

BOOKS IN CANADA

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FOR GOODNESS' SAKE

Critics have hammered Rudy Wiebe for his prose but he continues to forge a narrative view of the West that runs from Big Bear to Aberhart by way of Batoche and beauty

by Stephen Scobie

THE SCENE IS a panel discussion at Identifications, a conference on ethnic literature held in Edmonton last summer. A member of the audience is asking a long question about the Purpose of Art: Is it art for art's sake, or is it beauty, or is it truth? "I can answer that one!" one of the panelists declares, loudly and confidently, and everyone laughs.

The panelist is Rudy Wiebe, and his answer is forthright and simple: "The whole purpose of art, of poetry, of story-telling, is to make us better. Okay? Let's leave it at that."

Both the answer and the laughter are highly characteristic. Everyone knows about Rudy Wiebe's High Seriousness: about the intense and elevated religious vision of his novels, about the unfashionableness of his views on art, life, and politics, about how he views himself as standing in the tradition of Leo Tolstoy and William Faulkner. But it's important to note that Wiebe quite consciously invited that laughter, and joined in it himself. "I'm not a naive author," he insists. He knows what he's doing.

No one is more aware than Rudy Wiebe himself of the stereotyped image of Rudy Wiebe as a dour, humourless, Old Testament prophet who won't allow alcohol on his land and who writes huge unreadable novels in stilted Germanic prose.

Wiebe's writing has certainly received more than its share of adverse criticism. When *Books in Canada* polled critics for nominations for "the most overrated" authors in Canada (January, 1979), Wiebe was a favourite target — a judgement repeated by Paul Stuewe in the October issue, where he described a reprint of *First and Viral Candle* as "further evidence that Wiebe is probably our most overrated writer since Callaghan: this is 'creative writing' with a vengeance, as rich in adjectival overkill and artificial paradox as it is totally devoid of interest." (Callaghan, indeed! The unkindest cut of all.)

It's the prose style that proves the greatest stumbling block, as Morris Wolfe noted in a recent review of reviewers in *The Canadian Form*. Attacking those who "insist on reading with the eye rather than the ear," Wolfe speculates: "That's why so many reviewers have trouble with the seemingly convoluted prose of a Rudy Wiebe." Outstanding here is William French, who described the prose of *The Temptations of Big Bear* as being coated in bear grease.

However, the prevailing image of Wiebe is deeply and seriously misleading. For one thing, he has a fine sense of humour, and his books are filled with it. "It's not so much the kind of satiric, black humour that seems to be the vogue now," he says, "but there's certainly ironic humour and some good belly-laughs. But when people pick up a book by Rudy Wiebe I think they expect a pretty heavy experience." He remembers giving public readings of his comic tall tales, and running up against the blank walls of the audience's preconceptions. "I tried to read the most wicked and

hilarious stories, and people would look at each other and say, 'Arc we supposed to laugh at this?' But it was the kind of thing which, if W. O. Mitchell had been reading it to them, would have had them holding their guts."

On the question of the supposed difficulty of his language, Wiebe is eloquent in his own defence: "What I try to do is to use language to get you beyond the early and quick understanding of something." In *The Temptations Of Big Bear*, "it's very important that the language should warn you at all times that you're sort of off-base with it, because you're dealing with a Cree world-view, and that world-view could not comprehend a lot of what was



Rudy Wiebe

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happening to it. How do you do that except by the way you handle the language?"

If there are any "infelicities," he says, "they're there because I want them there. That's deliberate on my part: I know exactly what I want to do with language. I'm not a naive author at all: I've spent too long at this already."

During the Identifications conference, Wiebe spoke in good-humoured disparagement of the "half-assed reviewers" who have "hammered" his prose, and he urged that we should welcome as a positive advantage, the echoes of other languages that appear in ethnic writing:

"We have accepted certain kinds of linguistic experiments with

"One of the beefs I have against many modern writers is that all the people they describe are vaguely or not so vaguely like themselves. Where's the imagination?"

the English language: the incredible literature of the American Jewish people has established itself linguistically on the prose of North America. We're willing to accept that, but we're not willing to accept, say, a Ukrainian or Italian kind of attempt to expand English — the most marvellous language in the world. I think, for the range of what it will allow to be done to it. We're not willing to accept that yet because, well, you know, who are these writers? We're just people from out on the prairies or somewhere, but after all, they live in New York, or in London, and that's different. Right? Well, it's not! It's no different at all."

Rudy Wiebe has spent a good part of his life like that, defending minority positions. He was born in 1934 on a homestead at Speedwell, in the northern bush country of Saskatchewan; his Mennonite parents had emigrated from Russia four years earlier. The land was so poor that it hadn't been homesteaded before the grim years of the Depression. When the Wiebes left 12 years later, "the whole community disappeared, because by that time it was pretty clear that it was very hard to make a half sensible living there."

The family moved to Coaldale, a small coal-mining town in southern Alberta. Like so many authors, Wiebe remembers himself as an omnivorous reader. And though his spoken language at home was a Friesian dialect of Low German, the books he read were in English. He came to the University of Alberta initially as a pre-med student, but his imagination was caught by such English teachers as Wilfred Watson and F.M. Salter. He planned to do a standard critical M.A. — being a pacifist, he chose the topic of "Shakespeare and War" — but Salter urged him to write novels instead. The result, eventually, was *Peace Shall Destroy Many*.

The publication of this study of the divisions in a small Mennonite community brought on by the problems of taking a pacifist stand during the Second World War caused a fair amount of controversy. "People in my community all over Canada," Wiebe recalls, "said to me, 'It would have been all right if you had written that book and it had only been distributed among us!' And I said, 'Who have we been trying to fake all these years, pretending that we are only fine hard-working decent people, who never had any adultery in our midst, we never had any avaricious people, or anything?' And they would say, 'Oh yeah, but the outside world didn't know that!'"

Though this account, 16 years after the fact, is humorous, the issue was serious enough at the time. Wiebe found himself unable to continue as the editor of the Mennonite newspaper in Winnipeg. But if the book lost him some friends, it gained him others; Wiebe is quick to stress that the Mennonite community is not monolithic, and the novel was highly praised by those who "never had the impression that Mennonites were such holy people that they never made mistakes."

It was, in fact, on the strength of *Peace Shall Destroy Many* that Wiebe was invited to teach literature and creative writing at Goshen College in Indiana, the largest Mennonite college in North America. He's been teaching; apart from sabbatical leaves, ever

since. "I've sometimes seriously thought of not teaching any more," he admits, "but there is a stimulation that comes from watching younger writers struggling to express something. You get a lot of ideas yourself; you get enormous feedback of all kinds. And also you see some of their mistakes and you recognize that you've been doing the same things!" Again the stress is on the craft of writing, on the conscious working to perfect the medium.

Wiebe's own progress in the craft was speedy and startling. *Peace Shall Destroy Many* is recognizably a first novel, and largely conventional in form; by the time of his third novel, *The Blue Mountains of China*. Wiebe was able to present an epic narrative of Mennonite history in a strikingly innovative and successful form. (And by the way, those who think that Rudy Wiebe has no sense of humour should read the hilarious account of Leonard Cohen's *Beautiful Losers* at the end of this novel.)

From the far-flung Mennonites of *The Blue Mountains of China* to the Cree warriors of *The Temptations of Big Bear* may seem a large jump, but Wiebe contends that "there are more connections than one might think." Thom Wiens in *Peace Shall Destroy Many* finds a buffalo skull on the prairie, and is suddenly aware that the land has a history. Wiebe talks of "the mass migrations of Canadians moving into what they think is empty prairie. I mean, how come it's empty? It never used to be." If the land was "empty," it was only because it had been "cleaned out by military campaigns of the Canadian government. The wave of Mennonite settlement that moved into Rosthern, Saskatchewan, in the 1890s took over land that the Metis had been deprived of at the Battle of Batoche."

Wiebe's imaginative identification with Big Bear was made possible, he admits, by the intensity of the Cree's religious vision. White writers generally have, in Wiebe's view, underestimated "the strength and the power of the spiritual sensibility that keeps these people going." He extends this idea into the present-day political situation. He sees the Indian leaders now as having a view of the world that is simply "matching one political power against another — and it's not really distinctively different enough to make the opposing faction uneasy about what they're doing. If they ever actually began one of these conferences with a calling on the Great Spirit and doing the sweetgrass ceremony, I think they'd have the white man at a real disadvantage."

Fine as the other novels are, it is *The Temptations of Big Bear* that remains the centre of Rudy Wiebe's achievement to date. It is a novel with a wide range and sweep, conveying a sense of the expansiveness of the Western plains, the scale of their geography and of their history; yet it is also a subtle and complex novel, full of intimate detail and precise shifts of voice and tone. The climactic account of the death of Big Bear's oldest son is, in its grandeur and its tragedy, the finest piece of narrative I know of in all of Canadian fiction.

Wiebe projects himself into an astonishingly wide range of characters — from the dying Cree chieftain to the young white girl, Kitty Maclean — and this ability is one he himself sees as central to his craft: "A primary job of the writer is to imagine yourself, any way you possibly can, in the life and minds and being of people who are other than yourself. One of the beefs I have against many modern writers is that all the people they describe are vaguely or not so vaguely like themselves. Where's the imagination? That's no writer, who just describes what's happening in himself."

Wiebe is determined to extend his own range further yet. He was even reluctant to write *The Scorched Wood People*, for fear of being trapped or "typecast" as a specialist in Western historical novels, but Riel, fortunately, demanded a voice. Right now, he says, "I see that there are at least two other novels that should be written about that period, but I'm not going to do them. At least not now. Maybe some day." Then is a new novel in progress, but Wiebe isn't saying anything about it. He has, however, been asking mysterious questions about mediaeval romance. . .

Meanwhile, he has been moving in other directions. He cooperated with Paul Thompson and Theatre Passe Muraille to produce *Far As The Eye Can See*, and he has worked on two film

scripts: one based on the legend of the Mad Trapper, and the other an adaptation, along with Aritha Van Herk, of her novel *Judith*, a work that grew out of Wiebe's creative writing classes and won the Seal Books \$50,000 prize for first novels in 1978.

His most recent publication is *Alberta! A Celebration*, a collection of short stories, accompanied by the superb, subtly coloured photographs of Harry Savage, issued by Hurtig Publishers in

"There is a stimulation that comes from watching younger writers struggle to express something. You get a lot of ideas yourself; you get enormous feedback of all kinds."

Edmonton to celebrate the province's 75th anniversary. Wiebe's stories range widely over the geography and history of Alberta: the Indians are there again, ambivalently signing the treaties that deprived them of their land, but so is a small boy celebrating "Chinook Christmas" in Coaldale, and so is an imaginatively resurrected William (Bible Bill) Aberhart, offering some caustic comments on Alberta today.

Aberhart, who also appeared in *Far As The Eye Can See*, is clearly a character who fascinates Rudy Wiebe. Like Big Bear, like Riel, Aberhart was a charismatic leader, a man whose vision of politics was not limited to the secular dimension. Wiebe describes him as a "sensitive man," deeply affected by the poverty of the Depression. "Maybe he was a power-hungry man too. I'm sure he had plenty of that, but he did always remain in many ways a small man, lie never thought of himself as big and inflated: he was trying to do some good for ordinary people." The story, Wiebe believes, "reflects pretty honestly what he would think of Alberta as being rich, when for him Alberta was the poorest province in the country. Of course he's idealized. I guess, in some ways. There's nothing desperate about that."

A few days after the identifications panel, I asked Rudy Wiebe to expand on his statement about art making us better. "I see.. basically, the moral purpose of art," he replied. "I don't mean a narrow kind of morality at all: I mean the appreciation of what's beautiful, and what is evocative, and what is stimulating to you in your finest perceptions. Bad art always makes you, somehow, less than you might have been. Trash writing limits you, inhibits you: great art broadens you, and makes you, in that sense, a better person."

A few days later still, being a conscientious person, and careful about his words, he came back to me again. "I think I should say 'good,' not 'better.' The purpose of art is to make us good. Yeah. I like 'good' better." □

THE DIFFERENCE

*five eleven, a hundred and eighty pounds,
brown hair, brown eyes,
five fingers on each hand
all the norms*

*or
the way memory takes everything
out of proportion
six-four, two hundred and twenty,
solid across the shoulders
and four fingers on this right hand*

the pinky caught in the grain auger

(From *Karst Means Stone*, a selection of poems by Monty Reid, NeWest Press, 71 pages. \$5.95 paper. ISBN 0 920316 26 3.)

Taking Candide from a baby

by Michael Smith

The Co' Man, by Ken Mitchell, Talonbooks, 224 pages, \$7.95 paper (ISBN 0 89922 168 5).

GILLMAN SAVARD, the con man in Ken Mitchell's novel, is sort of a prairie Candide. Despite his best intentions, he spends his youth mostly a victim rather than a perpetrator of life's frauds. Born in the bush near Brochet, Sask., he's a half-breed yokel, gifted only with innocent good looks and wide dark eyes (all the better to co' you with, my dear), the so' of a drunken lout who pots him out to work, then steak his money. When, as a schoolboy, he tries his luck selling soft-drink powders and Christmas cards for bonus premiums, his suppliers swindle him. His teenaged brother, Porter, a victim of the world's blest con, enlists to light in the Second World War and becomes a hem-at least, the way Gilly tells it — only to die, cannon-fodder, at Dieppe. Poor Gilly embodies the stung more than *The Sting*.

When Gilly does commit frauds — so innocently that he uses his real name on phony cheques — his victims are so willing to be had that they bully him into it. In the face of his honest protests, the citizens of Willson, Sask., force on him their best hotel suite, the finest clothes, the snazziest car, the yummiest teenaged waitress (naturally, he doesn't touch her) and finally the hotel itself — all es much because he's a curling fan as anything else. The civic brass in Regina — the Queen City, and Gilly's personal Mecca — are just about as ardent, partly because he likes hockey. Even when he deliberately commits a time, such as the theft of a car, it's in the pursuit of an ideal — in this case, Maggie Steffen, Cunégonde to Gilly's Candide, a not-so-perfect teaser who manages to get pregnant as a result of relieving him of his virginity.

There's nothing elaborate about Gilly's scams. His victims' greed is inflamed by his

artless diffidence, and modest impersonations of George Rizutto, the barbed-wire king, and Howard Hughes-anybody who might have some money to spend. To his own greedy cohorts, Clint Malach (Gilly's Pangloss) and Pepsi Vaccarino, the mobster, he "ever plays more the" a reluctant shill. In fact, to their dismay, he's more interested in sports than scheming. His prowess in prison at exercise-yard fuzzer leads him to consider not appealing his sentence, and his kicking ability later almost lands him a position on his favourite football team, the Calgary Stampeders. When he and another inmate break out of a West Coast penitentiary it's because the Stampeders are in the Western play-offs and may make it to the Grey Cup. Just once, Gilly would like to see them play.

The novel spans a period from Gilly's wartime childhood to the 1970 Grey Cup game, in chapters that alternate between present action and the biographical past. His impoverished upbringing leads him almost inevitably into crime, (he "borrows" a motorcycle to escape to the city), and from there on his quixotic ramblings end with repeated returns to prison where, a victim of society, he spends a lot of his adult life. His story is a social tragedy (which may or may not end with Gilly's death), relieved by Mitchell's unpretentious, fast-paced, simple narrative and sardonic sense of humour, though it also relies on set-pieces — a police chase, a hockey game, his brother's departure for the army — not all of which are terribly original. For instance, when Gilly calls on Maggie at the home of her foster parents, he notices his fly is undone:

"Will you took at that?" he cried, pointing toward the yard in a transparent ploy to focus attention elsewhere. The Jensens looked out the casement to see what he was pointing at.

