Gordon R. Dickson: Science Fiction for Young Canadians

RAYMOND H. THOMPSON

To encounter a discussion of the science fiction of Gordon R. Dickson in the pages of *CCL* raises, in the minds of most people, three immediate questions: Are these writings Canadian? Are they for children? And do they possess literary merit?

Like all science fiction authors, Dickson belongs more properly to that vast universe of the future which transcends merely national boundaries. However, although he now resides in the United States, he was born in Edmonton and raised in Canada, and traces of this background can be discerned in his work. Thus the hero of his recently critically-acclaimed novel, *Time Storm*,[1] is Marc Despard, whose name is French-Canadian even though he, like the author, lives in Minnesota. Even more interesting is Jerry McWhin, the Scots-Canadian navigator in the short story "Tiger Green" (1965), for he provides a link with many other characters of Scottish ancestry who have settled in a new world,[2] notably the Graemes of the famous Dorsai series.

Of greater significance than such details, however, are the thematic concerns. While it is always dangerous to claim specific themes as "typical" of any nation, some do loom large in Canadian literature, and it is intriguing to find so many of these recurring in Dickson's work. Thus the splinter cultures of the various worlds in the Dorsai series remind one sometimes of Canada's cultural mosaic, at other times of the federal provincial structure; the trials and tribulations of small groups of humans struggling to survive in a hostile environment ("The Odd Ones," 1955; "Our First Death," 1955) recall the hardships of life on the frontier, with nature red in tooth and claw manifesting itself in such episodes as shipwrecks, Indian massacres, lumbermen mangled in log-jams, and the agonies of starvation and solitude;[3] and heroes – such as Donal Graeme of *Dorsai* – who triumph over apparently hopeless odds could easily take their place alongside those heroic and romantic figures of many a fast-paced adventure story by such authors as T.G. Roberts or R.M. Ballantyne.

Dickson even manages to explore the conflict between the individual and the garrison society. Describing the "garrison mentality," Northrop Frye notes that "a garrison is a closely knit and beleaguered society, and its moral and social values are unquestionable. In a perilous enterprise one

does not discuss causes or motives: one is either a fighter or a deserter."[4] In "The Bleak and Barren Land" (1952),[5] Dickson's hero, Kent Harmon, finds himself forced to choose between his admiration and sympathy for the highly independent natives of the planet Modor, and his responsibilities as administrative head of the human colony. In the final analysis, "Like calls to like with the strongest call in the Universe" (p. 213), and Kent, like so many of Dickson's heroes, fulfils his duty to those entrusted to his care, despite personal misgivings. He saves the colony from extinction, but it is a success that brings him no satisfaction, only a weary awareness of his own inability to resist the tide of history: "In the long run the individualist always loses to the organization . . . . Man will win, and Modorian will lose – as far as the races are concerned" (p. 214).

Dickson returns to the conflict between the individual and the garrison society in *Naked to the Stars* (1961),[6] where mankind's expansionist drive through the universe brings him into competition with other races. The human government, influenced by the military establishment's argument that "The only safe way is to be on top" (p. 47), pursues a policy of aggression and conquest. Dissenters are viewed with suspicion and subjected to harrassment. The hero, Cal Truant, is a combat soldier who exhibits the conventional attitudes of his profession: he dislikes members of the Contacts Service, whose job it is to make peaceful contact with the enemy, and he believes in the basic policy of the pre-emptive strike. As a consequence he launches an attack upon an alien town, only to learn that it contains only innocent and unsuspecting civilians. The sense of guilt which this discovery brings initiates a process of change in the hero's attitudes, until he reaches the point where he is willing to destroy most of the human invasion army, including many of his former comrades-in-arms, the woman he loves, and himself, in order to force the military leaders to enter into peace talks. As he changes, Cal comes under increasing pressure from those who possess the "garrison mentality": ostracism, scorn, hatred, appeals to authority, charges of betrayal of ideals and friends. This pressure, however, serves but to sharpen his awareness of the wrongs and injustices perpetrated in the name of human survival, and to strengthen his resolve when he finally presents his ultimatum, peace or destruction. Like Kent Harmon in "The Bleak and Barren Land," Cal Truant feels "small, and insignificant" (p. 156) in his struggles with immensely more powerful forces. Yet he stubbornly persists: "You stick by what you believe, and go on doing what you can in your own clumsy imperfect way, trying to hack out Heaven by next Tuesday, even though practical people like Harmon are sure it can't be done. And damned if you don't make some progress now and then" (p. 153).[7] The novel concludes on an optimistic note, with the vindication of the hero and the promise of a brighter future when men will go "naked to the stars. Without weapons because we don't need them" (p. 153).

