

Child in the Wilderness: The Romantic View

M. A. WHITAKER

Dr. Samuel Johnson's view of Canada as a "region of desolate sterility . . . a cold, uncomfortable, uninviting region, from which nothing but furs and fish were to be had"¹ suggests an eighteenth century reluctance to encounter the Canadian wilderness. But, as the imperial boundaries widened into an empire on which the sun never set, Canada presented to the British author a milieu particularly suited to tales of adventure. Every region was a frontier: the Atlantic seaboard with its icebergs and storms, the animal-infested forest of Quebec and Ontario, the prairies swarming with scalp-hunters, the rugged mountain barriers of British Columbia, and the grim polar wastes. It is not surprising to find a youthful Henty hero, an "eagle not made to live in a coop,"² turning up with Wolfe in Canada where he knocks off redskins and Frenchies, evades Indian massacres, and climactically finds the path which leads to the Plains of Abraham. Similarly, R.M. Ballantyne's young fur trader has listened from childhood to tales of the voyageurs, his heart bounding as "they spoke of dangers encountered and overcome among the rapids of the Far North, or with the bears and bison-bulls of the prairies."³ Such adventure is the stuff of Ballantyne's books and even of his life, for he had been a servant of the Hudson's Bay Company. Charlotte Yonge considered these adventure stories "perfectly safe from the moral point of view."⁴ Indeed, the heroes never fail to say their prayers, even when retiring to a bed of evergreen boughs under a canoe propped up on the prairies.

These nineteenth-century wilderness tales may appropriately be classified as romances⁵ for they are analogous in several ways to the exotic tales of adventure and knight-errantry which delighted medieval audiences. The heroes and heroines are members of an elite society imbued with the virtues and ideals of the British middle class. The fort, like the hospitable castle that welcomed the knight at the end of the day, is an island of comfort and security in the midst of the perilous realm. Leaving this centre, the Victorian hero ventures into the wilderness with all the self-confidence of the medieval knight, determined to demonstrate his prowess and eventually to possess the lady whose innocence he protects with his valour. Slaughtering grizzly bears and buffalo, clearing the bush, surviving rapids and blizzards, and Christianizing the natives, he seizes the wilderness and impresses on it the marks of his superiority. Not for him the "cultural schizophrenia" which, in D.G. Jones's words, resulted from a division between conscious aspirations and unconscious convictions."⁶ He is no Mr. Sparkler, his brain "frozen up in a mighty frost which prevailed at St. John's, New Brunswick, at the period of his birth there."⁷ On the contrary, he thrives on adversity.

No one made a more comprehensive use of the Canadian scene as a *royaume aventureux* than the contributors to the "penny parts"—*The Boys' Own*, the *Union Jack*, *Chatterbox* and the like. Jessie M. Saxby, whose "Prairie Life and Adventure" ran as a serial in *Chatterbox* during 1898, introduced into a single story blizzards, frost bite, temperatures of 56° below zero, frozen water-holes, ravenous wolves, thieving Indians, villainous white men dressed as Indians, thunderstorms, mosquitoes, and fever in order to demonstrate the intelligence, courage, and "staying power" of the young Englishman.

The desire to crowd as much incident as possible into a short space does not characterise the periodical offerings alone. W.H.G. Kingston, a prolific Victorian author of adventure stories, used the Canadian setting in a number of books, including *The Frontier Fort* (TORONTO, n.d.). Before the first chapter is completed, Reginald Loraine, "a young Englishman of good fortune and family who had lately come out to make a tour in Canada," and his schoolboy companion Hector Mackintosh, son of a Hudson's Bay factor, have encountered and survived a huge swarm of locusts, a prairie fire, an electrical storm, ordinary-sized hailstones "mixed with lumps half an inch to an inch across," and hostile Indians. Not much later Loraine is attacked by wolves with glowing eyeballs and is rescued only just in time by Hector and his burning brands. The Englishman is soon provided with an opportunity of returning the favour when he finds Hector treed by a savage, wounded, "big she-grizzly, with a couple of cubs." And so it goes—never a dull moment.

