THE WAY OF THE SEA
- A SYMBOLIC EPIC -

By FRED COGSWELL

IN the fiction of the Western World from 1880 to the present time the subject matter and treatment of the individual has been, to say the least, unheroic. It is no coincidence that this period has been the age *par excellence* of urban literature. The heroic virtues—magnanimity, strength, loyalty, endurance, and courage—exist in the city as elsewhere, but they are difficult for the writer to see and still more difficult for him to depict. In the city, all too often the best energies of the human race are displayed not in obviously heroic action but in the trivia of routine against backgrounds too complex, numerous and subtle for the tragedy. The case is otherwise in man's primitive, unending struggle against the sea. The poet Yeats knew this when he advised Synge to quit Paris for the Aran Islands; the result was *Riders to the Sea*, a tragic masterpiece. The work of Norman Duncan in Canadian fiction illustrates the truth of this paragraph. His stories and tales of city life deal with unheroic failures who, regardless of how they are wept over and caressed by their author never succeed in arousing the reader's admiration, sympathy or interest. His volumes on the Newfoundland fisherman are likewise the stories of failures, but they are heroic failures. One of them, *The Way of the Sea*, deserves a place on the same shelf with Melville's *Moby Dick* and the best work of Conrad.

The Way of the Sea has usually been regarded as a collection of short-stories dealing with the lives of Newfoundland fishermen at the beginning of the twentieth century. In my opinion, *The Way of the Sea* is a good deal more; once its underlying symbolism has been detected by the reader, the book is as unified in plan and construction as *Mrs. Dalloway* or *Ulysses*.

The Way of the Sea is divided into ten chapters, each of which presents a single aspect of a vast conflict—Man's struggle for existence against the harsh northern environment. From the first chapter, "The Chase of the Tides," in which the sea triumphs over two children in a quick burst of energy, to the final chapter, "The Fruits of Toil," in which it wears away, as water does a rock, the stubborn strength of Luke Dart, there is a definite order of progression in which men of different ages and temperaments are confronted with challenges peculiar to their separate natures. Consequently, a total impression of the glory and tragedy of a living snatched precariously from the sea can only by gained from a consideration of the work as a whole.

But *The Way of the Sea* is more than a picture of the lives of fishermen; like *Moby Dick* it has symbolic significance. It is essentially a prose epic with two characters, alien and unalterably opposed. One is Mankind, protean in form and assuming a different age and shape in each chapter. Against him is pitted the Great Antagonist, external Nature, usually symbolized by the sea. The tragedy lies in the disparity of the conflict. Man's mortality and the limitations of his body doom to futility all the efforts his indomitable spirit can devise. What is outside Mankind is timeless and vast and cannot be conquered by the temporal and the finite. But, although ultimate defeat is certain, Man has his temporary triumphs, his moments of glory. The battle is never completely one-sided; for if Man cannot conquer Nature, neither can Nature conquer the spirit of Man. *The Way of the Sea* is both an admission of Man's weakness and a glorification of his strength.

Illustrations abound throughout the book. In the first chapter, "The Chase of the Tides," the boy Jo, who puts to sea beyond the bounds of safety to discover the secret of the tide, is the archetype of the scientist in Man. The strength of the Sea can kill him, and does, but it cannot keep him from discovering the truth he wishes to know.

In the second chapter, "The Strength of Men," the force of the Sea can reduce the crew of Saul Nashe's schooner to the level of a herd of frightened animals, but it cannot keep it there. The fixed purpose of the human spirit outlasts the mindless impulse of the Sea and triumphs, though at fearful cost. Likewise in the third chapter, "The Raging of the Sea," the force of the elements can swamp Job Luff and his boat, but it cannot make him sacrifice the precious cargo which means so much to his wife and children. In the closing paragraph of "The Wind of the North", Man's defiance is made explicit:

> "These things mock you, Wind of the North: the wool on sheep's backs at the shearing time, and through the time of the short, white days, the cunning hands of women—the swift, tireless hands of old women at the loom. A turf hut in a cleft of rock mocks you; and the red sparks that fly upward from chimneys of stone—and flash and crackle and die—they mock you while they have life. A little stove and a heap of hewn wood mock you; and dried fish and steam from a kettle make light of your boasting. And, O Wind of the North, the rosy cheeks of children mock you through all the lands of the North."[1]

