western by girls, while the middle row is debatable ground. Usually the boys possess the larger seats and the girls the smaller; for the seats increase in stature as they near the stove. A flat, smooth, comfortable board sprouts from the back of the rear seat in the middle row, in the direction of the stove, which has also often in bad weather a bench placed at either end. When a pupil asks to "go to the stove," he means to sit on one of the benches or on the projecting board; preferably the latter, since it furnishes a back for comfort and a neighbour for conference.

In addition to the one big blackboard—the blackboard of state—there is another painted on the plaster of the western wall, and the maps hang anywhere around the room. There is an old globe on a frame in one corner, bearing itself with that rakish swagger which is attributed to this world in the Geographies, and hidden under the title of the inclination of the ecliptic. This swagger may be merely the globe's jaunty way of bearing up against a load of evil that weighs it down. The broken spot in our globe, resembling a colossal earthquake not far from the North Pole, was caused by the rough handling given by some previous generation of pupils. There is a tall pointer in the south-west corner; near the south-east corner stands a bench supporting a water pail and a tin basin. Somewhere in the teacher's desk lies a heavy strap used in ethical instruction.

The community from which the pupils come is quite homogeneous, of British stock throughout. Everybody is white; practically everybody is Baptist or Methodist; everybody except an occasional epicene—who is not highly esteemed—is strongly Tory

or strongly Grit; everybody, with very rare exceptions, is bitterly respectable; everybody gets his living from the soil and the forest. The interests of these children are those of the parents. Theological discussion turns chiefly on the nature of baptism, and is not all unworthy of the subtlety of the Greek Fathers. Ethical argument is concerned with the relative wickedness of cards, dancing and tobacco. Political oratory is devoted to attacking and defending the doctrine of Protection and the character of the Dominion member. None of these questions is, perhaps, much inferior in genuine intellectual interest to the latest baseball score, the latest jazz on the gramophone, or the latest jangle over the radio. These minor differences in opinion against a common background give life and zest to all sorts of neighborhood rows. In the usual absence of any real scandal, the gossip is pretty small stuff; but such as it is, the children capture it and drag it joyfully to school, to furnish occasion for further squabbles and make life more interesting.

While there is no difference of opinion about the ultimate constitution and government of the universe, which are accepted without enthusiasm and without anxiety, there is a tendency on the one hand to revere everything British, counteracted on the other by a worship of Americans and their prosperity. As England is very far away, the glamour of the divinity that doth hedge a king is not dissipated by cruel realities; there is no glamour about the United States, but many elder brothers and occasional parents make money there. Everyone reverences the memory of Queen Victoria; when she died, it was vaguely felt at heart, though it would have been stoutly denied in words, that she had some sort of rank more than human, and closely associated with the celestial hierarchy. There was doubt and dismay about the future; and it was thought probable that only the fact of the death occurring in January, when the weather could do nothing that it had not already done, prevented some cataclysm of nature. But an earthquake could very little alter the shape of the country when the snow lay deep, nor could a flood much change the appearance of a January thaw.

The teacher is usually a girl holding a "C" license. The chief need of the school is for sound discipline and for sound elementary knowledge. Thus if the teacher can maintain order in the school-room and teach the pupils to read, write and cipher diligently and well, she is safe from interferences on the part of parents and trustees, and may add anything that she knows and that the pupil will endure. Her salary is diminutive; but so is her board bill. She is paid enough to buy food; and if some kind relative will help with her clothing, she may get through the year without debt.

She has a respected position in the community; for the people hold the quaint opinion that education is a good in itself, provided it doesn't cost too much, and, in some measure, a practical necessity as well. If the teacher has been to Normal School, she may disparage this primitive notion; but she is more likely to yield to the gentle pressure of neighborhood opinion, transmitted perhaps from Loyalist ancestors. And the parents will, for the most part, support her authority without question. Presumably there are as many meddling people here as elsewhere, and no doubt they think highly of their offspring; but their intimate contact with Nature, "who speaks with a blow, and gives no word of explanation", restrains them from too great an excess of humbug in dealing with the youth. These are taught to obey. If Johnny will not do what the teacher tells him, he may refuse at home to bring in the wood. If Jenny will not learn her lesson, she will perhaps refuse to learn to knit. Hence the teacher is not only allowed but upon occasion expected to apply corporal punishment; and when corporal punishment is never obtrusive, but always ready on demand, the business of the school flows for the most part smoothly.