"My God!" Mrs. Jensen cried, reeling back in shock.

Gilly looked then where his finger was pointing. Against the sunset, a pair of dogs was silhouetted, a female cocker Spaniel and a huge black Labrador, copulating in ecstatic fury in the middle of Jensen's manicured lawn.

Because Gilly is more victim than hem, his own personality lacks depth (as perhaps a habitual criminal's most), but our sympathies are always with him. Gilly, says Mitchell, "was doing something far more outrageous than" bilking people of money.

He was making fools of them. What was worse, he was making fools of important people, who resent it far more than the "ordinary folk." It's clear right from the opening few pages that these people are fools to begin with — they make fools of themselves — and readers can scarcely avoid wanting to see them deflated. Most of the characterizations are so simplified that Mitchell's civic politicians, for example, are cartoons, similar to the gold-crazed townspeople in Roch Carrier's *The Garden of Delights* and Mayor Weins in Jack Hodgins's *The Resurrection of Joseph Bourne*.

Like Carrier and Hodgins, Mitchell writes in a realistic style that caroms from comedy toward fantasy. By the time he reaches the climactic Grey Cup game, even factual references to such realities as Expo 67 and Pierre Trudeau are sacrificed to the plot. In the novel the game is played between the Stampeders and Ottawa Rough Riders while simultaneously the FLQ kidnapers of James Cross are escaping to Cuba — though in fact it was Montreal who won the 1970 Grey Cup, and Cross wasn't released for another live days. No matter. When the teams are announced on television, they include players named Diefenbaker, Kierans, Lang, and Lamarsh (*sic*). One wonders: Who's kidding whom? Who exactly is the co' men here? The football game, the fate of Gilly Savard, the novel all comprise an unresolved conundrum. Fiction, after all, is just another word for fraud. □

Rowing home to haven in sunny Prairie style

The Sad Phoenician, by Robert Kroetsch, Coach House Press, 80 pages, \$5.50 paper (ISBN 0 89910 159 0).

By DALE REAGAN

THIS IS THE latest sequence in a long Poem by Robert Kroetsch, tentatively entitled "Field Notes." Earlier segments include "The Ledger" (1975), "Seed Catalogue" (1977), and "How I Joined the Seal Herd" (published in the *Seed Catalogue* volume). The present volume contains two poems: "The Sad Phoenician" and "The Silent Poet Sequence."

Unlike many contemporary long or serial poems — which seem to be bound together by no more coherent an organizing principle than the feet that they are the product of a single consciousness — "The Sad Phoenician" is identifiably part of a poetic sequence and takes on its fullest meaning



when read as the fourth movement in a longer poem. Some insight into the genesis and unifying concerns of the poem as a whole is provided by a recent statement by Kroetsch:

What has come to interest me right now is what I suppose you can call the dream of origins. Obviously in the Prairies, the small town and the farm are not merely places, they are remembered places. When they were the actuality of our lives, we had realistic fiction, and we had almost no poetry at all. Now in this dream condition, as dream-time fuses into the kind of narrative we call myth, we change the nature of the novel. And we start, with a new and terrible energy, to write the poems of the imagined real place.

"Field Notes" is an attempt to find a language for exploring "the imagined real place." Working within a succession of imposed imaginative structures (as the titles reflect, the ledger and the seed catalogue are the organizing devices of the first two poems), Kroetsch sounds out possible ways of imagining the real. Each poem at once struggles to create the dream and contends with the possibility that "no song can do that." "Seed Catalogue," for example, expresses the concern that the poet's "record" is an insignificant fabrication, worthless in the face of the real:

*As for the poet himself
we can find no record
of his having traversed
the land in either direction
no trace of his coming
or going only a scarred
page, a spool of wording
a reduction to mere black
and white a pile of rabbit
turds that tells us
all spring long
where the track was
poet . . . say uncle*

And yet without the creative act upon nature, there is "the danger of merely living." The landscape remains a wilderness. We learn nothing.

"The Sad Phoenician" takes this process of inquiry back to its rudiments. Here Kroetsch focuses on the act of language itself, building the poem as a kind of test chamber within which he systematically probes the capabilities and limits of poetic speech. The organizing device in this case is the alphabet, with each of 26 passages set in counterpoint to a letter. The structural conditions of the test are made more rigorous still by pegging the syntax from beginning to end, to alternating constructions of "and" and "but." Within this formal framework, Kroetsch locates an embattled protagonist, "The Sad Phoenician of Love." He is the poet (the Phoenicians, we are reminded, were the inventors and dispensers of the alphabet) and the failed lover ("My women all have new lovers," he announces in the Opening line):

*. . . I. The Sad Phoenician of Love, dyeing
the world red, dyed laughing, ha, lost
everything, lost home; . . .*

As a trader in language he has charted the world but has lost contact with his home, himself as lover, the "actuality" of his own life. He is "at sea" in the sense that he is both engaged in the search for the real and lost within it. Through 26 shufflings of contending images of the poet (as explorer/evader; seer/trickster; namer/manipulator; and, in the culminating image on which the dialectics of the poem hinge, "Phoenician"/"Phoney") Kroetsch explores the power of language to "tell us the whole truth but hide what must be hidden."

"The Sad Phoenician" offers the confirming evidence, which "The Ledger" and "Seed Catalogue" had led us to anticipate, of Kroetsch's emergence as a master of the long poem. Basil Bunting has suggested that the mark of the poet successful in this form is that while he keeps his eye constantly on the overall architecture of the poem, he takes equal care with the local details, ensuring that they are "as tightly condensed, as thoroughly worked, as harmonious, as those of the short lyric." Kroetsch meets this test. "The Sad Phoenician," for the dizzying involutions of its word play, is an intricately patterned poem with each image, each verbal detail, taken up in an elaborate system of echoes and anticipations. It is not the kind of poetic writing that we see a great deal of in Canada today, its formal affinities being more with a certain stream of recent British poetry (Kroetsch acknowledges David Jones as one of the writers he most admires) than

with anything characteristically Noah American.

"The Silent Poet Sequence," presumably the fifth of the "Field Notes" series, is clearly an independent poem, but displays certain formal and thematic links to "The Sad Phoenician," being designed, it would seem, as a coda of sorts to that work. Although it dispenses with the alphabet as a structuring device, it retains the syntactic shifting between "and" and "but." As well, it picks up in its first line on the final image of the earlier poem. The transmutation of the protagonist from "The Sad Phoenician" into "The Silent Poet" (he retains the same initials) is emblematic of the process of diminishment that the "Sequence" documents. As in "How I Joined the Seal Herd," in which the hero is reduced to silence by the truths he has explored in the foregoing poem ("Seed Catalogue"), so here, acquiescing to the image of himself as "Phoney" that the main poem has proposed, the protagonist slips into silence, courting the anarchy he now has no hope of ordering.

The "Sequence" is a curious appendage to the title poem. Taken on its own, it is an interesting and skilful piece of writing, and read in the context of "Field Notes" as a whole it can be seen to have a place as a separate fifth movement. Viewed specifically as an extension of "The Sad Phoenician," however, it sits somewhat uneasily, as if it were an afterthought to bind the two more closely together. Granted, the poems are integrally related to the extent that the image presented in "The Silent Poet Sequence" is conditional on what has been represented immediately previously-but



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the same may be said of the relation of any section of "Field Notes" to the poem preceding it. Why Kroetsch has chosen to suggest a closer continuity between these two particular movements is not readily evident. Essentially the two sequences read as independent elements within the continuum of the longer poem, and the suggestion that in some ways they are part of the same unit only confuses things. □

The riddles of the shrinks

Four Stories. by Sheila Watson, Coach House Press, 62 pager, \$6.50 cloth (ISBN 0 88910 135 3).

By WAYNE GRADY

THESE FOUR SHORT stories by Sheila Watson are not new: two were first published in *Queen's Quarterly* in 1954 and 1956, the third appeared in *Tamarack* in 1959, and the fourth came out a few years ago in a special Sheila Watson issue of *Open Letter*, the magazine run by Coach House, which also reprinted the first three stories, six essays on the paintings of Wyndham Lewis, and four essays on such diverse subjects as Swift's debt to Ovid and the poetry of Michael Ondaatje (these essays date from the early 1970s).

The point of this bibliographical matter is that the first three stories here collected were published before Sheila Watson's epochal 1959 novel, *The Double Hook*. (A note for trivia collectors: *The Double Hook* was the first paperback published by McClelland & Stewart; in a little foreword the publishers boldly prophesied "that many new Canadian works will make their appearance in this way in the future.") The relationship of these stories to the novel is thematic rather than linear: there is no overlap of character or even setting, but in both the stories and the novel Watson's prime concern is the importance of myth in culture, and the fragmentation of individual and society when its culture is demythologized.

The first three stories — "Brother Oedipus," "The Black Farm," "Antigone" — take their structure, loosely, from the Theban plays of Sophocles — *Oedipus Rex*, *Oedipus at Colonus*, and *Antigone* — and it is fun, though not particularly instructive, to go through the Sophoclean trilogy to see what is borrowed and what is new. In Watson's stories, Oedipus is the son of a doctor who runs a psychiatric hospital, an apt modern parallel for Laius, King of Thebes. Watson also gives Oedipus an uncle named Daedalus, a slightly mad relation in "The Black Farm," and the

connection between Oedipus and Daedalus seems more like poetic licence until one remembers that Tiresias, the blind soothsayer who once confirmed that women enjoy sex much more than men, spent some time on Crete, and that it was Theseus who finally buries Oedipus. The narrator of the stories is Oedipus's brother, who is unnamed but who must be either Eteocles or Polynices (probably the latter, since only Polynices appears in Sophocles). who are both Oedipus's sons and his brothers. This presence of the father among us as a brother serves to make mythology — which is essentially religion — immanent, pantheistic, the word made flesh. That, at least, is how the Hellenic idea pervades the Watson stories. In this way, she is also a typical Western Canadian writer, quite firmly in the fictional lineage of F. P. Grove (whose Abe Spalding is a mythical saga hero) and all that contemporary blather about Louis Riel.

The problem is that the stories, suffused though they are with intelligence and urgency, aren't very readable. Theoretical literature can be important and thought-provoking (to use two standard reviewers' euphemisms), and thoroughly heavy-going, sometimes quite dull: witness some of the obscurer works of the writer who seems to be Watson's favourite painter, Wyndham Lewis. Hen is a patch from the fourth story, "The Rumble Seat," which has no Sophoclean prototype and seems to have been added, perhaps as a comment on the rest of the canon:

Pierre's deceptively small image dilated.

Sarcophagus papa, he prayed to a hidden but hovering shape. Coragyps at-ratus. Neophron perconopterus. King vulture, black vulture, Egyptian vulture. The litany from Webster's New Collegiate rolled sweetly off his tongue.

The sphincter round his mouth tightened.

A-ha, how he's pursing his lip, our uncle mocked.

Oiseau rapace d'Europe et d'Asie. Lâche, prudent, très vorace vautour, Pierre prayed trilling his r's with conviction as he shifted to Larousse.

Pierre is a television talk-show host, interviewing Oedipus, and the vultures he's praying to are TV cameras. The uncle, watching the show at home; is Daedalus. This is all very recherché, but it can sometimes be wily and perceptive, as:

Oedipus himself turned full into the screen.

Dwellers in our native Thebes, he said, I am Oedipus who knew the famed riddle.

He seemed to be trying out a role.

This is Toronto, Pierre said. Riddles are beside the point. Here we have obstruction, obscurantism, and worse.

We must, he said turning to Oedipus, demythologize.

For me it is too late. Oedipus answered. . . .

In short, the four short stories are intellectual games, riddles, a kind of mental gloss on *The Double Hook*. As palimpsests of the

Sophoclean plays they act as guideposts toward a more enlightened approach to the major themes of the novel. By themselves they sit like the fabled Sphinx on Mount Phicium, dose to the city of Thebes, ready to throttle and devour all those who cannot solve her riddle. □

From potato soup to natural gas

The Alberta Diamond Jubilee Anthology, edited by John W. Chalmers, Hurtig, 335 pages, \$14.95 cloth (ISBN 0 88830 176 6).

By DAVID MACFARLANE

THIS COLLECTION of 115 stories, essays, and poems, published to mark Alberta's 75th anniversary, is something of a masterpiece. It is handsomely bound and printed, edited with obvious thoughtfulness and dedication, and presents a pleasantly fragmentary portrait of the province. Page for page, it is a pleasure to read.

All expected names are present and accounted for: W.O. Mitchell, Robert Stead, Edward McCourt, Earle Bimey, Robert Kroetsch, Eli Mandel, James Gray, Grant MacEwan, and so forth. Bimey's poem, "First Tree for Frost," is a delightful combination of warmth, humour, and subtle craftsmanship. Robert Stead, it seems, could turn a phrase with the best of his peers; at times his sentences are as elegant as those of Henry James: "Then was but one drinking cup, and the water had been in the mom since the previous Friday — this was Monday — but neither of these facts checked the thirst or, so far as could be learned, affected the health of the children." Howard O'Hagan's "The Woman Who Got on at Jasper Station" and Henry Kreisel's "The Broken Globe" are excellent short stories. "Protected Environment" by H. A. Hargreaves, though very different, is as frightening a story as Jack London's old chestnut, "To Light a Fire." I even confess to getting a little moist at the eyes while reading John Patrick Gilless's Depression tale, "Especially Worthy." Never a dull moment.

Even the occasional instance of bad writing manages to survive, if nothing else, as an example of good editing. Lois McLean Davis's short story, "Bittersweet Winter," for example, reads like the most pre-chewed *Reader's Digest* fare: "Hot corn meal muffins ate devoured with little murmurs of delight, before the butter is melted. A homemaker can feel proud of

humble 'Johnny Cake'. **Yecch!** And yet, preceded as it is by **Leona Gom's** fine poem "Späne" — "I remember my mother at home/under the sighing lamp/with its moth-soft mantles/making kindling" — and followed by **Anne Woywitka's** straightforward tale of homesteading at the turn of the century — "When the last handful of flour had been used and the last potato had gone into the soup pot, death by starvation, became a very real possibility" — Davis's saccharine domesticity becomes just another piece of the overview of Alberta. The story's inclusion, far from being a momentary lapse of taste, bespeaks an intelligent and circumspect editor.

The Alberta presented in this anthology is a province where hardship and poverty have given birth to affluence. The hardship has not been forgotten: its remnants are still clearly seen. Nor has the irony of the recent affluence been overlooked. The first sentence of R. Ross Annett's "It's Gotta Rain Sometime," one of the once-popular "Babe" stories, reads: "In the seventh year of the drought, the tractor that had been buried in the soil-blowing of 1932 came unexpectedly to light." The time passed, and years later George Bowering could write about driving across the prairie: "Alberta floats on a pool of natural gas/the Peigans knew nothing of." The changes the province has seen, the debt Alberta owes to its part, are captured between these covets. At 335 pages, this collection is a chain of considerable length. There are few weak links. 0

Apricots and earnestness

The Earth is One Body, by David Waltner-Toews, Turnstone Press, 51 pages. \$4.00 paper (ISBN 0 88801 017 6).

