"Nothing Odd *Ever* Happens Here:" Landscape in Canadian Fantasy

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> . . . She added rather sadly, "Besides, I don't know if there *is* any magic in Canada."
> "Why not?" asked Robin.
> "I don't know why," Susannah replied. "I wish there were. But everything's very matter-of-fact here and logical."
> "What's logical?" asked Robin.
> "Oh – things happening because of a reason. Sensible. Nothing odd *ever* happens here." (*Magic for Granny*, p. 2)

Why not, indeed? Susannah echoes Sheila Egoff's observation that the Canadian environment seems, for some reason, inhospitable to fantasy.[1] Not only have there been comparatively few fantasies written in Canada, but the authors of those few have for the most part avoided making the Canadian landscape a significant element in their fantasies. The novel in which Susannah's comment appears is a case in point: although concluding that magic really can occur "right here, in Canada" (p. 101), when its author sends the children to find magic talismans they go to India, Peru and other countries but make no journeys within Canada.[2] *Magic for Granny* is a slight work, but it does illustrate two characteristic aspects of Canadian attitudes to fantasy – our sense of an oppressively pragmatic approach to the environment, and our tendency to locate fantasies in "Secondary Worlds," the Third World or, best of all, England. A survey of the genre shows our fantasists experimenting with interestingly varied uses of landscape, but only a few managing to make a significant use of Canadian settings. Too often, the fantasy seems to become a means of escape from an empty, mundane or intimidating environment rather than a transformation of such an environment by the revelation of spiritual powers within it.

Although writing about Canada in their adult fiction, both Margaret Laurence and Mordecai Richler set their first children's books in England. *Jason's Quest* apparently was inspired by the presence of an unusually large number of moles in the garden of Laurence's cottage in Buckinghamshire, England; the rose bushes of this garden appear in the novel as "the Pink Jungle" whose exotic blooms stimulate Jason to seek adventure. Laurence's technique is that of miniaturism – the familiar world seen from the different perspective of a small animal. Although hardly original, the device is used to humorous effect in describing the animals' adventures in London, riding on the Underground and climbing into Nelson's lions in Trafalgar

Square. Another aspect of miniaturism in the novel is less successful: Laurence imagines tiny replicas of human institutions existing for the benefit of small animals. The Persian Room is a "cat boo-teek" which "handles a nice line of bells and baubles and bows" (p. 100), while the Petunia Patch is an animal night club.

> Sitting around the tables, or dancing on the small circular dance floor, was a motley collection of cats, mice, and pigeons. On a raised half-moon platform at the end of the room was the band: two mice playing guitars, two mice singing, two cats playing trumpets and two cats playing drums. All were dressed in purple velvet jackets with gold epaulettes shining on the shoulders. (p. 162)

This kind of cuteness denies the real nature of the animals and offers little in its place except a gimmick. The idea of a miniature world concealed within the larger human landscape has been used effectively elsewhere – in *The Borrowers*, for example – but is not well carried out here. Although it also evokes *The Wind in the Willows* by making its hero a mole who, at the start of the book, leaves his confining burrow to explore the wide world, *Jason's Quest* has none of the deep feeling for the countryside which distinguishes Grahame's book. Grahame conveys to the reader a vivid sense of how the world might smell, feel and sound to a little animal coming out of its burrow. Except in a very few passages, Laurence fails to do this. Her descriptions of the terrain the animals cross on their way to London are scanty and unremarkable; the river her animals encounter is simply a river, a wet obstacle, not The River of *The Wind in the Willows*.

Richler's *Jacob Two-Two Meets the Hooded Fang* also opens in his own house in England. Like Laurence, he delights in naming and briefly evoking the atmosphere of specific London localities. From "a rambling old house on Kingston Hill in England" the story moves to Richmond Park, nearby, where young Jacob falls asleep in a fog and has his dream-adventure with the Hooded Fang. The landscape of the dream is mock Gothic, with some of its horrid features drawn from the less appealing aspects of the English landscape – an excess of fog, and clammy stone buildings infested with deathwatch beetles. It is, however, essentially literary in its sources, and facetiously exaggerates its horrors.

