

Isabella Valancy Crawford's *The Halton Boys*

FRANK M. TIERNEY

Isabella Valancy Crawford's reputation as a significant nineteenth-century Canadian writer of poetry and prose fiction is becoming established, and considerable attention has been justly paid to elements of her creativity. The Crawford Symposium, held at the University of Ottawa in 1977, was one major forum that critically assessed her work.¹ But there is a good deal more to be done; much of her work remains in manuscript at Queen's University. A significant part of this deposit is in children's literature. Some work has already been completed: *The Fairy Tales* was published in 1977,² and a critical edition of *The Halton Boys* appeared in 1979.³ This edition presents a comparison and study of the two complete manuscripts of *The Halton Boys*, the initial one called "A Hereditary Prince", and the final with its present title. The study traces Crawford's creative process through five sets of alterations and 11,341 changes from her first writing through to the final ms. A critical "Introduction" summarizes and discusses these changes.

The Fairy Tales and *The Halton Boys* both reveal surprising and pleasurable streams in Crawford's creative impulse. *The Halton Boys* in particular reveals her adjustment from a tendency toward material and psychological realism to a romantic, youthful realism, fit for the taste of her young audience and the requirements of the genre. The book presents an unusual blend of aristocratic and democratic elements in characterization and plot; this blend, and Crawford's unique handling of elements evolving in nineteenth century English and American literatures, constitute the focus of this paper.

The Halton Boys is an adventure story for boys of the nineteenth century between the ages of eight and fourteen. Although the two manuscripts of the book are not dated, it is probable that they were written before 1880 and most likely between 1876-1879. Evidence for this is available from the "Malcolm's Katie" ms. which contains about twenty-five percent of "A Hereditary Prince" on its reverse. It is probable that "Malcolm's Katie" was published in 1884 and most likely written between 1880-1884. Crawford could have used the reverse of "A Hereditary Prince" because it had been replaced by *The Halton Boys*, and, therefore, presumably completed before 1880. Dorothy Livesay, in her biographical paper delivered at the Crawford Symposium, added important evidence for dating Crawford's prose

fiction between 1876-1879:

1876-1879: . . . For a period of approximately three years, no record has been found of any Crawford writings in Canadian publications. During this time, it is believed that Isabella Valancy Crawford was writing prose pieces and sending them to an American publication, Frank Leslie's, and to other U.S. publications. June 25th, 1879: The publication of "Erin to her Grandson", in the *Evening Telegram*, Toronto, on this date, is apparently the first work by Isabella Valancy Crawford known to have appeared in Canada, following the aforementioned period.⁴

The setting for *The Halton Boys* adds internal evidence for this dating because the New York State College town and farm, and New York City itself, identify the story with the United States and form an important link with the American markets and American publishers for whom she was working during this period.

The title itself is an important clue. *The Halton Boys* is a more democratic tale than the aristocratic "A Hereditary Prince", and would, therefore, likely appeal to boys in the United States, and their parents, as publishers would be quick to observe. It would be valuable to have a record of her publication attempts, if there were any, with this ms., but to our knowledge none exists.

Crawford's venture into juvenile prose fiction was consistent with the pattern followed by major writers of adult literature, most of whom wrote stories for young people at some time during their careers, or had their books taken over by children. The list is impressive; a few examples from British literature are Bunyan, Defoe, Swift, Scott, the Brontë sisters, Dickens, Kingsley, Stevenson, and Kipling, and so on into the twentieth century; American writers are plentiful: Franklin, Howells, Bryant, Cooper, Poe, Whittier, Longfellow, Lowell, Holmes, Lanier, Dickinson, Crane, Thoreau, Melville, to name a few. This stream of writers was fed and nourished in the nineteenth century by a striking number of women writers of children's fiction, such as Mrs. Gatty, Mrs. Ewing, Mrs. Molesworth and Charlotte Yonge to mention four of the most prominent, who focused on literature for the young and did much to develop young readers' interests in good reading and to encourage refinement of their literary taste. Charlotte Yonge (1823-1901), for example, wrote over one hundred and twenty books, and is best remembered for historical tales and family stories; the family, of course, is central to Crawford's story with its concern for the reuniting of the Halton brothers Lyon and Larry, and the large, extended family at the Halton "Farm".

