

FREDERICK PHILIP GROVE*

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PROFESSOR PACEY has written an extremely interesting and useful book, on a most important subject—the life and writings of Frederick Philip Grove. He has the good fortune to use his critical powers, which are considerable, on a subject which almost clamours for discussion. For his task Professor Pacey has certain advantages: he has lived in Manitoba, the scene of most of Grove's books; he has the great advantage of having read the as yet unpublished *Autobiography*, which very few can have seen. Again, it is something of an advantage, in dealing with Grove's unique and world-wide experiences, not to have lived all one's life in Canada. Professor Pacey is a New Zealander by birth, and had part of his education in Europe.

Both the publishers and the author of the book lament the general dearth of critical writing in Canada, and, in particular, the lack of critical scrutiny of any sustained kind of Grove's work. Both author and publisher are to be congratulated for producing such a book. It is genuinely critical. Dr. Pacey, writing in a series, *Canadian Men of Letters*, is concerned chiefly with Grove's place, as novelist and essayist, in Canadian literature. There he places him very high; sees indeed that his work is unique. By implication, and comparison with authors past and present, he records his belief that Grove is a great writer. For example, he says of *Our Daily Bread*, "Better novels than this may some day be written in Canada, but I do not believe that they have been written yet." Though he objects to certain things in it, he says of *Settlers of the Marsh*, "It contains scenes which, in their capacity to arouse in us the tragic emotions of pity and fear, have seldom been surpassed." That is well said. Grove is indeed one of the masters of tragedy.

Professor Pacey shows critical acumen in discussing some of the things that have been said about Grove's three books of essays, *Over Prairie Trails*, *The Turn of the Year*, and *It Needs to be Said*. Though he thinks the second of these "superb", "breath-taking", "far above the ordinary level of description", he gives good reasons for thinking *Over Prairie Trails* the superior book. He says just the right things about *It Needs to be Said*, a book of literary and social criticism addressed to Canadians.

*Frederick Philip Grove, by Lesmond Pacey (Ryerson Press, Toronto).

He sums up:

There are those who maintain that his essays surpass his novels, that they will be read when the latter are forgotten. Such people refer particularly to *Over Prairie Trails* and *The Turn of the Year*: these books, they say, are nearly perfect of their kind, whereas his novels have obvious faults. This view I do not share. Recognizing the value of these essays, I nevertheless believe that there is more power, and depth, and scope, more of the stuff of life, in the novels. The essays are perhaps more nearly perfect in achieving their aim than the novels, but their aim is more limited.

Of his life the author writes in a restrained way. Since he says in his preface that Grove read over and checked the biographical section—not the comments and criticisms on the writing, be it noted—we may take it that this restraint has Grove's approval. A less accomplished writer than Dr. Pacey would have been tempted to use more heightened and emphatic language in setting forth the multiplied adventures, the heroism, and the frequent untowardness of fate, which have marked such a career. Of this restraint, then, one does not complain. The facts speak sufficiently for themselves. But at times I have wondered, giving close attention to Dr. Pacey, paragraph by paragraph, while carefully re-reading all Grove's published work, and some of the unpublished, whether our critic has made quite adequate use of the experiences of the life, in weighing the validity, so to speak, of his judgment as an artist, and his deliberate purpose in letting the tragedies unfold as they do—for example—in *The Yoke of Life*, and *Settlers of the Marsh*; and in weighing what he calls the "incompletion" of the tragedy in *Fruits of the Earth*. I wish to be fair. In many places Dr. Pacey carries over into his criticism an explanation of the unsatisfactory form in which some of Grove's work was published. The abrupt ending of *A Search for America*, for example, and the staccato style and "telegraphese" abbreviations in *Settlers of the Marsh*, were forced on the author by the necessities of publication, as Dr. Pacey makes clear. At times also he makes effective use of Grove's own criticism of his books, which occurs in the unpublished *Autobiography*. But there are times, so it seems to me, when he does not, in passing judgment, weigh the evidence before him. Why, having read Grove's masterly criticism of Flaubert and Zola, in *It Needs to be Said*, does he think that this critic lapsed from the realistic to the romantic in the latter part of *The Yoke of Life*? Dr. Pacey pays

