

David Savage

Not Survival But Responsibility

A fine writer, Margaret Atwood, in an interesting and challenging book, *Survival*, states:

The central symbol for Canada – and this is based on numerous instances of its occurrence in both English and French Canadian literature – is undoubtedly Survival, *la Survivance*.¹

“Undoubtedly” is a big word, for doubters do exist, doubters who believe survival stories are popular all over the world, not just in Canada. Pulp magazines, especially, are filled with survival stories. Any human being in the world who is not dead is a survivor, so there is nothing peculiarly Canadian about surviving. Few would quarrel with Miss Atwood’s “Survival” thesis if she were talking about human beings in general and world literature, rather than Canadians in particular and Canadian literature. Miss Atwood finds “a superabundance of victims in Canadian literature.” (p. 39) There is a superabundance of victims in almost all the world’s great literature. What is distinctive in Canadian literature is the superabundance of responsible people looking after the victims. Miss Atwood states “Certainly Canadian authors spend a disproportionate amount of time making sure that their heroes die or fail.” (p. 34) But authors in other countries do the same, repeatedly. Much of the world’s great literature is about losers, losers like King Lear, Macbeth, Hamlet. Dying is losing – everyone dies, everyone loses. Hemingway pointed this out some time ago. What is distinctly Canadian is the abundance of characters in our literature who reject mere survival, and accept responsibility, for both themselves and their neighbors.

Canadians do not now have what Northrop Frye, in his celebrated phrase, calls “the garrison mentality”. We have a “neighbor mentality”. Margaret Atwood herself, in a fine poem, “Further Arrivals”, states:

Whether the wilderness is
real or not
depends on who lives there.

Precisely. And that is why Canadians place such great emphasis on responsibility, on neighborliness. In our national game of ice hockey we have, characteristically, the "assist". We have been giving assists to neighbors at home for centuries, and now give them to neighbors around the world. Canadians willingly accept the responsibility that goes with having neighbors.

Accepting responsibility is the theme of Thomas McCulloch's *The Stepsure Letters*, in essence a series of sermons against irresponsibility. We witness the downfall of the irresponsible Gosling family in Letter 1. On a typical day, the chain of irresponsibility has Mr. and Mrs. Gosling going to a wedding, leaving their daughters to churn the butter. But the daughters go visiting, and leave the butter-making to the black girl. She, in turn, goes to chat with a friend, and the Goslings' pigs eat the unguarded butter. Inevitably, Gosling ends confined by Mr. Holdfast, the sheriff. In Letter 2 the narrator, Mephibosheth Stepsure, reports how irresponsibility puts Jack Scorem's family in a worse plight: "Before I left home, his little boys were at my house, asking a few potatoes to keep them from starving; and when I arrived at Mr. Holdfast's, I found Jack's thoughts and enjoyments limited to a game at cards and a glass of grog."² In Letter 3, the sad fate of Mr. Soakem, the irresponsible tavern-keeper, is described:

Accordingly, Mr. Soakem's boys are mere lazy, drunken vagabonds. His daughters, too, who are really fine-looking girls, have become pert, idle hussies, without industry and economy. Mrs. Soakem, through the misfortunes of the family, has lost all heart to well-doing; for, what can a woman in such circumstances do? And, when I arrived at the sheriff's, I found Mr. Soakem with eyes like collops, poring upon the cards, and the grog before him.³

By contrast, the responsible, hard-working Stepsure slowly but surely, in the good, gradual Canadian way, wins happiness and security:

I was no visitor myself, and few came to see me. Here was a large saving of time and expense. I was neither a great man nor a great man's son: I was Mephibosheth Stepsure, whose highest ambition was, to be a plain, decent farmer. Here, the whole habiliments and expenses of a gentleman were saved; and, being a gentleman, I assure you, is a trade which requires costly tools. But, though I was lame Mephibosheth, I had a good stout back and good hard hands, and a disposition to keep both out of mischief, by giving them

something useful to do. I was always at home to do everything properly, and at the proper time. On this account, though I was rarely in a hurry, and seldom needed to work hard, I was able to do a great deal; and I must here observe, that I never accounted any kind of labour too mean or slavish, if I saw it to be useful....But the time slipped past, and I soon found myself surrounded with every comfort which a farmer ought to desire.⁴