The conflict between the individual and a conformist society is not unusual in science fiction, particularly in dystopian novels set in a

totalitarian state, as are Huxley's *Brave New World* and Orwell's *1984*. However, rarely is the theme as central or as pervasive as it is in Dickson's writings where it recurs in novel after novel.[8]

Dickson's "Canadianism" thus emerges as clearly as can be expected in science fiction, but his interest to younger readers also needs to be explained, since his novels are obviously written for adults. Dickson has written books for juveniles: *Secret Under the Sea* (1960) is a case in point. However, I am here concerned with the appeal of his adult fiction to the adolescent. One can, of course, argue that most science fiction exercises a fascination for young people. After all, it is a branch of the romance genre and like its parent it can create a world which dazzles the imagination. Yet clearly some science fiction writings remain truer to the romance tradition than others: the novels of Philip K. Dick owe more to the satire of Swift than the romance of Malory. Dickson, however, does write in this romance tradition,[9] and just as Malory's tales are enjoyed by young and old alike so, I believe, are Dickson's.

Dickson's novels are, of course, studded with those marvellous scientific "discoveries" of the future which allow the hero to perform feats impossible at present. Spaceships can travel faster than the speed of light by jumping into "phase shift" (*Dorsai*); people can move themselves by teleportation (*Hour of the Horde*, 1970) or transfer into other bodies (*The Dragon and the George,* 1976); they can "swim" through space (*The Space Swimmers*) or move forward in time (*Time Storm*, 1977). The sense of freedom and power which such abilities bring appeals not only to the imagination but also to desires which are deep-rooted in the adolescent. On the threshold of adulthood, he longs for greater freedom from parental control and restriction, for the power to do as he chooses.

These twin urges are further gratified by the type of hero who frequents Dickson's novels. He is usually a young man just starting his career, like Mark Ten Roos, the eighteen-year-old protagonist of *The Outposter*, or Miles Vander, the young artist about to graduate from university in *Hour of the Horde*. Regardless of his chronological age, however, the hero's youth is exaggerated by the company in which he finds himself. At the opening of *Dorsai*, Donal Graeme is a cadet graduating from military academy, and his brilliant success ensures that he always remains by far the youngest man of whatever group he joins. Mark Ten Roos takes over command of an entire outpost or colony over the heads of older and more experienced men, one of whom grumbles, "right now you're just another green kid fresh from Earth with your head full of book learning."[10] In *Naked to the Stars,* Cal Truant encounters similar resentment when his rapid promotion places him in charge of Contacts Service on the military expedition against the Paumons. In some cases the hostility or condescension towards the young hero comes from older and more technologically advanced races, as in *Wolfling, Time Storm* and *Hour of the Horde*, where an alien remarks, "one of our people

has fighting abilities worth many times that of the total population of the world. So to us it's a small matter whether you join us or not."[11] This attitude of superiority on the part of older people has infuriated the young since the dawn of time, and it is particularly galling to see "book learning," which has been demanded of them through long years of schooling, dismissed so casually in favour of the experience they seek when they apply for their first job. They can readily identify with Cletus Grahame, fresh from the Military Academy where he has served as an instructor, when he is reminded,

> "Practical experience works."
> "As opposed to theories, Colonel," flung in Pater Ten, gibingly, "as opposed to bookish theories. Wait'll you get out among practical field officers . . . , and discover what war's really like!"[12]

To add injury to insult, this air of superiority frequently masks weaknesses and limitations: the Center Aliens of *Hour of the Horde* "made the decision to scrap their instincts for other abilities . . . . All at once, their road into the future turns out to have been a dead-end route all along" (p. 157); the races of the future in *Time Storm* are shown to lack detached judgement in their approach to dealing with the problems created by the time storm; in *Wolfling* the advanced civilization of the Highborn is revealed to be decadent. In *Dorsai*, Marshal Galt, Donal Graeme's superior, discounts his advice when the forces of Newton launch their invasion, only to discover the young man proven correct, and the former's error is only retrieved by the latter's brilliant counter-attack. In *Arcturus Landing* the actual opposition of the all-powerful Interstellar Trading Company to the development of faster-than-light drive they profess to be seeking is based upon their wish to protect their own commercial monopoly, even though all mankind suffers as a result. Consequently, the hard-won success of the young heroes of Dickson's novels proves doubly satisfying: it redresses the balance of justice as well as avenges unkind taunts.