The Man with the Styrofoam Head, by Gregory Grace, Turnstone Press, 62 pages. \$5.00 paper (ISBN 0 88801024 9).

By **JEFF MILLER**

*shipwrecked in Saskatoon
we whisper plots of victory
and escape
we have planted trees,
we shall build an ark*

THESE FUNNY, unpretentious lines seem to me the best of *The Earth is One Body* by David Waltner-Toews. Even should such a preference betray an Easterner's bias, the lines are so much stronger than the preceding 16 in "The Golden Sea" ("the only reliefs from the relentlessly receding horizon/are windowless lighthouses") that

it seems a pity the author didn't let them tell the whole story.

When he is more in earnest (alas, the other humour here is more deliberate), Mr. Waltner-Toews, a Grande Prairie veterinarian, is most effective on human suffering. After setting its narrator behind a "comfortable" desk where he sips lemonade while taking stock, "In an Old Colonial Mansion (Guadeloupe)" concludes wisely with

*How easily appearances might hold a
conscience captive
and a sunset justify a thousand slaves.*

The poet expresses similarly compelling sympathy for "those who died and are dying at the hands of the Chilean Junta," for Chilean exiles in Saskatoon, for children in a Calcutta slum. But as in this last instance, his political conscience can make him taken more journalistic than poetic tom. The subject matter of "A Calcutta Street, 1967" is so repellent that it overpowers language and Pathos. It opens with a group of ditty, mutilated children ("One of them is missing an arm./One is missing an eye") urinating on a rat that has just been crushed by a passing Mercedes. The Mercedes then appears outside "an ornate temple," and presumably belongs to the "Nehru-suited Brahmin" inside.

*In the courtyard, a rain is being
slaughtered,
bleating fearfully.
The blood pours along riled troughs.
Dark women in faded saris drink from the
troughs and pray for children.
From the shadow at the temple door
a rat scuttles out to join them.*

One is too sickened to feel pity or sorrow, and also perhaps a little scornful of such ingenuous dialectics so flatly stated.

In this regard I was particularly disturbed by "Christmas, 1974." Set in an "occupied city" in "Palestine," the poem carries an epigraph by Tagore — "Have you not heard his silent steps?/ He comes, comes, ever comes" — and ends "down a cobbled alley" where

*calloused hands
are pushing some goats away
from their manger
nearby, on a bed of dirty straw
a palestinian woman groans
pushing with all her prayerful might
against the pain in her belly*

If Mr. Walter-Tows is saying what he seems to be saying, his conscience and sympathies do not extend to Jews. I would like to believe that he has confused religion with politics here, Judaism with Zionism, but surely he doesn't believe it was Zionists who refused Joseph and Mary rest at the inn. So who, by his imagery, is left? In any case, a poet who also writes of breasts as "your hills," of a penis as a "growing redwood," and of a vagina as a "bearded apricot" is yet perhaps a little more earnest than wise..

Earnestness of a like intensity but different quality exhibits itself in *The Man with the Styrofoam Head* by Gregory Grace. A Winnipegger studying theology in Vancouver, Mr. Grace is cummingsesque when at his best:

*oh and giraffes are eating the
green part of the sky
a giggle
a tumult
a silencing of
tongues
this tenderness is like a third
person . among us a stranger
sharing our bread*

Otherwise, a methodology that the literary magazines call experimental or avant-garde ultimately exhausts our sympathy. As in much poetry of this sort, the arbitrariness of prosody, grammar, and imagery more often calls for the reader to practise extra-sensory psychoanalysis — "Guess what I'm thinking." or "Whatever you think I'm thinking we are thinking, so it roost be poetry." In this collection, style and context rarely substantiate one another, and the poems end up earnestly ineffective. The title poem, for example, begins:

*the man with the styrofoam head
moves through the moving pages of the wind*

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*trying to decode the devious intent of a
sky ecstasy
of leaf-turning, a headache of brown
clouds. . . .*

With this combination of technique and imagery, or similar instances of it such as "jolts of peace pierce the bag of/ life. . ." (in a poem apparently about sexual intercourse), the poet seems at best hedging his bets. And when he applies it with regularity to the middle class and middle-management, it makes these objects of his fascination seem that much more banal (objects, indeed) and the poetry pettishly disdainful or condescending:

*after drinking a glass of gasoline each
they argue for a while and finally
switch channels (the livingroom
is cluttered with a misery of infant's toys): a
situation comedy flutters across
a square of space. It's always
the same story line. The mistaken identity
is easily enough resolved. There's
no need for real flesh
("An Ordinary Wednesday Ewing."
quoted in its entirety.)*

Perhaps Messrs. Walfrer-Toews and Grace, both, are too squintingly intent on imny to quite see it through. □

Small lyrics in the big land

Ancestral Dances, by Glen Sorestad,
Thistledown Press. 72 pages, \$12.00 cloth
(ISBN 0 920066 26 7) and \$5.95 paper
(ISBN 0 920066 25 9).

By **STEPHEN SCOBIE**

IN THE PRESENT precarious state of publishing in Canada, where many small regional or literary presses are in danger of collapsing, it's good to see a press such as Thistledown in Saskatoon not only surviving but also turning out quality products. *Ancestral Dances* is an attractive book, for the printing as well as the poetry, and the "test substantial volume the press has brought out so far. It makes good use of photographs and has a fine cover design by Neil Wagner. It's not an ostentatious showpiece of the printer's art, but it's not a mimeographed pamphlet either; the production" is simple, clean, and commendable.

Much the same could be said of Sorestad's poems. They're not ostentatious: they make no large claims to cosmic significance; nor do they seek to dazzle us with verbal pyrotechnics. They are basically realist poems, relying on simple description and anecdote. There is an almost complete absence of metaphor or symbolism. The occasional stylistic trick, like a line-break in the middle of "spring/s," stands out by its inappropriateness within the context of this collection.

The themes have a similar simplicity and directness. The book is divided into four sections: "Dances," which focuses on the history of immigrants coming to the Prairies; "Faces," a series of portraits of friends and acquaintances; "Petroglyphs," poems dealing mainly with the Indians and the Metis; and "Sharers," a more loosely defined section on poetry and personal relationships.

Both style and subject-matter are typical, almost archetypal, of much of the poetry being written on the prairies. The theme of the land and its history — immigrant ancestors, Riel — is coupled with a distrust of highly symbolic or perceptually oriented language. *Prairie Pub Poems*, one of Sorestad's earlier books was called, and the style has that kind of directness, colloquial and unpretentious. One couldn't imagine this book, stylistically, coming out of Montreal or Toronto or Vancouver.

The virtues of this poetry depend upon the tact and the sureness of voice with which the style is handled. It's all too easy to let it fall off from the simple to the banal, or to let these basic recurring themes become clichés. (Do we really need — after Al Purdy's fine poem on the subject — another poem about the battlefield at Batoche? And do we really need, as we get here. "other three?")

At his best, Sorestad has that tact and sureness. His work leaks the resonance, soy, of Andy Suknaski, but it is confident, controlled, and capable, as in this short poem called "Listening":

*Rain voices mutter
on garden leaves
in the darkness
Down the alley
a cat's sudden squall
In the distance
a police siren
I return to the house
out of the darkness
to face my unkindness
in the light's glare*

It's not easy to bring this kind of poem off with such exactness, to let the whole structure rest on the double meaning of "unkindness" and resist the urge for further explication.

For all that, the reader may well end up feeling a little frustrated, a little undernourished. The poems are so consistently restrained, so unassumingly modest, that one longs for some extreme gesture, a touch of the outrageousness of Robert Kroetsch, some break in the flawless surface. Try something bigger, Glen: it's clear that the talent is there.

Writers such as Rudy Wiebe have long argued that the expanse of the West requires a large form, like the novel, to encompass it, and that the short lyric poem gets lost in the prairie vastness. Well, such poets as Glen Sorestad have established that the lyric does have its place, that there are smaller, more homely spaces within that vastness. But there is still something true about

Wiebe's intuition. There is a push for the bigger form, and that's an idea that casts its shadow over both the virtues and the limitations of *Ancestral Dances*. □

The best of oil possible worlds

The Blue-Eyed Sheikhs: The **Canadian Oil Establishment**, by Peter Foster. Collins. 320 pages. \$17.95 cloth QSBN 0 00 216603 sot.

By DAN HILTS

WORLD EVENTS and the news media usually conspire to make us nervous and fearful. During the 1970s, questions about the supply of oil have been the source of panic-mongering played against a colourful background of money, power, and foreign intrigue. What ties it all together in popular accounts is the human factor. Those shadowy figures behind the news, deftly pulling levers, really in the know, possessors of The Big Picture. Usually they're found in New York or Geneva but Peter C. Newman has uncovered some pretty important examples right here in Canada. He even knows their favourite mineral water and the colour of their ties.

The Blue-Eyed Sheikhs, Peter Foster gives a similar nose-against-the-window, breathless account of what the big guys are like and where they go for lunch. However, the book is more than an anecdotal series of personality and corporate profiles. Part One places Canada's petroleum industry in a global economic and political context. The events leading to the 1973 oil embargo, the subsequent rise in oil prices, the relations between OPEC, the U.S., the multinationals, and Canada are outlined and the confrontations between Ottawa and Alberta are examined. This information is generally well-organized and clearly written.

Parts Two and Three deal with the big multinational oil companies in Canada, the financial wheeling and dealing in the oil industry with emphasis on the Canadians involved; the flamboyant characters get a separate chapter. These two sections are the core of the book but suffer badly from poor organization and repetition. They appear to have been hastily written in short bursts. For

example, the difficulty in recovering oil from the tar sands is explained three times. This lack of order is a serious shortcoming in a book that deals with an often bewildering array of information on a complex subject. In addition it would have been helpful to the uninitiated to have explained some of the basics of oil extraction, and the financial arrangements and terminology peculiar to the industry.

The best parts are the accounts of the financial deals and the takeover bids, which are described with relish and which convey the excitement and drama of strong personalities competing for high stakes. The chapter on the fight for control of Husky Oil is a good story, well told, with the sort of frenzied action suited to the author's gee-whiz-bang style.

The individual profiles are less successful. Corporation executives in general are usually very careful about what they say for the record and this wariness is especially true of the oil companies, which have been vilified for most of this century. The author hasn't been able to pierce that tough corporate shell to bring us much new information or insight.

Part Four covers Alberta, Calgary, and the local *nouveaux riches*. It contains a respectful apologia for Peter Lougheed, probably the last man in Canada who needs one.

Despite its faults, the book is the best on the subject so far because it's also the only one. If you don't mind organizing the information yourself, most of what's required for an understanding of Canada's oil industry is there. □

From baron of beef to burgomaster

Grant MacEwan: No Ordinary Man, by R. H. Macdonald, Western Producer Prairie Books, 275 pages, 59.95 paper (ISBN 0 88833 029 4).

By PHIL SURGUY

GRANT MACEWAN was born on a farm near Brandon, Man., in 1902. In 1951 he was being mentioned as a future Minister of Agriculture in the St. Laurent government and he ran as a Liberal in the Brandon by-election. There seemed to be no way he could lose.

He was known everywhere in the West, but particularly in the Prairies, as a first-rate

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judge of cattle and horses. As an author, broadcaster, and after-dinner speaker, he was also very well-known as a proponent of farming innovations and a popularizer of Western history. For the past five years he had been the dean of agriculture at the University of Manitoba. Before that, he'd been a prominent and innovative professor of agriculture at the University of Saskatchewan. Upon his move to the U of M, one farm journal had commented: "Dean MacEwan has rendered far more service to the primary producers of Canada than will ever be known or recompensed."

It was a surprise to everyone, then, when MacEwan lost the by-election. It was a double blow to him and his family, because he had been forced to resign his position at the U of M when he announced his candidacy, and he now had to look elsewhere for work. After a short stint as the agriculture editor of the *Western Producer*, he became general manager of the Calgary-based Council of Canadian Beef Producers (Western Section) and spearheaded a short-lived PR campaign to counteract the bad press beef was getting as a result of the epidemic of hoof and mouth disease in the early 1950s. MacEwan entered civic politics in Calgary, eventually becoming mayor. He was also elected to a couple of terms in the Alberta legislature and, in the late 1960s and early 1970s, served as the province's lieutenant-governor for eight years. Throughout this time and afterwards, he continued to be a prolific author.

That is only a sketch of Grant MacEwan's busy life. Unfortunately, R.H. Macdonald's biography is hardly less sketchy; it is, in fact, rarely more than a long, rather tedious survey of MacEwan's activities and achievements.

Broadly speaking, MacEwan and a legion of other deeply religious, frugal, ambitious, and hard-working men like him imposed their own particular tone on the general development of this country. And, more specifically, the work of agrologists such as MacEwan apparently had an enormous impact on the development of Canadian fuming. MacEwan's move to the U of M and his subsequent forced resignation were only episodes in the furious debate

over the proper relationship between the academy and the fanning community that followed the Second World War. Yet Macdonald neither brings MacEwan to life nor illuminates the events and issues of his time and place.

Part of the problem may have been that Macdonald, who as an editor of *Prairie Books* has known MacEwan for a long time, was reticent about digging below the surfaces of his subject's life. Instead, he has relied almost exclusively (and unimaginatively) on library files and newspaper morgues. As a result, once again an important and potentially fascinating part of Canada's story was ready to be told, and once again everyone missed the boat — or in this case, the prairie schooner. □

Light under a bushel

William Irvine: The Life of a Prairie Radical, by Anthony Mardiros, James Lorimer & Co., 298 pages, \$19.95 cloth (ISBN 0 88862 238 4) and \$9.95 paper (ISBN 0 88862 237 6).

By ASHLEY THOMSON

"I wish to state that the Honourable Member from Central Winnipeg, Mr. Woodsworth, is the leader of the labour group — and I am the group."

—William Irvine, Member for Calgary East, to the House of Commons, 1922.

IF BILL IRVINE is remembered at all today, it is because he, J. S. Woodsworth, and a small group of like-minded Progressives worked together as the "ginger group" before it gave way, in 1932, to the newly formed CCF. Hitherto, Irvine has not claimed much attention on the part of historians. And, if truth be told, this is not at all surprising, since as a figure in Canadian history he has ranked somewhat below

Mackenzie King, Woodsworth, or even Joe Clark. As a parliamentarian, he served 17 years in the House—a not unexceptional length of time — and as a politician, he still managed to lose 10 elections, a figure that may put him in the same class as the early John Diefenbaker or the late Harold Stassen.

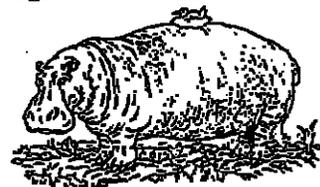
When he wasn't in the House, or running for office, Irvine served as a sometime Unitarian Minister, a journalist, and a party organizer, until his death at age 77 in 1962. He may well be, as Mardiros claims, "the founding father of the democratic socialist movement in Alberta," but even that does not seem like much of an accomplishment.