Fourteen years later, Thomas Chandler Haliburton dealt with the same theme of responsibility in *The Clockmaker*. Although Sam Slick is a Yankee, his recipe for Nova Scotia has the Canadian flavor: " 'In short,' says I, puttin' on my hat and startin', 'look to yourselves, and don't look to others.' "⁵ In another passage, Haliburton has Sam say of Nova Scotians:

"...how much it is to be regretted, that, laying aside personal attacks and petty jealousies, they would not unite as one man, and with one mind and one heart apply themselves sedulously to the internal improvement and development of this beautiful Province. Its value is utterly unknown, either to the general or local government, and the only persons who duly appreciate it are the Yankees."⁶

Haliburton accused his compatriots of neglecting the wealth of nature. Margaret Atwood, in Chapter Two of *Survival*, entitled "Nature the Monster", tells of the Canadian's distrust of nature, and speaks of "Death by Nature". We have an abundance of nature, for we are the second biggest country in the world. But it is because of this abundance of nature, with its vicious whims and silent cruelty, that Canadians react, not by being cruel, but by being responsible, by being neighbors. Canadians view nature as "Nature the Monster" because nature accepts no responsibility, and this to a Canadian is monstrous. In this chapter on nature, Miss Atwood discusses Earle Birney's poem, *David*, saying "The death of David is ostensibly a kind of accident, and any guilt for it belongs to the narrator, who caused David's fall by his carelessness (he didn't test his footholds) and, more directly, by pushing him over." (pp. 56-57) But surely the narrator, in pushing David over, is accepting responsibility for his carelessness. It would be so easy for the narrator to do the universally acceptable thing and leave David suffering while he went for help. But instead he becomes a technical and secret murderer by accepting responsibility. This accepting responsibility, even if it means committing a crime, is a peculiarly Canadian way out, except that we do not call it crime, we call it being practical.

We find a light-hearted and gentler version of this Canadian trait in Stephen Leacock's *Sunshine Sketches of a Little Town*, after sixty-two

years still the book by which the outside world knows us best. The chief figure of the book, Josh Smith, burns the over-insured church, thereby rescuing both the church finances and poor, befuddled Dean Drone. Smith's church-burning shows a sense of responsibility carried to limits few but Canadians would carry it. Lots of people would burn churches for spite. Few but neighborly Canadians would do it to help others. There is no denying Josh Smith is, like his creator Leacock, an accomplished survivor. But what makes Smith typically Canadian is that he is citizen as well as survivor. He keeps the "caff" open when he no longer has to because he feels the people deserve this: "They got me the license for to keep the caff and I'm going to keep the caff."⁷ Smith, being Smith, probably has more selfish reasons too, but certainly his sense of citizenship plays its part. When Jeff Thorpe's financial bubble bursts, it is Smith who resumes buying eggs from "Jeff's Woman" to help out. And Jeff himself is a beautiful example of the distinctive Canadian sense of responsibility. He keeps his barber shop open until eleven every night, working late so that he can pay back the \$500 that Johnson, the livery man, put into Cuban Land at Jeff's suggestion. Jeff feels obligated to do this — possibly because he is Canadian.

This distinctive Canadian sense of responsibility stems from our distinctive Puritan heritage. After the American Revolution, many of the Loyalists who left the United States in such numbers to settle the Maritimes were Puritans, and Canada has been attracting people with that Puritan basis of thought ever since. In the United States, the original Puritan colony had its Puritanism watered down by the later huge influx of Irish, Italian and Greek Catholics. American Puritanism was watered down further by the vast numbers of immigrant German Lutherans. In Canada by contrast, Puritanism was made stronger by the hundreds of thousands of immigrant Scots Presbyterians. No wonder the father of our country was named Macdonald and spoke with a Scottish accent. No wonder the *Literary History of Canada* lists four columns of "Macs" and "Mcs" in its index. Presbyterianism is an outgrowth of Calvinism, the Calvinism which teaches self-discipline, reason, conscience, work, responsibility. Literature reflects life, and Canadian literature strongly reflects the sense of responsibility that Calvinism teaches.