A more serious and detailed use of a British landscape by a Canadian fantasist is in W.T. Cutt's *Message from Arkmae*. An Orkney islander by birth, Cutt uses these remote and rugged islands as the setting for a fantasy in which the sea animals warn mankind against ecological disaster. The protagonists of the story are "selkie" boys, with seal blood as well as human in their veins, and the novel beautifully evokes an island world in which land and water mingle as closely as the disparate strains of the "halflings" ' ancestry. The most arresting image in *Message from Arkmae* is that of Hildaland, a great cavern reached through a whirlpool and inhabited by the last of the Finmen. The seals use part of the cavern as their refuge, and here deliver their message to the boys. Although the cavern is

quite credible as a natural phenomenon, its symbolic power as a mysterious sanctuary on the border between earth and water contributes greatly to the impact of a book whose theme is the interdependence of all forms of life.

Cutt's other children's books, historical novels, have Canadian settings; it is interesting that he, like Richler and Laurence, should choose a British setting for his fantasy. Its inspiration lies in the Orkney folk tradition of the selkies, as Richler's dream setting comes from the British traditions of Gothic fiction and architecture, and Margaret Laurence's world in the grass was first revealed by such English fantasists as Grahame. In all these works the inspiration as well as the landscape seems essentially British.

The majority of Canadian fantasists do, however, at least begin their fantasies in a Canadian setting, though some then move off into other countries or other worlds. Pierre Berton's *Secret World of Og* opens and closes in a decidedly North American setting, and takes its young protagonists into an underground world which is a miniature and distorted version of that portrayed in the junk fiction beloved of our children. The inhabitants of the Og world re-enact scenes from the comic book westerns which they have discovered on their foraging parties up into the children's playhouse. As in *Jacob Two-Two*, the threats and dangers of the fantastic landscape are not taken too seriously:

> as she looked down again on the scene below, Penny could see why Pamela always laughed at the unbelievable comic book stories. In spite of herself and in spite of the seriousness of the situation, she found herself giggling. It was just too silly for words! It must be a dream, like *Alice in Wonderland*! (p. 63)

The reference to *Alice* is significant. Although the children's adventures in the secret world may be a dream, the landscape of Berton's fantasy does not undergo the dreamlike metamorphoses of Wonderland; indeed, it is sufficiently stable for the new edition to provide us with a fairly detailed map. But the children reach the secret world by following someone down a hold and through a tunnel, and find that they have altered in relative size. Like Alice, they are treated as the grown-ups they appear to be, are questioned nonsensically, threatened and pursued. The secret world of Og operates at a third remove from the reality of the children's ordinary lives. In their playhouse, "situated several hundred yards from the house where the children lived and ate and slept" (p. 13), they indulge in fantasies which they can control – reading, or playing with dolls or toy cars. Emerging from the tunnel, they find themselves in a fantastic environment which they cannot control, until they learn to apply the jargon and the rationale of the westerns from which the Og people have created their own fantasy world. Much of the fascination of *The Secret World of Og* lies in the proximity of the strange to the familiar: one moves from the ordinary reality of the family house to the controlled fantasy of the playhouse nearby, and then by a short journey through a tunnel into a bizarre "secret" world.

The landscape of the world of Og has an internal logic and consistency; as it is situated on an underground river, its vegetation consists of mushrooms, while light is (rather improbably) supplied by the luminosity of the river. Making its inhabitants the "little green men" of science fiction cliché, Berton reverses the colour relationships of human beings to their environment.

> It was only the people who were green, Penny realized; everything else was pink or yellow or mauve or crimson or orange but not green. The people were rather like the grass and trees in the world above, she thought. (p. 62)

The colours of landscape and people in the Og world are used by Berton to make points about tolerance and race relationships. But the book as a whole is written in a playful spirit, and its landscape reflects the prevailing mood of whimsy and make-believe.

Whimsy and exaggeration, more baroque than Berton's, also prevail in Kenneth Dyba's *Lucifer and Lucinda*. The odyssey of a cat journeying from Victoria to Halifax in search of his young mistress, this novel makes many references to Canadian geography. The cat is jolted about in a small plane over the Rockies, rides through the foothills to the Calgary Stampede, skulks in the Saskatchewan bush, is held prisoner in a lighthouse in Nova Scotia, and so forth. But the towns and terrain he travels through are used decoratively, for local colour; landscape actually plays no significant role in the fantasy. The various local settings provide places for the adventures to occur, rather than motivating the adventures themselves.

The use of landscape to motivate and control the adventure seems particularly valuable in fantasies of time travel. Such classic English time fantasies as Alison Uttley's *A Traveller in Time*, Philippa Pearce's *Tom's Midnight Garden* and L.M. Boston's *Green Knowe* series are set in a clearly delineated locale. In each of these books a child living in and interested in an old house finds himself witnessing events which occurred there in the past: setting thus provides a rationale to prevent the time journeys from seeming arbitrary and disconnected.

