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The “British Connection” in the *Jalna* Novels of Mazo de la Roche: The Loyalist Myth Revisited*

Those “Tories” or “Loyalists” of the American Revolution (the appellation depended on whether you were, respectively, a supporter or an opponent of the Revolution) who were exiled to British North America following the peace in 1783 carried with them variants of the Great American Dream. To their opponents, they carried the “ugly sisters” part of the fairy tale; for them, they carried the “lived happily ever after” bit. The Loyalists were united by their common abhorrence of the American Revolution but by little else. Studies of Loyalist ideology struggle mightily to construct a coherent whole out of various and variant opinions.¹ There is very nearly a Loyalist ideology for every Loyalist, or at least for every small group of Loyalists. A major weakness of the Loyalist side during the revolution was its inability to conceptualize its ideological position in simple terms.² Simplicity was on the side of the patriots.

As the refugees re-built their shattered confidences and lives, they constructed from the remnants of their American experience a new ethic, both moral and political, on which to base and justify their individual and community existences. For English-speaking Canada this justification, which is variously called the “Loyalist Myth”, the “Loyalist Tradition” or the “British Connection”, was a highly significant part of the collective identity for the next hundred years or so.³ This tradition did not survive the First World War, except in a fantasy world that occasionally found expression in patriotic speeches, bad poetry, or as I hope to illustrate, the *Jalna* novels.

Although there were nearly as many reasons for loyalty as there were Loyalists, the Loyalist Myth became through time as simplistic as any burgeoning nation state would require. I do not wish to enlarge on the description of the myth as I have already done so elsewhere.⁴ Suffice it

to say that the Loyalist Myth expressed respect for monarchical governance and a hierarchical social system, for the rule of law, and for some degree of religious involvement in civil life. Some of these characteristics were stronger than others, and the levelling tendencies of pioneer life in North America wore them down until they came little by little to resemble the American model left behind. The previous generalizations are a more positive way of saying that the Loyalists and the Loyalist Myth accepted inequality, and remained unconvinced that all men were, or even should be, created equal.

The *Jalna* novels are a fictional expression of this tradition. Ronald Hambleton, in his biography of Mazo de la Roche, concludes that she "was significant as the chief mourner for the dying English influence in Canada."⁵ Hambleton, however, does not enlarge on this conclusion to any great extent and when he does so he is inclined to limit the English influence to rather superficial expressions of taste and society.⁶ The *Jalna* novels describe obliquely some very basic ideas of the Canadian national identity, at least of the English-speaking identity. Leaving aside a consideration of the novels as literature, they provide a most interesting source for the student of social and intellectual history.

From the time that Philip Whiteoak and his young bride emigrated to Southern Ontario because of the assurances of their friend Colonel Vaughan that "You and your talented lady, my dear Whiteoak, would receive the welcome here that people of your consequence *merit...*"⁷, the family accepted intrinsically the idea that they held a certain position in society. This position was one of a kind of squirearchy, or to quote de la Roche, the Courts and Whiteoaks were "gentlemen, soldiers, 'goddamming' country squires."⁸ The family dominates the immediate neighbourhood – which means that they claimed a kind of feudal authority over a small, miscellaneous collection of country bumpkins, maiden ladies of humble means, the local clergymen and a few farm hands. Their only family retainers were Wragges and his wife, who were English born. It seems that even in fantasy, Mazo de la Roche could not conceive of a Canadian servant class. The Whiteoaks writ does not run far, and it only runs at all because the Whiteoaks feel that they have authority over their neighbours and their neighbours are willing to accept this opinion.

This authority is rooted in the past and based on wealth and culture. Philip Whiteoak had enough cash to open up the neighbourhood by

clearing and establishing his estate. The family also endowed the local church. In the present of the novels, the family dominates the neighbourhood because of these events in the past — in other words the authority is inherited — because they have better educations, are possessed of talents in cultural terms, and have a wider experience of the world based on travel.