That business consists in teaching twenty or thirty boys and girls, of various sizes from three feet to six, and various ages from five to twenty, whatever is required by the Nova Scotia curriculum. There is very little interference on the part of anybody outside. Once or twice during the year the inspector calls on his weary round; but he is a kindly man, and both teacher and pupils hold him in esteem. Everybody is firmly persuaded of the paramount importance of arithmetic. It is a prominent "note" of virtue that it does not allow its possessor to be swindled, and a man "good at figgers" will not allow any adversary to juggle them to his hurt. He will not get a mortgage on his farm. It is important to be able to read. One gets news from the papers, and there are interesting books. It is important to be able to write a good hand, for one writes only for someone else to read. There is a lamentable lack of modern accomplishments. It is not, for instance, thought necessary to teach those to sing who are without voice or ear; and, for those who can learn, a singing school is kept up in the Union Hall in the winter. The broad modern idea that the school should teach the rudiments of all trades and all amusements by a bird's eye glance has not developed. No one has seen the full splendour of the philosophy that a child should not learn what he does not want to learn. For he might not, and sometimes does not, want to learn to work. And in spite of the entire absence of knowledge of Plato in the hamlet and of Plato's lack of respect

for mere human bread-winning, there lingers something of the old fashioned error, the idea that Plato held of education as a development of human faculties by strenuous discipline as a means to a richer and better life.

Concerning the old school-books, a volume could be written. Of the primers in which one began to read, the only tale that remains in the head of one of the pupils of The Little White Schoolhouse is that of a cat that was fat, and lay on a mat, and eventually saw a rat. It was a tale not at all remote from life. Everyone had seen all the figures in the tale,—had seen the family cat often bringing in, somewhat contemptuously, the ordinary mouse, and sometimes standing proudly over the prostrate rat. And as for mats, everyone knows every step of their manufacture, from the time that the aged garment disappeared from use to reappear in all the majesty of reinigorated youth and colour from the dye pot as from Medea's caldron, until after the regular mat festival the gorgeous blend of colours glowed upon the floor. Then came the *Royal Readers*, of pious memory. Tags from their verse and tales from their prose haunt all memories—and will until the memories cease. "The juice of the grape makes red and white wine, The juice of the apple makes cider so fine." Wine is wicked besides being expensive, but each autumn the presses are merry with the foaming cider. Then there is the pathetic cry, "Oh how I wish I had the crust that once I threw away." The moral of this didactic poem is that "Tis wilful waste makes woeful want." There is a robin who cared for the babes in the wood, and a fox who played a shabby trick on a goat, and the donkey who furnished the beautiful line often quoted to a schoolmate about some absent comrade, "I'm sure he's an honest though stupid old ass." There is the pathetic tale of Little Jim, and the thrilling tale of the child and the tiger. Boadicea is esteemed, and no one cares if her name should be Boudicca. Sir Ralph the Rover is a wicked man who has a sad adventure at the Incape Rock, and the snow at Hohenlinden is as white as the snow in the yard after a big storm. There is a famous story about a skater and the wolves, and how the man escaped from the beasts because he could turn more quickly on the ice than could the wolves. That is what the children will do if a wolf comes among them on the pond. He probably won't, but there are large, cross dogs, and wild cats are not unknown. Something interesting may happen. There is a pleasant account of Hudson's Bay traders, and everyone remembers the picture of the moccasin at the top of the page. There is Macaulay's story of the relief of Londonderry; and the whole class shares the joy of the haggard wretches on the wall

when the great boom broke, even if the *Mountjoy* had rebounded and stuck in the mud. Long passages from *The Lady of the Lake* are known by rote, not because they have been learned, but from the sheer impact of the printed word upon the eye and ringing verse upon the ear. There is no end to the interest of the *Royal Readers*.

Each lesson in the *Reader* is provided with a list of difficult words to be spelled, and meanings thereof to be memorized. The spellings are in heavy type, and the meanings in lighter type. One can "hear out" one's own spellings by covering with a blotter either the words or the meanings; but the favourite method is to persuade some friend to "hear them out," and it has been discovered by long experience that he who hears learns faster than he who recites.

After all, the old *Readers* furnish an opening into the world of letters, and the pupil who has mastered them faithfully is able to read as far in English literature as his industry and taste and time permit. It is perhaps as little possible to leave The Little White Schoolhouse with a total incapacity and disinclination to read a decent book as it is to graduate from College in the same state. College courses may be used by the adroit as a vaccine against liberal culture; and it is still possible, in some places, "to obtain a degree" as President Lowell puts it, "and evade an education."