The gateway between past and present in Janet Lunn's *Twin Spell* (published in hard cover as *Double Spell*) is an old house in Toronto, for many generations the family home of the protagonists. Coming to live in the house, the girls first glimpse, then partially re-enact, a family tragedy which had occurred there 130 years earlier. The crucial events all take place in the house and its garden, as past and present begin to merge for the terrified girls. The house is more than just a device to get the children from one time to another; in a sense, understanding and coming to terms with the history of the house is the central purpose of the action. By providing a fixed point of reference and a rationale for the time journeys, the image of the old house helps to make the fantasy coherent and convincing.

The action of the novel is a process of discovery whereby the protagonists

gradually learn to understand the connection between their present lives and the uncanny experiences they have of flashing back into nineteenth century Toronto. As part of this process of discovery the girls learn something of the development of their own city: their family house began as a lakeside farm, but had long been incorporated into the suburbs of the city. Seeking the house of their visions, the girls journey through the city streets, and only after much searching and speculation do they discover that the visionary house is their own home. Structural alterations, the growth of ivy, and the growth of the city around the house have transformed the one into the other.

> And then she saw it too . . . the picture of their house – Aunt Alice's house. It leapt into her mind, and over it in the same way Jane had seen it – like a double-exposed photograph – was the little house of their dream. Its peaked roof ended just below the tower window, its white wood-carved roses fitted themselves neatly over the pigeonholes of Aunt Alice's house, its front yard settled into the kitchen garden. And just as it had happened with Jane, Aunt Alice's house faded. The dream became reality, and Elizabeth was sharing completely the memory of someone who had lived in that smaller, older house. (pp. 134-135)

The gradual process of coming to understand the history and nature of the house accompanies the girls' growing understanding of the past of their own family, and the tragic incident (a half-intentional murder) which took place in the house over a century before. As they discover and partially relive the past of their home and family, the girls come to a better understanding of themselves and of the value of compassion. The action and concerns of the book are admirably integrated, with the old Toronto house as their central image.

The same integrity is not, unfortunately, to be found in Lyn Cook's *The Magical Miss Mittens*. The time journeys here also begin from an old house, but the children involved have no particular connections with it[3] and are summoned to it quite arbitrarily to undergo a series of encounters with famous people of the past. Cook sets her novel in the Annapolis Basin, and gives attractive descriptions of the local landscape and village life, but these in turn are not adequately linked to the time journeys. In their first journey the children meet Champlain and the Baron de Poutrincourt in 1606 at Port Royal, a local historical site which they had visited with their grandfather. On that visit the rather fey younger boy had seen a vision of the younger Poutrincourt, and it seems then that the book will use time journeys to reveal the history of Nova Scotia. In the next episode, however, the children are in Newfoundland with the Vikings, then at Runnymede holding sealing wax for the signing of the Magna Carta; they are also sent to ancient Greece, Elizabethan England, and Africa during the slave trade. By failing to provide a significant link between landscape and history, the book dissipates its energy and deteriorates into a disconnected series of history and geography lessons.

A similar disunity mars Eva Lis Wuorio's *The Return of the Viking* another overly didactic excursion into history. The children's voyages bacl in time are in this instance all concerned with Canadian history, but the lack any real energy or motivation. Each has a different starting point After looking at a Viking sword in the Royal Ontario Museum, the childre rather arbitrarily push at a door in the eighteenth century room and fin themselves on the shores of Lake Nipigon with Leif Erikson. Durin holidays in Quebec City, on Orchard Island, and at Timigami, they agai suddenly find themselves back in time, involved in historical events whicl occurred in those places. Although the geography of the old city of Quebe is described in some detail, none of the landscapes is deeply or vividl experienced, and there is no inherent connection between the chil protagonists of the book, the events it describes and the settings withi which they take place. Only Janet Lunn, among Canadian fantasists of tim travel, has succeeded in making this crucial connection.

As *Twin Spell* depicted the alteration in Toronto between time past an time present, Suzanne Martel's *The City Underground* imagines a Montrea of the far distant future, after a nuclear disaster has forced society to di out a new city beneath Mount Royal. Venturing up to explore the earth' surface, two boys discover the ruins of the ancient city of Montreal. Marte effectively uses contrast with the machine-dominated sterility of th subterranean city to emphasize the richness and variety of nature in th open air.