Crawford's story was written for the same audience as that of these

women writers and expresses, therefore, much of the same tone and mores. But the sympathetic modern reader who is prepared to understand and accept the limitations imposed by the period and the genre will be pleasantly surprised by her use of this traditional framework, and her innovative creation of unusual characters and fresh settings.

The reader will not be surprised to find such well-worked machinery of the time as a boarding school, the students' favorite store and meeting place, the feuds between Juniors and Seniors, and the class system operational within this framework; but there is a sudden delightful move away from these traditional elements to such scenes as a circus, a pig-pen, and a murky river bank, and to a hero - the eleven-year-old Simfletcher - who is independent of all elements of the traditional mode. The reader is suddenly confronted with the real thoughts and sensations of childhood, of wisdom without the loss of innocence, and is given a judicious, humorous blending of the expected and the unexpected, the familiar and the unfamiliar. The late nineteenth century North American young readers could more readily identify with Simfletcher's personality, quick wit, lively imagination, and exploits than with such familiar figures of virtue, as Larry Halton or "Old Gentle" (Professor Harkleboy). There is in this book a real awakening of the imagination that gives it life beyond the audience and time for which it was written.

This story, therefore, is an unusual blend of the English and American juvenile fiction of the later nineteenth century. The English story written at that time addressed itself largely to boys and contained strong class consciousness; the American story for juveniles had very little class consciousness and eliminated more of the differences between stories for boys and stories for girls. *The Halton Boys* is a cross between the English and the American with the latter dominating the settings, plot, tone, and characterization.

Feeling for the North American way of life evolves through the rural scenes. The barnyards, the small town, the circus, and the folksy characters form the bulk of the plot, the excitement and the dramatic impact on the story. Crawford would have been exposed to such scenes and people throughout her life; they were also the elements most attractive to American publishers of juvenile fiction during her creative period. Stories of this type for girls and boys flourished in the decades from the fifties to the nineties. Crawford's American contemporary Edward Eggleston (1837-1902), for example, published *The Hoosier School Boy* in 1883, (about the time that *The Halton Boys* was ready for publication), a work that has the comfortable, leisurely tone of the soil in setting and character. Even thirty-three

years earlier, in 1850, the American writer "Elizabeth Wetherell" (Susan Bogert Warner, 1819-1885), published *The Wide, Wide World*, and in 1852 released *Queechy*. In both, heroines who are orphans face trials that are resolved with strong Christian fortitude; the settings are New York and its countryside. Crawford's story similarly is set in Upper New York State and New York City; these settings help to create an illusion of reality for one of the largest markets of young readers in the English speaking world.

Yet the first two chapters of *The Halton Boys* have an English thrust in setting and tone. Perhaps this would lead some readers to assume that it would convey didactically the values of Rugby, as found for example in Thomas Hughes' *Tom Brown's School Days* (1857). Crawford was experienced with both American and English literary characters and characterization; many characters in *The Halton Boys*, as will be seen, have a touch of the colouring found in Charles Dickens' work. The personality of Larry Halton and of some background characters at the outset and even in the final paragraphs produce this same British flavor; but the heart of the work does not. The principle of equality found throughout most American fiction of this type emerges repeatedly, though implied rather than expressed, through the wisdom and leadership of the "lower class" characters, and the emotional unevenness and intellectual limitations of some of the principal characters who represent aristocratic values. The blend works. It reveals an interesting side of Crawford's creative impact: her contribution to the transition in juvenile fiction of the period from the aristocratic structure to the democratic framework that dominates modern stories.

Crawford's story does not suggest a conscious plea for the American way of life or a rejection of the English; the two systems blend into a single unique framework, in which both serve their functions well and both emerge as attractive. The most striking difference between Crawford's story and the traditional framework is in some of the characterization and the subtle suppression of class power. In fact, the aristocratic structure remains but is ignored and transcended by Simfletcher. This principle of equality is in harmony with the feelings of most of the youth of North America at that time.