The chapter headings of R.M. Ballantyne's *The Young Fur Traders* (London, 1856) not only describe the contents of that particular book but also set out a plot formula that was to be used repeatedly during the next hundred years. Recurrent motifs include: Wolf-hunt in the Prairies, The Storm, Ascending the Rapids, An Enemy in the Grass, Narrow Escape, A Murderous Attempt which Fails, Frozen Toes, A Snow-storm, Bear-hunting and its Results, Disagreement with the Natives, An Enemy Discovered and a Murder, The Chase, The Fight, Retribution, and, for the concluding Chapter XXXI, The Course of True Love—which runs smooth for once. The last sub-title is only surpassed in pithy condensation by the conclusion of the same author's *Ungava* (London, 1858): "Happy meetings and joyous feastings—Love, Marriage, desertion, desolation, and conclusion." In all such books, the plot development is progressive and episodic, involving such conventional motifs as a journey to relieve a threatened outpost (*The Frontier Fort*), a quest for home (*Canadian Crusoes* and *Children of the Forest*), a voyageur expedition (*The Young Fur Traders*), and excursions in search of game (*Three Boys in the Wild North Land*). Structurally, these tales follow the patterns of archetypal literary forms, of myth and romance.

Heroes and heroines are presented in formulaic terms, with emphasis on upper middle class British values. Kingston's description of Reginald Loraine might be applied with little change to a host of imperial adventurers:

His intelligence, high spirits, and good humour made him an agreeable companion. He was never put out by any

mishaps or inconveniences. His personal appearance was also much in his favour; while he was a good rider, and possessed of activity and endurance, equal if not superior, to any of the rest of the party, long accustomed though they were to the mode of life they were leading.

From the sentiments he uttered, and the expression of his handsome countenance, it might have been surmised that he possessed many other qualities of a higher character. Young Hector Mackintosh . . . declared, indeed, that he never wished to have a stauncher fellow at his back in a skirmish with Red-skins, or in a fight with a grizzly, and that he was as highminded and generous as he was brave.

Among "other qualities of a higher character" that the romantic heroes possess are modesty, upright solemnity, a sense of delicacy, piety, and a sympathy so tender that a tear or two could on occasion be induced to "hop over" a sunburned cheek.

The heroines, for their part, are pretty and bright with fair hair, blue, laughing eyes, and rosy mouths constantly wreathed in smiles, or, alternatively, with black eyes and nut-brown hair. They have gentle, winning ways, thoughtful and well-regulated minds, buoyant spirits, and the willingness to be a help and comfort to elderly or ailing parents. They may be dressed in white gowns that rival the snow itself or in the picturesque apparel of fringed and ornamented deerskins. It is true that Catharine Parr Traill's Catharine Maxwell, the heroine of *Canadian Crusoes: A Tale of the Rice Lake Plains* (1850; reprinted Toronto, 1923), demonstrates an initiative and sense of responsibility that reflect, no doubt, the author's own experience of "roughing it in the bush." Nevertheless, like the ladies of medieval romance, the heroines are usually treated chiefly as prizes to be awarded to heroes who have demonstrated their prowess in a series of combats.

Often the encounter with the wilderness is treated as a *rite de passage* marking the transition from adolescence to manhood. In Egerton R. Young's *Three Boys in the Wild North Land* (New York, 1896), an English, a Scottish, and an Irish youth from "one of the great historic schools in the homeland" interrupt their formal education to spend a year at a Hudson's Bay outpost in Northern Canada, "the congenial home of the red man." The threat of hostile Indians having been mitigated by their Christianisation—their Indian guide, Big Tom, with his nightly Bible reading is actually a reminder to them of their happy Christian homes—the boys are pitted against other denizens of the forest: wild birds and animals. Ducks, geese, partridges, bears, wolves, wolverines, moose and reindeer (i.e. caribou) are joyously slaughtered as proof of the heroes' skill and bravery. To the modern reader the most distasteful of these exhibitions is the account of killing a loon. After describing the beauty and virtuosity of the bird, the author details the various stratagems used in achieving "the honor of killing the first loon."

