Thunderbird: The Quest for a Nation

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Thunderbird, Colin Partridge. Illus. by Susan Hackett. Catalyst Press, 1979. 131 pp. $6.00 paper.

Like many books, Colin Partridge's *Thunderbird* reflects its cultural and political moment. Published in the year before the Quebec referendum, *Thunderbird* attempts to understand this nation's dilemma through the adventures of a twelve-year-old boy on Vancouver Island. This is its larger concern. More immediately, the book tells how Darien, the twelve-year-old, becomes involved in the struggle of the Hapolite Indians to save their heritage and their ancient totem, Thunderbird, from the rapacious greed of the white man for land and valuable artifacts. Darien's experience of the Hapolite people and their fight brings maturity; he comes to comprehend on a personal level what the reader understands on a national (and, indeed, international) level, that all people are "separate yet related, bonded by invisible ties but secretly unbonded" (p. 131). To learn this Darien must undergo an ordeal; his naive trust in people falls apart, but a stronger grasp of human reality replaces it. The ordeal – by fear, pain, blood, and cruelty – provides the book's adventure. And both the adventure and the larger thematic concerns which derive from it transcend the historical context of a threatened Canada.

So far the book sounds rather sombre. It *is* serious. Fortunately the plot moves swiftly and excitingly. The story begins when Darien's aunt, with whom he has been staying during his summer vacation, leaves him on a lonely stretch of road somewhere in the interior of Vancouver Island. His uncle is ill, and Darien is to catch the bus back home. Before the bus arrives Darien smells smoke and fears the forest might be on fire. He investigates and finds a burning cabin outside of which two men struggle with a third who is bleeding from a head wound. Darien offers to help, but receives for his kindness a knock on the head which renders him unconscious. He wakes to find himself a captive of a band of cutthroats working for a real estate agent named Zarkin, and for a mysterious boss whose voice Darien faintly recollects. The villains, as it turns out, have engineered the destruction of the Hapolites' seaside reserve by selling adjacent land to a lumber company. Once denuded of trees the hills have no water break and the Hapolite land floods. The deeper reason for this action is that the mystery boss wants to obtain the Hapolite treasure, Thunderbird.

This sets up the story which proceeds from one confrontation to another as the villains try ruthlessly to obtain their end. What comes to mind, although the books are dissimilar in many ways, is *Treasure Island.* The

adventure is hectic, and the boy must take a man's part; the villains are hard and unsavoury (except for their leader); the violence is swift and uncompromising. I cannot recall the number of deaths in *Treasure Island*, but six die brutally in *Thunderbird*. One could quibble here: in *Treasure Island* death is quick and expected; pirates are synonymous with bloodshed. Partridge's book, on the other hand, brings violence closer to home. This is no mythic island of romance; this is Vancouver Island in the 1970's, and the violence of Theodore Dark and Trench is terrible in its familiarity. Clearly, Partridge wishes to give his readers, young and old, a compelling experience, but the difficulty arises from the clash between a stern realism and the higher adventure of romance.

The problem is perhaps best exemplified in the scene where Darien shoots the hateful villain, Trench. Like Israel Hands in *Treasure Island*, Trench is the worst of a bad lot, an Indian-hater and a cold-blooded killer. He is, by the way, associated with the military in what is probably a sign of the author's distaste for the organized violence of conventional white society. The important difference between Jim Hawkins's dispatching of Hands and Darien's wounding of Trench is this: Jim acts instinctively when fighting for survival. Darien acts to save his friends, the Hapolite leader Mavron and the mountain man Jeremiah. But before he acts he thinks: *This man has done so much harm. He's a killer . . . He'll kill again. He wants to kill. He'll kill Jeremiah, my friend . . . He deserves to die, but – must I be the one to do this? . . . Who am I to kill? I can't be judge and executioner. I can't''* (p. 121). This is rather too portentous. And anyway, does anyone ever *deserve* to die? The question is worth asking – but not here. We are asked to accept Darien's reasoning and to sympathize with it. Trench does not know Darien is pointing a gun at him, yet Darien pulls the trigger. Not even in romance could this be termed acceptable. Mind you, Darien does not shoot until Trench has killed two Hapolites, and he only wounds the villain, but this is cutting things a trifle fine.

Paradoxically, this book which is filled with violence espouses a pacifist attitude towards aggression. All the violence derives from the white characters: Dark, Troebel, and Trench are a singularly ferocious threesome; Jeremiah carries a belt of knives around his waist and uses them viciously at least once; and Darien lashes out in fury pounding Troebel's face mercilessly. The Hapolite people, however, have a tradition of non-violence that their young leader, Mavron, is determined to preserve despite extreme provocation. The Indian band exact no revenge from their white tormentors; they merely ask to be left in peace. In a significant gesture near the end of the novel, Mavron takes from a secret compartment in the Thunderbird totem a two-hundred-year old parchment upon which is written a message of friendship to the Indians from James Cook. After reading the paper, Mavron releases it, allowing it to drift to the nearby river where it slowly sinks. As he does this, he remarks: "White man's treaty."

This desire for separation brings us back to the larger issues of people culturally secure yet humanly aware. The Hapolite people, not the white man, are the standard of a healthy society in this book. Familiar white society with its vampire greed looks on the Canadian landscape as a blood bank to satisfy the lust of the national economy; the future of the countryside has been decided by "some line drawn on a surveyor's map, legalized in the provincial capital" and the faceless bureaucracy has thoughtlessly "determined a new face for the land . . . a face fearfully scarred" (p. 49). This is an ecological adventure! The Hapolites are part of a mythic Canada: a people primitive, yet civilized, close to the land, secure in their identity, held together by a centre strong in tradition. They are their Thunderbird. Yet the significance here reaches not only to Canadians, but to all people. The themes of *Thunderbird* – of national pride and integrity, of growth and trust, of unity without uniformity, of peaceful coexistence – we can commend to any reader Canadian or otherwise, young or old.

I was about to add, "male or female," but this book might be best categorized as a "boy's book." Its rough and ready violence and its characters make it well suited to young boys' tastes. On the negative side, the style of the book often reminds me of the pulps. Here is part of the description of a car advancing at night along a difficult mountain track, its "headlights *biting* the darkness": "The *dark, chugging rectangle* with the lights at its *nose* seemed a *thing* of *immeasurable* strength as it *wended* along the *narrow ridge* of *road high above* the *eerie* valley" (p. 59. Italics added). The qualifiers are numerous, dragging the prose to a crawl (like the car?), but even more disturbing is the imprecision of the description. Is this advancing automobile a live monster, a robot, or merely a rectangle of motorized metal?

But one can quibble over any book. *Thunderbird* is a well-meaning adventure that will particularly appeal to boys from 11 to 15. In this book, they may not experience the fineness of technique displayed in *Treasure Island*, but they will thrill with Darien's dangers, and learn about tolerance as well.

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