

*Thomas Saunders*

## A NOVELIST AS POET: FREDERICK PHILIP GROVE

ON JULY 17, 1962, the University of Manitoba made arrangements to purchase from Mrs. Catherine Grove, widow of the late Frederick Philip Grove, a number of manuscripts of her husband's work. These included both published and unpublished material—novels, short stories, articles, addresses, notebooks, essays, sketches, letters, and poems. The collection also includes some reviews and comment on Grove's work.

Of the published novels six are represented: *Our Daily Bread*, *Fruits of the Earth*, *Two Generations*, *Consider Her Ways*, *The Master of the Mill*, and *Settlers of the Marsh*. There is, in addition, the children's story, *The Adventures of Leonard Broadus*, which was serialized in the United Church paper, *The Canadian Boy*, in 1940; and a number of short stories and articles.

Unpublished works include *The Weatherhead Fortunes* ("History of a Small Town"), *The Poet's Dream* (or *The Canyon*), *Murder in the Quarry*, a manuscript of short stories entitled *Tales from the Margin*, and a collection of poems. To these must be added a number of other short stories, articles, essays, and sketches.

Though by no means a complete record of material by and about Grove, the whole adds up to what must be considered the beginning of a definite collection. It is to the University of Manitoba library that Grove scholars and researchers must now turn for much of the material on which their work will be based.

There is, of course, an appropriateness in the University of Manitoba having acquired these documents. It was in Manitoba that Grove "found" himself as a writer. Here much of his best work was done, and here he first found publication in the early twenties. His discoverers, indeed, were men of the university (or of one of its affiliates, United College)—Arthur L. Phelps, Watson Kirkconnell, and the late Dr. J. H. Riddell. Grove took his B.A. degree at the university, which subsequently honoured him with an honorary degree as well. When death claimed him.

it was to Manitoba that his body was returned—to rest beside his daughter in the little cemetery at Rapid City where both he and his wife had taught school.

What the documents acquired by the university will mean in terms of future research only time, of course, will tell. Grove was a controversial character during his lifetime; he has remained a controversial figure since his death. The controversy has raged not only about his life but about his work. He has been described by one set of critics as a great writer, by others as a poor one. By some, both as a person and author, he has been considered something of a fake. But both he and his work continue to command interest; and, among not a few knowledgeable people, they continue to command respect.

It is not the intention here to become involved in this controversy or to make an assessment of the value of the manuscripts and typescripts now in the University of Manitoba's possession. To make such an assessment (entirely aside from the question of Grove's merit as a writer) would require a more detailed analysis of the documents than the writer has so far been able to give them. One of the manuscript collections, however, is worthy of immediate comment, and I therefore deal at present with the poems.

Not many people are aware of Grove as a poet, and the manuscript now housed in the University of Manitoba collection would not encourage rhapsodies over his achievements in verse. Yet it is interesting to note his apparently life-long respect for poetry and his attempts to write it. For, while most of what is contained in the University of Manitoba collection was written after 1927, and was apparently motivated by the death of his daughter, there are indications that he dabbled in poetry during most of his writing life. A date on one of the poems, indeed, suggests that it was written in Nova Scotia as early as 1909.

Grove's interest in writing poetry, however, does not seem to have given him any great mastery of the craft. (Perhaps it would be more accurate to say that he reveals mastery of the craft but little beyond that — technical proficiency within imitative limits but not the true poet's ability to give words implications and ramifications beyond themselves.) In 1922, after reading *Over Prairie Trails*, Arthur Phelps wrote him: "You give us the observation of the scientist made with the eye of the poet." Phelps was enthusiastic over the poetic quality of Grove's prose. But when Grove set out consciously to write poetry, he was not so successful and Phelps was less enthusiastic. "I don't like your verse so well," he wrote in the same letter—a judgment which, after reading the typescripts in the University of Manitoba collection, I am prepared to support.

Written almost exclusively in unvarying iambic pentameters, Grove's verse,

over all, while technically correct, is pedestrian and dull. It seldom gets off the ground. It is obviously imitative and much of it could as well have been written in prose. For example:

I never thought a day could be so stale  
And drag its weary hours as this one did.