> The song of a bird enchanted him, and its rapid flight was even more marvellous. The deep silence of the natural world amazed him after the mechanical sounds of the world run by motors. His sandals trod lightly on the spongy earth of the pine forest. He touched the rough bark of a tree, and blackened his finger in the shining gum. Like Adam in his earthly paradise, Luke discovered the magnificent world that God had created. (p. 49)

Another French-Canadian fantasy, Claude Aubry's *The King of the Thousand Islands*, also uses a specific landscape to point a spiritual moral. Writing in the tradition of the European fairy tale, Aubry gives a fanciful explanation of how the Thousand Islands came to be in the St. Lawrence River and observes that although the greedy and deluded human beings who had them constructed have all disappeared, the islands remain. In both fantasies the landscape stands as a mute witness to the folly of man. It has a somewhat similar function in Anne Wilkinson's *Swann and Daphne:* the beauty and self-sufficiency of nature, particularly as represented by the two children, are contrasted to the vanity, greed and folly of human society. In none of these books, however, is landscape description a significant element in the story.

The fantasies of Christie Harris also have a didactic edge, although in structure they are novels rather than fables. One difficulty in discussing Harris as a fantasist is that her books postulate the validity of para-norma

phenomena – the fantasy, she insists, is not really fantasy. Real or unreal, the spirit-life with which Harris' characters come into contact is always intimately associated with the natural life of a specific environment, as it is in the Indian legends which she has studied and adapted elsewhere. *Sky Man on the Totem Pole?* and *Mystery at the Edge of Two Worlds* are not full-fledged fantasies but do both contain fictional episodes where modern children have mystical experiences of communication with supernatural beings who inhabit the natural world. The spirit of the mythical Indian princess Skawah in *Sky Man* appears to one of her modern descendants, encouraging him to value the old belief in the inter-relatedness of man and nature, and the immanence of the spiritual world within the natural. But because the didactic and theoretical concerns of this book are so prominent, and because the locale and characters change so frequently, the reader is not left with a vivid impression of that Nature which the book is intent on respecting. *A Message from Arkmae* makes a similar point more effectively by depicting the beauty and fragility of a single landscape. Harris' recent novel, *Mystery at the Edge of Two Worlds*, has a clearer focus in its Prince Rupert and Lucy Island settings, and effectively evokes the unusual terrain and atmosphere of the latter. The island is seen first in a painting which has a mysterious, visionary quality; her reactions to the painting and then to the island itself eventually impel the protagonist of the story to accept and use her own psychic gifts.

Secret in the Stlalakum Wild, Harris' only true fantasy, also concerns a young girl's attitude towards the natural environment. Again set on the Northwest coast, it stresses the wildness and mystery of the area, where stlalakum or uncanny presences abound. "The timid gasp and edge away from the silent forest, away from the lonely waters. For there *is* something strange about the northwest wilderness" (p. 4). The stlalakum spirits, it emerges, are concerned with the threat of civilization encroaching on these their "last hiding places" (p. 5), and so take a rather gormless young girl on several out-of-the-body tours in a cloud to persuade her to help preserve the wilderness. Harris' descriptions of the plant life on the mountain trails are exact and vivid, as are the heroine's timid reactions to the wilderness.

> Fallen timber lay crumbling, rotting away, with flabby fungi that seemed like big ears listening for something. You'd need big ears to hear anything, she thought. It was gruesomely quiet. (p. 38)

An uncertainty of tone unfortunately mars all of Harris' ventures into fantasy. Sincere as her beliefs in the "stlalakum" world may be, she never succeeds in making it convincing to the reader. Her efforts to assert its scientific validity only tend to destroy its imaginative validity within the novels. Attempts to rationalize fantasy are almost invariably destructive, and all the quotations from *Wildlife* magazine about experiments done with psychogalvanic reactors don't help at all to make us believe in Morann's experiences with the stlalakum sprites. At the end of the novel, after having laboured to create a sense of the mystical beauty of a mountain valley,

Harris has Morann's father – very impressed with the sight – exclain "Straight out of Disneyland!" (p. 74). The comparison is unfortunate, ar typical of Harris' inability to blend slangy realism with a spiritu perception of power and grandeur in nature.