If Mardiros has not quite managed to convince us that Irvine is an important historical figure who deserves great attention, Irvine may get it anyway, since anyone who enjoys consistently fine prose will want to read this book. In addition, Mardiros, an emeritus professor of philosophy, possesses an almost unrivalled ability to make political philosophy comprehensible. Since this happens to be one of the major concerns of this book, most readers will find it doubly rewarding. His chapter on the compatibility between socialism and Social Credit is one of the clearest expositions this reviewer has seen anywhere.

As well as being a philosopher, Mardiros is also a long-time Alberta socialist, and, given the scarcity of socialists in that province, could not help becoming Irvine's friend. That friendship must have paid dividends, since it enabled Mardiros to obtain Irvine's papers, which include correspondence, a fragment of autobiography, unpublished manuscripts and documents relating to the Alberta CCF. As an academic, Mardiros should have known enough to go beyond Irvine's version of events; but as a socialist and his friend, he did not bother.

If one were to deduce from this that the Mardiros biography is not one of the most critical ever written, one would be correct. In fact, after reading Mardiros — who has tried to deflect every pot-shot ever fired in Irvine's direction — one gets the impression that Woodsworth will have to step aside in favour of another saint in politics. No wonder the Alberta Woodsworth House Association has provided "generous financial aid in support of publication."

Whatever his limitations, Mardiros will be the person to consult on Irvine for a long time, since no one else will likely be moved to write the definitive account. As the quotation at the beginning of this review is meant to imply, Irvine was a modest man, and as Churchill put it in another context, he had a good deal to be modest about. □



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One darn thing after another

Our Nell: A Scrapbook Biography of Nellie L. McClung, by Candace Savage. Western Producer Prairie Books, illustrated, 242 pages, \$17.95 cloth (ISBN 0 88333 027 3) and \$10.95 paper (ISBN 0 88333 033 2).

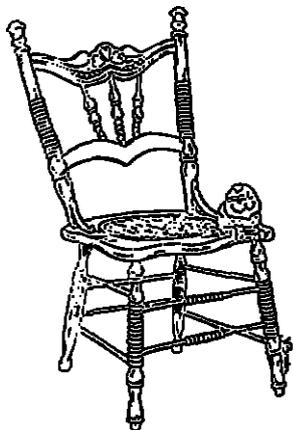
Lady Rancher, by Gertrude Minor Roger, Hancock House, illustrated, 182 pages, \$12.95 cloth (ISBN 0 88839038 6).

By RUTH OLSON LATTA

NO SOONER HAD the feminist revival of the 1970s stimulated new interest in Nellie McClung than the denigrators took aim at her again, this time posthumously. The writer of an introduction to McClung's collected essays, *In Times Like These*, insisted that Nellie's crusades for women's rights and prohibition were too rural to be relevant to an urban age.

Candace Savage's portrait depicts Nellie as a woman for all seasons. True, Nellie was not as radical as some with hindsight wish she had been; for example, she sided against the Winnipeg General Strikers and was associated with the middle-class strike-breaking Citizen's Committee. But while Nellie exemplifies liberal rather than radical feminism, she was more than an idealist proclaiming the salvation of public morals once women got the vote.

Prohibitionists such as McClung were not spoil-sports; they were critics of the widespread heavy drinking current in the early 20th century because of the wife beating and impoverishment that accompanied it. McClung sang the praises of domesticity but was quick to warn women in 1919 that



society wanted to force them out of the factories and back to the kitchen without regard for their desires or needs. The excerpts from Nellie's own works illustrate her humorous rather than shrill approach:

I wish that you could see the proportion of my mail that tells me to go home and darn my husband's socks. I never would have believed one man's hosiery could excite the amount of interest that those socks do -- and yet you know, they are always darned.

Lady Rancher is the autobiography of a good woman who kept her husband's socks darned, fulfilled her other housewifely duties, and did outdoor ranch work besides. In a novel-like style, Mrs. Roger tells how she and her husband married as teenagers and set about roughing it at home on the range. The title is misleading; Gertrude was an integral part of the family operation in her capacity as wife and mother, but was in no sense the primary worker or the business manager during the period covered by the story. The author is not even the central figure. This honour goes to her eccentric pioneer of a father-in-law who terrorized her during the early years of their acquaintance by referring to her as "that goddam girl."

Gertrude Roger does not write from a feminist point of view nor does she think many critical thoughts about the society in which she lived. Her graphic depiction of a bar-room brawl between two native women is devoid of comment. One wonders what Nellie McClung would have had to say about the episode. *Lady Rancher*, a more superficial work than *Our Nell*, provides a picture of macho ranch life in the mid-20th century which may be of some historical interest. □

IN BRIEF

Darkness Visible, by William Golding, Oxford (Faber) 265 pages, \$13.95 cloth (ISBN 0 571 11454 7). As Gertrude Stein might have observed, every William Golding novel is different and yet they are all the same. Since *Lord of the Flies*, the cynical updating of *Coral Island* that now has become a standard high-school text, Golding has apparently ranged far and wide. With *The Inheritors*, his imaginative masterpiece, we were yanked back into Neanderthal times; with *Pincher Martin*, a psychological *tour de force*, we were marooned with a Second World War merchant seaman on a curious molar-shaped rock. Later works (*Free Fall*, *The Spire*, *The Pyramid*) departed for the wild, blue, metaphysical yonder from a variety of launching points in the space-time continuum. But throughout it all Golding has really been exploring only one (admittedly infinite) territory: the human mind, particularly its aberrant regions. Where too many other novelists are content to describe (or at best, interpret) the behaviour of an epileptic or a visionary or a psychopath, Golding tries to put us inside their heads and present us with a view of the world as they see it. He has done so with chilling success in this his seventh and second-best full-length novel. It opens in the bright holocaust of the London blitz and moves toward the dark

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abyss of modern terrorism. by way of Abraham. Australia, pederasty, and punk rock. His two main characters are a charred mystical odd-job man who may be an Old Testament prophet, and a teenage angel, who may be the devil incarnate. Their inward and outward lives are mixed together in a plot remarkable for its cunning,

its descriptive power, and its control of multiple perspectives. As always, Golding makes enormous demands on his readers. The reward is that this may well be the thriller later generations will say best defines the second half of the 20th century.

— DOUGLAS MARSHALL

Echoes from an empty life

by Douglas Hill

The Executioner's Song, by Norman Mailer. McClelland & Stewart, 1056 pages, \$19.95 cloth (ISBN 0 3 16 54417 51).

THIS IS MAILER'S 21st book, and one of his best. It's a work of reportage; the label isn't intended to beg theoretical questions about the line between fiction and non-fiction. but to suggest the profundity of Mailer's immersion in his material, and his scrupulous anonymity in processing it. Legends about his ego will endure, but the man has made some remarkable decisions — all for objectivity and self-effacement — in putting this "true life novel" together.

Book One, "Western Voices" — the account of the months between Gary Gilmore's release from prison and his refusal to appeal the death sentence — is slowly and hypnotically terrifying. Its massive circumstantiality is orchestrated for tension; Mailer arranges the inevitability of disaster — the two nearly inexplicable murders — much as Truman Capote did, but resists the flourishes and drum-rolls that hyped *In Cold Blood*. And it's dispiriting. Evil is not banal under the Utah skies, it's awful: empty vistas — "the desert was at the end of every street" — empty Jives.

In Book Two, "Eastern Voices," we get the unfortunate carnival atmosphere of Gilmore's final weeks, a midway of lawyers, promoters, writers, therapists, all shilling and shouting for the public's attention. It's bound to be a Jet-down. Mailer's organizing powers are just as strong here — depending, as before, upon his establishing accurate chronology — but his subjects are less interesting. And the book turns analytical, not because Mailer intrudes, but because each of his "witnesses" has a stake in trying to make sense of Gilmore, each other, and the world. Book Two is middle-class (I don't know what to call Book One); after 500 pages of the demons in the blown minds of Gilmore and his girlfriend, Nicole Baker, it's hard to be affected by what makes David Suskind tick.

The level of language Mailer is faithful to — it sustains character, landscape, life on the whirlwind — is crucial to his success.

It's relentlessly colloquial and documentary, drifting variously into street and prison patois, pop-slop lyricism, legal, medical, or journalistic jargon, but never interfering with the integrity of the voices. Most of what Mailer has people say and then they actually said and thought: he's left their melodies alone, and he'd sense to pitch his connecting prose to harmonize. Even the trills and grace-notes of Mailer's metaphor don't advertise themselves. The material itself is made to perform; if its tones are drab, suffocatingly pathetic, disheartening, all the more reason to feel the pain and despair under the odd startling insight or perception of beauty.

It would be presumptuous to sketch Gary Gilmore when all those pages can't pin him down and won't draw conclusions. Still, a few impressions. For one, there's the fear — total, existential fear; for Gilmore, as for Nicole, to be free was only "to feel a Jot of fear." For another, the probability of severe sexual warping — deprivation of experience, fixation, role-confusion. For third, the possibility of a mind deformed and a personality altered by institutional drug therapy (with Prolixin, a stupefying, long-lasting super-tranquillizer).

There are questions here for society at large; they imply every besetting doubt about the penal system (Gilmore was locked up steadily from age 13 on). More to the point of the book itself is the problem of how seriously to take Mailer's Gilmore as a human being: is he some sort of saint or tragic folk-hero, or only a thorough-going con man? The answer depends on figuring out if Gilmore, in some corner of his existence, ever consistently touched reality, if he was "real." I'm not convinced he ever did, ever was. He was clever, even brilliant, but I'd have to conclude it was all in the service of the hustle his life had become.

He knew his way around inside sensitivity; he could manipulate words and emotions; he could play his audience like a hap. But even in his apparently most open and private letters to Nicole, even in his apparently most thoughtful revelations to interviewers, the evidence leads to a suspi-

cion he was acting, always acting — even if, as one witness says, it came to be "the kind of acting that makes you forget you are in a theatre." Gilmore could never find in himself a centre, a stillness, because there was none. Horrible. Yet he was only a psychopath, a sociopath, not a psychotic; he was certifiably one of us, not them.

The book is depressing. Mailer recently said that, "the way things work in America are not necessarily as sinister as I always assumed. There may not be this grand paranoid network after all." Deeper depression: we can't blame anybody, these things just happen. All we can do is assemble the date; structure without intelligence is our only meaning, our pattern, our only pattern. I weep for the children of this dream; their irrelevant anguish, their wasted present and wrecked future, as recorded here, is heartbreaking.

With the bleakness of its vision, this void at its core, *The Executioner's Song* can be considered the most genuinely radical book Mailer has yet written. He's like Whitman in the ambition, scope, and energy of his treatment, but this is a *Song of Myself* without the self, without any coherent, centering, possibly redemptive presence — either of hero or writer — to guide us. Mailer has tuned to a soulless, sun-drenched America singing, and taped the "varied carols" he's picked up; the voices of East and West in this poem come from a world disintegrated, desolate, beyond help. □

Full circle for the Circus

Smiley's People, by John le Carré, Random House, 374 pages, \$12.95 cloth (ISBN 0 394 50843 2).

By I.M. OWEN

GEORGE SMILEY, that earnest student of the minor German poets of the 17th century, must be in his 70s now, as he got his degree at Oxford in 1928. Presumably, then, this seventh volume in John le Carré's biography of him is the last. It also ends the trilogy begun in *Tinker, Tailor, Soldier, Spy* and continued in *The Honourable Schoolboy*, dealing with Smiley's long duel with the Russian spymaster whose work-name is Karla. If you haven't read those two books, don't read this one until you have. Without them, the activities of Smiley and his people narrated here would seem like much ado about very little; with them, this third book provides an elegantly symmetrical completion to the story.

Ambiguity and inconspicuousness are the qualities that make George Smiley the most effective intelligence person of our day.

Much of the time it's **even uncertain whether he has a job**. The first time we met him, in *Call for the Dead*, **he resigned from the service the first day, and at the end of the book; he refused an invitation to come back with a promotion. Or did he?** In *The Spy Who Came in From the Cold* **he was said to be still out of the service, but he dearly wasn't. Further, early in that book Control told Leamas that Smiley didn't like the operation and would have nothing to do with it; but the attentive reader could detect that the whole infamous, heartless plot was devised and directed by this gentle and humane man. That's his ambiguity, which he made explicit, to the intense embarrassment of his colleagues, in *The Honourable Schoolboy*:**

To be inhuman in defence of our humanity, he had said, harsh in defence of compassion. To be single-minded in defence of our disparity.

Smiley's rival **Karla has his own version of the same thought, it is said: "There'll be no war . . . But in the struggle for peace not a single stone will be left standing."**

Both **Karla and Smiley understand the nature of love, because both have suffered from it. It is this understanding that enabled Karla, in *Tinker, Tailor, Soldier, Spy*, to make ruthless use of Smiley's devotion to his wandering wife to blunt his perceptions. In *Smiley's People* Smiley turns the tables by playing on Karla's natural affections.**

It's about **three years since Smiley relinquished his position as acting chief at Cambridge Circus and once again withdrew to the 17th century. The atmosphere at the Circus has changed greatly. The new chief is Sir Saul Enderby, the admiring friend of the CIA. A new government is in office that is dedicated to détente and is contemplating a Freedom of Information Act. As liaison between these incompatibles, Oliver Lacon is more dithering and irritating than ever — especially since his wife has gone off with her riding instructor. (Typically, Lacon seeks advice on marriage from Smiley, the constant cuckold.)**

A former agent, an Estonian nationalist who was once a Red Army general, has asked to see Smiley, not knowing of his retirement. When the general is found on Hampstead Heath with his face blown off, Smiley is called in, not so much to uncover the mystery as to buy it discreetly. Instead, he mounts an elaborate unofficial operation with the help of many of his former people: Connie Sachs, terminally ill, running a boarding kennel in partnership with a young lesbian lover, and still a mine of inside information on Moscow Centre; Peter Guillam, still in the service but relegated to the embassy in Paris; the irrepressible Toby Esterhase, now owner of a dubious art gallery under the name of Signor Benati; and others whom we have not met before.

The ending echoes the ending of *The Spy Who Came in From the Cold*, **but in a minor key. Once again George Smiley stands watching at the eastern edge of West Berlin; but instead of the searchlights and rifle-fire**

that accompanied Alec Leamas and Lie Gold in their dash for freedom, there are only darkness and silence, and a solitary man crossing a bridge.

The story lacks the compelling suspense of *Tinker, Tailor* (a suspense that survives several readings, by the way) and the richness and sweep of *The Honourable Schoolboy*. But it's a necessary and (in its way) satisfying ending. Don't neglect, though, to read the other two first. Or, better still, the other six. □

Hard lives and home-grown pleasures

Squatter's Bights, by Fred Bonnie., Oberon Press, 129 pages, \$12.95 cloth (ISBN 0 88750 327 6) and \$5.95 paper (ISBN 0 88750 328 4).

By JANE W. HILL

HOW REFRESHING it is to read good, simple, stories about people who know who they are and where they belong. But for simple do not read simple-minded; though clear and straightforward, these stories shine with an

inner light, a sympathetic feeling for the men, women and children who live — have always lived — in that part of southeastern Maine near the New Brunswick border. Bangor is their metropolis. Fred Bonnie's ancestor, Calixte Bonin, migrated to Maine from Quebec 100 years ago and the French Canadian influence is still there, unself-consciously called Canuck. Jesuit schools are in fierce rivalry with their "American" counterparts; the French and Irish Catholics still are aware of their differences. But it would be a mistake to make too much of this. Bonnie is concerned with the daily liver of all these people, with the relationship between brothers and husband and wife, between neighbours and boss and worker, with the conflict between central authority and the stubborn individual, between the vulnerable old and the domineering young. Some of these eight stories have appeared in *Fiddlehead* magazine, published in Fredericton.