The basis of the young hero's success is that essential advantage which youth possesses over age, namely flexibility. The much-vaunted experience which the older men and races regard as the basis of their superiority becomes, in Dickson's universe, the source of their weakness. The willingness of the young hero to challenge axioms and long-held beliefs in the face of conventional wisdom leads to his success. In *Hour of the Horde* Miles Vander's refusal to accept either the inferiority of humans and the other twenty-two races contemptuously assigned to the "Fighting Rowboat" or inevitably of defeat by the invading horde, despite overwhelming evidence to the contrary, preserves all forms of life in the galaxy; in *Time Storm* Marc Despard saves the entire universe by challenging the assumptions of the future race with all their technological advances: "It's a case of my being on the outside of your culture, so I'm able to see clearly something you're refusing to see."[13] Since the older humans who wield authority are equally circumscribed by their experience,

they too are blind to the realities which the more open-minded young hero perceives. In *Dorsai* Donal Graeme catches his opponents completely off guard when he successfully disproves "the military truism that goes – you can't conquer a civilized planet."[14] In *The Outposter* Mark Ten Roos' insight into the psychology of the alien Meda V'Dan enables him to free humanity from their parasitic raids when he abandons the official policy of appeasement to launch an audacious retaliatory strike against vastly superior forces. In *Spacepaw* (1969), by contrast, the authorities succeed beyond their wildest dreams when they encourage the young hero to develop and exercise his innate flexibility in the role of the "Unconscious Agent" who is "*forced* to improvise. And, being ideally suited to the situation and the characters in it, he can't fail – we hope – to come up with the ideal situation."[15]

The young hero's triumph against seemingly hopeless odds wins not only the admiration of wise and respected leaders like Sayona the Bond and Marshal Galt in *Dorsai*, General Scoby in *Naked to the Stars*, but also the love and devotion of the heroine. Dickson frequently employs a traditional pattern for the relationship between hero and heroine: though both are of an age, the latter is more sophisticated and socially superior; despite his attraction towards her, the hero manages to offend the heroine at their first meeting, and he must subsequently endure her displeasure through a series of futile attempts to improve their relationship until they are finally reconciled. Dickson's heroines have earned the criticism of feminist critics for their subservience and for the unquestioning loyalty they finally adopt.[16] Nevertheless they do appeal strongly to the adolescent male reader, uncomfortably aware of his clumsy ineptitude yet romantically eager to win appreciation and enduring devotion from those haughty and intimidating beauties to whom he finds himself attracted.

Many aspects of Dickson's novels thus provide wish-fulfilment for the adolescent, but what gives them literary merit is the author's refusal to permit them to remain at this escapist level. Dickson's heroes are invariably flawed, usually by a selfish indifference towards others which originates from some earlier injury at the hands of society. In *Soldier, Ask Not* (1964) Tam Olyn was witness to the slaughter of a group of helpless prisoners, including his brother-in-law; in *Hour of the Horde* Miles Vander must struggle against the limitations imposed by a crippled arm and conventional reaction to it; in *Spacepaw* Bill Waltham is disappointed in his first assignment as a trainee-assistant; in *The Outposter* Mark's parents were massacred by aliens, and his foster-father later crippled; in *Naked to the Stars* Cal blames his father for his mother's death. Extenuating circumstances are no excuse, however. The hero must learn to recognize and accept responsibility for the mistakes he commits and for their tragic consequences, for only thus can he gain the wisdom and fortitude which are vital if he is to triumph over the final challenge to survival.