Of the old *Arithmetic*, one may not speak lightly. Many years ago there was a green one, later a yellow one, or it may be that the yellow one came first. Each furnished a joyous excursion through the mystical field of numbers. One admitted at the first, without undue scrutiny, a few simple propositions, that $2+2=4$ and $3\times 3=9$, and the like, and with their support marched bravely through the thorny field of fractions and decimals, and the dense forest of interest and percentages. There were exciting problems about Yonge St., Toronto, and quieter investigations as to the length of time that it took six men to dig a ditch x feet long and y feet deep and z feet wide. After the green and the yellow came a series of little paper-covered books, culminating in a hard-covered thing known as *The Academic Arithmetic*. It, too, contained problems profitable for instruction and edification. And any *Arithmetic* has the merit that it can always be used at intervals of the cessation of other business. The slate and pencil are produced, and one gets comfortably involved in a calculation that may be easily prolonged until the bell rings without bringing one under the imputation of laziness.

Now and then some advanced pupils are initiated into algebra

and geometry. The younger among them at times wonder whether x and y always mean the same, or if they sometimes change. And if they do change, why is it? It seems a complicated sort of tit-tat-toe. But geometry deals with figures that are much more obvious, and often beautiful to see; though it does sometimes seem ridiculous to spend an hour proving something, when the matter could be settled in a moment by a graduated ruler.

The *Geographies*—there are two, the big one and the little one—are excellent entertainment, even if they do contain tales difficult of belief. Nor is their beauty wholly obscured even when the teacher tries to keep the flock busy by requesting them to learn the counties of England or Ontario or Scotland or even Quebec. There was once a stout youth who had no strong impulse toward philosophical pursuits, and no aptitude for the printed word. He was asked to learn the counties of Quebec, and he did nothing else of a studious nature for some days. But the French names baffled him. One day, during a lull in activities, the teacher called on him to recite them. "Tollyollyok, Willygiskel" he began, and stopped. He was not set to further research, and is to-day a prosperous and respected man of business.

Of *Histories* there are three in use. One is a small soft-covered book, known as *The Brief History of England*, filled with little nuggets of fact, and delightful lists of names and dates. This work is begun well down in the grades, and may be carried on indefinitely. There is a larger volume on the same subject, restricted to the eighth grade and the ninth, when a ninth grade appears. The third is a genial little history of Canada from Cabot to the present. This last contains some fascinating small maps, and occasional shifts from large to small type that catch the eye. There is abundance of time to study these various works, and everybody who can learn anything gets some notion of Canada and England from them. An occasional radical parent grumbles at the time that his child wastes over "dates and stuff." But the grumble is half hearted; for everybody has, or thinks he has, some ancestor or ancestors, and after all, in a way it is only learning about one's family affairs.

The subject of grammar occupies a peculiar place in The Little White Schoolhouse. There is a small and stern volume which may be permitted in the hands of pupils in the sixth grade, and accompanies them through the remainder of their course. It contains a reasonably succinct statement of English grammar from a functional point of view, and affords fairly rigorous practice in the logic of language. It is customary for those pupils who pursue this study to carry on their investigation during the last

period of the day—from three till four—on Monday, Wednesday, and Friday. The Friday afternoon grammar may be omitted, as some teachers prefer to have that time for the speaking of pieces. It is a convention among the pupils to profess that grammar is without value. Yet they do not really hate it with especial hatred, and those who reach the dizzy height of the High School at Fox Brook or the County Academy find its lessons very valuable in their higher studies. But it must on no account influence one's daily speech. There is a *mos minorum* that requires each and all to speak as the community speaks; and the community on the whole, and apart from special occasions of display by licensed speakers, prefers a dialect terse, racy, rather highly figurative, and picturesquely ungrammatical superficially, though not far from correct English idiom in essential structure.

There is one exercise of the day that, though not strictly a part of the curriculum, is never omitted. Every morning, after the roll is called, the pupils read a chapter in the Bible, taking a verse each. The selection is usually from the New Testament. There is no comment or explanation. But no one can leave the school after a few years without having the doctrines, imagery, and phraseology of the Scripture firmly imprinted upon his mind. The elders all know the Bible too: and the language of the natives is, often redolent of the King James version. There is no danger of anyone missing an apposite reference to Scripture characters. A curious glittering poverty of mind marks a generation that lacks this training.

There are other subjects of study, but these are the staples. Once or twice some pundit among teachers has taught some hesitating Latin or French. Drawing of some sort is often introduced, but is treated by the children rather as an amusement than as a serious pursuit. There are funny little books on hygiene, chiefly devoted to proving the evil effects of alcohol and tobacco on the human frame. These are not taken very seriously, as there are no steady drinkers in the community, and the tobacco users are respectable citizens who have no intention of making any change in their habits, or of listening to any impertinence about their pipes from anybody's children.