The practice of this authority is restricted to rather trivial events. For example, the family is able to prevent a row of trees from being cut down and a road from being widened. Later in the series, Renny Whiteoak is able to prevent a developer from moving into the neighbourhood and building cheap little bungalows for commuters from the city.⁹

Although the Whiteoaks are lords of the manor in their immediate neighbourhood, encounters with the big world outside are usually unsatisfactory. The urban society of the nearby big city and that of New York City alike prove uncongenial to the Whiteoaks. They tend to come through as coarse Neanderthals in these urban milieux. Their knowledge of the outside world has mostly been established in the past, as the decline of their financial resources has restricted travel and educational opportunities for the younger generation. The Uncles Nicholas and Ernest as young men and Gran in her youth are the most widely travelled of the family. Likewise, the practice of sending the Whiteoak children to England to be educated has ceased.

The Whiteoaks respond to this encroaching and threatening world outside by ignoring it and turning their attention inward to the family circle. They remain gloriously unconcerned with the opinions of people outside their extended family group and their small circle of immediate neighbours. The only two Whiteoaks to break free of the enclosure and “make it” in the outside world are Eden and Finch. They are both artists, and they both tragically endure, respectively, death and a series of nervous breakdowns. The world outside is not congenial to the Whiteoaks.

The major British institution that is represented in the chronicle of the Whiteoaks is the functioning of authority on the basis of hierarchy. For example, Gran plays Queen Victoria to the hilt, and Renny succeeds on her death as the young king. This kingship is the ancient Germanic one by consent of the governed rather than the new-fangled “divine right” one of Louis XIV and his imitators.¹⁰ This nice balance

between ruler and the ruled is explained in *Jalna*: "Renny, the chieftain had spoken.... In truth, Renny was more often the organ of the family than its head. They knew beforehand what he would say in a crisis, and they excited, harried and goaded him until he said it with great passion. Then, with apparent good grace they succumbed to his will."¹¹

The elemental, basic quality of the authority exercised by the Whiteoaks is repeated often in the books. It is organic and timeless, based on the family group, the tribe, the clan and eventually the kingdom, with a religious re-inforcement.¹² "She [Alayne Archer] felt that they were helpless, moved inexorably by soulless forces. They were being woven into the pattern of *Jalna*. They could no more extricate themselves than the strands caught in the loom"¹³ The maintenance and the function of the family on the basis of these forces is the most important value in the novels. This authority demands a limiting of the choices available to the individuals in the family, but it also provides for mutual protection and responsibility.

The Whiteoaks have "no opinion whatever" of the profit motive as a primary value of human existence. The family lives chronically short of cash and is quite unwilling to do anything about this situation. Their energies are expended in maintaining their "traditions". These traditions are much more important than money.¹⁴ Here is one of many declarations of this sentiment. This one comes from *Mary Wakefield*. "Very well. Prejudices. Prejudice against making a fetish of material progress — against all the hurry scurry after money that goes on in the big American cities. They wanted to lead contented peaceful lives and teach their children to fear God, honor the Queen, fight for her if necessary. In short behave like gentlemen."¹⁵

As I have already suggested, the outside world has become increasingly alien to the *Jalna* way of life. Outsiders themselves are usually totally rejected by the clan. However, there is one significant exception in the person of Alayne Archer, who plays a very significant role in the series and is without a doubt the most interesting character. Coming from the nearby city would have been bad enough, but Alayne is an American from New York City. *Jalna* gives a perceptible shudder when first faced with this alien sense of values.

Alayne Archer's entry is eased somewhat by the family's mistaken impression that she is very wealthy. Whiteoaks are only permitted to acquire wealth in the traditional manner either by farming, breeding

and raising horses, or by inheritance. The last category presumably also includes marrying wealth.

After the truth of Alayne's modest means is revealed, other mitigating circumstances are introduced to make her acceptance a little more tolerable. Her ancestry is as "British" as an American is likely to have, at least in the popular mind. Her ancestors were from puritan New England, and her grandfather was a native of that most acceptable state, Massachusetts. Her father and grandfather have both been academics and for that reason are pictured as being outside the general stream of American life. Her grandfather "had got into trouble more than once because of his advanced religious views...."¹⁶ Furthermore, although Alayne's nationality might be suspect, her heart was in the right place. She turns out to be on the side of the "good Americans".¹⁷ For several years before the death of her father, he had been writing a history of the American Revolutionary War and Alayne had been doing research for him. "Her admiration had been aroused for those dogged Loyalists who had left their homes and journeyed northwards into Canada to suffer cold and privation for the sake of an idea. It was glorious she thought and told her father so." Her father we are assured had ended up by calling her "his little Britisher" and although Alayne was "proud of being an American, still one could see the other person's side of the question."¹⁸

It is interesting that for all the obvious praise of "Britishness" in the book, de la Roche draws a romantic, vibrant young American woman on one side and offers for the British opposition, Aunt Augusta, old, quarrelsome and rather stupid. Aunt Augusta puts on superior airs that the other members of Jalna do not like and she makes occasional cracks about "colonials". The main contradiction of the Loyalist inheritance is illustrated in this comparison. The Loyalist tradition admired British ways and institutions but not necessarily the British.