The fortunate opportunity came at last, for there right in front of the canoe not fifty yards away rose up that beautiful bird, and the same instant from the unseen gun and lad,

behind that little barrier, rang out the report which followed the fatal missiles that had done their work, for one of them had cut clean through the neck of the loon, severing the vertebrae, and there he lay in the water with the snowy-white breast uppermost.

A rousing cheer told of the successful shot . . .

In Ralph Connor's *Glengarry School Days* (Chicago, 1902), where Hughie Murray, the minister's son, succeeds in shooting a large black bear, there are also implications of a ritual killing. Afterwards, when the whole affair is being discussed at the supper table, the usually loquacious Hughie is silenced by

a strange new feeling in his heart. He had done a man's deed, and for the first time in his life he felt it unnecessary to glory in his deeds. He had come to a new experience, that great deeds need no voice to proclaim them. During the thrilling moments of that terrible hour he had entered the borderland of manhood, and the awe of that new world was now upon his spirit.

Alternatively, the *rite de passage* may be contained in a more extended myth—a Robinsonnade in which are described "the struggles of isolated human beings to obtain the aliments of life." The words are those with which Agnes Strickland introduced *Canadian Crusoes, A Tale of the Rice Lake Plains*, written by her sister, Catharine Parr Traill, in 1850. Three cousins, Hector Maxwell, age 14, Catharine Maxwell, age 12, and Louis Perron, age 14, lose their way in the Ontario bush while looking for strayed cattle. They find themselves in a paradisaical wilderness of glittering foliage and shining waters, romantically tinged with "a holy calm." Strawberries and nuts are found together (in defiance of the seasonal cycle) and wildflowers twine among the grasses. The lake is so full of fish and wild rice, the woods of partridge and deer, that the children feel they are "pensioners of God's providence." Their dog turns up to help with the hunting while an Indian girl instructs them in woodcraft, suffering in return an infusion of Christian dogma. While the sorrowing parents are convinced that their children have sustained "death, a lingering death by famine, death, cruel and horrible, by wolves or bears, or yet more terrible with tortures by the hands of the dreaded Indians," the children have settled down only seven miles from home, thoroughly enjoying themselves except for an occasional twinge of conscience at the thought that they have forfeited their parents' confidence. All ends happily with rescue, reconciliation, and, in due course, trips to the altar for Catharine and Louis, Hector and the converted Mohawk.

Farley Mowat's *Lost in the Barrens* (Toronto, 1956) is a more recent Robinsonnade with Mrs. Traill's Ontario Eden being replaced by "the loneliness and immensity" of the Arctic wastes. Again, the heroes survive by utilising and controlling the resources of the wilderness—ground squirrels, forty-pound lake trout, a tree-filled valley, and migrating caribou herds. Even the dreaded Eskimo turns out to be hospitable and harmless.

Many of the attitudes in Victorian adventure stories may be traced ultimately to the influence of Rousseau and of the English Romantics.

According to Lord Morley, ⁸ Rousseau's *Emile*, published in 1762,

effected the substitution of growth for mechanism. A strong current of manliness, wholesomeness, simplicity, self-reliance was sent by it through Europe. ⁹

The exercise, hard work, useful activity, and avoidance of luxury recommended by Rousseau are all readily available in the wilderness setting while self-reliance, developed through experience, is constantly utilised as a means of survival. Many a hero and heroine of wilderness tales has the opportunity of practicing the "natural arts" that in Rousseau's view characterised "des solitaires" and "des sauvages." (Not surprisingly, *Robinson Crusoe* is the first and foremost book that *Emile* is allowed to read.)