The Friday afternoon "recitations" occasionally bring in a stray parent or two; and the boy stands on the burning deck immediately before the teacher's desk with brief though unrelenting volubility; or a very small child brings in Mary's lamb, or lisps the poem about the little drops of water and little grains of sand that constitute this terrestrial globe. The annual "examination" is a

larger affair, and often requires an elaborate "dialogue," as the pupils call the elementary plays that they learn for the occasion. Then the adults of the neighborhood attend in large numbers, and watch with parental zeal the performances of their progeny. But the affair bears little enough relation to the serious work of the year.

The amusements of the pupils are not, as in well regulated schools with improved pedagogical methods, the principal part of the curriculum. Most of the pupils have so much exercise at home that they are not suffering for new methods of wearying the flesh. A primitive sort of baseball is the only thing known as a game that would appear as such to the sophisticated youth of larger vision. There is much wandering in the neighboring woods; and if it is desired to cloak this fondness for the bush in the guise of a rational activity, it is known as the game of "moose." At the start there may be pursuer and pursued; some zealots may insist on playing the farce through, but in general it seems to be a free and joyous occasion for prolonging the noon hour. Most of the pupils bring their dinners with them. As the school opens at nine and closes at four, and the morning and afternoon recesses are of only fifteen minutes each, the sole period for communal festivity is the noon hour. Before school it is too early, and after school one goes home to do the chores. Once there was an otter in Brown's Brook that everybody hunted with diligence for a month. The otter eluded the school, but was captured by Indians.

There is, of course, the normal amount of fighting and wrestling among the boys. On rainy days the scene in the boys' ante-room often resembles a "free-for-all". But nobody is injured. Occasionally there is a more serious combat, regularly and formally fought out in the school-yard before the admiring gaze of the boys and sometimes to the delighted horror of the girls. Once one beaten youth drew a knife. He was outlawed, for one must play the game according to the rules.

At times an epidemic of trading strikes the school. Everything portable that will not be the subject of too stern enquiry on the part of one's parents is then vendible. Once a currency was devised. Postage stamps and beans were coins of some denominations, and the highest coin known was the tobacco stamp. No one there had heard of the use of beans as stage money in antiquity. But some things, even portable things, are not bought. Thus one does not sell one's dinner. One knows that hunger will come. And one would not sell a cherished knife. But within limits the currency, when established, differs only in degree from legal tender; people buy with it things that they think they want, and then get

tired of them just as one does with real money. Some prefer barter. And indeed, while not convenient, barter has many social advantages. It is probably a survival of the custom that leads some friendly souls to persist in bargaining across the counter. One tall youth there is in the school who can read and write, but who will avoid these practices if he can. Sometime every morning or afternoon he asks to be allowed to speak to Jim or Bill or Tom; and as the teacher's task is reasonably heavy, and this lad can easily make it heavier, his request is usually granted. And the first question is always, "Got anything in your pocket to trade?" He does not make great gains by his trading, but he enjoys the game. He excels, too, in the manufacture of some objects of aesthetic interest, such as oxen from bits of fir bough.

In summer the small children have the school pretty much to themselves, for the pressure of agricultural operations keeps the larger ones at home. Trade languishes, and sport is of a more feeble variety than at other times. One curious habit is that of snaring tadpoles—known locally as pollywogs—in little nets of rushes that all children learn to make. The wiggling pollywogs are pursued from sheer love of the chase. They are not injured when caught, but immediately released. And the game goes on, to the joy of children and pollywogs.

Then there is always the road to watch. Often nothing moves for an hour. But often some neighbour passes with a heavy team and a load of cordwood or timber, or in his light buggy on some swifter errand. There are no motor cars as yet. Heavy teams wear bells at all times, and all cattle and horses when there is snow for sleighing. One becomes expert in the detection of the differing tones of the bells. Or one or other of the rival medical men dashes by on some emergency errand, or passes more sedately on his regular round. There are two leading medical men who hate each other cordially, and most children are sworn partisans of one or other. On one gala day two foreigners arrived with a tame bear on a chain. A collection was taken of the small cash of the school, and the bear was persuaded to dance and climb the telephone pole. The road in itself, like all roads, leads everywhere for those who persevere. One hopes that one may, some day, drive back over it as a man of power or his wife, and point out The Little White Schoolhouse to admiring and envious friends.

For The Little White Schoolhouse never quite loses its appeal. Here shall appear no paean of praise, no tear of sensibility, no exuberance of enthusiasm. It is a dingy little spot, with some solid merit, and no superficial attractions. And it is pleasant to reflect

that the generations, as they come on, pass through its discipline; that they fall into the same mud holes, fight in the same ante-room, roam the same woods, parse the same sentences, stand upon the same burning deck, struggle with the same sums and the same dates. It is the university of the people, that turns rather primitive little savages into rather commonplace young Canadians. What one thinks of it depends on what one thinks of the commonplace Canadian.