Flight to Canada

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Escape, — Adventures of a Loyalist Family, Mary Beacock Fryer. J. M. Dent, 1976. 152 pp. $4.95 paper.

A sophisticated fourteen-year-old of my acquaintance has been assiduously gathering and drying dandelion roots this summer. She intends to grind them up to make dandelion coffee. I await the results with interest, but what fascinates me even more about this project is that this teenager, who frequently jets to and fro between Canada and Europe with not the slightest nibbling of an exquisitely-painted fingernail to betray a glimmer of excitement, should be drawn to a simple recipe that makes her independent of processing, packaging, and commerce.

There must be a name, a psychological term, for the deeply ingrained need, in adults and children alike, for simplicity and self-reliance. What is it that makes us want to leave the undeniable comforts of home and take to the woods with a tent and a sleeping-bag? What makes us want to try our hand at potting and weaving? Whatever the name for the instinct may be, it is to this that Mary Beacock Fryer's story, *Escape,* appeals. Did you know that willow twigs contain a natural pain-reliever, or that a poultice of hot turnips will help to remove a stone embedded in a horse's hoof? Would you like to know how to make a concoction guaranteed to keep off blackflies and mosquitoes? Scattered throughout the story are many such examples of the ingenuity and self-reliance of our great-great-grandparents.

The sub-title, *Adventures of a Loyalist Family*, hints at a history lesson in disguise, but facts about the American Revolution are supplied only to the extent that Ned Seaman, the twelve-year-old narrator of the story, is told them so that he can understand why he and his father have been thrown into prison, and why, when they escape, the whole family must leave their home in Schenectady and go to Canada. The political situation is explained to the Seaman children by their father and his friend, Truelove Butler, in response to their own questions, questions that an alert young reader will anticipate; and so,

when the facts are supplied, there is no sense of imposition or intrusion.

A further aspect of the historical setting that M.B. Fryer handles deftly is the relationship between the Indians and the European settlers. The reason why the Oneida Indians are sympathetic toward fleeing Loyalists is given matter-of-factly, and her picture of Indian life has a strong integrity to it. She maintains a nice balance between the undeniable "otherness" of the Indians, and the sense that their way of life is perfectly suited to their environment. During a humorous meal-time scene the story's underlying theme of live and let live is voiced clearly:

> Smiling broadly, Lodlihont and the Indian woman, whose name was Kahawit, placed a large iron kettle of stew and a wooden platter of golden-brown trout beside the strawberries.
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> The fish and the scones disappeared quickly, but the Indians didn't seem to think much of our roast turkey. When I peered into their iron kettle, I felt the same way about their stew. There was a muskrat head floating right on top. For a second I felt a little queasy, and Mama looked rather doubtful too, but we both took a little of the unfamiliar fare. The only one of us who really enjoyed it though was Mr. Butler, who kept dipping a wooden ladle into the kettle. Obviously he'd eaten that kind of stew before and liked it (p. 91).

The dangers in the flight to Canada are very real. A hunted man with a wife and eight children makes a highly visible target for suspicious militia-men, and when the family splits into three groups for safety in the early part of the journey, the possibility that the separation might be permanent creates some tense moments. From the opening lines of the story, M.B. Fryer quietly weaves together the threads that form the strong fabric of the Seaman family, and once all of its members are reunited, and the fear of capture recedes, the strength of the family unit emerges as the most important element of the story.

By modern standards, Caleb and Martha Seaman are rigid, austere parents, but in the eighteenth-century wilderness setting, the unquestioned authority of the adults and the children's acceptance of their proper place within the hierarchy of off-spring can be seen as a necessity for survival. But the Seaman children are by no means repressed automatons. Fifteen-year-old Sam is an argumentative young hot-head with an eye for a pretty girl, while Cade, the eldest son, is a steady, reliable fellow much like his father. The four youngest children form an amorphous blob of "little ones," from which four-year-old Sarah pops up now and then in bouts of naughtiness, but the main interest centres around Ned and thirteen-year-old Elizabeth.

As the eldest daughter, Elizabeth is encumbered by domestic duties at which many a full-grown woman would quail. Washing, cooking, cleaning, mending, caring for the little ones—Elizabeth's lot seems a hard one, and yet, despite the burden of her adult responsibilities, she manages to find time to be a child. She and Ned, whose most endearing quality is his sympathy for his sister, go off together whenever a rare opportunity presents itself; Elizabeth has taught herself to swim—an unmaidenly activiy about which her mother knows nothing. When her father's precious anvil falls into the river, Elizabeth is faced with the dilemma of saving the family fortunes at the cost of revealing her secret skill. The outcome of her decision causes a positive change in the relationship between mother and daughter that heralds a happier life for both of them in their new home in Canada.

Mary Beacock Fryer has created a fine tale of a close-knit family caught up in a true adventure. She herself is a descendant of the real Seamans who made the journey from Schenectady to Johnstown in 1789, and she does not romanticizes her forebears; naughty Sarah is spanked when she needs it; tempers fray, and the children worry when their mother is too fatigued to nurse the baby. Ned's role as child narrator is validated by convincing characterization of him as a basically sensible boy, perceptive, but not precociously talented.

Stephen Clark's abundant illustrations reinforce Ned's realistic narration; he shows the Seamans as a pleasant but homely-looking family, rather on the short and stocky side. His incidental drawings of a sparsely furnished room, a spinning-wheel, a wagon, and other single objects complement the story with clean, simple lines and provide a visual background for the sense of simplicity and strength that *Escape* evokes.

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