This strong thread of Puritanism is apparent in two of the books Miss Atwood discusses in her chapter, "The Paralyzed Artist". Talking about

the fate of the artist in Canada, she says "Philip Bentley in Sinclair Ross's *As For Me and My House* is just such a warped artist (as his last name suggests)...Mrs. Bentley came along and he married her, thereby trapping himself economically." (p. 185) But artists are traditionally irresponsible, and most artists would refuse to be thus trapped. Philip, despite his artistic temperament, is trapped by his Puritan background as much as by his lack of fortitude. His Puritan background has taught him the work ethic, has taught him he should stick with it and accept the responsibility of his wife and his congregation. Mrs. Bentley's sense of responsibility is of a high order: she accepts the responsibility for her own barrenness by adopting the child of her husband's lover, and even gives this child her husband's first name. Speaking of another would-be artist, David Canaan of Entremont in Ernest Buckler's *The Mountain and the Valley*, Miss Atwood says "A great writer, an artist of any kind, is not imaginable in Entremont." (p. 187) But David, despite his artistic leanings, is responsible. In perhaps the key passage of the book, David, aged eighteen, leaves home to go to Halifax. On the way, he suddenly tells the people giving him a lift, "I'm terribly sorry...but could you let me out? I forgot something. I have to go back."⁸ What he forgot is his Puritan heritage, his sense of responsibility to his family and his community. Years later, only David and the aged grandmother he is caring for are left on the family farm. Just before he leaves to climb the mountain to his epiphany and death, he fills up the stove for her. Even during his epiphany on the mountain top he thinks of her: "I will ask her if she's warm enough, he thought, the first thing when I go through the door. Then I'll go over and tell her that's the prettiest rug yet."⁹ *As For Me and My House* and *The Mountain and the Valley* are perhaps the most truly Canadian novels in our literature. As Miss Atwood correctly points out, they say something about the hard lot of the artist in Canada. But they say a good deal more about the strength of our Puritan-inspired sense of responsibility.

In the chapter, "Ice Women vs Earth Mothers", Miss Atwood mentions how Sheila Watson's *The Double Hook* balances the Canadian poets' metaphor of Nature-as-woman with the Canadian novelists' metaphor of Woman-as-Nature "in the person of a dead old woman who haunts the living characters as a ghost or dead goddess....The old lady has been killed by her son James in a desperate bid on his part for freedom, but her control remains until the attitudes towards the

environment she stands for can be destroyed also." (p. 202) This is a small part of Miss Atwood's very perceptive analysis of this book. But some emphasis should perhaps be given to the fact that James, after leaving the settlement, returns: "I ran away, he said, but I circled and ended here the way a man does when he's lost."¹⁰ James, a Canadian, comes home to his responsibilities, including the responsibility for his newborn child. In Margaret Laurence's *A Jest of God*, Rachel, who is so firmly established as from a deeply Presbyterian background, an originally Puritan background, wants a child but is frustrated in this desire. With a sudden insight into her relationship with her mother, who is old and ill and frightened, Rachel says "I am the mother now."¹¹ This simple acceptance of responsibility is one of the most beautifully Canadian lines in our literature. Being mother to her own mother means putting aside all her selfish wishes, just as, at the end of Robert Stead's *Grain*, Gander Stake has to put aside all his selfish wishes. His wishes tell him to sleep with Dick Claus's wife, Jo, whom he has loved so long. But his Puritan sense of responsibility dictates that he shall not lessen the Stake name in this fashion, and he leaves for the city to work in a garage. This is a much-debated ending because many people cannot see Gander, the son of the soil, going to the city. But it makes good sense when viewed as Gander's final acceptance of responsibility. He goes to the city job, not because this is the ideal work for him, but because he can only carry out his responsibilities by getting far away from Jo.

In the last chapter of another farm novel, Frederick P. Grove's *Fruits of the Earth*, a weary and disheartened Abe Spalding accepts his responsibilities:

True resignation meant accepting one's destiny; to him, it meant accepting the burden of leadership; and the moment he saw that, he felt at one with the district, with his brother-in-law who had told him his story, with Ruth in her sorrow, and, strangely, with himself; for here was something to do once more: the gang would vanish into thin air. His own life had been wrong, or all this would not have happened. He had lived to himself and had had to learn that it could not be done....¹²

Nature lives to herself, all over the world, but Canadians are particularly aware of this; they realize no help can be expected from nature, only from oneself, and from the neighbors.