Another element of equality emphasized in juvenile literature written in America in that period was the slowly elevating position accorded to women in society and the increased opportunities offered to them for education. Crawford is inclined to describe their plight but prudently, considering the genre and the audience, suppresses the temptation and protects the artistic integrity of her work. That she was tempted to bring out the secondary and sometimes painful role of

women under the aristocratic system is clear in her first ms., "A Hereditary Prince", where she does describe their situation; she eliminates all such comment from the final manuscript. The blend of English and American attitudes in this story, however, retains the central moral characteristic of nineteenth century literature for children. It is literature of good behavior:

the sense of adventure; . . . the importance of the school and of the playing-field and the code of fair play developed on the playing field; the fierce feeling for right and justice; individualism running into eccentricity; class consciousness; the importance of the nanny and the governess; the pervasive morality usually but not always allied with religion; the humor running so easily into nonsense and fantasy; the tenderness and gentleness and kindness and with it the courage and tenacity and loyalty; the deep feeling for nature - nature tame and neat - and for animals; all these traits that we recognize at once as part of the composite of the English character. From American literature emerges a different picture: equalitarianism rather than class consciousness; a stronger family feeling; adventure, . . . courage and a hatred of the bully; self-reliance; work and the gospel of work; nature in the raw rather than tamed, democracy and humanitarianism, a feeling for fair play and for the underdog; ingenuity and mechanical skill, humor that ran to the boisterous, and the tall story rather than to whimsy or nonsense; simplicity and morality.⁵

The effusive display of feeling, another aspect of the age that is abundant in this story, will require some adjustment for modern readers, especially to the character Larry Halton. Larry is quickly moved to strong emotional responses of love, of sorrow, of regret, in a manner that is demonstrative beyond the comprehension of most young readers today, who are experienced largely in realism. But sensibility was a popular element in characterization during Queen Victoria's reign; tears flowed from men and women without hesitation and with ease; so when Larry, and his brother Lyon too, toward the end of the book, manifest this romantic trait with occasional self-indulgence, this would capture the sentimental young reader, and perhaps many adult readers of the time as well. The display of an acute sensibility is not now fashionable, but the modern reader may be sympathetic because Crawford's incidents and endings always follow naturally and the pathos is genuine.

Today's reader may also think the thematic preoccupation with character-building is overworked. This too was a central pillar of nineteenth century writing for the young audience. The popular magazine, *The Monthly Packet*, which Charlotte Yonge created and

edited for forty-eight years, stated this ideal in the introduction of the first number:

It has been said that every one forms their own character between the ages of fifteen and five-and-twenty, and this Magazine is meant to be in some degree a help to those who are thus forming it; not as a guide, since that is the part of deeper and graver books, but as a companion in times of recreation, which may help you to perceive how to bring your religious principles to bear upon your daily life, may show you the examples, both good and evil, of historical persons, and may tell you of the workings of God's providence both here and in other lands.

The principal, Mr. Beaufield, Larry Halton's guardian Mr. Standish, the narrator, and Larry himself all accept and proclaim through the work the essential need for the highest moral character and leadership, and project its importance into their future lives at the end of the story. But Crawford has welded this theme unobtrusively and artistically into the work. It is an ingredient common to this type of literature in Crawford's time that she has handled with artistic success. Crawford knew how to capture and retain the interest of young readers, whose general criteria for a good story have always been adventure, variety of exciting incidents, the presence of a central character with lofty ideals, and a circle of interesting supporting characters and challenging foils; all presented with suspense, humor, and realistic language and dialogue. Crawford succeeds in creating this fusion in *The Halton Boys* in eight short chapters.

The story begins in a whirl of excitement, exclamatory sentences, bold colloquialisms, and impatience by the young students who have rushed into Mrs. Stuffy's candy store. The third person narrator, describing the store and the warm and playful attitude of its patrons, maintains the action and mood by using language consistent with the popular colloquial idiom of the students - and the readers:

Mrs. Stuffy's minute store on the quiet street behind the -----College, was literally packed with boys. They writhed, howled, hooted, gobbled and roared with the zeal of young savages. They clambered over each other to write their names on the grimy ceiling: took turns in dancing on the one chair which Miss Julia Stuffy had forgotten to remove before the descent of the College hordes: made desperate sorties on Miss Julia holding her in loving embraces while confederates whisked tarts and "Pop" from the unprotected part of the counter; and wasted precious moments in endeavouring to confound Mrs. Stuffy in her arithmetic, an effort in which no one had as yet succeeded, though two generations of boys had given their keenest attention to the task. (9-22)

The store is a small, warm, friendly locale, unofficially a part of the college. Here Crawford skilfully introduces and integrates seven characters: Larry Halton, "Old Gentle" (the delightful Professor of Mathematics), Mrs. Stuffy and her daughter Julia, and three mischievous students, Slicker, Hogg, and Twottles. This variety of colorful realistic characters effects robust hilarity for the opening.