Whatever else these lines may be, they are not poetry. At times he is positively banal. It is hard to imagine, for example, anything pretending to be poetry that could be much worse than this:

Come, let us sit behind this wind-built dune  
And look upon the slumbering lagoon.

But not everything he offers as poetry is on this low plane and, aside from their merit as verse, the poems are not without value in assessing the man. They give us something of his basic philosophy, throw light on the content and form of the novels; and in the long poem, *The Dirge*, written after the death of his daughter, we have as searching an account as we are likely to have of his emotion and thought during what was undoubtedly one of the most tragic and critical periods in his life. This poem, though philosophically more pessimistic than anything that could have come from Tennyson, is reminiscent in its form—though not in its rhyme-scheme—of *In Memoriam*. This may make its sincerity suspect by some readers. Long poems in the form of dirges over someone we profess to love can have an aspect of falseness about them. But from those who knew Grove at the time of his daughter's death, and from all we know of the rapport that seems to have existed between father and daughter, plus the natural affection that can be assumed, this does not seem to have been the case here. Grove, like many artists, seems to have been an essentially selfish man. His tendency was to *use* people, even those closest to him. But there is no evidence of this in his relationship with his daughter. She seems to have occupied a special place in his affections, and he gave himself to her as to perhaps no other person.

Before considering the long poem occasioned by her death, however, it may be well to examine some of his other verse. The first poem in the typescripts, entitled *Preface*, states his purpose in writing the poems that welled up in him following this tragedy:

To tell posterity in accents terse  
How one man felt whom God had bent and rent.

But there is nothing terse in what follows. In his verse, as in his prose, Grove

took his time and was unwilling to be hurried. His nearest approach to terseness is in his description of the world, his outlook on which is dark indeed:

This world?  
A synonym for prison bars.

But although he feels that life is basically harsh and unjust, he refuses to bow to it or to take comfort in the thought of a kindly providence in which he cannot believe. His concept of life, for himself as for the main characters in his novels, is essentially tragic and is nowhere better expressed than in the poem, *The Rebel's Confession of Faith*:

I still decline  
Thus to be mothered by a providence  
Whose kindness is less provident than mine,  
Whose justice is but bartering recompense.

I'd rather have my weakness than its strength;  
I'd rather stand, a beggar, on my own  
Than in reward receive the breadth and length  
Of worlds or kingdoms . . .

It is in passages such as this, where feeling and conviction are both strong, that he comes closest to being a poet. Sometimes, in the midst of otherwise pedestrian writing, he holds us with a single line, as in his description of "The sleeping phantoms of a fossil past."

But it is the long poem dedicated to his daughter (about two-thirds of which was published in *The Canadian Forum* in its issue of April, 1932) that is most self-revealing and contains most of his better lines. The girl, Phyllis May, died at Rapid City when she was barely twelve years of age. The loss of the child seems to have touched Grove as perhaps no other event in his life. All the other hardships he had been confronted with were as nothing compared with this. His heroic attitude toward life, never broken by adversity, came nearest to the breaking-point at this time; and the verse which resulted, if not without its flaws, is in many respects worthy of its subject. It has, I believe, a quality of deep sincerity; and for Grove, in writing it, it must have acted as a sort of catharsis, giving relief to his burdened mind.

In it we find the first expression of his desire to be buried beside his daughter when his time comes:

Sleep without fear, my child, not long alone:  
 For there is room for me, too, in that throng.  
 Some quarry even now grows my own stone.  
 Here will I come, nor will I tarry long.

Grove had been a wanderer throughout much of his life. After the death of his daughter he could be a wanderer no more. As he expresses it,

No country, so far, claimed me all her own;  
 My emblem was the sail . . .

But his child's death changed all that:

Now am I anchored; and forever now  
 Must here I tarry. For a woman gave  
 A child to me; and to the ground I bow;  
 My roots are growing down into a grave.