1. DUNCAN, N., *The Way of the Sea*, pp. 124-25.

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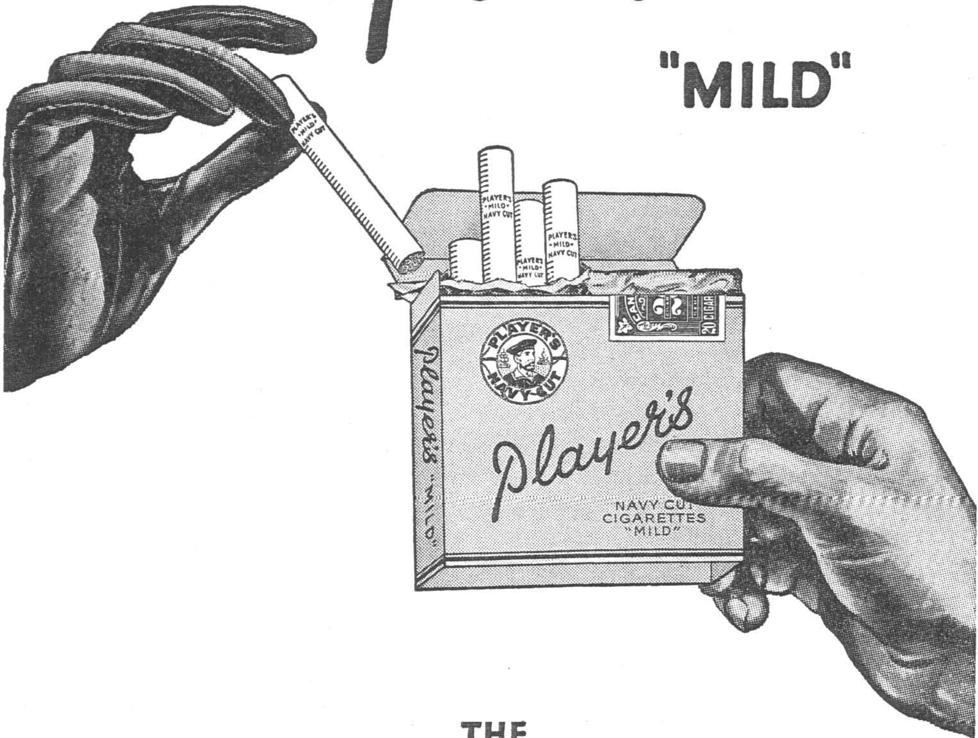

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The chapter entitled "Concerning Billy Luff and Master Goodchild" is a microcosm of the struggle of humanity with the forces of Nature that is all the more poignant for being waged in the mind of a small boy. The forces of Nature conspire to preserve in Ragged Harbour only one book, *Early Piety*. From this book, Billy Luff learns how a child should behave and how a child should die. The hour of his own death comes; in his mind a struggle is waged between human feeling, exemplified by his love for his mother, and an inhuman code of conduct imposed by the external medium. Neither side triumphs completely, and the struggle is terminated by the boy's death.

The human triumph which concludes "The Wind of the North" is reversed in "The Love of a Maid." 'Melia May must choose between two lovers. The one whom she does not love offers her food in the midst of a Nature-imposed famine. She chooses him and thus indirectly the Sea triumphs over a human being whose spirit was not great enough to survive the struggle or apprehend its significance.

The two succeeding chapters, "The Healer from Far Away Cove" and "In the Fear of the Lord", symbolize the attempts of Mankind to conquer Nature by appeal to that Power which made and controls both. Jared Luff is the archetype of the religion which fails through confusing itself and its own desires with God and His purpose. In Jared's madness and self-deception the Sea achieves its most notable triumph. Nazareth Lute, however, represents the faith that transcends both Man and Nature. The Sea cannot harm him. He cheerfully consigns his most prized creation to the deep, convinced that the only reality is God.

Dannie Crew in "A Beat t' Harbour" is the poet, the man gifted above others with imagination and sensitivity. Because of his great insight, he alone recognizes the magnitude and the danger of the struggle with Nature, and he cannot lull himself into a state of false security. The fear and agony of his existence can only end with death. But, like the scientist of the first chapter and the altruist of the third, Nature with all its terrors cannot conquer him: it can only kill.