Larry Halton's spectacular entrance, his ego, self-glorification and condescending attitude are questionable character traits in the person whom the reader expects to be the hero of the story. Everything in the plot suggests that Larry is the "Hereditary Prince", the future leader of the community and of the Halton family. But Crawford's portrait of Larry as a sentimental and indecisive seventeen-year-old aristocrat shows the need for a new leader, and hence the eventual emergence of the heroic yet democratic Simfletcher. Larry's ambivalent character, although partially exposed, leaves room to be unfolded and developed in subsequent chapters.

Action follows, in the second chapter, when Larry's guardian reveals that Larry's twin brother, Lyon, who has been supposed dead, is in fact alive and at the guardian's home. When Mr. Standish announces that he has found Lyon, Larry

descended on him like a young whirlwind: he seized that gentleman's plump hands with the strength of four boys, and wrung them until his guardian danced in anguish.

"You've found Lyon!" he cried, "when? where? why didn't you telegraph? Where is he? is he like me? is he like papa? is he a big chap? when shall I see him? Why? Why, why don't you answer?"

Mr. Standish fairly ran Larry backwards into an armchair.

"Sit quiet, you young tempest," he exclaimed, "you have not left a whole bone in my fingers."

The traditional motif of the lost twin is followed tastefully by three well-established devices: first, the father's last "will" of which Larry is executor and custodian; second, the dying confession of the kidnapper of Lyon, fourteen years earlier; and last, the revelation that the kidnapper brought him up "to a life of crime" (161). Larry's acceptance of responsibility prepares him to meet his brother, whom Mr. Standish describes irreverently as a "villain" who has

"barricaded himself in; I let food down to him through the stove-pipe hole, so he isn't starved. Bread and water - not a bite of

anything else. Mrs. S., with feminine weakness pleaded for pie, but I wouldn't hear of it. Hullo! he's at it again!" (240-244)

Mr. Standish calls to Lyon insultingly, "Open the door, you villain!" (272), and the first exposure to Lyon's strong personality follows: "Won't", howled the prisoner, "less ye give yer blessed oath ter let me free. Ain't no law, thar ain't, ter keep a chap in a amatoor jail – let me out, yer old Poll-Parrot!" (273-276) The narrator allows Lyon's experience, character, and personality to emerge through his own words. The plot focuses on the capture and taming of Lyon by Larry, and the growing friendship between the brothers, with a surprising and dramatic ending.

Lyon doesn't know that he is Larry's twin, so he struggles with the problem of recognition; and to convey Lyon's turmoil, Crawford uses imagery and evocative language:

With him, but dark as a demons then, in frightful city prisons; with him in loathsome city lairs where thieves lurked, and murderers hid in their darkness from the darker shadow of the gallows. With him, sullen and lowering, in vagabond marches through the leafy country – with him, ferocious, scowling, savage in all the turnings and twistings of his miserable existence; aye with him *now*, with the sunken, glaring eyes of a wolf; the chalky pallor of rage, terror, and weakness on it. The lath fell from his shaking hands – he crouched back against the wall like a terrified animal, a prey to fright as sudden as it was undefined; his eyes, dilated and bloodshot, never winked, as he stared into those other eyes, so familiar, so strange, so steady.

"Who are ye?" he asked at last, in a loud and hissing whisper; he shivered convulsively – his teeth fairly chattered. (116-132)

Shocked by the revelation that he and Larry are brothers, Lyon feels intense guilt for his past, and suddenly goes blind.