A genuine sense of this power and grandeur, dwelling within ar transforming the natural landscape, has been achieved in the works of tw Canadian fantasists – Ruth Nicols and Catherine Anthony Clark. Nicho has received more attention, perhaps because her fantasy is closer to th familiar tradition of C.S. Lewis and Tolkien, but Clark is the more origin writer. Her fantasies make a unique and distinctively Canadia contribution to the genre, largely due to her imaginative use of settin Clark lived for many years on a ranch near Kaslo, B.C., and th magnificent landscape of the Kootenays is the setting for all of her bool but one. The landscapes she describes are quite as varied and dramatic those used by Tolkien, Lewis and Ruth Nichols – high mountains wit glaciers and deep canyons, hot springs, great lakes, marshy river flat hidden valleys and barren hillsides riddled with mines. The difference is th Clark actually lived and worked in this landscape and knew suc surroundings as her everyday world, not as an imaginary or seconda world. She thus handles them with a fresh sense of physical realities, i addition to their literary and psychological symbolism. Familiarity wit wonders might perhaps be expected to inhibit fantasy, but Clark manag instead to bring the familiar and the marvellous together in a distincti way. Since her characters already live amidst scenery of dramatic contras and extremes, and close to vast tracts of virtually uninhabited land, she do not have them journey far away on their spiritual quests. They need onl ride over a mountain pass visible from their ranch-house, or row to the f shore of their own lake, to find themselves in a world as wild and strange the mountains between Narnia and Archenland, or the marshes, plains an mountain ranges of Middle Earth.

Sheila Egoff's strictures against Clark as "uncommitted in her attemp to contrast the everyday world with the fantastic"[4] have been challenged b Keiran Kealy, who observes that rather than failing to write the tradition type of "otherworldly" fantasy, Clark is attempting something quit different. Her fantasies are set

> in the still living tradition of Indian legends, a tradition in which it is often difficult to distinguish between the natural and the supernatural, the real and the fantastic, or as Clark suggests, between the Inner and the Outer Worlds. The fantasy, the magic, the influence of the supernatural are always there – in the *real* world – awaiting the imaginative, sensitive person.[5]

The landscape of all of Clark's fantasies after *The Golden Pine Con* (where some of the supernatural events take place at the children's ow home) is an extension of the known, familiar landscape, which i realistically evoked and yet also imbued with magic. While some fantasis

like Garner, Mayne and Janet Lunn have the magic break into the everyday world of their characters, and others such as Lewis, Tolkien and Ruth Nichols transport their characters into other worlds, Clark's characteristic technique is simply to lead them a few miles away to find a world which is both strange and familiar, real and unreal – an authentic world of fantasy. From that world the children return home with new strength and understanding to cope with and appreciate their ordinary environments.

All of Clark's fantasies are quest stories, in which the characters journey through rugged terrain towards some landmark such as a mountain or the entrance to a secret valley. The landscape thus imposes some of the tests by which the protagonists develop their courage and prove their worth: climbing dangerous screes to rescue the Silver Man, or venturing through the foggy pass that leads to the valley of the Sun Horse. Although the landscape may be dangerous and taxing to travel through, it is never evil in itself. A neutral, amoral landscape is unusual in quest fantasies, but it effectively reinforces Clark's emphasis on the necessity of individual responsibility and action. If elements of nature are manipulated for evil by a malicious person or spirit-being (the polluted Ghosts' Pool in *The Hunter and the Medicine Man* or the poisonous hot springs of the Flower-Witch in *The One-Winged Dragon*), the questor must and can find a way to overcome the malefactor's influence. He, rather than any external powers of good or evil, determines what he shall become and what shall happen to him. Nature is simply a fact of life, often urging egocentric man to a better sense of proportion:

> It was a weary ride up and round a mountain that the children could not even see. The fog was thick and far below them they could hear the roar of a gigantic waterfall where the river fell down into the Indian valley. That made the climb seem unnecessary and provoking but mountains do not move for anyone's convenience. (*SH*, p. 118)

Certain landscape images recur frequently in Clark's fantasies, most of them significant features of the Kootenay landscape. A mountain pass or a lake provides the transition from the ordinary world to the world where spirit powers are operative, and it takes a while for the children to realize that they have passed into a different kind of reality.[6] From the place of transition the children journey through a place of desolation (Ghosts' Pass in *The Hunter and the Medicine Man*, the sea voyage of *The One-Winged Dragon*, the barren mountainside above the Frozen Man's cabin in *The Diamond Feather*) to a community, usually an Indian village. This community situated in a fertile valley and out of touch with the modern world, is an image of a benevolent society living in harmony with nature. In *The Silver Man* and *The Hunter and the Medicine Man* the communities are on the verge of disintegration because their leaders are bewitched, and in *The One-Winged Dragon* and *The Sun Horse* they are threatened, respectively, by famine and by the malice of the Thunderbird. To preserve the village and to complete their own quests, the children must journey

further. Each book thus maps a journey which moves by exacting stages of initiation and transition deeper into more secret and more sacred places. At these shrines in mountain caves, grottoes, islands and secret valleys the protagonists attain purification and self-knowledge.