full tribute to the capacity for portraying a man's decay in old age. He knows indeed that Grove's consummate skill in making us feel the horror, when this decay is accompanied by mental decay, springs from his own experience with insanity. Well, the hero in *The Yoke of Life* ages prematurely, having weak lungs from the beginning; and his mental grip weakens as well. Worn down with heavy toil, and at length with pneumonia, he makes some return to life, but in a trance. His world had never been a real world,—on the farm, in the lumber camp, in the city coalyard—it had been a dream-world, and the dreams were too bold for the fate which enmeshed him. Feeble in health, with more than his own way to make in a penurious lot, he dreams of mastering all knowledge! There is a high nobility in him, a delicate chastity. When the girl who crosses these dreams betrays him shamefully, his mental torture goes far beyond his physical suffering. Not only has he always lived under a spell, he somehow communicates this spell to others, even to his rather brutal step-father. The girl is caught in it briefly, but throws it off. Later, the spell becomes hypnotic.

She leaves her wicked life to nurse him through pneumonia and long delirium. He makes a physical recovery, but mentally he is shattered, and abjures life. It seems to me pointless to say that he "is suddenly transformed into a wild Shelleyan or Byronic hero". It is not a case of *acting* wildly: he *is* wild. The derangement is trancelike, enabling him to go through common motions, and even to arrange affairs on his brother's behalf, but his whole purpose is death. He hires a boat to let himself be drowned in a northern lake. Dr. Pacey objects: "From the real and tangible world of a pioneer district we are whisked to a strange, unearthly lake." How does he forget that for Len Sterner himself the lake has always been strange and unearthly? In the very opening chapter the lake is part of Len's dreams. Some day, when he is a man, he means to explore it. The terrible tragedy is that of all Len's dreams, the lake alone remains. True, he does save the farm by his toil in the city, but for his brother, not for himself. It was never part of his dream-life. Love has not only been denied him; Lydia has turned his mere thought of it into the ashes of hell. Not least, his dream of acquiring knowledge has become a vanity of vanities. The lake, and death, remain. And Lydia? Does Grove kill her off to get rid of her? Is she transformed, or "reformed", as Dr. Pacey says, from a prostitute into a ministering angel? Would Grove make that demand

on our credence? It is Len's knowledge that she cannot be remade, that the past cannot be undone; that is Len's tragedy. She too knows it, and that nursing him back to life is no atonement. In his delirium she cannot communicate with him; when he wakes from delirium to trance, she tries, but cannot. Neither can she leave him, though he gives her ample opportunities to do so. A part of his black fate she is now helpless to escape his final doom, or her own. She acts as a puppet in the strange dancing of his mind. It is the more remarkable that Professor Pacey misses this, since in the case of Elliott, who at the end of *Our Daily Bread* is mad, he shows a complete comprehension of how the old man, in his extreme feebleness, is enabled, by his madness, to cover an otherwise incredible distance, afoot and on all fours, to get home and die.

Yet he gives high praise to *The Yoke of Life*. After calling it "a magnificent failure", he adds:

There are times when the style does its work so well, becomes so expressive of the operation of sinister forces beyond the comprehension of man, that one is almost persuaded to believe in the reality of these strange events . . .

* * * * *

A tragic masterpiece? Not quite. It is too uneven for that. Its climax is too sudden, too strained. Its failure is far from an absolute one: it is a failure rather in the sense that it falls short of fulfilling its own promise. It remains a good book, though it is not a great one.

Many years ago, soon after *The Yoke of Life* appeared, I reviewed it and called it "a great book". I not only think so still, I am the more struck with its greatness, its eminence in tragic pathos, every time I re-read it.

The only other serious disagreement I have with Dr. Pacey is about *Settlers of the Marsh*. Yet the disagreement becomes less serious when he goes on to qualify a part, the most important part, of his judgment. Besides, one is grateful to him for treating this book (which has been violently and stupidly attacked) as a work of art, "fascinating" and "powerful". He is troubled by two "improbabilities" in the book:

There are undoubtedly men as sexually naive as Niels; (women) as neurotically timid as Ellen, and as exuberantly lustful as Clara; but that the three of them should exist contemporaneously in a pioneer settlement as small as this is scarcely probable.

Well, I admit, the chance is one in millions; but is it not an artist's privilege to seize upon that one chance? Could not one urge that the collocation of Desdemona, Iago and Othello is "scarcely probable"? Or that the chances against Oedipus surviving to meet and slay his father, and marry his mother, are millions to one? A moment's reflection shows us that Dr. Pacey's objection cannot hold.