In this world of **farmers, fishermen, and small businessmen, of natives and summer tourists, life is hard but yields to home-grown pleasures — building a boat, hunting deer, making out in the back seat of an old Chevy. Common sense and resourcefulness are what matter, as Roland Fogg finds out after he overturns a truck on the job and realizes how he can best his mean, selfish foreman: or Blanche Ledet, who is determined not to sell her piano to her oldest friend even though she never plays it herself; or Lloyd, who has to live with his**

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Ancient and Modern

by Nancy McPhee

"Houses of ill-fame in Toronto? Certainly not. The whole city is an immense house of ill-fame."

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overbearing son-in-law Gordon but who manages to prevent Gordon from selling his decrepit old car.

Though Bonnie might be called a regional writer he does not dwell on atmosphere or description of place (unlike Howard O'Hagan, for example, whose stories set in the Rockies make the mountains almost palpable). Bonnie mostly uses dialogue and situation to reveal his characters. Every story introduces the protagonist in the first sentence: "Nino watched as Johnson caulked the hull of the houseboat;" "Leland had not seen his pig in ten days;" "Roland had been at the gravel pit for fourteen hours, since six o'clock that morning, and they still hadn't finished for the day." Often an initial antipathy between two people turns to sympathy through some shared and difficult experience, as with young Nino and the unlikable Johnson, his brother-in-law's friend, who both come to grieve over the fate of their handmade boat; or Daniel and Michel, whose fathers are friends and who come together in the high schools' demanding cross-country racing meet. Bonnie tells his tales in a distinctive voice, with charm and vividness, excelling at conversation and the revealing gesture. It is hard to give excerpts since the stories are so organically composed. But the title of the final story was rightly chosen for the book as a whole: Bonnie's people seem to belong to their environment by virtue of squatter's rights. 0

Our sum by long division

The Canadians, by George Woodcock, Fitzhenry & Whiteside, illustrated, 301 pages, \$19.95 cloth (ISBN 0 88902571 1).

By DONALD SWAINSON

GEORGE WOODCOCK is a gifted writer and a clever synthesizer. These qualities are evident on every page of *The Canadians*, which is a panoramic view of Canadian history and life.

The book's organization explains its nature. We start with three chapters on "Canadian Origins." These studies set the tone of the volume. Canada is inhabited by many peoples, but the Indians and Inuit have been here longest, and help define the Canadian reality. European contact began with Icelandic Vikings and was almost certainly never lost. Regions were settled at widely disparate times and had a variety of kinds of contacts with each other. Separate communities and societies evolved in Newfoundland, British Columbia, the Prairies, the North, Ontario, Quebec, and the Maritimes. Many ethnic groups contributed to the population mix. The burden of all of

this is central to Woodcock's interpretation of Canada. French-English relations are important, but are only one of Canada's realities. Canada, a land of nearly autonomous regional societies, is inhabited by a rich mixture of ethnic types.

This view of Canada is heavily reinforced in the volume's second section, "A Pattern of Regions." Hem Woodcock writes a separate chapter on each of the seven regions that he finds in Canada. These are interesting articles that attempt to explore those distinctive characteristics that have resulted in our multiplicity of unique regionalisms. One is left with the impression that Woodcock searches too hard for the meaningful. For example, in his chapter on Newfoundland he quotes in its entirety that delightful folk song, "I see the B'y that Builds the Boat." Fair enough. This is an authentic and justly famous example of Newfoundland folk culture. Is it not however, a bit excessive to describe it as "a view of outport life that combines authentic detail with a kind of wild surrealist fantasy"? The discussion of Ontario concludes with this comment on Margaret Atwood's novels:

They reflect the development of a real intelligentsia of writers, artists, and academics in Ontario which is inclined to use its own mental and emotional life as a mirror of the world in general, and this in turn is a sign of the growing sophistication and mental autonomy of Ontario as a regional society.

Maybe, but one will find rather less "autonomy," mental and otherwise, if one focuses not on novels but on such institutions as General Motors, Maclean's magazine, Windsor University, and prime-time TV.

The regional chapters, the heart of the book, are its evidentiary base. However, in the third section, "A Canadian Identity," Woodcock attempts to poll everything together. Like countless other Canadian intellectuals he plays our national parlour game, which is discovering the Canadian id & Q. Woodcock relies heavily on regionalism and cultural evidence.

Some of the things that he says represent aged banalities. The old argument that we are Canadian by choice is presented afresh: "People who remained in Canada would rather live under a parliamentary system based on responsible government than

under a republican system based on an irresponsible executive power." We are also told again that "those who elected to stay in Canada . . . were inclined to remain a more formal people, a people more willing to accept hierarchies and ancient ceremonial than were their neighbours to the south of the border. . . ."

Like many others who have searched for the real Canadian identity, Woodcock also makes some rather strange remarks. What, for example, should we make of this: "Canadians, I would say, are less a spiritual people than a people in whose lives formal religion has played and continues to play a considerable role. . . . Ours has never been a society permeated by spirituality like that of the European middle ages or of relatively recent Tibet." Even if our insecure worst we have never required an identity distinct from mediaeval Europe or Tibet!

The real key to Woodcock's definition of Canada is summed up by the word "decentralization." Regionalism for Woodcock is not an analytical tool or even an interpretation of Canada; rather, it is a weapon to be used against the evils of the centralist nation state. This is clear throughout: early in the book Woodcock suggests that the "basis of Canadian life has always been local and regional, determined by linguistic differences and also by cultural and geographical divisions." Woodcock's hostility to centralism and centralists sometimes carries him to absurd lengths:

Therefore I regard Pierre Trudeau as perhaps the leading enemy of a workable Canadian unity, and René Lévesque as perhaps its greatest friend, since he has awakened us to the perils of an artificial constitutional unity that will not take into account the various — though not always different — needs and aspirations of Canada's regions.

Apart from being grossly unfair to Trudeau, it is grotesque to regard Lévesque as possibly the "greatest friend" of a "workable Canadian unity." The kind of unity Lévesque represents is not worth the verbiage of the referendum question. This kind of approach will perhaps lead us to the belief that Richard Nixon is really a great reformer, because he awakened Americans to the perils of insufficiently regulated executive action and political activity.

Regardless of these criticisms, *The Canadians* is a book of substantial merit. It is a fascinating overview of the Canadian people and their society, for the literate general reader. As such it is commendable; we have a dearth of such books. It also places a healthy corrective emphasis on literature, art, and architecture and on native cultures. The book is lavishly illustrated with hundreds of well-selected items that represent a wide array of visual materials. Colour plates provide an all too cursory introduction to the work of Canadian artists. General Canadian awareness of Canada is excessively underdeveloped. Books such as *The Canadians* will do much to rectify that situation. □



Mannafest destiny

Droppings from Heaven, by Irving Layton. McClelland & Stewart, 111 pages. 57.95 paper (ISBN 0 77104944 7).

By MICHAEL THOMPSON

"IT'S ALL IN the tide poem" says Irving Layton in the foreword to this collection. Actually, "Droppings from Heaven" isn't one of the best poems in *Droppings from Heaven*, though it does contain a fair number of Irving's less endearing Laytonisms — carelessness of craft sometimes, the wrong kind of vulgarity, posturing, opacity. But it isn't, by any means, all in the title poem.

A lot of it is in the foreword: "I want to go into the sunset with both pitchforks blazing. / want to be remembered as someone who believed that a great poem was the noblest work of man and that no one ever wrote one who didn't want to get out of hell." There is very much that is noble in *Droppings from Heaven*. Layton excoriates Canadian poets, the "pathetic versifiers," the "philistines and mediocrities in our midst." for the

tenuity of their poetic concerns. They write "as though the Holocaust had never happened, as though Lenin's butcheries had never taken place." For an audience "still basically Christian, conservative, and castratory; small apple. Presbyterian, and philistine."

Layton's new book is full of poems appalledly mindful of Gulag and Holocaust, of the maniac contrast between the rich part of the modern world and the poor (though he can ask: "Do you really suppose the proletarian less envious or vain or cruel than the capitalist who exploits him?"), of the absurd animal who "drowns his fear of death/in his enemy's lifeblood." Death is the reeking Foe For Layton. no! his own which he hasn't time to be bothered with. but that, say. "of the eternal Jew crucified/for freedom and creativity," of the gentle Cabalist changed into a bar of soap, of the passive multitudes whose "corpses lie on the frozen earth/in rigid tribute to the cold/or have twisted themselves in black swastikas/littering the white plane/like jimmys on an enormous frosted cake."

Those writers especially (including the Canadian wimps) who condone the workings of death by passive or active collaboration — "Eliot, Pound, Yeats, and Wyndham Lewis, Hauptmann and Hamsun, Céline and Benn" — are the villains of this book. Layton asks if Frost and Yeats knew how ridiculous they looked. "how loosely their clothes/hung on their fraudulent

selves." Where, he challenges Neruda — quite rightly and long overdue — where, Pablo, "was your shit-detector/when it came to Stalin/and his evil-smelling crew?" There is a healthy reminder of the foul sexual implications of "Jane Eyre. Every-woman," love as domination, sickness. the necessary death of the male: the very reverse of Layton's thundering sexuality here in *Droppings from Heaven*, wholly unmuffled.

It is indeed the ecstasy and assertion of uncontaminated sex which makes bearable for man the Foul human appetite for death. What makes Layton and his Young Roman Existentialist so nauseated that "the whole cosmos becomes a black vomitorium/and the stars frozen puke loosening/to Fall into it" is that "the vagina will always remind men/of their finitude, an apprehension they will everlastingly/seek to bury under hecatombs of fresh corpses, mountains/of medals." I" the poems For Harriet and Sandra death is for a moment irrelevant: "I love all passing things: /roses and dust/Their brief stay,/like your smile. instructs me to embrace the world/with imny and joy." Delight and amazement at the flesh give respite, King David dances with a wild peculiar joy.

Irving Layton is alive, in this book, as ever. Sometimes the life is a bit shapeless. sloppy. careless, silly. "I sometimes become moist-eyed thinking what an Alfred Kazin or an Irving Howe might have done For this country" is silly. It's not all "Prot



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rotor cornstarch" even in Canada, and Jews aren't the absolutely only salvation of humanity. Rough tough I. L. wanting to kill thugs "with a karate chop" is over-producing the boyo a bit. Layton as "a man learning to forgive God" sounds like a bright schoolboy who has just jabbed his g&into existentialism. But it's hard not to agree with him that one live Layton outweighs, by many a dropping, the whole dead slew of those whose "colonial cringe and ever-prevalent gentility have made it possible for even the young to achieve a necrophilous nasal twang, shaking prizes from every Establishment tree as soon as it's heard." Here's more proof. □

Big John in a small pond

Bassett, by Maggie Siggins, James Lorimer & Co.. 251 pages, \$15.95 cloth (ISBN 0 88862 284 8).

By JIM CHRISTY

IT IS GENERALLY agreed that the James Lorimer & Co. stable of authors does not include any frisky humourists about to gallop across our funny bones. There is now an exception. This biography may be an arrant misapprehension yet it is not an absolute bon: there is frequent relief provided by comic ineptitude.

The sole intrusion it makes on one's intellect is to pose the question of why it was published. The author states that Canadians "should know more about the élite who are directing their affairs." Bet one learns little -despite boasts of four years in the works. 200 interviews — that couldn't be gleaned from old clippings. Let's be honest: the real reason you'd read about John Bassett is for some dirty gossip. Otherwise, given a certain political perspective, the one you assume the publisher has, you read it to see exposed the machinations of an upper-class capitalist using his old-boy influence to enrich the coffers of an empire of greed. You don't get that either.

Only in Canada could a John Bassett be regarded as interesting. Only in Ontario, particularly, could he be thought of as a flamboyant entrepreneur. So he is fabulously wealthy. He was born that way and managed his inheritance in a totally predictable manner. As for entrepreneurs, I would rather read about his rival Jack Kent Cooke, whom Siggins says he bested in many deals although she doesn't give examples. Hell, Bassett makes Harold Ballard look good.

I don't suffer from reverse class prejudice either, and it also falls under the heading "only in Canada" that Bassett could be considered upper class; it is just that one suspects he could have done something

even slightly amusing with all that money. Nor is one titillated by hints that he was a lady killer. Indications that he philandered are noteworthy only to those who came through that decidedly middle-class phenomenon, the sexual revolution; the upper class, not to mention the lower class and the unclass, have always done it.

You are left with a recitation of his activities. But you never get a true picture of what Bassett was up to because his fields of endeavour are handled in successive chapters — from publishing to sport to politics to television. The book thus takes for granted the reader's knowledge of this particular élitist, that he managed many of these activities simultaneously. Without this familiarity one would be terribly confused following author end subject back and forth over the decades in a prose style you have to figure Siggins picked up during six years at the Toronto Telegram reading her boss's attempts at writing. But unlike her editorial compositities, Siggins enlivens her text with gaffes and errors, and nouns and adjectives that are uncomfortable in each other's presence.

We are told that Bassett's father, as a Montreal *Gazette* reporter, ended a story with a quote from Shelley's "Ode to a Skylark" and that this "stunned the press corps, many of whom had just discovered "The Cremation of Sam McGee". Those guys deserved a promotion and old Robert Service should have been the one to be stunned, because he hadn't published the poem yet.

Siggins tells us that John Bassett was anxious to fight in the Second World War, so he "rushed to join the Army when the Second World War broke out." perhaps "rush" isn't quite the word. Bassett did wait nine months before enlisting.

We are introduced in chapter three to John David Eaton with whom Bassett is to do business. We have had 75 pages by then to be assured that Bassett is not a shrinking violet. We are told that Eaton is his opposite number in every regard except wealth. He maintained "a thick well of reserve" was "painfully shy" lived "a miserable life" because he was "basically shy and intimidated. . . ." Once his character is established, and just so we don't miss the differences, Siggins devotes a few paragraphs to contrasting the men. And then to make absolutely sure we haven't forgotten she begins a paragraph on the next page with "Bassett was much more outgoing than Eaton."

We learn that everyone found Bassett "amazingly accessible" at the *Telegram* and 10 pages later that many "senior people couldn't get in to see him." We meet a "well-tanned Californian sports promoter" and a "Bii Scot" and learn that Bassett "crossed the continent as often as most people visit the local milk store." One day we see Bassett "bounding through the newsroom, flailing a newspaper. . . ." What was he flailing the newspaper for? Did he flail it with a reporter in whom he detected pinko leanings?

Siggins conjures up a sentimental picture of poor big John alone in his office two months after the *Telegram* died. We are to believe he couldn't bear to leave the place even though we have been assured repeatedly that he had been sick of it for years. There he is with the ghosts of deadlines past, don't you know. "staring at piles of papers slowly turning yellow with age." After 60 days?

