

# Converging Art Forms: Sports and Literature

JAMES S. REANEY

*Canada's Sporting Heroes: Their Lives & Times*, S.F. Wise and Douglas Fisher General Publishing, 1974. 338 pp. \$14.95 hardcover.

*The Wild Canadians: Hockey's Bush League Champs*, Chip Young. Illustrated by John Mardon. Clarke Irwin & Company, 1975. 44 pp. \$5.95 hardcover.

*The Wormburners*, John Craig. Illustrated by Alan Daniel. Scholastic-Tab, 1975. 159 pp. \$1.15 paper.

The three books above are all nominally sports books, or as Jon Stott has already argued earlier ("Hockey Books and the Young Reader", *CCL* issue 5/6), books *about* sports. Stott has suggested that all such works face a basic problem; the author must use literature (one art form) to describe sport (another art form). All three of the books under review deal in quite different ways, and with varying degrees of creativity, with the translation of sports into literature. After discussing the books, I would like to conclude with another look at the concept of translation that Stott has introduced.

*Canada's Sporting Heroes: Their Lives and Times* is a Big and Beautiful series of mini-biographies of athletes inducted into Canada's Sports Hall of Fame. Each section is introduced with a chapter concerning the history of the particular category of sport in Canada. S.F. Wise and Douglas Fisher open with the declaration that they hope to write a history of sports as popular culture without reflecting traditional academic prejudices:

In their attitude towards sport they (Canadian academic historians) reflect not only a traditional academic prejudice but also the values of our society's directing groups. The concern of these groups has been with government and commerce, and with that form of culture characterized by small audiences and large subsidies. Mistrust of athletic and hermetically embalmed "culture" are both survivals of our puritanical past. . . . (*CSH* p. ix)

Such ambition reflects a bias all its own ("small audiences and large subsidies") and in the course of the book one senses that despite the attempt to write a populist history of Canadian sports Fisher and Wise are somewhat uncertain of the relationship between sports and society. To pick three biographies (Tom Longboat, Marilyn Bell, Bruce Kidd), from among many in which society may be seen as a negative, even corrupting force and to find in each case that social criticism has been kept under control is still to come

away from *Canada's Sporting Heroes* with the feeling that the lives are epic and the institutions are compromising. The sheer exploitation of Longboat, the wild irresponsibility of the press in their coverage of Bell, and the increasingly radical politics and sports analysis of Kidd all provide substantial opportunity for analysis of the place of the athlete and of sports in Canadian society. As noted, however, Fisher and Wise concentrate on individual heroics, and the flavour, not the structure, of the times. When the stories are fascinating—and many are spectacular, whether it is Tommy Burns fighting Jack Johnson, or Noel Macdonald as the buzzer sounds, sinking the winning basket after playing an entire game for the Edmonton Grads—this approach does work well and takes up some of the theoretical slack.

If there is a coherent theory of Canadian sports history here, it is an impression of a regional Canada already receding, once dominated by extraordinary athlete-personalities like Ted Reeve. This subtle implication unifies *Canada's Sporting Heroes* and gives some of the work a near-elegiac tone. Other books may reconstitute Canadian social structure more successfully, but these wonderful stories and eyewitness accounts and generally evocative photographs secure a neglected dimension of our past and will introduce to the young reader, a hundred potential books ready to be written.

*The Wormburners* by John Craig is another kind of sports book entirely. It is a realistic novel and from the cover illustration by Alan Daniel (inside illustrations are more appropriate) one might assume that the book is all loneliness and long distance running. Which it isn't: *The Wormburners*, if such a parallel may be allowed, is actually a serious *Bad News Bears*. Some of the same elements that made the film so successful—the group of kids bonded together in apparent futility, the occasionally inept coach, and the unexpected thrill of co-operative triumph—are here. What the Bears played for laughs, though, the Wormburners play for real.

The Wormburners. Great Kids. Maybe, just maybe, Calladine mused, if they could beat the odds in their running they could beat the odds in their lives. (*WB* p. 17)

The Wormburners, some of whom “run fast enough to burn the worms in the ground” are a club of teenage runners whose boy's cross-country team has a very longshot chance at the national championship. Obstacle after obstacle, chiefly financial, is confronted on the way to the nationals, including a witty and well-handled (by the Wormburners and by Craig) meeting with what must be the Toronto City Council. While the Council formally rejects their request for funds, several Council members help the club raise travelling expenses in a chapter (“Go, go Don-in-o!”) that is a fine balance between the serious and comic.