Fog and cold are also recurrent images in Clark's fantasies, ambivalent in their significance as are most of her nature images. Fog guards the sacred places: it protects the narrow entrance to the valley of the Springs of Morning in *The Sun Horse*, and shrouds the passage to the world of the dead in *The Diamond Feather*; however, in *The One-Winged Dragon* and *The Hunter and the Medicine Man* evil characters make use of fog to conceal their doings and to trap the unwary. Cold from the mountains, a spiritual frost as well as a physical one, "gets into the blood" of the Frozen Man in *The Diamond Feather* and the young chief in *The Silver Man*, but heat too may be dangerous, and both the Flower-Witch (*OWD*) and the Wild Woman (*SM*) use heat destructively. The Mammoth, on the other hand, uses a sulphurous hot-springs for healing purposes (*SM*). Although the icy mountain peaks are the home of the fearful Silver People who have lost their humanity (in *SM*), the brutal Hoo-Doo (*OWD*) and the Ice-Witch (*GPC*), they also enclose the secret valley of Tekontha, benevolent ruler of the Other World (*GPC*). Thus no element of nature has a single meaning for Clark; the natural world, like man himself, always retains the potential to be used for either good or evil.

Iconography apart, Clark's use of landscape also adds a texture of earthy detail which helps to make her fantasies credible and memorable. Her mud really squelches, and her ice is really slippery. Sometimes the passages listing the wildflowers and other vegetation along the questors' route are too lengthy, but the natural descriptions are always closely observed, and add conviction and specificity to the larger features of the landscape.

> Now the trail wound down the hill between two dark buttes of lava. The little defile between them was open to the west and full of sun. It was warm and steamy and a small hot-spring gushed from the rock and wound away in a yellow-stained channel. The place was like a park, full of flowers, and everything sparkled with moisture. Maidenhair fern grew in thicker clumps than they had ever seen; the large white-crepe blossoms of the thimble-berries starred the shady places, golden musk flowers rimmed the watercourse and the lavender spikes of wild holly-hocks were like garden flowers. But above all the place smelled of roses, wine-pink and pale, that bloomed in every nook and cranny and spangled all the place. It looked as though someone lived here for the grass was short as if pastured. (*SH* p. 119).

The "yellow-stained channel" and the cropped grass here are the sorts of detail which help us to believe in the place, and thus in the fantasy as well. These are not just the Perilous Mountains and Comforting Valleys of every quest fantasy; they are real places which Clark knows, and makes real to us as well.

Clark's achievement emerges clearly from a comparison with the fantasies of Louise Riley, slighter works in a similar vein. Riley's *Train for Tiger Lily* and *A Spell at Scoggin's Crossing* both contain a real feeling for landscape, and so partially succeed in evoking the atmosphere of the Alberta prairies and mountains in which they are respectively set. But the scenic description is often clichéd.

> A small boisterous stream tumbled beside the tracks. No trees grew along its rocky banks, but farther back there were white birch and alder, their leaves dancing in the breeze. Behind them the dark pine-covered slopes rose steeply, enclosing the valley, and at its head stood a majestic snow-capped mountain. (*A Spell at Scoggin's Crossing,* p. 23)

Even where the setting is more freshly evoked, it is not brought into a significant relationship with the action of the books. The magic adventures are rather trivial – tricks performed by Gus and the porter/magician which don't arise naturally from the place or the people involved. Although *A Spell at Scoggin's Crossing* is partly concerned with the spiritual strengthening and redirection of a troubled boy – a theme typical of C.A. Clark's work – Riley does not use the boy's surroundings to help bring about this change, as Clark would have done. The change is accomplished by a deus ex machina who might as well have been living in the middle of a city. Similarly, the crusty hermit Mr. Bendigo at first seems like one of Clark's hermit characters who has withdrawn from human society for a closer, cleaner contact with nature, but he is easily persuaded to give up his solitude to go and claim a dukedom. Nature in the wilderness is made pretty rather than awesome (e.g. the handling of Ursa, the bear), and while the high-spirited fun of the books may carry the reader along, there is ultimately little there to make a lasting impression on his imagination.