The setting for Chapters Two and Three has been predominantly one room with the focus on the brothers. This continues into Chapter Four while Lyon and Larry get to know each other and while Lyon learns of his aristocratic family and of his great father. During the night, however, Lyon runs away and takes Larry's watch with him. The settings suddenly spread out into a railway station, a countryside, a back road, and a farm; and we meet many new and colorful characters. The timing for this sudden broadening of the story balances appropriately with the open and varied action and personalities in the first chapter.

A month passes; Larry, ill from the hurt of Lyon's loss, goes to his

farm. Larry's severe illness and fragility are just bearable for modern readers, but perhaps quite acceptable for the nineteenth century boy:

Larry wan as a ghost, arrived at the depot nearest the Farm
Lyon could not be traced, and Larry was very nearly broken hearted as Heb lifted him out on the platform like a bit of egg-china. Mr. Standish and the detectives had grimly told him that Lyon had escaped from sheer love of his old criminal life; and the poor lad was bewildered with doubt and sorrow. (164-173)

Larry is met by forty members of the "farm", including Simfletcher. Much more will be seen of Simfletcher shortly; but Crawford at this point blends other farm characters into the story, most of whom have been going through a rehabilitation process. Penny Petrone suggests an interesting model for Crawford's "farm":

The Halton Farm seems to be conducted along the principles promoted by Johann Heinrich Pestalozzi (1746-1827) who in Neuhoﬀ, Switzerland between 1774 and 1780, operated a farm experimenting in bringing up vagrant boys and girls. Deciding that the most natural environment for a child was a loving home dominated by firm discipline, and clearly realizing the importance of emotional security in educational development, he introduced psychology to formal education and attempted to implement his ideas on his farm. His educational principles were love and patience - the basis behind the operation of Halton Farm".⁷

The ideas and work of Pestalozzi were in general circulation in North America from the 1860's onward, and Crawford had probably read them.

On the Halton farm, Larry adjusts to the role of "Father" to the boys, and reconciles himself to Lyon's absence. "Lyon was dead" the next chapter begins:

Lyon was dead. He had been tracked into the country, lost, refound, lost again - then found finally. A barn had been burned, and in its ruins had been discovered the charred ruins of a tramp of Lyon's build - with Larry's watch uninjured beside the body. It was supposed that Lyon had sought shelter for the night in the barn, and accidentally fired it. (1-7)

Larry will stay at the farm for the winter, travel through Europe during the following year, then return to study at Harvard. But central to his life is the loss of his twin brother. With these details quickly established in twenty-one lines, Crawford turns to Simfletcher.

Sim, as he is affectionately nicknamed, is in trouble: "He accidentally fastened himself into the cow-house after setting fire to the straw"

(26-27). His punishment, imposed by Larry, is that he cannot go to the circus that arrives in town tomorrow. Sim waits at the farm while everyone else goes to the circus, and enroute, their wagon, which is loaded with hay for the animals, collides with a circus wagon, and an elephant escapes. Larry, with the help of a mysterious woman circus character, "Mousselle Zephyrine", saves the circus people, the wagons, and all the animals except the elephant. The elephant, in fact, has wandered to the Halton farm, and has playfully picked up a piglet. Sim grabs the elephant's tail, and "swinging like a pendulum valiantly determined in the ultimate rescue of the pig" (137-139), is carried off to the exciting circus setting. Here we meet fascinating new characters: Bobbles the manager, Litledot the dwarf, and "Mousselle Zephyrine".

The first three lines of the next chapter produce the revelation: "Mousselle Zephyrine" is Lyon in disguise. Lyon pleads humbly that he is unworthy of being known as a member of the Halton family because of his disgraceful past as a thief. Guilt and shame lead Lyon to disappear again.

The reader is suddenly aware that this high seriousness and excessive emotionalism are designed for contrast with Sim's comic realism, and a marvellously humorous scene follows in which Lyon's self-pity and Larry's paternalism are deflated. When Lyon, after a three days' disappearance, is discovered in the swampy reeds by the river, Crawford refuses to let the story drop into melodrama. Sim exclaims in a superb four lines:

"It's him! he's been did for! Gosh, what's a feller to do now? I say, you! Lyon Halton! You ain't dead be you? Say! speak up if yur dead, and say so, Lyon Halton!" (420-422)

Sim saves Lyon's life by refusing to leave him alone in self-pity. The brothers are finally reunited permanently.