The role of tutor, whether assumed by an experienced fur-trader, a friendly Indian, or the author *in sua persona* enables both the character and the reader to learn a great deal about woodcraft, Indian lore, fur trading practices, and natural history. In the preface to *Canadian Crusoes*, Catharine Parr Traill asserts her didactic purpose, that of providing a handbook in survival for those who might be lost "in the vast forests of the backwoods". One quotation is sufficient to illustrate how the progress of the plot is interrupted by the author's lecturing voice:

Not many days afterwards, Louis accidentally found a much larger and more valuable root, near the lake shore. He saw a fine climbing shrub, with close bunches of dark reddish-purple pea-shaped flowers, which scented the air with a delicious perfume. The plant climbed to a great height over the young trees, with a profusion of dark green leaves and tendrils. Pleased with the bowery appearance of the plant, he tried to pull one up, that he might show it to his cousin, when the root displayed a number of large tubers, as big as good-sized potatoes, regular oval-shaped; the inside was quite white, tasting somewhat like a potato, only pleasanter, when in its raw state, than an uncooked potato.

The author goes on to give directions for cooking the roots, storing them, and using them for making flour; in a footnote she identifies the plant botanically with the *Psoralea esculenta*.

Similarly, especially since the heroes of Young's *Three Boys in the Wild North Land* have been allowed to travel for educational reasons (another Rousseauian precept), that book abounds in information of a factual nature and admonitions with practical application. At one point the slaughter of deer is terminated by an Indian, with the explanation that "we have killed as many as our people can eat before the meat will spoil and we must not kill the deer if we do not need the meat." Considering how much of the story has been devoted to a glorification of the hunt, there seems some hypocrisy in the author's comment:

Well done, red man! Would that some white hunters, when bent on the wholesale destruction of valuable animals just for the mad ambition to kill, had some of his wisdom and religion!

The "tone of deep terror in regard to nature . . . a terror of the soul" which Northrop Frye finds in Canadian poetry ¹⁰ does not seem to

have inhibited these children in the wilderness. Confidently, they build their log cabins, kill caribou and bear, tan hides, make pemmican, and shoot rapids in light canoes. Even the Indians, fixing the children with "cold staring eyes . . . as the wily serpent is said to fascinate his prey," (Mrs. Traill again) end up burying the hatchet and becoming surrogate parents or blood brothers.

Despite the wolves and grizzlies, the wilderness is a paradisaical setting where the child is protected not only by remoteness from men (Rousseau's view) but also by nearness to God. As Charley, the hero of Ballantyne's *The Young Fur Traders*, is about to depart from Fort Garry with the fur-brigade, he is reminded by the clergyman that "there is but one incentive to every good, and one safeguard against all evil, my boy, and that is the love of God." The recollection that God Provides for his creatures is a source of comfort to Catharine, Louis and Hector, the Canadian Crusoes.

Trailing their clouds of glory, they are inviolable. "Toads hop quickly out of sight," as Mary Mapes Dodge put it, in writing of children's magazines.¹¹ When Sybil, the heroine of *The Frontier Fort*, is overtaken on the prairie by an Indian chief whose proposal of marriage she has declined, she is expeditiously rescued from a fate worse than death by the hero, Loraine. Similarly, the Indian heroine of Egerton Young's *Children of the Forest* (London and Toronto, 1904) is protected by her innocence and beauty from the evil designs of her Sioux kidnapers. About to be kidnapped by a "savage", Catharine Maxwell must endure:

the deadly glare of a pair of dark eyes fixed upon her . . . gleaming with sullen ferocity from the angle of the door-post, whence the upper part of the face alone was visible, partly concealed by a mat of tangled, shaggy, black hair.

Naturally, the hinted threat of violation is never allowed to become a reality. Sexual relationships are inevitably underplayed, with the affection of brother and sister having precedence. Kate and Charley, in *The Young Fur Traders*, frequently exchange "a long, passionate embrace," but when Harry Somerville proposes marriage and presses Kate "fervently to his bosom," he is so energetically repulsed that he hangs his head, "a deep blush of shame on his face."