A sense of responsibility, inspired by good old Puritan guilt, dwells in Dunstan Ramsay, the narrator of Robertson Davies' splendid novel, *Fifth Business*. As a child, Ramsay dodges in front of the pregnant

Mary Dempster, and a snowball intended for him hits her on the back of the head. As a result of this blow her baby is born prematurely and she herself becomes simple-minded. Ramsay's sense of guilt at this incident is only lifted many years later when he becomes her guardian:

The next day I made inquiries as to how I could be appointed the guardian of Mary Dempster and found that it was not a very complicated process but would take time. I experienced a remarkable rising of my spirits, which I can only attribute to the relief of guilt. As a child I had felt oppressively responsible for her, but I had thought all that was dissipated in the war. Was not a leg full and fair payment for an evil action? This was primitive thinking, and I had no trouble dismissing it — so it seemed. But the guilt had only been thrust away, or thrust down out of sight, for here it was again, in full strength, clamouring to be atoned for, now that the opportunity offered itself.¹³

Later, Ramsay moves Mary Dempster to a better hospital, at some cost to himself:

I would have thought myself false to her, and to the memory of Bertha Shanklin, if I had not made this change in her circumstances, but it meant a pinch, considering that I was trying to build up a fund for my retirement as well. My position was a common one; I wanted to do the right thing but could not help regretting the damnable expense.¹⁴

Canadians are refreshingly aware that doing one's duty and being responsible — for oneself, one's friends, and one's neighbors — is often a damned nuisance. In *Fifth Business*, even selfish Boy Staunton feels responsible for Ramsay's financial welfare, and tells him to sell some stocks before the 1929 crash. As a result, Ramsay finds himself "pleasantly well off when the worst of the crash came, because Boy Staunton regarded me as in certain respects a responsibility."¹⁵

That Margaret Atwood should emphasize survival rather than responsibility is typical of the young people of her generation. They have excellent reason to emphasize survival, for they grew up in the era of the atomic bomb, and cannot recall any previous one. But there were previous eras, and much of our literature belongs to them. Along with the atomic bomb, we still have our heritage, a heritage made up in some degree of Puritan-inspired responsibility. This sense of responsibility and duty is the kind of thing Archibald Lampman speaks of in these lines from his 1900 poem, "Salvation":

This bent, this work, this duty — for thereby
 God numbers thee, and marks thee for His own:
 Careless of hurt, or threat, or praise, or pelf,
 Find it and follow it, this, and this alone!

If responsibility were not a part of the Canadian character, it would be difficult to explain our endless, thankless peace-keeping missions around the world. These reflect, on the national scale, the individual Canadian's sense of responsibility. Our neighbors are no longer just over the fence, they are around the world. Canada spent nineteen long years as a peaceful presence in Vietnam, first with the International Control Commission, then much more briefly as one of the four members of the International Commission of Control and Supervision. Now our forces are on another thankless but neighborly task, helping to keep the peace on the Israeli-Egyptian battlefield. A country which places its emphasis on survival would not be consistently present in the deadly places of the world, nor would one with "the garrison mentality". Canadians care. F.R. Scott describes this facet of our character with his accustomed grace and restraint in the last three lines of his short 1954 poem, "Caring":

Centre of all we mourn and bless,
Centre of calm beyond excess,
Who cares for caring, has caress.

Our literature is not about garrisons we are afraid to leave, but about our acceptance of responsibility — for self and for others. Our literature is not about losers, but about how we lose — and there is much courage and endurance in our losing. Our literature is not about the mean struggle for survival, but about something glorious — about a people who are responsible, who are their brother's keeper, who are Canadian.

FOOTNOTES

1. Margaret Atwood, *Survival* (Toronto: Anansi, 1972), p. 32. All subsequent quotations are from this edition and are identified in the text.
2. Thomas McCulloch, *The Stepsure Letters*, New Canadian Library (Toronto: McClelland and Stewart, 1960), p. 25.
3. McCulloch, p. 32.
4. McCulloch, pp. 74-75.
5. Thomas Chandler Haliburton, *The Clockmaker*, New Canadian Library (Toronto: McClelland and Stewart, 1966), p. 102.
6. Haliburton, p. 73.
7. Stephen Leacock, *Sunshine Sketches of a Little Town* (London: John Lane, 1912), p. 34.
8. Ernest Buckler, *The Mountain and the Valley*, New Canadian Library (Toronto: McClelland and Stewart, 1966), p. 170.
9. Buckler, p. 299.
10. Sheila Watson, *The Double Hook*, New Canadian Library (Toronto: McClelland and Stewart, 1969), p. 132.
11. Margaret Laurence, *A Jest of God* (Toronto: McClelland and Stewart, 1972), p. 196.
12. Frederick P. Grove, *Fruits of the Earth*, New Canadian Library (Toronto: McClelland and Stewart, 1965), p. 264.
13. Robertson Davies, *Fifth Business* (Toronto: Macmillan, 1970), p. 186.
14. Davies, p. 271.
15. Davies, p. 163.