The only warming of this relationship with Britain itself occurs in the novels as a result of the Second World War. As is stated in *Wakefield's Course*, "The tie that bound the Whiteoak family to the old land had been strong but since the war that tie had as in the case of countless other Canadian families, so strengthened, toughened, and tautened that they now felt as one. The Atlantic crossing, which had once been safe, was now perilous, but a bridge of courage and loyalty had been flung from shore to shore."¹⁹ One feels, however, that the tone of this

passage is rather shrill and smacks of the jingoism of the war years.

The Whiteoaks, either singly or together, are not as important as the place itself, Jalna, and it is significant that Mazo de la Roche so titled the first novel in the series. The house and the land represent the traditions that are maintained, albeit in rather a run-down state, in the face of urban development, of the profit motive and of increasingly democratic political institutions. As the author remarks, "...it was a house with an odd, knowing air, an air of enduring and endurance, as though it stood for an idea that would not soon die."²⁰

There is no room for bi- or multi-culturalism at Jalna. There are a number of anti-French statements in the novels.²¹ The "sturdy British stock" are the core of Jalna, and if the Whiteoaks had prevailed they would have been the core of Canada as well. "Their sincere hope is to keep it [Ontario] free of foreigners. They want to build up the population slowly but solidly out of sturdy British material."²²

Of course, the air of decline and decay about Jalna is very obvious. The Philistines are at the gate. The house gives a shudder as the termites finish off the south wing. Thus, the element of fantasy enters. The novels are a kind of cross between those of Faulkner and those of the Brontë sisters. The decay of a regional culture is aptly illustrated, and the flight into fantasy in the maintenance of the set of values that have lost their validity is obvious. Jalna and its neighbourhood are gorgeously unrealistic. The novels describe a world that has internal consistency, but that is decidedly detached from the real world. Jalna is an ideal, a kind of regional type, but it has no real connection to the hinterland and specifically, since mention is made occasionally of realistic details, to North America in the first half of the twentieth century. Jalna is a dream world with more similarities to Xanadu or Shangri-la than to Southern Ontario.

Jalna is the Loyalist Myth. It is the dream of the descendants and followers of the United Empire Loyalists. The family is of primary importance. Everything is subservient to the maintenance of strong family ties, and behind this feeling of kinship lurks the basic, fundamental feelings of a clan or kingdom or any sort of organization based on a hierarchical authority and a respect for inherited power and position. The authority that is paid to the chieftain or leader is emotionally based. The leader dominates by force of character as well as by inherited authority, but the basic ingredient in his position is

dark, obscure, elemental. The religious sense of the family is also somehow tied into this respect for authority, and mystery plays a big part both in the religion of the Whiteoaks and in the functioning of their family. In the final analysis, the Whiteoaks eschew the levelling tendencies of American democratic society. Some are meant to rule, and some to follow. These intentions are primeval. The family specifically opposes the pursuit of material wealth as a primary value. Emotional, irrational impulses, a feeling for order based on nature — these are their concern. The family, the land, a rather precarious impression of “being a gentleman” — these are the basic values.

The epic myths of Homer work out individual and group relations on a grand scale. The conflict is between man and fate.²³ The myth in modern time (say, from the Renaissance on) is much more concerned with interpersonal or intergroup relations in the context of the nation state. It is usually a statement of national aspiration. The myth is constructed around a specific historical event, rather in the way that a pearl is built up, layer by layer, around a piece of grit in an oyster. The historical event provides the starting point, but the ideals and values of the society are illustrated in the myth, and the myth re-inforces or directs the development of the national psyche.²⁴ It is a two-way street.

