

A Story of the Rebellion of 1837

CLAIRE ENGLAND

To Hang a Rebel, D. Harold Turner. Illustrated by Merle Smith. Gage Publishing, 1977. 218 pp. \$9.95 cloth.

In this historical novel, Doug Lachlan is willingly caught in the events surrounding the Rebellion of 1837 in Upper Canada. In that year, Doug is a self-reliant, motherless lad of fifteen, who, because his father must travel west, is sent to join the household of William Lyon Mackenzie. To save his Da' money, Doug decides to walk the corduroy road from the Lachlan farm in the Niagara peninsula to Toronto. This journey begins the adventures, and is the device that explains the historical situation.

Novels that hold the interest of young or indifferent readers require a rapid exposition. *To Hang a Rebel* complies. Before Doug's departure, readers learn that Mackenzie was a friend of Lachlan Sr. in the "auld land before we all came out to the Canadas". The compatriot pro-reform bias is established early, and is confirmed by the forbidding English schoolmaster although he warns Doug that rebellious reformers are against God and the natural order of a ruling aristocracy. Further exposition comes en route to Toronto as Doug meets both rebels and "robber barons" at first hand. Camped at night, Doug has the chance to save Patrick Rafferty, Mackenzie's organizer, from the bullying Squire and the "high-stomached boyos" of the Family Compact.

The plot is simple: a series of adventures as Doug undertakes to be a messenger for the Reform movement. The historical events offer dramatic incident, and the story-line adheres to chronological sequence as the narrative order. This order has the merit of making an historical novel easy to follow, and is one of several ways in which the book is constructed for ease of reading.

Another way is by use of simple characterization. Mackenzie and his followers all receive favourable descriptions of physique and character. Patrick Rafferty is, as his name conveys, a charming, raffish Irishman. Mackenzie is described as having charm and magnetism. He is "an old-faced little boy," a bald-headed excitable elf with a wicked smile. He has a habit of throwing his red wig about. Mackenzie's

welcome is generous. Praising Lachlan Sr., Mackenzie immediately takes Doug into his domestic heart and political confidence. Mackenzie's friends and family are equally open and hospitable to the stranger at their gate. Not always consistent credibility between character and action, but then this is a story of adventure for adolescents, and Doug is the stalwart hero.

Characterization for incidental persons relies on stereotype; it is a little better for Doug who does undergo some development. Doug is stocky, the physical picture of a sturdy soul. He is stolid. His initial views are maintained. Adolescent readers will respond gleefully to the apparent cleverness Doug displays in splitting hairs over his devotion to the truth. He discerns a great difference between lying by statement and concealing the truth by maintaining silence. (This difference occurs more than once and is the humour in the story. Other humour is supplied by the description of a fat, mean member of the Compact being pulled through a carriage window.) Doug's character development is minimally marked by his reaction to the rebellion, and more by his realization that Mackenzie has faults. This recognition of Mackenzie's flaws is also the author's concession to objectivity. Readers, along with Doug, learn that Mackenzie's temperament is not conducive to successful conclusion of a rebellion.

Mackenzie's opposition have less favourable appearance and character. Family Compact men are "prideful lairds," with whom "everyone knows there is no reasoning". Their sons are arrogant scions. Doug's first encounter in busy Toronto is with these inhospitable scholars of Upper Canada College as they loaf beside St. James Cathedral. When Doug asks for directions to Mackenzie's house, the young gentlemen band together to beat the "country bumpkin". One lad, superior to the others, Laurence Todd, sides with Doug. "Laurie" soon becomes Doug's friend, and, by the book's conclusion, is swayed to the rightness of the reform cause. Most characters are static, labelled by appearance and deed into either the self-indulgent, bad ruling class or the selfless, good reformers.

Style also appears consciously employed to promote ease of reading. Sentences are usually short and simple, a construction for an intended audience of juveniles between eight and twelve years who have not acquired much appreciation of literary style. The author primarily relies on adjectives and localisms to highlight the style. Doug frequently uses a Scot's accent or idiom, but this touch of verisimilitude is not allowed to obfuscate an understanding of the story. If a boy enjoys the *Hardy Boys* series, he will find similar satisfaction in this novel.

The reader will also gain historical knowledge. For if the simple style is deliberate, the same deliberation has been used to establish

accurate setting in time and place. Unfortunately, the unelaborated style tends to prevent the creation of a permeating atmosphere of the times. In the illustrations, Mackenzie bears a sketched facial resemblance to his portrait in official archives. The black line drawings contribute either a mysterious-adventure mood or an historic reminder of costume, but illustration cannot create the necessary sense of immersion in historical event. This novel operates on the level of easy reading adventure set in past time.

The climax comes in the search of Mackenzie's house for evidence to hang the rebel, in the gradual dissolution of the rebellion and in Doug's imprisonment in a shed. Predictably however, there is rescue and reunion with Lachlan Sr. who has arrived at a moment of crisis. A departure for the Prairies follows, and a later letter from Laurie acts as historical epilogue.

Turner's novel is roughly on a par with John Hayes' *Rebels Ride at Night* which deals with the same subject for the same age or grade level. *To Hang a Rebel* should generate some enthusiasm for Canadian history in the novel. It could not be used for any great understanding of the social, economic or political climate of Upper Canada in the late 1830's. Nor is it a notable book in any literary sense. It is worth comment as good recreational reading. It has a audience firmly in mind, and mixes equal parts of action and easy readability with History's spoon.