As a book about cross-country running (keeping Jon Stott's observations in mind), *The Wormburners* evokes the mystical spirit of the runners,

and the special world that the race represents. Craig makes this explicit through Calladine's thoughts in passages such as this one, contrasting their lives as Dead End Kids with their communal existence as the Wormburners:

All together they couldn't raise enough cash to pay for a single meal at one of the gourmet restaurants whose lights were pulsating in the gathering darkness not far beyond Wedley Park. But what they shared, no amount of money could buy. (*WB*, p. 13)

Specific information about cross-country is divulged by the narrator, not the characters. This use of narrative voice allows Craig to develop the fourteen to sixteen-year-old characters as teen-agers. The members of the club are largely defined in terms of spunky loyalty to each other, with less successful interludes taking us into individual homes, away from the running.

Only Coach Calladine suffers as a character because of this general separation of action and narrative voice, perhaps because the separation is not so rigorously observed in his case. Calladine is an interesting figure: he can only find work as a night watchman, is continually late, drinks too much, and breaks his leg in a careless accident at work. In spite of such all-too-human details, refreshingly so when one considers the paragon too often found as coach in similar works, Craig also has Calladine function as the narrative conscience. If there is a flaw in *The Wormburners* it is the frequent disparity between Calladine's actions and his all-too-articulate (or clichéd) thoughts.

The three concluding chapters depicting the national championship are a complete success, however. Craig is able to integrate the physical details—the pain really—of cross-country running, the determination of the worm-burners, and Calladine's reflections into a suspenseful and satisfying conclusion. The final confrontation between Calladine and a novice reporter (“a pleasant and sincere young man who didn't really know much about the sport”) underlines for once and all the border between those sharing the inside of cross-country, and the outsiders who can only guess at the story. Recommended, especially for readers of ages eight to fifteen.

*The Wild Canadians: Hockey's Bush League Champs* by Chip Young appears to be a much slighter, less ambitious book than the other two. This short story (beast fable?) about two teams of animals playing off for the Little Brown Jug, symbolic of supremacy in the North American Bush League Hockey Championship, does indeed tend to resist analysis, rather pleasantly. A few relaxed points can still be made about its style without critical overkill.

*The Wild Canadian* is patterned after the Thornton W. Burgess books with eggstealing mischief, missing bobcat kittens, folk wisdom and some of the particular regional flavour of Burgess. Some of the names (Slick Otter, Rascal Coon) are also in the Burgess tradition, while others (Boom Boom Bear, Rink Rat) are familiar as hockey nicknames. Young is even able to draw on television cartoon animals—the meandering navigator, Capt. Wrong Way Pelican, is a variation on the legendary Capt. Wrong Way Peachfuzz of

the *Rocky & Bullwinkle Show*—without losing the awe appropriate to a Burgess book:

Little Hewey Beaver relaxed. He loved to fly with the great white pelican, whose movements were easy, unhurried, and graceful. There were nearly 2000 such birds (rocking chairs of the air, Grandpa Groundhog called them) nesting, and raising their young, each summer, on a rocky, windswept island in Lake of the Woods. . . .(TWC p. 4).

Young handles the hockey match in a deliberate and affectionate parody of Foster Hewitt calling the play-by-play. We enjoy Hewey Beaver's opening cry of "Hello, hockey fans in Canada and the great outdoors everywhere" (TWC, p. 2) and subsequent commentary. Further than this, *The Wild Canadians* is contemporary enough to include the Wild Canadians' acceptance of Coy Bobcat as a female goalie:

"We don't care," Uncle Shack shook his head. "A goaltender is a goaltender." (TWC, p. 26).

Howie Meeker's enthusiastic praise on the back is justified—*The Wild Canadians* is thoroughly enjoyable.

If one can draw together the differing tendencies in each book with Jon Stott's terminology (the team game as an artistic construct to be translated into words), a tentative synthesis may be achieved. From *Canada's Sporting Heroes* comes the notion of our athletic history as a true index of the Canadian character; from *The Wormburners*, a feeling of the demands of team psychology; and from *The Wild Canadians*, the suggestion that our attachment to sport is inevitably bound up with our attachment to the media personalities who announce it. Do they form an artistic construct independent of the given sport if they are combined? Perhaps, and the combination certainly indicates the possibility for an art that is recognisably Canadian, complex psychologically, and as familiar as Foster Hewitt. And it may be the best way for books about sports to rejoin our literature.

*James S. Reaney was a contributor to CCL's special issue on Canadian children's drama.*