In *Naked to the Stars* the barometer of Cal Truant's sense of social

responsibility is his attitude towards his friend Walk Blye. After the massacre of the alien townfolk, the worst details of which are subconsciously blocked from his memory, Cal grows increasingly alienated from the rest of society, setting up a protective barrier of indifference between himself and other people: "The thought of this made him feel a sudden satisfaction with his decision to stay isolated, neutral and apart" (p. 60). This withdrawal affects his friendship with Walk, and the latter responds with an insult: "They had been as close as men and soldiers get in service. But they were now openly friends no more . . . . Walk had done it. He had done it all on his own, brought it about himself" (p. 74). At this stage Cal lays all the blame upon Walk. Only later, after he has suffered and grown wiser, does he recognize his own responsibility: "For it was Walk, his dark twin; Walk his other self for whom he was responsible and had always been responsible" (p. 128). Walk had followed his friend's vision of military glory. "And Cal, who had known his lie for what it was from the beginning, deep inside, had escaped his own mirage – but left Walk behind with it, stumbling in the desert. Walk had pursued the mirage of love and, not finding it, had grown more savage and murderous. He would *force* the mirage to be real . . . . But the sin in this, it came home to Cal now, was on Cal's head . . . . If Walk massacred tonight, Cal massacred also" (p. 129). Armed with this realization, the hero is now ready to force the human authorities to negotiate peace rather than perpetuate an unjustified war. His conscious willingness to accept the responsibility for his actions has the effect of releasing the subconscious block on his memory of that initial massacre: "He [Cal's father] had been right about that thin line that marks off the soldier from the murderer . . . . Cal could face this, too, now, as he could face the fact that with the Lehaunan in that village he himself had crossed the line and fallen" (p. 152).

Variations of this pattern recur in Dickson's novels. In *Dorsai* Donal must recognize that his carelessness has been responsible for the death of his brother, Mor, and that his revenge upon the latter's slayer is a failure in compassion, before he can grow into full awareness of his powers as an intuitional superman.[17] In *Hour of the Horde* Miles is alienated from other people at the outset: "All the rest of life does for me is get between me and the painting" (pp. 17-18); but he learns to love his people and his world to the point where he is willing to die in battles against hopeless odds for their sake: "Our peoples . . . are part of us, you see – the way our arms and legs are parts of our body . . . . If our people had to face death, the least we could do – not the most, but the *least* – was to face that death with them" (p. 149). The willingness to make this sacrifice results in the defeat of the horde and salvation of the galaxy. The hero of *Spacepaw* soon sheds his scorn for "this small drab job" (p. 6) of assisting the apparently primitive bear-like inhabitants of the planet Dilbia; he rapidly establishes a bond of empathy with the aliens, which enables him to win them over to the humans' side in a struggle for galactic influence with another crueler race. In *Soldier, Ask Not* Tam's quest to take revenge upon all the Friendly

people for the massacre of prisoners is changed by the recognition of his fear of his "own self-destruction . . . It had not been me, thinking, *what is he doing here, what is he doing to those helpless innocent men!* I had thought nothing so noble. Only one thought had filled my mind and body at that instant. It had been simply – *after he's done, is he going to turn that gun on me*?"[18] Purged by this realization, he can once again appreciate the virtues of faith among the Friendly peoples and work sympathetically as a translator between the far-flung branches of the human race.

The presence of this pattern reveals that many of Dickson's novels are, quite simply, about growing up. The hero learns to accept responsibility for others and for his own actions. This is a particularly valuable lesson for the adolescent, who is moving from the self-preoccupation of childhood towards the responsibilities of adulthood. It is a growth that brings loss as well as gain. If, like Donal Graeme, the adolescent is now "a child in a taller land" (*Dorsai*, p. 521), it is at the cost of much sorrow and suffering. The development of a conscience brings with it a keen awareness of one's own failures and limitations; concern for others renders one vulnerable to hurt and loss. Yet these consequences are willingly embraced by the heroes of Dickson's universe, because only thus can the brighter future of mankind be realized: "Together, the spectrum of their many-colored rays made up the white light of a city. It was the city toward which he and Annie and Scoby – all of them together in the flyer – were now heading above the primitive darkness, as to an inevitable destination" (*Naked to the Stars*, p. 159, *cf. Hour of the Horde*, p. 159).

This note of optimism – which concludes virtually all of Dickson's novels – arises naturally from their narrative pattern in which a superior hero saves civilization from disaster. Most "serious" writers of the twentieth century have inclined towards a pessimistic view of mankind and his future, but the affirmation that man will rise to the challenge of coping with his problems is arguably as valid a deduction from history as the fear of defeat. Moreover, the affirmation that mankind has the potential to succeed if only he is willing to persevere despite discouragement is especially valuable and appealing to adolescents. They represent the hope of the future. If that future is to be a brighter one, then they need to be encouraged as well as warned. And that is what Dickson's writings do.