But the wilderness setting is valued not only as a stage for heroic human action and an opportunity for didactic instruction; its beauty and grandeur evoke a response of another kind, that emotional identification between man and nature that is so important an aspect of nineteenth-century romanticism. An excellent example of the "heart leaps up" syndrome is to be found in R.M. Ballantyne's *Ungava*:

There are times and seasons, in this peculiar world of ours, when the heart of man rejoices . . . We do not intend to enter into a detail of the occasions that call forth this feeling of exultation. . . one of these occasions of rejoicing is, when man arises from his couch, on a brilliant, sunny, sparkling morning, gazes forth from his window, and beholds the landscape — which yesterday was green, and red, and brown, and blue — clad in a soft mantle of whitest snow!

An accomplished artist, Catharine Parr Traill recreates the setting with

a Ruskinian eye to detail:

The high sloping hills surrounding the fertile vale of Cold Springs were clothed with the blossoms of the gorgeous scarlet enchroma, or painted cup; the large pure white blossoms of the lily-like trillium; the delicate and fragile lilac geranium, whose graceful flowers woo the hand of the flower-gatherer . . . and there, mingling with a thousand various floral beauties, the azure lupine claimed its place, shedding almost a heavenly tint upon the earth.

Even Egerton Young's bloodthirsty youths have an apocalyptic vision of rainbow hues and molten gold, the whole lake so ablaze under a sunset sky that they are reminded of the sea of glass, the streets of gold and the pearly gates of St. John's City of God.

Wilderness adventures of the kind here considered are not dissimilar to medieval romance in that they utilise archetypal characters and the structural principle of a quest or journey interrupted by combats. In their representation of childhood innocence and self-reliance and in their emotive and didactic use of landscape they show the effect of nineteenth-century romanticism, particularly as it derived from Rousseau. Slightly emending the words of Keats, generations of youthful readers could say,

Happy is Canada! I could be content
To see no other verdure than its own;
To feel no other breezes than are blown
Through its tall woods with high romances blent.

NOTES

¹"An Introduction to the Political State of Great Britain," *Works*, VI (London, 1810), p. 129.

²G.A. Henty, *With Wolfe in Canada; or, the Winning of a Continent* (New York, 1890).

³R.M. Ballantyne, *The Young Fur Traders* (London, 1856), p. 20.

⁴Charlotte Yonge's "Children's Literature of the Last Century," first published in *Macmillan's Magazine* in 1869, has been reprinted in *Signal* vols. 2-4 (1970-71)

⁵cf. Northrop Frye, *The Anatomy of Criticism* (New York, 1966), p. 151: "The mode of romance presents an idealized world: in romance heroes are brave, heroines beautiful, villains villainous, and the frustrations, ambiguities, and embarrassments of ordinary life are made little of."

⁶D.G. Jones, *Butterfly on Rock* (Toronto, 1970), p. 14.

⁷Charles Dickens, *Little Dorrit* (Toronto, 1969), p. 231.

⁸*Rousseau*, 2 vols. (London, 1915), II, pp. 249-250.

⁹Among English authors of children's books who took up the ideas of Rousseau were Laetitia Barbault, Thomas Day, Maria Edgeworth, Hannah More, Sarah Trimmer, and the Kilner sisters.

¹⁰Conclusion to *Literary History of Canada*, ed. Carl F. Klinck (Toronto, 1965) p. 830.

¹¹"Children's Magazines," *Scribner's Monthly*, 6 (July, 1873) reprinted in *Children and Literature: Views and Reviews*, Virginia Haviland ed. (Glenview, Illinois, 1973), p. 29.

Muriel Whitaker, who teaches Arthurian and Children's Literature at the University of Alberta, has contributed articles to previous issues of CCL.