In the fantasies of Ruth Nichols, imaginative force is achieved by an essentially symbolic use of landscape: following the tradition of Lewis and Tolkien, they are set in other worlds, where the terrain reflects the moral and spiritual condition of its inhabitants, or of the questors passing through it. Although sometimes derivative, it is vigorously evoked and effective in its function. Both of her children's fantasies begin in a specific setting in the real world, from which the protagonists are suddenly transported into another realm. They do not, however, develop any significant relationship between the Canadian landscapes and those of the other world, beyond a superficial similarity in that both are dominated by forests and wilderness.

A Walk Out of the World opens in Vancouver – described as "a new city and an ugly one" whose redeeming feature for the alienated child protagonists is an intriguing woods bordering their favourite road. Drawn into this wood in pursuit of a mysterious light among the trees, they find themselves in another world. In this new landscape all the elements are charged with ethical value – they support either the forces of evil (the Black River, the poisoned stream) or the forces of good (other rivers, the lake, the Whispering Plain). Only the forest is ambivalent, dangerous to

both the protagonists and their enemies also.

At certain points these natural elements become almost animate and tak part in the action, notably when the friendly river rescues the protagonist from the wild cats.

> The water began to swirl about her knees. It was as though a sudden flood had swelled the river; but, through her panic, Judith could see no cause for the sudden turbulence of the water.
>
> (*A Walk Out of the World*, p. 107)

It is not clear in this novel to what degree the elements are animated by th semi-human beings who live in them – the River People and Lake Peopl described in Chapter II, and this uncertainty is a major weakness in it depiction of the landscape. One character equates the rivers and the forest "the forest and the rivers have protected us till now. They have longe memories than men, and they remain loyal to the true king" (p. 37). Bu while this memory and loyalty, and the resultant behaviour of the rivers would seem attributable to the naiad-like beings with purple hair who live *i* the rivers, the trees of the forest seem to have their own life and wil independent of the Forest People who are mentioned but never appear ir person in the book. Is it the trees, or Forest People, or both, who think anc act? Can they do so independently of each other? Why are they considerec sometimes as friendly (as in the quotation above) and othertimes as highl dangerous?

> Thorn whispered in return, as though he feared the trees would overhear. "Wild animals fear fire; but trees fear it with even greater reason. Their fingers will not reach down to touch us while we carry this torch." (p. 87)

Although the participation of the landscape in helping or hindering the questors is an important element in Nichols' story, too much is left cryptic or blurred. Her imagination does not manage the vivid creation of new races within nature, like Tolkien's Ents who animate and tend the forest of Fangorn. She suggests such beings, but does not develop their nature or function in the plot, and in this case of the forest she settles for evoking the vague terror of clutching branches exploited by Disney's Snow White.

As *A Walk Out of the World* opens in a bleak and barren urban landscape, and ends its otherworld quest in a White City, one might expect more of a parallel to be developed between the two. Their experiences in the otherworld landscape seem, however, not to equip Nichols' questors in any way to deal more confidently with or to find formerly unperceived beauties in their own world; they are left with a terrible sense of loss and alienation. Judith cries, "I belong here. How can I bear to go back to the apartment house and the pavements and our school with the iron fence?" (p. 187).Obliged to return, she lies on her bed refusing to speak, and is given tranquilizers.

The heroine of Nichols' second fantasy, *The Marrow of the World*, is also an alienated, neurotic personality who does, however, achieve integration and reconciliation to the real world through her experiences in another world. A clearer parallel is developed at the outset between the landscapes of the two worlds. The book opens on an isolated Ontario lake; beneath its surface two children glimpse the walls and towers of a city, which vanish when Philip dives to search for them. When they go out on the lake at night, their canoe is caught in an unexpected current, and beached by a stream in a place where formerly there was no stream. Their cabin has mysteriously vanished, the patterns of the stars have changed, and the children realize that the familiar lakeshore has become another world. This transition is chillingly effective.

Again, the landscape of the otherworld takes an active role: currents carry their boat where they had not intended to go, and "straight, thin [tree] trunks rayed away into the darkness, cutting off their retreat" (p. 89). Virtually the entire landscape of this quest, however, with the exception of the magician's walled garden, is a barren and evil-omened one. Even when the questors finally arrive in the fertile lands of the good king, their adventures still occur in polluted places – the haunted farmhouse, and the ruined tower where Ygerna waits. Lakes, marshes, plains, forests and mountains all seem bleak and ill-intentioned.