This chapter has moved among four colorful settings: the circus, river bank, farm, and town. It could be expected that the story should end with the return of Lyon and the reuniting of the brothers. But Crawford gives the second half of the final chapter to Sim. Sim has decided that he should entertain the recuperating Lyon by bringing a steady stream of farm animals up and down the stairs. The last animal is "Billy"; Lyon asks "What sort is he?"

"A bully goat, *he* is," answered Sim. "Wears a beard like Lawyer Jones, he does, an' fights with his head. You blat at him, an' run aside, an' he lets his brow down an' knocks splinters out of the barn door - thinkin' its *you*. Fetch him right up, I will." (243-247)

In as entertaining an escapade as ever ended a book in this genre, Crawford relates the destruction of Lyon's room and a variety of minor injuries to "Old Gentle", Mr. Standish, and Larry. Sim remains at centre stage.

Crawford has taken a simple and traditional plot and surrounded, integrated, and developed it with innovation, colorful settings, interesting subplots, fascinating and dynamic characters, to create a story that is additional evidence of her talent.

Crawford's story is outside of the prevailing trend of young people's fiction of the time. It is akin to the small, growing stream of stories for boys that focus on the common boy as hero, the best examples of which were written about the same time as *The Halton Boys: Tom Sawyer* (1876), and *Huckleberry Finn* (1885). But *The Halton Boys* is not only a distinctive variation on the usual didactic story of the time; it is also a story that implies a contrast of the traditional with the new, the aristocratic with the democratic.

Larry, the stereotyped aristocratic ideal, does not measure up to heroic standards in emotional stability, intellectual astuteness, decision making, or action when he is outside of his sheltered environment. His heroic image largely dissolves as he is faced with challenges outside of his experience. He tends, under these circumstances, to self pity, and to stasis. It is the young orphan Simfletcher, poor, uneducated, culturally deprived, and socially destitute, who, through spontaneous, creative, decisive action, solves one problem after another, from hiding the identity of Lyon, to ultimately saving his life and uniting the brothers. Sim is cool and constant. He is the democratic child of America from the mould of the Huckleberry Finns and Tom Sawyers, expressing, however, a unique witty personality.

This story, therefore, is satisfying reading, calling into play the imaginations of boys, teenagers, and adults alike. It is a humorous novel which also stimulates appreciation for language. There is ample colorful dialect and a pleasing variety of narrative language to harmonize with the rhythms, structures and tones of the speakers and situations, as well as to comment objectively. *The Halton Boys* presents a pleasing spectrum of moral, social, and cultural levels of character portrayal, and a hero in Simfletcher who is outside the traditional nineteenth century heroic framework.

NOTES

¹See *Proceedings of the Crawford Symposium*, edited and with an "Introduction" by Frank Tierney (Ottawa: University of Ottawa Press, 1978).

²*Fairy Tales of Isabella Valancy Crawford*, ed. Penny Petrone (Ottawa: Borealis Press, 1977). Professor Petrone also edited the *Selected Short Stories of Isabella Valancy Crawford* (Ottawa: University of Ottawa Press, 1975).

³Isabella Valancy Crawford, *The Halton Boys: A Story for Boys* ed. by Frank M. Tierney (Ottawa: Borealis Press, 1979).

⁴*Proceedings*, "The Life of Isabella Valancy Crawford", p. 9. Biographical information on Crawford has been produced by the devoted research of Dorothy Livesay, Catherine Crawford Humphrey, Mary Martin, Penny Petrone, Catherine Ross, James Reaney and Margo Dunn.

⁵A valuable overview of this subject, followed by ample examples and insights throughout the text, is offered by Henry Steele Commager in his "Introduction" to *A Critical History of Children's Literature*, ed. A.T. Eaton, C. Meigs, E. Nesbitt, R.H. Viguers, 1st edition (London: MacMillan, 1953), p. xvii.

⁶Georgina Battiscombe, *Charlotte Mary Yonge; the Story of an Uneventful Life*, with an "Introduction" by E.M. Delafield (London: Constable, 1943), p. 67.

⁷*Selected Short Stories*, p. 11.

Frank Tierney, Professor of English at the University of Ottawa, is also the author of the "Silly Sally" stories, reviewed in CCL, #18/19.