So this is a biography of a man who was born rich and grew richer by publishing a terrible newspaper, owning a dull football team and a lousy television station, and who failed miserably along the way as a politician. Bassett is neither the exposé of a man who wanted to form a political party composed of rich businessmen to run the country and who used to lecture on the communist menace nor is it a tell-all with tittle-tattle about sex and tennis. You expect it to be one or the other, of course. Come to think of it, John Bassett himself would approve of the business idea that inspired the book's publication. Since the subject will sell the book there is no need to provide a decent product or even one the public expects. The reader is left feeling like the kid who went into the sideshow to see the Man Eating Fish. Bet then carny hucksters don't pretend to be anything else. □

For Auld Laing's line

Memoirs of an Art Dealer, by G. Blair Laing. McClelland 4 Stewart, illustrated, 264 pages. \$24.95 cloth (ISBN 07710 4569 7).

By CHRISTOPHER HUME

THE WAY G. Blair Laing tells it, becoming an art dealer is even better than joining the navy. You not only get to see the world but also to hobnob with rich collectors and famous artists. Occasionally you find yourself in the neighbourhood when history is being made: drawing-room deals with Lord Beaverbrook interrupted by telephone calls from Winston Churchill; or afternoons at Rideau Hall haggling with the Governor General's son, Lionel Massey, over the price of his father's vast collection of David Milnes (many of which now an individually worth more than the \$33,000 Laing paid for all 166).

Toronto's Laing Gallery, founded in 1932 by the author's father, A. R. Laing, came onto the scene long before the art boom of the 1950s and 1960s. In those days selling Canadian art to Canadians was as rewarding as flogging ice hockey in Micronesia — the climate just wasn't right. Laing senior intended his gallery to be a "showcase for European art..." Within a

'couple of years, however, the Laings had developed an abiding interest in Canadian art, the area in which they were ultimately to make their name.

Despite what one might think, the problem from the start was not a shortage of first-class artists as much as a dearth of paying customers. Painters whose names are now nationally recognized spent their lives in miserable poverty. Pictures given away for grocery money now being enshrined in public galleries that only 40 years ago couldn't have been less concerned. The story, of course, is an old one but Blair Laing tells it in a Canadian setting. If things were bad when the gallery opened, they grew progressively worse. With the advent of the Second World War, the art business hit rock bottom:

We had magnificent pictures for sale... Lawren Harris by the score, Kriehoffs, dozens of J. E. H. McDonalds, A. Y. Jacksons, Lismers, Tom Thomsons, and some French Impressionists as well. Bet nothing was selling, and my father thought up an unusual but practical sideline. In August, 1942, we started up a machine shop in the basement.

The Laings turned from canvases to canvasing for crumbs from large industries holding prime contracts. Within weeks the basement business was thriving: lathes and drill presses were kept going around the clock.

Although it must have seemed crazy, the Laings eventually sold their machinery to devote themselves once again to dealing art. Business slowly improved. In 1950 they opened their present gallery on Blow Street West. The three-story structure was then considered something of an architectural standout. Bet times have changed and in 1980 the Laing Gallery pales in comparison to its most recent neighbour, a McDonald's restaurant.

Predictably, the book abounds with examples of paintings left neglected in attics for decades that turn out to be priceless. The unlikely scenario for one of Laing's greatest triumphs was an ancient monastery in Cuba. While rummaging among hundreds of paintings, antiques, chandeliers, and assorted leftovers from that island's decedent past, the author chanced upon four small canvases for which he paid \$5,000 each. After months of research they were discovered to be Old Masters individually valued in the \$100,000 to \$200,000 range. Passing one in a London gallery 10 years later for sale at £75,000 the normally reticent Laing permitted himself a slight chuckle: "With its added value, I must say, the picture looked more enchanting than ever."

The quality of the book is excellent and the numerous full-colour reproductions add considerably to its appeal. Laing provides the reader with many glimpses into the backroom dealings of Canadian art. However, he "ever really tells us what the various characters were like. Laing's tendency is to keep the reader at arm's length. The book reads like a catalogue of events, most of which are interesting, some down-

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right fascinating. In the end, though, we are left wanting to know more: the glimpses, intriguing as they may be, don't add up to a good look. □

Whig and pen woman

Letters & Diaries of Lady Durham, edited by Patricia Godsell, Oberon Press, 203 pages, 517.50 cloth (ISBN 0 88750 323 3)

By DuBARRY CAMPAU

LADY LOUISA LAMBTON, Countess of Durham, came from the very midst of pleasure-loving, politically powerful Whig society. Her father, Earl Grey, was the Prime Minister of Great Britain between 1830 and 1834, and she was the second wife of Lord Durham, Governor General of British North America in 1828, under Lord Melbourne's administration. Yet Lady Durham was a quiet, family-oriented woman whose only interest in either pleasure or power was in how it could benefit her husband. Her energies were all extended toward protecting him from ill health, from enemies within his own party and from the

consequences of his unfortunate temper and arrogance. These letters and journals, all written during his term of office in Canada, while understandably biased in his favour, do make us understand what his hopes for this country were.

The letters are almost all written to her mother, Lady Grey, with whom she seems to have been on affectionate and open terms even to the point, in that formal age, of addressing her as "Mary." In them she tells of their rugged trip across the Atlantic and their arrival in Quebec, which was to be Lord Durham's headquarters as administrative head of the colony. From then on both the letters and journals continue to tell a comprehensive and usually detailed story of the Durhams' six months in this country.

It is surprising that in so short a time Lord Durham could cause so much trouble and misunderstanding, and yet succeed in laying down the groundwork for lasting peace with the United States and the democratic, representational form of government that ultimately became the Commonwealth. His first problem came from exiling eight rebellious French Canadians to Bermuda, whence they would return only on pain of death, while releasing more than 100 other French Canadian rebels — all without benefit of trial. Although he had been given wide power, both the English Canadians and the government at home took exception to this high-handedness. From then on it was all downhill for the Governor General, whose enemies in Britain were far more

dangerous than all the rebels in Quebec. Lady Durham, predictably, was on his side in this political catastrophe, and she explains it away most persuasively. Her greatest concern about the whole event was the effect it might have on his always precarious health.

But for the average reader, her day-to-day accounts of their travels — sometimes by sail, canoe, or steamship, sometimes by horseback or carriage over almost impassable roads — is the most fascinating part of the book. They journeyed as far west as Niagara Falls (her description of them is one of the most vivid ever written) and stopped along the way at Kingston, Toronto, Hamilton, Queenston, and what is now Niagara-on-the-lake. Several times on their journey they entertained lavishly — a huge reception and dinner at Niagara — and received countless deputations, listened to and made speeches, all very taxing on the Durhams, their family, and attendants.

Although they lived only briefly in Quebec City, one wishes that Lady Durham had been a bit more explicit about their domestic arrangements there. She complains about the servants, but never mentions whether she could communicate with them in French. Or, indeed, whether her husband could speak the language of the people among whom they were living.

Whether he could or not, he clearly thought it would be best for everyone if the French Canadians all learned English and adapted themselves to English ways, socially and politically. This attitude he officially set down in the Durham Report, written in the two years between his return to Britain and his death. Unfortunately, although the rest of the report was a far-seeing, liberal document, which formed the basis of our confederation and constitution, his French Canadian policy may well be responsible for the more than 150 years of mistrust between the two main factions of this country.

Although Lady Durham becomes quite a real person to us through her own writings, her concentration on her husband's welfare, both physical and political, almost obscures her own personality. As an example of her total devotion, when she uses the pronouns "he" or "him" in referring to him, they are capitalized.

Patricia Godsell, the editor of this book, is an excellent historian, proof of which are her 46 pages of detailed and comprehensive notes. They give all of the necessary background to Lady Durham's work and also expand her social, geographical, and political comments. This is not only a valuable (and previously unpublished) addition to Canadian history, but also a delightfully readable one. □

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A U.S. dictionary gains latided-immigrant status by substituting "deke" for "Delaware"

MCI: IN 1975, the Macmillan Publishing Co. of New York published the attractive *Macmillan Dictionary for Children*: Geared to the reading levels of children between the ages of eight and 12, this dictionary features entries in large, easy-to-read type with simple definitions, a pronunciation guide, interesting language notes, and many full-colour illustrations. It is a good introductory dictionary end, although it is American. many Canadian elementary school libraries have it as part of their reference sections.

Not satisfied, however, Collier Macmillan Canada Ltd. now has published *The Canadian Dictionary for Children* (768 pages, 513.95 cloth). It is also a handsome boo!<, well worth the money. We know it is "uniquely Canadian" (es the Collier Macmillan publicity releases state) because it includes such entries es "muskeg," "Canada goose," and "Doukhobor." It is not American because it does not have entries for "White House," "Star-Spangled Banner," or "Memorial Day." Eut in fact, this new *Canadian Dictionary for Children*, is virtually the same book as its five-year-old American Counterpart.

Of course, it has been carefully Canadianized. Specifically American entries have been deleted; Canadian words and expressions have been added. Pronunciation and spelling have been scrupulously altered to conform with Canadian usage. After all, our pronunciation 'of "khaki," "lieutenant," and "author" marks us as an independent people, as does our spelling of "centre," "colour," and "whisky." Sample sentences in the Canadian dictionary also have a national context. For example, in the entry for "monument" (on page 407 in both books) the American sentence is: "The Washington Monument in Washington, D.C. was built in honor of George Washington." The Canadian sentence reads: "The monument near the Legislature in Winnipeg was built in honour of Louis Riel."

To compare the two books page by page is fascinating (also easy, because almost all the items can be found in identical columns on identical pages). Obviously many of the American plates were used unaltered t' print the Canadian version. It is intriguing to see how neatly some of the Canadian additions replace the American deletions. For example, the American dictionary has entries for all 50 states. In the Canadian version, "Alaska" is replaced by "Alberta," "California" by "Calgary Stam-

pede," "Montana" by "Montreal canoe," "Delaware" by "deke" (yes, "deke") and so on. Thii is so cleverly done that hardly a column of print is thrown out of line.

Perhaps this enforced parallelism restricted to some extent the Canadianizing of the dictionary's contents; them are some curious omissions. "Stanley Cup" is an entry, but not Grey Cup, "Red River cart," but not Conestoga wagon, "shorthorn" and "longhorn" but neither Holstein nor Hereford, "larch" but not tamarack, "saskatoon" but not elderberry, "soybean" but not rapeseed.

The illustrations in the Canadian dictionary are better: they are all in colour while in the American book, some are in black and white. And a great deal of care her been taken to make sum these illustrations help to emphasize "the spirit and heritage of the Canadian scene" — another quotation from the publicity releases. For example, the illustration accompanying the entry "knapsack" (page 353 in both books) shows three children carrying pecks and hiking toward a picnic area. In the American book, a road sign reads "1 mile"; in the Canadian book, the sign is "2 km" and on one of 'the children's knapsacks is a tiny Canadian flag.

Both dictionaries are attractive books and anyone in the market for a children's dictionary might es well get the Collier Macmillan Canadian version for the convenience of finding Canadian definitions of such terms es "Senate" end "rebellion." But there is no point in getting to" excited about it es a "uniquely Canadian" book "designed especially" for our children.

* * *

SEVERAL POPULAR Canadian children's writers have recently published new books. Among them is Dennis Lee, whose place in Canadian children's literature is almost sacred. But for several reasons, Lee's admirers might be disappointed in his new book, *The Ordinary Beth* (Magook Books, McClelland & Stewart, 48 pages, \$8.95 cloth). The text of this book is only approximately 650 words in length- some single poems in Lee's previously published children's books em that long. And, although the language is rhythmic, full of alliteration and rhyming words. The *Ordinary Beth* is not written in the regular verse form that made his earlier books so much fun to reed aloud t' young children. Also readers might miss Frank Newfeld, whose illustrations em closely associated with

Lee's verse. However, the illustrations by Jon McKee em effective in conveying the nightmare end panic as the young hero's imagination gets the better of him and his bathtub fills up with monsters out of the tap.

Patti Stren made her reputation as a writer and illustrator for very young children with her successful books *Hug Me* and *Sloan and Philamina*. There's a *Rainbow in my Closet* (Fitzhenry & Whiteside, 136 pages, \$11.75 cloth) is her first novel for older readers, specifically intended for ages eight to 11. It tells the story of a sensitive young girl and her warm relationship with her grandmother. The characters in the book are appealing, the story is gentle, sometimes amusing, sometimes touching, but nothing much happens. Stren's porcupines and anteaters have more to offer the" her pre-adolescents.

Elizabeth Cleaver has illustrated many children's books. The *Fire Stealer* (Oxford, 24 pages, \$6.95 cloth) is the latest in her series of *Canadian Indian legends*. William Toye provides the text, retelling the Ojibway legend of how the famous hero-trickster Nanabozho acquired fire for men's use. Cleaver's vivid colleges create a handsome art picture-book for children.

Nanabozho, also known es Nanabush, is a popular figure in Canadian children's literature. More of his stories appear in *The Adventures of Nanabush: Ojibway Indian Stories* (Doubleday, 82 pages, \$12.95 cloth), but this is less particularly for

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children than the Cleaver book. In the 1930s, the historical field researcher Emerson Coatsworth recorded these tales told by elders of the Rama Ojibway Band. His soon. David Coatsworth, has compiled the 16 stories presented here. Although these legends are written in language simple enough for children to follow, underlying them are such complex themes as creation, treachery, death, rebirth, and immortality. Ojibway artist Francis Kagige provides wonderful illustrations for each story.

In 1977, Tony German had great success with his *Tom Penny*, an adventure novel set in the early 19th century. *River Race* (PMA Books, 153 pages, \$9.95 cloth and \$5.95 paper) is a sequel. It follows 15-year-old Tom, his family and friends as they try to get their timber from the shanties in the Gatineau Hills to the highly competitive market in Quebec City. It is an exciting book—its excitement lying in its violence. Characters are pursued, arrested, threatened at gun point, shot, or blown up in almost

every chapter. Such stuff is bound to make that period of history gripping for some readers.

Also in 1977, Scholastic published a book of verse by Fran Newman and pictures by Claudette Boulanger depicting the months of the year and Canadian children's reactions to the changing seasons. *Sunflakes and Snowshine* (Scholastic, North Winds Press, 56 pages, \$7.95 cloth) has been revised and reissued in hardcover with a companion book *Hooray for Today* (also 56 pages, \$8.95 cloth). The second book presents special occasions in the Canadian calendar, everything from Hallowe'en to St. Jean Baptiste Day, Grey Cup weekend to the Arctic Winter Games. The comments and memories of some well-known Canadians accompany Newman's text and Boulanger's illustrations. A bit gimmicky, perhaps, but both books are appealingly designed and provide a cheerful way for children to mark off the year. □

is celebrated in *The Hecklers: A History of Canadian Political Cartooning and a Cartoonists' History of Canada* by Peter Desbarats and Terry Mosher (256 pages, \$19.95 cloth). Soon after publication McClelland & Stewart yanked 1,500 copies of the book because of a previously unpublished cartoon by Mosher (who draws under the pen-name Aislin) that depicted, in the words of a press release, "the uncomfortable relationship between Ottawa and Quebec." Presumably it's the one (on page 192) of a naked man sticking his head up his own behind.

No doubt today's eco-chic homesteaders (the kind who drive Volkswagens) will want a copy of *The Harrowsmith Sourcebook*, edited by James Lawrence (Camden House, illustrated, 320 pages, \$11.50 cloth and \$7.95 paper). This compendium of "alternative tools, goods, and services" is reminiscent of the remarkable *Whole Earth Catalog* published by Random House and the Portola Institute in 1968, though never as exuberant, literary, shaggy, or eclectic. Like *Harrowsmith* magazine, it devotes excessive attention to woodstoves (63 pages) and solar energy (44 pages) and little to such topics as implements (22 pages) and animal husbandry (16 pages). It's interesting that communal living — an idea that was central to the *Whole Earth* philosophy — has become in *Harrowsmith's* version merely a footnote to the 1970s. The section on gardening is extensive, but leans a bit towards such exotica as aquatic cultures and hydroponics.