Gordon Dickson has been deservedly popular among readers of science fiction.[19] Indeed he is one of the few novelists to make a full-time living out of his profession. This very popularity has unfortunately contributed to critical neglect,[20] and it is time that his merits were recognized. His novels certainly deserve a place in every school library and should win increasing and popular acceptance as texts in the classrooms throughout Canada. Young Canadians can find no better introduction to the field of science fiction.

[1]An episode from this novel, published under the title "Time Storm" in *Issac Asimov's Science Fiction Magazine* (Spring, 1977), won the 1978 Jupiter Award, presented by the Instructors of Science Fiction in Higher Education, in the category best novelette.

[2]The author's father is Gordon Fraser Dickson, a mining engineer.

[3]*Cf.* Northrop Frye's "Conclusion" in *Literary History of Canada: Canadian Literature in English*, ed. Carl F. Klinck, 2nd ed. (Toronto and Buffalo: University of Toronto Press, 1976), II, p. 355.

[4]*Ibid.*, p. 342.

[5]Collected in *Ancient, My Enemy* (Garden City, N.Y.: Doubleday, 1974), pp. 170-215.

[6]DAW Books, no. 227 (New York: New American Library, 1977).

[7]General Harmon is the spokesman for the aggressive military point of view in this novel, but his name associated him appropriately with Kent Harmon and his decision to support rather than defy the official policy of human expansion and settlement of alien lands in "The Bleak and Barren Land."

[8]Although some aspects of the theme intrudes into most of Dickson's novels, it emerges most powerfully in *Arcturus Landing* (published originally as *Alien from Arcturus*, 1956), *Dorsai* (published originally as *Genetic General*, 1959), *The Alien Way* (1965), *The Space Swimmers* (1967), *Wolfling* (1968), *Sleepwalker's World* (1971), *The Pritcher Mass* (1972), *The Outposter* (1972), *Alien Art* (1973), *The R-Master* (1973).

[9]See my forthcoming article, "*Shai Dorsai!* A Study of the Hero Figure in Gordon R. Dickson's *Dorsai*," in *Extrapolation*. Dickson's considerable interest in medieval history and romance finds its clearest literary expression in *The Dragon and the George*, set in a medieval world of knights and dragons, ogres and magicians, and fair maidens awaiting rescue in remote towers.

[10]*The Outposter* (London: Sphere Books, 1973), p. 53. Published in the United States by Manor Books (New York, 1973).

[11]DAW Books, no. 303 (New York: New American Library, 1978), p. 41.

[12]*Tactics of Mistake* (1971), collected in *Three to Dorsai* (Garden City, N.Y.: Nelson Doubleday, 1975), pp. 159-60.

[13](New York: St. Martin's Press, 1977), p. 398, cf. 390.

[14]Collected in *Three to Dorsai*, p. 513.

[15](New York: Berkley Medallion Books, 1969), p. 219.

[16]See, for example, Mary Kenny Badami, "A Feminist Critique of Science Fiction," *Extrapolation*, XVIII (1976), 8-9. Most of Dickson's heroines, particularly in the Dorsai series, fit this pattern with minor variations.

[17]See my forthcoming article, "*Shai Dorsai!* A Study of the Hero Figure in Gordon R. Dickson's *Dorsai*," in *Extrapolation*.

[18]Collected in *The Hugo Winners*, ed. Isaac Asimov (Garden City, N.Y.: Nelson Doubleday, 1971), II, p. 470.

[19]In 1965 "Soldier, Ask Not" won the coveted Hugo Award, which is decided by popular vote, in best short story category. In 1966 "Call Him Lord" won the Nebula Award of the Science Fiction Writers of America as best novelette. Other stories and novels have regularly been nominated for awards.

[20]For example Brian Aldiss in *Billion Year Spree* (London: Corgi Books, 1975) merely lists Dickson, among the "swarming talents of the fifties" (p. 298), as an "ambitious and productive writer . . . best known for his Dorsai series" (p. 299). Robert Scholes and Eric S. Rankin in their scholarly study, *Science Fiction: History, Science, Vision* (London, Oxford, New York: Oxford University Press, 1977), do not even mention him.

Raymond Thompson is head of the Department of English at Acadia University, Wolfville, Nova Scotia.