> On the fifth day the river ended and lost itself in a desolate marshland of stagnant water, willows, and brown reeds. Here and there a late water lily, bright as a buttercup, bloomed among the rushes, crowning a long stem gray with slime. "We must take care," Herne warned. "The water here is shallow and choked with rotting logs. . . ."
>
> It seemed that the marshland had gradually engulfed what had once been a living forest; for now from the water reared the trunks of drowned trees. Their wood was silver-gray with disease and age. Twisted roots splayed their arms above the water, and the way was choked with fallen branches.
>
> Linda had read about the Dead Sea where, when the water is still, one can glimpse in its depths the cedar trunks of an ancient forest. But now the ghostly wood was all around them. She shivered. "What a horrible place." (pp. 44-45)

Such a powerfully negative landscape inevitably suggests comparison with Browning's "Childe Roland to the Dark Tower Came" in which every feature of the landscape similarly seems blighted, distorted and evil to the protagonist. Nichols follows Browning in having the landscape manifest the psychological state of the protagonist, rather than existing as an objective reality independent of human values; it is a neurotic vision, but a powerful one.

The most striking landscape image in *The Marrow of the World* is the subterranean cavern formed by the petrified ribcage of some prehistoric

leviathan. Entering this cavern in search of the Marrow, "the earth from which all life sprang" (p. 56). the questors descend silently along steps carved out of the rock, in whose fossils "the tale of ages lay revealed" (p. 134). Concerned with the vastness and emptiness of geological time, Nichols echoes the cadences and the imagery of "In Memoriam:" "For here we behold the desolation to which all things must come. It is best to be happy within the bounds of our small lives, and bless that blindness and be wise" (p. 134, compare "In Memoriam" #124: "But that blind clamour made me wise.").

Many other details in Nichols' fantasies derive from literary sources — she thus increases the resonance of her work, but sometimes at the cost of its integrity. For example, her dwarves in their mountain caves are very similar to those of Tolkien, and this similarity tends to make us aware of Nichols' comparative weakness in character delineation, and her much less varied and memorable landscapes. Nonetheless, her expressionist technique whereby the landscape becomes a projection of the state of mind of her protagonists, embodying all the doubt and despair of those divided natures, makes her fantasies darkly compelling.

This survey of how Canadian fantasies have presented and utilized landscape reveals something of the variety, achievement and weaknesses of the genre in Canada. Only, but significantly, in the works of Janet Lunn, Ruth Nichols and C.A. Clark has an imaginative use of setting brought about that transformation of the commonplace world into an extraordinary one which is the essence of fantasy. Lunn and Nichols write within traditions which have been mastered within recent years by others such as Pearce, Garner and Mayne; what the Canadian writers do is well done, but has been even better done elsewhere. Clark's fantasy attempts something different: she adapts elements of the older quest tradition to a landscape which is familiar and deeply-known, though at the same time awesome. Her books have thus an earthy realism, which fortifies the fantasy: the dream world and the real world meet, and enrich each other. Clark's books are flawed, but they contain an originality of vision which is derived not from bookishness but from a deeply tolerant humanity and a long and close association with the natural environment. Perhaps these qualities will in time help to establish a new, Canadian tradition in fantasy.

NOTES

[1]*Republic of Childhood,* 2nd ed., Toronto: Oxford University Press, 1975, p. 75.

[2]They do visit a chilly locality called "Eskimoland" but no indication is given that this might be the Canadian North. An earlier fantasy by Read, *The Enchanted Egg*, is set in China.

[3]One character in the book does turn out to be descended from the original owners of the house, but he does not take part in the time journeys.

[4]*Republic of Childhood*, p. 74.

[5]"The Flame-Lighter Woman," *Canadian Literature* #78, Autumn 1978, p. 32-33.

[6]The transition between worlds is less naturally accomplished in Clark's third and fourth fantasies, *The One-Winged Dragon* and *The Silver Man*, written just after she moved from Kaslo to Vancouver Island; they open in the Victoria area and then magically transport their protagonists to Indian villages in the mountains. Her last two novels are again exclusively set in the Kootenay landscapes where her own spirit-powers seemed to operate best.

[7]The light in the woods, which recurs as a mysterious lantern in the forest in Chapter 6 of *The Marrow of the World*, closely resembles the light glimpsed through the trees by Lucy when she first enters Narnia in *The Lion, the Witch and the Wardrobe.*

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