Ecological purists (the kind who hate snowmobiles) will also find handy Michael Keating's *Cross-Country Ontario* (Van Nostrand Reinhold, illustrated, 111 pages, \$3.95 paper), a pared-down version of his excellent *Cross-Country Canada* that includes basic instruction in cross-country skiing and listings for 287 Ontario trails. Keating offers some information on winter survival, but there's more — details on how to build an igloo, for example — in *Northern Survival*, prepared by the Department of Indian Affairs & Northern Development (Fitzhenry & Whiteside, illustrated, 105 pages, \$3.95 paper) and Dwight R. Schuh's comprehensive *Modern Survival* (Hurtig, illustrated, 182

the browser

by Michael Smith

Arrivals and departures, with some heckles, hydroponics, and arachnidic homages.

WHEN THE EARLY homesteaders arrived in the Prairies — recruited by the federal government and deposited by the CPR — there were no social agencies waiting to help them settle. Except for a little neighbourly advice, even finding the survey stakes that marked their lots was left mostly to chance. How migrants from inside Canada and abroad managed to defy these odds is the subject of James H. Gray's *Eoomtime: Peopling the Canadian Prairies* (Western Producer Prairie Books, illustrated, 148 pages, \$24.95 cloth and \$14.95 paper) and Ted Regehr's *Remembering Saskatchewan: A History of Rural Saskatchewan* (University of Saskatchewan, illustrated, 74 pages, \$5.00 paper).

Regehr wrote his slender book to commemorate Saskatchewan's 75th anniversary this year. While he writes specifically about that province, he covers a broader range of prairie history (such as the development of farming techniques) than Gray, who limits his informal chronicle to immigration in the 50 years before the First World War. Social history is something of an industry for Gray, and it shows in the glib way he writes, while Regehr is sometimes tediously studious. Still, though the texts and photos may occasionally overlap, the two are complementary rather than competitive treatments of "Next-Year Country" — a slogan that described both a frame of mind and the reality of a period in which next year just had to be less terrible than the last.

These hardships are also illustrated in Saskatchewan: *A Pictorial History*, compiled for the Saskatchewan Archives Board by D.H. Bocking (Western Producer Prairie Books, 209 pages, \$29.95 cloth and \$18.95 paper). Like Gray's book, it's short on text — relying mainly on extended captions and quotations from contemporary published sources, such as Department of Agriculture reports, local newspapers, and magazines. The 243 photos — which begin in the late 1880s and end with the Second World War — include the late Prince of Wales, with cane and boutonniere, riding with cowboys at a 1919 Saskatoon "stampede"; two Mounties displaying a moonshiner's still seized in the '30s in the Moose Mountains near Arcola; and transient Nova Scotia stokers sharing a jug and sandwiches in the early 1920s.

The family of John Diefenbaker moved to Borden, Sask., in 1906, when he was 11 years old. A view of their homestead house and one of young John travelling to school by ox-cart are among the 160 photos collected by his step-daughter, Caroline Weir, in *The Right Honourable John George Diefenbaker, 1895-1979: A Pictorial Tribute* (Macmillan, unpaginated, \$9.95 paper). Despite the affectionate memory Weir seeks to kindle, the image of Diefenbaker that sticks with me — indeed, it seems almost interchangeable with reality — was created and embellished through the years by caricaturist Duncan Macpherson of the *Toronto Star*. His work, among others,



pages, SC.95 paper), which also covers survival in the desert and boating safety. (Today's hint: bears may be attracted by the smell of food in a tent, perfume, menstruation, or sexual activity. Forewarned, forearmed.)

Gilean Douglas is an enthusiastic conservationist who finds something to praise, in rather fancy language, even in the abysmal months of winter ("Unmuffled by snow, the conifers lilt into madrigals with every breeze"). She alternates musings on the months of the year with essays on the wildlife on Cortes Island, B.C., where she lives with her cat, in *The Protected Place* (Gray's Publishing, illustrated, 189 pages, \$7.95 paper), her second book of wilderness lore. Her articles, collected from such sources as the *Atlantic Advocate* and *Victoria Colonist*, draw mostly on her own experience, opinions, and observations rather than research, and reflect a sentimental, though clearly well-informed interest in nature. They include homage to a

pet spider named Sephia and lugubrious deliberations over an ailing young harbour seal that dies and is buried amid strewn marigolds, at sea.

For more highfalutin farewells there's nothing to match some of the quotations in *The Goodbye Book*, by Robert Ramsay and Randall Tove (Van Nostrand Reinhold, illustrated, 152 pages, \$7.95 cloth). Their Colombo-style compilation strings together a prolonged series of love poems, letters, movie partings, and last words, rendered in disconcerting italic type and interspersed occasionally with a few lines of editorial gloss. A lot of the archaic poetry and letters are just as well left unread, and some of the famous patting lines from stage and film ("Here's looking at you, kid") will sound very familiar. I did like the defiant dying words of Ethan Allen, the American revolutionary, who, when told that "the Angels are waiting for you," replied: "Waiting, ate they? Well, let 'em wait!" This is much adieu about nothing. □

first impressions

by Douglas Will

Childish nudges, a drab adolescence, and a talkative scenario in 'black and white

Stephanie's, by Jane Austen-Leigh (A Room of One's Own Press, 284 pages, \$5.95 paper), seems to be pointed toward an adolescent female audience. I can't imagine anyone else's being more than mildly interested in it; even grown-up feminists, who can easily find attitudes to approve of, should quickly tire of the book's insistent doctrinal whine. There are few other rewards.

The novel paints a drab picture of British Colonial society in Victoria, B.C., during the Depression. Stephanie Carruthers-Croft is 11 when the book begins, 18 at its close. She is plain and awkward, and mostly unloved. Her little sister is pretty and adored. Father is vague, Mother is venomous. Stephanie survives. She will be a writer.

Although the book is sensitive and not unaffectionate about the nastiness that colours more childhoods than we care to admit, its characterizations are cliché-ridden, its episodic pace is tedious, and its pedestrian style evokes only impatience. Recommended to liberated masochists.

"THE DIFFERENCES between men are those of quality and not of colour." This admirable if conservative thesis informs John Trengove's *Mr. September* (General, 192 pages, \$10.95 cloth), which calls itself "a novel of South Africa." Trengove is a surgeon who left that country for Canada in 1973; his narrator is a surgeon who will remain to fight the Afrikaner Broederbond

and its policy of apartheid. Though the novel seems deeply felt, and in places speaks its passion eloquently, its plot is so weak and its characters so lifeless that it fails to rouse my excitement.

It's all MC talky; the arguments come in speeches and asides, not in action and motive. Add the perfervid rhetoric and you get the sort of didactic history-piece — the "cardboard characters come to life" thing — that CBC-Radio used to insult Riel or Mackenzie with.

That there's material for thoughtful fiction in Trengove's subject is undeniable. Alan Paton and Nadine Gordimer, for instance, write from the same side of the colour barrier. But *Mr. September* offers no insights into racial prejudice or guilt beyond those of the popular romance, no subtleties that would disturb the equilibrium of a Sidney Poitier movie.

THE PUBLISHER of *Puffin Rock*, by James Heneghan and Bruce McBay (Book Society of Canada, 103 pages, \$3.95 paper), informs us that "adults will recognize the satiric humour in the authors' treatment of many aspects of modern Canadian life." I'd like to withhold comment on that claim, since I think the less said about contemporary political bird- and beast-fables the better. But I can report that my six-year-old co-reviewer found the story quite pleasant, and -d hardly distracted at all by the book's mild-mannered winks and nudges at a grown-up audience. □

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Norman Levine, long of St. Ives, changes his scene but the machine still thrives

NORMAN LEVINE was born in Ottawa in 1923, and for the past 31 years has lived in England, where he has earned a considerable reputation as a short-story writer. In 1958 he wrote *Canada Made Me*, an autobiographical "travelogue" that McClelland & Stewart commissioned but refused to publish; and in 1965-66 he was the University of New Brunswick's first writer-in-residence. Until recently, however, his work has been little known in his native country. Partly to rectify that, and partly because he has never stopped feeling Canadian, Levine is moving back to Canada. While in Toronto recently to promote his new book, *Thin Ice* (Deneau & Greenberg), he spoke with Wayne Grady about his life and art:

Books in Canada: *Since you left Canada in 1949, one can assume that you don't agree with A. J. M. Smith's idea of "eclectic detachment," the idea that Canadians have it better here than elsewhere because we can choose our cultural influences without having to participate politically in the rest of the world?*

Levine: What happens in Canada is like what happens to writers everywhere.. True, you take things from all over, but you've got to make something and then give it back to that world. Unless you can make something that means something to other countries, then this eclectic detachment is not good enough. In writing, you take something from life and then you give something back into life. In the '40s, when I left Canada, I didn't know that much about writing, but I felt instinctively that Canada was not good enough. I didn't think that the critics had the standards that I wanted. Over there, *Horizon* was going, with Cyril Connelly, and that stood for something, and *Penguin New Writing*, and I had my early stories in a thing called *World Review*, and I felt the standards were higher. Here, I'm afraid, people do pretend they're important because they get a local applause. It's much easier to be a local poet, to walk down the street and to be recognized as a poet. But if you are a writer, then that's not what interests you. Local writers are not very good writers.

BIC: *And you found that by isolating yourself in St. Ives you were able to work without having to contend with the restrictions of being a local writer?*

Levine: No. I found that by being in England I felt much more Canadian than I did in Canada. And that allowed this crazy mechanism that goes on inside a writer (which I don't want to examine too closely because this is the functional part, how the

plumbing connects inside me) to make use of my Canadian feelings and material; I had to have this displacement. I really do feel I'm a displaced person, because I think that that is the natural condition of man. In fact, *Displaced Persons* was one of the titles I considered for *Thin Ice*. Of course, no one can live as a displaced person very long: one of the things that people can't take, as Eliot said, is too much reality. So we have protective devices — the family, children — to help us come to terms with the brutality and ruthlessness of life. But life itself is meaningless. I think we are just guests of existence; the human condition for me is to be a tourist. We see the sun rise, and we know it will not rise for us some day, but it will rise for somebody else.. I try to set all my stories in a particular, physical landscape. I like the visible world. And I am also interested in the work people do in that landscape.

BIC: *Can tourists contribute very much to the country they're visiting?*

Levine: Oh yes, they leave their mark. But like the tide, time wipes it off for others to leave their mark. A field, left alone, will return to its natural state in eight years. With a house it's 25 years. And the nice thing about writing is that no writer knows if he's any good or not. It takes up to 50 years for time to do its work. If you are any good, then what you've done will begin to float through time. Chekhov's short stories, for example, were written for newspapers, and nobody read them very much until Constance Garnet began translating them, then suddenly his stories began to float through time. And so with Shakespeare and Shaw, Rostand, Joyce, Hemingway, they're all floating. They're not merged, but they are released from their time, separate identities going along. This is what time does



Norman Levine

after we're dead. Dylan Thomas is a case in point. When he was alive he was on the same level as Yeats, and even T. S. Eliot and Pound. But now...

BIC: *What writers have influenced your own writing?*

Levine: Well, when I first went to England the one I hadn't read before was Graham Greene. And although he was writing about the England of the '30s and '40s, the thing I like about Greene was that he was describing the England I could see around me. Here was the visible world. I've always liked two things in writers: I want them to make me see, and this is why I'm tickled pink that all my books have been translated into Braille; and also I like things to be clear. When I write I write very quickly, and then I revise and revise. The revisions are to make things clear, lucid.

BIC: *You make people see, but you don't do it by painting the whole canvas. Your stories are like line drawings, a touch here and there to suggest the whole picture.*

Levine: Well, you don't have to eat the whole cow to know what steak tastes like. I know painters who, if they're going to do your face, will do a lot of lines, and they'll get your face, all right, but with a lot of lines. One of those lines has got to be the right one, so I like to remove all the other lines and just leave the right one.

BIC: *Is that what attracted you to the short story rather than to the novel?*

Levine: I began by writing verse. I wasn't interested in meaning so much as in the sound of the words going. I remember a poem I wrote as an undergraduate. It was called "Autumn":

*The leaves blew trains' departures
And the sheaves blushed a colour the trees
never dreamed of,
Speechless blackbirds, taste the day smug-
birds . . .*

I mean, it was just sounds. Then I wrote a novel. And then I stumbled on to those early stories that were completely made up. The earliest was about a woman who had had a hard life, worked all the time, didn't get any vacation at all. But she looked forward to going to hospitals to have her operations because then she got a little vacation. I made her up. Nothing to do with life. Just an idea.

Well, since that time I've found that things I like writing, that give me satisfaction, have to do with the world and the people I know. And after I finish them I sort of fix them. A lot of writing is paying tribute to people and places that have meant something to me. I make traps. It usually starts with a feeling, and I want to trap this feeling I have about people or a situation. And in order to trap it I have to construct an armature, like a sculptor, a structure to build the clay up on. And unless you have this structure, unless it holds together, then people reading that story who have different backgrounds won't understand it. It won't have any lift-off for them.

BIC: *And when you revise, is it like going back to make the trap more airtight?*

Levine: Yes. Now, I tend to keep adding

things in. As I said, I write very quickly, and I write every day. I think writing for me is an obsession, my crutch, what helps me to come to terms with what life is. I can make sense out of life because I'm a writer. There are all kinds of levels at work. And although it sounds like it just comes off the end of the pen, this is all deliberate. I write for myself, and what's the point in telling myself things I already know? There is a certain material. If I come across it in life I know I can dig there, I can make something from it. A typical example is "By a Frozen River" [the first story in *Thin Ice*]. What, on the surface, is the connection between a man going into an isolated community, finding the last Jew, and an unhappily married couple that he meets in a hotel. I guess I knew there was a connection, but I don't know what it is, so I build this trap, and I write to explain to myself why I feel there is this connection.

FC: And you don't ever tell us what the connection is?

Levine: No. I just put the two things there. If I knew what the connection was before I wrote the story, I wouldn't write the story. And I don't know what the connection is after, either. I've just been able to trap this feeling I've had. This is how a lot of my better stories work.

FC: It's how life works, too.

Levine: Well, that's where I got it. □

Letters to the Editor

OF FACT AND TRUTH

Sir:

A few weeks in hospital away from an extremely busy rural practice gave me, for the first time in many years, an opportunity to read in peace. What I read excited me and at last I think Canada is coming of age, and doing so with dignity and sophistication both in the arts and in sports. Or at least that was my impression. But by no means do I think that we haven't yet a long way to go but at least it seems to me we are on the road.

I read your October issue with a great deal of amusement and interest. Your article on Ludwig Zeller was superb, and to me most surprising because of its candid implications and criticisms of how Canada treats its artists. With people like Zeller in our country, I feel safer.

Barry F. Brewer's article, "License not Freedom," was in my thinking (if that's of any importance) one of the most balanced I have ever read anywhere on such an emotional issue with such vital implications for all. And in my opinion, he accomplished that of which too few are capable — he, in the words of a fellow islander, didn't let facts interfere with the truth. Fact: Censorship is dangerous. Truth: In an ever-changing and increasingly complex social world, it offers some protection to the right of every child in Canada to remain just that.