He goes on:

Grove himself, discussing the art of the novel, in *It Needs to be Said*, says that the novelist must always make us feel that in a certain set of circumstances the characters could not have acted otherwise. In this novel he does not always succeed in convincing us. Why does Clara, knowing the kind of isolation which would be her lot in the bush, accept Niels's proposal of marriage? Why does she remain with him so long as she does? Why does Niels insist on keeping her there when she has become repugnant to him?

Now, if Dr. Pacey left it at that, this would be, from one of his critical ability, a grave objection indeed. Fortunately he does not leave it at that. He immediately qualifies his statement:

It is only fair to say, however, that this view of human character (obedience to obscure impulses) is endemic in Grove's writing. He is in conscious reaction against the secure eighteenth century view of human nature as completely self-responsible and self-coherent. Probably, as a result of his reading Schopenhauer and Nietzsche, he is impressed by the irrational finality of much human behaviour. To him each person is a pulsing centre of uncontrolled and virtually uncontrollable energy, of whom the most we can assert with confidence is that he exists and will react strongly to his environment . . . We are what we are, and, reason as we may, we can be essentially no other.

He goes on to quote from Grove's many passages on free-will and doom:—let's Grove, in fact, reply to this judgment upon him.

I revert once again to our author's knowledge of the novelist's career. The chances and changes which happen to Niels Linsledt are no more fluctuating and violent than the chances and changes which have befallen Grove. It would be too long to go into a description of that life here. Any reader can get some ideas of its ups and downs in *A Search for America*, though the facts of it are much stranger than the fiction of that work. Dr. Pacey relates that a marked feature of Niels's character is taken from a person Grove had known. The domestic unhap-

piness in Ellen's family, and the promise she makes her dying mother, are not unlike his own experience. In a very vivid way, Niels's strength and depth and tenacity remind one of Grove, whom Dr. Pacey likens to a towering rock. He reminds one of the same figure in his child-like simplicity, though the simplicity appears in a different way. It was only the chance of a conversation with a French priest in a railway station in Dakota that made Grove a school-teacher, after twenty arduous years as a hobo and author. It was another chance conversation that revealed to him that publishers' readers would not look at a hand-written book. One is reminded also that the recovery of Niels from his disasters, and his ultimate union with Ellen—Professor Pacey calls this an anti-climax—were written, or planned, in a brief lull in Grove's own misfortunes.

Dr. Pacey writes well of *A Search for America*. He has a higher opinion, so have I, than Grove himself entertains of it. He quotes passages that would make anyone want to read the book, and says truly that many another such passage might be quoted. Of the soliloquies which hold up an otherwise swiftly-moving narrative he says, in part, the right thing—that they give depth and solidity to the book. He classifies it as an example of the picaresque novel, "which arose in England in the eighteenth century, spread to France later, and then returned to England and penetrated to America in the later nineteenth and early twentieth century." That is the language of the professional critic of the novel, and quite in place. But perhaps for some readers it might be clearer if the novel were compared with Defoe—*Captain Singleton* and even the *Tour of England*, as well as the complete *Robinson Crusoe*—and with Mark Twain. (No one complains of the soliloquies in these authors.) But Grove probes life more deeply than they do. Professor Pacey says, in conclusion, that it is a successful re-creation of an American area of life, and has an historical value: "but the ideal of America which he sought dwells in the future, and much of what he says of that ideal is of eternal validity".

I shall be brief about chapters on two other books: *Two Generations* and *Master of the Mill*, the latter of which I reviewed recently in these pages. I shall say only that I am glad to have some of my judgments on these books confirmed by Professor Pacey. He cites Mr. Grove's opinion that the former of these books is a "trifle", then goes on to show that it is much more than that. It is not tragic, though it has tragic potentialities. The tragedy indeed is averted by the wisdom of one of its char-

acters, Mrs. Patterson, who is surely a considerable exception to Dr. Pacey's dictum that Grove's women are not successful creations.

Nor have I the space to write at length of the chapters entitled *Style and Technique, Ideas and Attitudes*. These chapters are competent, thoughtful and thought-provoking, whether one agrees on all points, on the emphasis laid on this and that, or not. It is plain that Professor Pacey has been an assiduous student of the novel form in two languages. He makes it clear, in his detached and allusive way, that he considers Grove a very great man, a great artist in tragedy, and the author of immortal work. He does this in 140 pages, and, as I said at the beginning, in a prescribed mould. It is a notable achievement.