The Loyalist tradition is only one of many in the pantheon of Canadian national ethics or myths.²⁵ The Loyalist myth was very restrictive. Even at its peak in the late nineteenth century the tradition probably was relevant to only a minority of Canadian citizens. It totally excluded Canadians and non-British immigrants. In terms of Canadian national values in the twentieth century, the myth has been in decline, in spite of de la Roche's parting shot, “I [Jalna] will remain here to justify your lives, as long as this country survives.”²⁶

However, even with the brash, strident tone of the Loyalist Myth stilled, the alternative ethic which the Loyalist tradition offered the Canadian nation still has some significance.²⁷ Porter, for example, concluded that the keys to the kingdom are still held by persons of British descent.²⁸ Mazo de la Roche certainly thought so, as she described the Whiteoaks, “But perhaps they were right. Perhaps they had some secret which others had lost or were losing. They did not save themselves. They were built on a wasteful plan. Like shouldering trees, they thrust down their roots, thrust out their limbs, strove with each

other, battled with the elemental. They saw nothing strange or unlikely in themselves. They were the Whiteoaks of Jalna. There was nothing more to be said."²⁹

* Acknowledgement is made of support from Canada Council Grant (S72-1421).

Footnotes

1. See, for example, C.H. Van Tyne, *The Loyalists in the American Revolution* (Gloucester, Mass., 1959, originally pub. 1902), p. 87; or W.H. Nelson, *The American Tory* (Oxford, 1961), p. 40. A complete survey of work on the Loyalists is available in Wallace Brown, "The View at Two Hundred Years: The Loyalists of the American Revolution," *Proc. American Antiquarian Society*, April, 1970, 25-47.
2. Mary Beth Norton, "Some Reflections on Loyalist Organization (or the Lack Thereof)," paper, Loyalist Studies Symposium, 13-14 October, 1972, University of New Brunswick.
3. Articles that deal specifically with the Loyalist Myth are: John Davidson, "The Loyalist Tradition in Canada," *Macmillan's Magazine* (Toronto, September, 1904), pp. 390-400; Carl Berger, "The Loyalist Tradition," Chap. 3 in *The Sense of Power* (Toronto, 1970); David V.J. Bell, "The Loyalist Tradition in Canada," *J. of Can. Studies*, 5, 1970, 22-33; Jo-Ann Fellows, "The Loyalist Myth in Canada," *Historical Papers* (Canadian Historical Association, 1971), pp. 94-111.
4. *Ibid.*
5. (New York, 1966), p. 217.
6. *Ibid.*, pp. 215-221.
7. Mazo de la Roche, *Jalna* (New York, 1927), pp. 23-24.
8. *Whiteoaks of Jalna* (Boston, 1929), p. 329.
9. *Return to Jalna* (London, 1948), p. 356.
10. See J.M. Wallace-Hadrill, *Early Germanic Kingship in England and on the Continent* (Oxford, 1971).
11. P. 101.
12. This type of authority is exhaustively illustrated in J.G. Frazer, *The Golden Bough* (London, 1890).
13. *Whiteoaks of Jalna*, p. 233.
14. Mazo de la Roche, *Wakefield's Course* (Boston, 1941), p. 14.
15. (Boston, 1949), p. 62.
16. *Jalna*, p. 115.
17. This phrase is used as a synonym for Loyalists of the American Revolution by Wallace Brown, *The Good Americans* (New York, 1969).
18. *Jalna*, p. 116.
19. P. 330.
20. *Variable Winds at Jalna* (Toronto, 1954), p. 130.
21. For example, *The Building of Jalna* (Toronto, 1945), p. 137.
22. *Ibid.*, p. 153.
23. Winston Weathers, *The Archetype and the Psyche* (Tulsa, 1968), pp. 2-4.
24. This is the definition of Claude Levi-Strauss, *Structural Anthropology* (New York, 1963), pp. 209, 229.
25. For an expansion of this statement see Fellows, "The Loyalist Myth in Canada," *op. cit.*, p. 107.
26. *Centenary at Jalna* (Boston, 1958), p. 14.
27. This conclusion is reached by James J. Talman, "Ontario: A Product of the American Revolution," *Historical Magazine of The Protestant Episcopal Church*, XXXVII, June, 1968, 129-134.
28. *The Vertical Mosaic* (Toronto, 1965).
29. *Whiteoaks of Jalna*, p. 209.