Very appropriately Norman Duncan ends his epic with a picture of representative Man against the Sea. Luke Dart is no scientist like little Jo; he lacks the world-transcending religious vision of a Nazareth Lute and the poetic insight of a Nannie Crew. His only remarkable quality is that of patient endurance, the ability to bear hardship and disappointment and yet keep struggling for what he holds dear. His, after all, is the most universal and characteristic of human traits.

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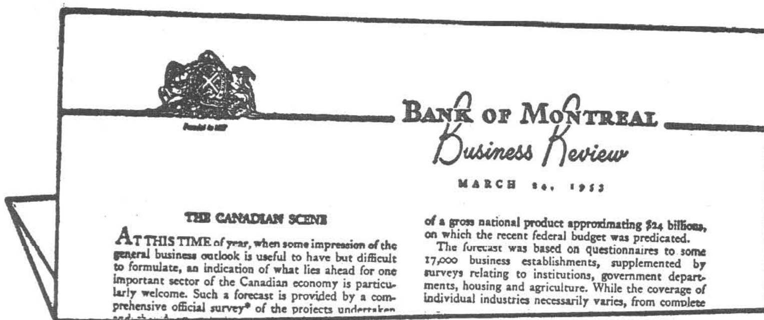

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Against the patient endurance of Luke Dart, the Sea presented the continual wearing and tearing of its indifference to his will, sapping his strength and dulling the bright edge of his hope. Slowly, inexorably, it killed him, but it could not make him strike his flag:

> "Sure," Solomon went on, smiling like a little child, "we've had but eleven famines, an' we've had the means o' grace pretty reg'lar which is what they hasn't t' Round 'Arbour. We've had one little baby for a little while. . .an there's them that's had none o' their own at all. Sure we've had enough to eat when they wasn't a famine—an' bakin' powder, an' raisins, an' all they things, an' sugar, an' rale good tea. An' you had a merino dress, an' I had a suit of rale tweed—come straight from England. We hasn't seed a railroad train, dear, but we've seed a steamer, an' we've heard tell o' the quare things they be t' St. Johns. Ah, the Lard, he've favoured us above our deserts; He've been good t' us, Priscilla."[2]

The pathos of this passage lies in the contrast between Man's dauntless optimism and the insignificance of his achievement. So much labour in the universe for such puny reward! Life escapes us before we can learn what the seven thunders have uttered—and the final triumph belongs to Nature:

> "Eternal in might and malignance is the sea! It groweth not old with the men who toil from its coasts. Generation upon the heels of generation, infinitely arising, go forth in hope against it, continuing for a space, and returning spent to the dust. They age and crumble and vanish, each in its turn, and the wretchedness of the first is the wretchedness of the last. Ay, the sea has measured the strength of the dust in old graves, and, in this day, contends with the sons of the dust, whose souls will follow to the fight for a hundred generations, and thereafter, until harvest may be gathered from rocks. As it is written, the life of a man is a shadow, swiftly passing, and the days of his strength are less; but the sea shall endure in the might of youth to the wreck of the world."[3]

As the above passage indicates, *The Way of the Sea* ends on a "modern" fatalistic note. But if Norman Duncan has seen "the life of a man" as "a shadow", he has at least seen it as a

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2. *Ibid.*, p. 329.
3. *Ibid.*, p. 332.

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fighting shadow and worthy of its great opponent. He has done so, moreover, without violating in any way the realities of the Newfoundland social and economic situation and the peculiarities of Newfoundland character and dialect. *The Way of the Sea* is a success of a rare kind—achieved because Norman Duncan possessed a gift rare among Canadian prose-writers—the gift of the child and the poet whose imaginations are quick to endow inanimate objects with life, and whose myth-making fancies magnify and transform prosaic facts into symbols of greater significance. With this gift and the congenial material of Newfoundland to work on, Norman Duncan produced one of the great works of Canadian literature—a book whose faults are purely technical. Less wise than Synge, Norman Duncan did not stay with his primitives but wandered to the cities of the United States where his vision forsook him and only a technical talent too slim to preserve his work from failure remained. Many modern Canadian writers could learn much from a consideration of his life and works.

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