It would be unfair to complain that Professor Pacey has not read so deeply, or nearly so widely, as Grove. He is not nearly half Grove's age. Very few men, nowadays, have so deeply pondered the Greek tragedians, or the Greek historian of the tragic fall of an entire civilization, as has Grove. He is the master of half a dozen other literatures besides. I make a statement of general application to writers to-day, given our curse of specialization, with no personal reflection on Dr. Pacey himself, when I say that his pages indicate (though I can only guess) that his training has been limited to literature, and a certain amount of history and philosophy; so I hope to escape suspicion of being impertinent or patronizing. But other books will have to be written about Grove. For Grove's outlook is not "literary" in this narrower sense. He has studied and pondered philosophical problems. He looks backward and forward in the vista of civilizations with a penetration matching that of Thucydides. He has travelled on every continent, across Siberia to the Arctic as well as to the Pacific. He has crossed the Sahara as well as the more accessible parts of Africa. He is a mathematician and physicist, something of a geologist, in botany and meteorology his lore is amazing. As a young man, Grove studied medicine in Paris; he is no mean human anatomist. But it is mental health and decay, more than physical, which he has mastered, and here his skill and power of observation are profound. Polymaths of this order are rare in our age.

I fancy I hear exclamations of protest at this point. What has mathematics to do with the art of novel-writing? And physics, botany, geology, meteorology—what have they do to with literature? Or medicine and psychiatry? In Grove's

case they have very much to do with it. In an excellent criticism of Galsworthy (which appeared after Dr. Pacey's book) Grove uses an original metaphor from mathematics to condemn the confused morality of the *Forsyte Saga*. Not only is the metaphor striking and apposite: one wonders whether any other metaphor could have been so illuminating. The reader of the Manitoba novels knows, if he has a deep tincture of scientific training himself, that these books would have been much thinner and less valid than they are, were Grove not a scientist. Finally, as George Sand understood of her peasants, drivers of oxen, the western pioneers—Giants in the Earth, Rolvaag called them—had to be ox-like themselves, rather than human, and their women-folk suffered fearfully in consequence. A scientific study of the abnormality of human life on the northern prairies is as much in place as a scientific study of wind-currents, snow-drifts and hail-storms. In Grove's treatment such matters become great literature, as they do in Lucretius.

But beyond the empire of thought lies another empire, of experience. There have been polymaths and observant travellers before, and there will be again. But there have been, and can be, few human careers of such varied and tragic experience as Grove's. Though his childhood and youth were unhappy, he was brought up in affluence, received an extraordinary education in Europe and the world at large, mingling with thinkers, writers, artists and musicians. In early manhood he found himself stranded in Canada, a penniless orphan, doomed to menial toil. In New York he made an easier living, but found that his occupation was fraudulent and left it. As a tramp he explored the long stretches of the Ohio, and after illness, and brief regular occupations, became a "hobo". For twenty years he was in the stream of polyglot immigrants and natives who laboured at the harvests from the southern States to the northern Canadian prairies. All this time he followed his youthful resolve, and wrote books, but occasionally he revisited Europe and travelled widely there, from the Mediterranean to Lapland. Afterwards came school-teaching, a most happy marriage, children, a sudden burst of fame with one or two of his books, then continued poverty, more misfortunes, invalidism, long neglect. But always writing, writing! It would seem a glib persiflage to quote Goethe's:

Wer nie sein Brot mit Thränen ass,
 Wer nie die kummervollen Nächte
 Auf seinem Bette weinend sass,
 Der kennt euch nicht, ihr himmlischen Mächte.

or anything in Dante.

Hence it is intuitively that Professor Pacey must write of his titanic subject. But, in my opinion at least, his intuition is sound, and I end in praise by quoting him:

In Grove's life, as in his work, two values stand out: unshakable steadfastness of purpose and absolute integrity of spirit. The image of the rock is inescapable. His figure perhaps lacks tenderness and facile charm; neither his personality nor his art is of the flexible variety; at times both, in their stiffness and angularity, are almost forbidding; but above all there Grove stands, solid, massive, enduring, a man and an artist to be reckoned with. His life, whatever his own discouragement may lead him to believe, has been a triumph, not a failure; from the stuff of real suffering he has moulded art; and literature, which in a moment of disillusion seemed only the ticket to the wash-room of a canning factory, will prove his certain passport to immortality.