When it comes to the man on the cover I must admit little familiarity either with the man or his works, but if he wrote nothing else or stated nothing else but the line, "Never let facts

interfere with the truth" I would remember him forever. Welcome to Cape Breton. Farley.

• Emmet O'Rafferty
St. Peters, Cape Breton

'T WAS EVER THUS

Sir:

I would have thought that Canada's cultural solitudes were by now less than airtight at least in the new, professedly cosmopolitan, Toronto. Phone calls to the Canadian Booksellers Association and the Canadian Book Information Centre prove otherwise. Neither could provide me with any information about the Canadian publisher of *Pelagie-la-Charrene* by Antonine Maillet. International *éclat*, like French Canada, leaves Hometown unimpressed?

Tim Bums
Other Books
Toronto

The editors recommend

THE FOLLOWING Canadian books were reviewed in the previous issue of *Books in Canada*. Our recommendations don't necessarily reflect the reviews:

FICTION

The Jimmy Trilogy, by Jacques Poulin, translated from the French by Sheila Fischman, House of Anansi. Two novels and a novella by one of Quebec's major novelists and essential reading for anyone interested in the soul of that province.

NON-FICTION

Points of Departure, by Dalton Camp, Deneau & Greenberg. Bewildered voters plodding to the polls this month should find political enlightenment in Camp's shrewd analysis of last May's federal election.

POETRY

The Gods, by Dennis Lee, McClelland & Stewart. An important new volume of poems in which Lee continues to explore the interactions between poet and contemporary society.

CanWit No. 50

AS THIS department celebrates its 50th numerical birthday, there comes astounding news from our old friends at McClurken & Newspider. Their most promising author, the androgynous Joyce Castor (*Resurfacing* in *Sarnia*, 1975), is about to embark on a 12-volume epic novel series about the settlement of the West — from earliest days to the year 2000. So far only one novel in the series has a title — *Whores and Peace River* — and the M & N editors will welcome suggestions for the other 11, together with a general title for the series. We're offering a

special golden-anniversary prize of \$50 for the best selection. (Note: contestants who use Louis Riel more than once will lose points.) Address: CanWit No. 50, *Books in Canada*, 366 Adelaide Street East, Toronto M5A 1N4. The deadline is March 1.

RESULTS OF CANWIT NO. 48

TO CONFORM with rumoured new CRTC regulations, contestants were asked to Canadianize the lyrics of foreign songs heard on our airwaves. The winner is Brian McCullough of Ottawa, who receives \$25 for these maple-flavoured adaptations:

(Tune: "Hey Jude")

Hey nude, don't get so down,
It couldn't last long
Who knew it better:
Remember,
The goofs that you made in your time,
Should have warned you,
To fake it
Better, better, better . . . Hahh!

* * *

(Tune: "Yankee Doodle")

Margaret Sinclair came to Bytown
My God, what a phoney,
Took an old man for a ride
Then dropped him, tough baloney.

* * *

(Tune: "The Saints")

Oh when the Grits,
Those foolish nits,
Let old Trudeau march on in;
They didn't see,
The folly of their blunder,
And now they wish he'd never been.

**



McClure

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Read about his life and work in Gaza, India, Sarawak, Peru, St. Vincent, Africa and his years as the first lay moderator of The United Church of Canada.

If you enjoyed McClure: *The China Years*, another treat is in store! Price: \$14.95.

Order from your book store.

(Tune: "Battle Hymn of the Republic")

*My eyes have seen a Tory
And he said to rest assured,
Told me there was plenty
But instead I have to hoard,
Squadd'd like a mousey
When he should damn-well roared,
Save your oil 'cause there ain't no more.
(Tory, Tory, how'd ya do it,
Tell me lies to keep me quiet,
Sorry, sorry, just won't change it,
'Cause my furnace don't run on words.)*

Honourable mentions:

(Tune: "Scarborough Fair")

*Where are you going? Along the Bruce
Trail?
Toads and snails, dank water and slime —
Remember me to one who lives there
He once was a true love of mine.*

CLASSIFIED

Classified rates: \$6 per line (40 characters 10 the line). Deadline: first of the month for issue dated following month. Address: Socks in Canada Classified, 366 Adelaide Street East, Toronto M5A 1N4. Phone: (416) 363-5426.

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WRITERS IN DIALOGUE — An evening of readings and discussion with Margaret Atwood and Marge Piercy on Saturday, March 1, 7.30 p.m. at O.I.S.E., 252 Bloor St. W. Admission \$5. For further information call the Toronto Women's Bookstore, 922-8744

*Tel, him to lead you a-hiking I" May —
Flies, snow flurries, mosquitoes, and
, rime —*

*To shiver nights, and k bitten by day
Perhaps he'll k a true love
of thine.*

*Tell him again you'll go with him in June —
Cows and bulls, swamps, trail-bikes, and
climbs —*

*If you will backpack 12 miles before noon
Then he might k a true love of thine.*

*Tell him to plan on a hike for July —
Craggs and cliffs, foot blisters, and briars —
Sleep on the rocks, and with the hawks cry,
And you may be one your true love admires.*

*Soon will August come into view —
Thirst and hunger, sweating and grime —
With shoulders aching, and feet black and
blue;*

*Will you still wish him a true love of thine?
September mi" and October wind —*

*The" November the snowfall and frost —
Unless these hardships your poor wits have
thinned,*

You'll count this true love a lover well-lost.

— Kevin McCabe,

Niagara-on-the-Lake, Ont.

(Tune: "Dixie")

*I wish I was i" the land of snowflakes,
Co/d times there made my frost-bit toes
ache,*

*"Mush," you dogs: "Mush," you dogs;
"Mush," you dogs: Rupertsland.*

*I wish I was in the land of Musk-Ox
Caribou hides, a tundra in-box,
Ice worms glow, Whitehorse snow, Arctic
Floe, Rupertsland.*

*I wish I were in Tuktoyaktuk,
A-panning gold,*

*I" Yellowknife I'd beat my wife
And eat fish with my husky.
Fro-bi-sheer Ray.*

Fly in the rye-grain whisky.

A-tha-baskan

Aurora make me frisky.

— Anthony Hopkins, Toronto

(Tune: Octopus's Garden")

*It would k "ice, under the ice
In a little beaver's lodge in a slough.*

*He'd let us stay, all night and day,
I" his little beaver lodge I" a slough.*

*I'd ask my friends to come and see
A little beaver's lodge with me.*

*It would k "ice, under the ice
I" a little beaver's lodge i" a slough.*

— Michael P.J. Kennedy, Saskatoon

(Tune: "The City of New Orleans")

Good Morning Canada! H' are ya?

Say, don't you know me? I'm your Acadian Son

I'm the CN train from Montreal to Sackville.

I'll be a good two hours late when the day is done.

Riding on the CN train to Sackville.

Prochaine arette — next stop Montreal.

Ignore those two old drunkards play some poker

The smell of diapers, hear those babies squall!

And on that fishbound odyssey

The train pulls out of Dalhousie

The Gov' ment fell — ain't you heard the new?

Clerk or Trudeau back again. . .

If not, there's always Uncle Sam.

This train's got the disappearing country blues.

Good Morning Canada! H' are ya?

Say, don't you know me? I'm your Acadian So".

I'm the CN train from Montreal to Sackville.

I'll be a good two hours late 'fore the day is done.

— Shannon L. Baxter, Sackville, N.B.

Books received

THE FOLLOWING Canadian books have been received by *Books in Canada* in recent weeks. Inclusion in this list does not preclude a review or notice in a future issue:

Angelina and Her Friend Giorgio the Squirrel, by Gabrielle Kirschbaum, Borealis Press.

Another Song, Another Season, by Roger White, George Ronald (Oxford).

The Banff Purchase: An Exhibition of Photography in Canada, by David McMillan et al., John Wiley and Sons.

Better Times Than These, by Winston Groom, Toten.

The Blooded Toga, by W.G. Hardy, Macmillan.

Canada's Guns, by Leslie W.C.S. Barnes, National Museums.

Captain James Cook and His Times, by Robin Fisher and Hugh Johnston, Douglas & McIntyre.

The Case of Port Hawkesbury, by Raymond L. Foote, PMA Books.

Charcoal's World, by Hugh A. Dempsey, Signet.

The Cloud Walkers, by Paddy Sherman, Macmillan.

Decendence and Objectivity, by Lawrence Haworth, UofT Press.

The Dictionary of Canadian Quotations and Phrases, by Robert M. Hamilton and Dorothy Shields, M & S.

Down North: The Book of Cape Breton's Magazine, edited by Ronald Caplan, Doubleday.

E. Cara Hind, by Carlotta Hacker, Fitzhenry & Whiteside.

The Eagle and the Raven, by Pauline Gedge, Signet.

Emlyn Davies: Man of God, by Alfreda Hall, G.R. Welch.

Entertaining at Bridge, by Carroll Empey and Bea Stewart, John Wiley & Sons.

Ernest Thompson Seton, by Magdalene Redekop, Fitzhenry & Whiteside.

George Brown, by J.M.S. Careless, Fitzhenry & Whiteside.

The Glace Bay Miners' Museum, by Sheldon Currie, Deluge Press.

Grandpapa's Cherries, by Gabrielle Kirschbaum, Borealis Press.

The Grey Goose of Arnheim, by Leo Heaps, PaperJacks.

Hearing and Deaf, edited by John Kray, Macmillan.

Heroes Three, by Marjorie Kendall, Borealis Press.

Histoire Simple et Véritable, by Marie Morin, Les Presses de l'Université de Montréal.

How to be Sure You have the Right R.R.S.P., by J. Christopher Snyder, Financial Post/Macmillan.

The Insanity Machine, by Peter Maxwell, PaperJacks.

Inuit, by Marjorie Kendall, Borealis Press.

The John A. Macdonald Album, by Lena Newman, Tundra Books.

The Kanner Allah, by Mark Gordon, Groundhog Press.

Killing Time, by Sandy Fawkes, PaperJacks.

The Little Star, by Marjorie Kendall, Borealis Press.

The Long Benches, by Ian MacAskie, Sono Nis Press.

The Longest Day of the Year, by Helen Marquis, PaperJacks.

Love in the Dog House, by Molly Douglas, PaperJacks.

The Milmans and Colonists, by L.F.S. Upton, UBC Press.

The Missing Numbers, by H. B. Paquette, Borealis Press.

Patterns Without End, by Nancy Toth, Academic Printing & Publishing.

Pauline, by Norma West Linder and Hope Morris, River City Press.

The Phone Book: Working at the Bell, by Joan Newman Kayak, Between the Lines.

The Primary English Class, by Israel Horowitz, Talonbooks.

Prisoner of Desire, by Brita Hagarty, Talonbooks.

Quilts and Other Bed Coverings in the Canadian Tradition, by Ruth McKeandry, Van Nostrand Reinhold.

R. B. Bennett, Robert Saunders, Fitzhenry & Whiteside.

Realism and Human Values, by Erika Erdmann, Vintage Press (U.S.).

Some One, No One, by Keziah Burnidge, Princeton University Press.

Tax Facts, by Sally Pipes and Michael Walker, The Fraser Institute.

Ten Decades of Service, The National Gallery of Canada.

The UFO Connection, by Arthur Bray, Jupiter Publishing.

"A Union Amongst Government Employees": A History of the B.C. Government Employees' Union 1919-1979, by Bruce McLean, B.C. Government Employees' Union.

The Usable Urban Past, edited by Alan F.J. Artibise and Gilbert A. A. Stelter, Carleton Library.

Voices of Discard: Canadian Short Stories from the 1930s, edited by Doana Phillips, New Hogtown Press.

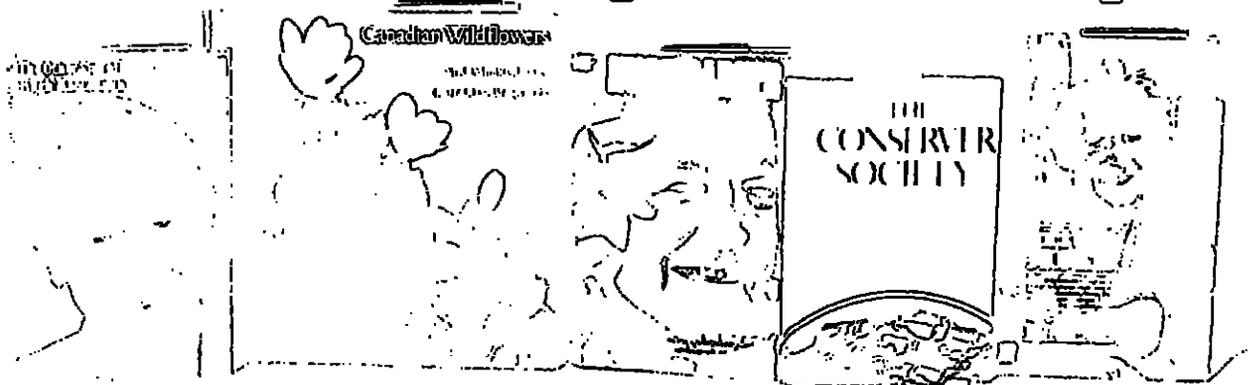
Voakle, by Marjorie Kendall, Borealis Press.

West Coast Whimsy & Womanee, by Dan Jason, Leprechaun Books.

Wheat and Woman, by Georgina Bonnie-Clark, UofT Press.

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1844 • **The Canadian Wood Heat Book: A Complete Guide and Catalogue**, by Gordon Flagler. Everything you need to know about wood heating, including a catalogue of all the major wood-heating units now on the market. Paperback. \$8.95.

1766 • **I Don't Want to Know Anyone Too Well and other stories**, by Norman Levine. Fifteen stories by a writer who, though a native Canadian, seems better known almost everywhere else. \$6.95.

1800 • **Photography & the art of seeing**, by Freeman Patterson. Advice from the best-selling author of *Photography for the joy of it* on how amateur photographers can expand their powers of observation and imagination. \$24.95.

1596 • **Louis 'David' Riel: 'Prophet of the New World'**, by Thomas Flanagan. A fresh and compelling (and controversial) look at a great Canadian hero. \$15.

1484 • **An Appetite for Life: The Education of a Young Diarist, 1924-1927**, by Charles Ritchie. The author of the award-winning *Siren Years* recounts his youth—first love, first sex, great years at Oxford. \$10.95.

1597 • **The Sweet Second Summer of Kitty Malone**, by Matt Cohen. The highly acclaimed novel about a season of transition. "A great read"—Dennis Lee. \$12.95.

1709 • **The Public Eye: Television and the Politics of Canadian Broadcasting 1952-1963**, by Frank W. Peers. An insider's view of Canadian television, required reading for anyone who cares about Canada's broadcasting priorities for the 1980s. \$25.

1765 • **Andrew Allan: A Self-Portrait**, by Andrew Allan. In this book, part autobiography, part a collection of his best essays, the distinguished broadcaster writes with restraint and dignity about a life which was not without its "dark times." \$10.95.

1394 • **The Imperial Animal**, by Lionel Tiger and Robin Fox. A book about the social bonds which hold us together and the antisocial theories which drive us apart. \$6.95.

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