There seems little doubt that, for Grove, the death of his daughter was the black night of the soul. It was a darkness out of which he found it hard to climb. Even St. Paul's trinity of faith, hope, and love held little comfort for him. Of faith and hope his entire philosophy of life had tended to rob him; and, in his bereavement, he felt that even love had failed. His love for his daughter had no power to break the bonds of death. His statement of this gives us the darkest lines in a dark poem:

But Love, the greatest, proving destitute  
 Of power to lift the lid from off the tomb,  
 The bauble Hope lay broken; Faith was mute  
 And mocked itself by shrugging, Faith in whom?

But something in him clings to the thought that death cannot have the last word. Beauty changes but never dies. Shelley's thought about the young Keats comes to him, and it is Shelley's lines that are engraved on the tombstone of his daughter's grave:

She is a portion of the loveliness  
 Which once she made more lovely.

His own, more verbose, expression of this runs:

What wafts the wind upon its midnight breath?  
 It bears, transformed, soft rain from out the sea  
 And spins a message that there is no death,  
 That what once was, transformed, shall ever be.

In all his poems, this is as positive a statement on the great issues of life and death as Grove ever allowed himself. There is no suggestion of a belief in personal immortality—only an assertion of the unextinguishable nature of beauty. It is still the tragic concept that prevails—a belief in the earthly immortality of the values he cherishes, values that may be buffeted by an improvident providence but can never be totally destroyed.

This, of course, is the basic philosophy that supported Grove all through his life and through the tribulations of his writing career. The long years of writing, in what was virtually a cultural vacuum, with little or no hope of publication, may be partly explained through the fact that he was a compulsive writer. But there is also this—his unflinching belief in the rightness of what he was doing, his faith in the permanence of its value, his conviction of the survival of the best that was in him and the world despite tragedy. These things go a long way to explain both the fact and the nature of his writing; and in revealing them, the poems illuminate both his life and his prose.

It may be true that the poems, as poems, leave something to be desired. It may be equally true that their publication in book form would add little to Grove's literary reputation—they might even detract from it. But they should still be of inestimable value not only to the research scholar but to the ordinary reader who is interested in Grove the man, as well as in Grove the writer. Besides throwing light on his thought and character, and being a mirror of his emotion and mind in the aftermath of perhaps the most tragic episode in his life, in condensed form they illustrate the philosophy that informed the corpus of his published work and motivated the delineation of his principal characters. Here, in essence, are Abe Spalding, Neils Lindstedt, John Elliott and all the others.

But more than this, the poems are a clue to the nineteenth-century influences that shaped Grove's writing career. Because his first book, *Over Prairie Trails*, was not published until 1922, and his first novel, *Settlers of the Marsh*, until 1925, it is sometimes assumed that Grove belongs to a much later era than he does. Adverse judgments on his writing have sometimes been made on this false premise. It is conveniently forgotten that Grove started his first draft of *Latter Day Pioneers*, the trilogy out of which *Settlers of the Marsh* was literally hacked, as early as 1892. He had been cut adrift from the European culture in which he had been nurtured some time before that, and there were few literary influences available to play on his life during the long years in which he worked as a farmhand, following the harvests from Kansas to the Canadian prairies, until he settled down as a schoolteacher in a series of Manitoba towns.

The poems reflect this. They are imitative not of twentieth-century, but of nineteenth-century, models. As such, they reflect the same influences that shaped his prose. But they are not imitative of the easy optimism that marked much nineteenth-century writing. They are marked by the tragic manner and a philosophy and concept of realism—the same philosophy and concept that informs his prose. This, even in the 1920's, was something new in Canadian writing. Indeed, it is a measure of Grove's greatness—and a reflection on the development of the art of the novel in Canada up to that time—that, when *Settlers of the Marsh* was finally published, it still broke new ground by introducing the novel of realism into the literature of this country. (Grove may have arrived late as a published writer, but—to use his own phrase—he was still a “latter day pioneer”.)

The poems have special value in reminding us of these things. Taken by themselves, and judged only as poetry, they may be regarded as having minimal significance. But seen in relation to Grove the writer, and Grove the man, they help illumine both his life and his published work.