The Animals in That Country

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Eyes of the Wilderness and Other Stories, Charles G.D. Roberts. Illus. by Brian Carter. McGraw-Hill Ryerson, 1980. 123 pp. $8.95 hardcover. ISBN 0-07-077829-x.

Among a distinguished company of nature writers at the beginning of the century - Ernest Thompson Seton, Jack London, Percy Fitzpatrick, and (after the First World War) Henry Williamson and Grey Owl - Charles G.D. Roberts was the most prolific, producing novels, romances and over two hundred stories. He wrote about the wild animals of his native New Brunswick, and in his day, his work was very popular. In recent years there has been something of a Roberts revival, marked first by the NCL anthology of stories edited by Alec Lucas, *The Last Barrier and Other Stories* (1958), which was followed by reprints of *Red Fox, The Heart of the Ancient Wood* and *The Lure of the Wild.* Now we have another selection of short stories, *Eyes of the Wilderness.*

The first question that any reprint poses is surely, was it worth doing? Is Roberts still worth reading? The answer, at least to this reviewer, is a resounding yes! These are strong stories, full of excitement and drama; they read easily, they are not too long. A librarian could with an easy conscience push this collection towards a young reader: once the child gets past the first prosy paragraph there is enough violent action to surprise even the jaded TV addict.

The selection has been made with skill, for the five stories give us variety, both in their subject and their dramatic form. The first is a comedy, a simple account of a city man on his first fishing trip, who is observed in his ignorance by the eyes of the wilderness. His catch of fish is stolen by a bear. As an introduction, this story serves its purpose, since the reader is shown a parade of wild animals going about their business: a weasel, a skunk, a porcupine, a wildcat, an eagle and several more. Man is the intruder in this natural world, "the eternal and irresistible enemy." And yet, the story is at odds with the other four: the mood is pastoral, the action slow. A reader should be encouraged to push on.

Roberts claimed that he was a "realistic" nature writer; that is, that he did not describe anything that could not have happened. But one cannot read very far without realizing that though his stories are

carefully observed and vividly described accounts of wild animal behaviour, his "realism" attends to the dramatic rather than the commonplace. His stories tell us of the Fight to the Death, of the Survival of the Fittest, of the strength of the Superior Animal, of Chance, of Fate, and of Justice. The second story in the collection, "The Winged Scourge of the Dark," is about a night in the life of a great horned owl. Roberts shows us rabbits playing in the soft twilight, then the chilling call of the owl, the games frozen, the "dim form" drifting in, the sudden piercing cry, and the strike. The rabbit "gave one short scream of terror, strangled on the instant. Then he was swept into the air, kicking spasmodically. And the dim shape bore him off into the deep of the woods . . . ." As the night goes on we follow the owl's hunting; we watch him kill and eat, kill and eat, and kill. His victims are mice, sparrows, a frog, two turkeys, a hen. The action is violent and sustained, and we become aware of a kind of hubris of the bird of prey, a cruelty which reaches retribution when the owl and his mate are attacked by a lynx. The owl dies defending his nestlings, but the lynx is driven off.

In Margaret Atwood's poem, the animals of this country "have the faces of no-one." They are mere objects glimpsed in the car headlights; they have no place in our imagination. Roberts denies her. His animals are vibrant with life: their struggles, their persistence, their very violence is testimony to the strength of the life force. Roberts does not make them people, but he does mythologize them. He places them in a cosmic order, he gives them Laws, and he sets them down in an enchanted landscape. He is a romantic at heart, a man who has looked at Darwin and seen not tragedy but vitality.

Each story begins with a set piece of landscape description. Roberts' language is poetic; his wilderness world a natural Eden. The light is dazzling, the air is clear, the colours gold, green and purple. The woods smell good. Summer is idyllic, winter savage and cruel. Nothing is ordinary. Inhabiting this unpeaceable kingdom are the Superior Animals, the strongest snow-shoe rabbit, the great black bull-moose, the great horned-owl. Each must defend himself and his mate against all foes; none is ever really safe. Nature is heartless. Only the fittest survive. This world has its heroes, and equally it has its villains: some animals are better than others. Ospreys, Roberts tells us, are "the most attractive, in character, of all the predatory tribes of the eagles and hawks." The osprey is courageous without being quarrelsome, and he minds his own business. (Good middle-class virtues!) And so it is especially proper that when his nest is threatened by a bear, Providence (in the form of a man with a gun) steps in to prevent a tragedy.

Only occasionally do we feel uncomfortable with the author's moralizing. The moose feels "fierce resentment in his heart" at the intrusion of man, and seems just a little too cunning and wise in his retreat to the "moose-yard." In the weakest story in the book, "The Little Homeless One," a snow-shoe rabbit is guided by "the Unseen Powers" as he grows to strength and maturity, and he bravely sacrifices himself "for the safety of his tribe." (This comes as something of a surprise to the reader, since we have just been told that a "rabbit has enough to think of in guarding his own skin.") In much of his work, Roberts had a sentimental and even a maudlin streak, and "The Little Homeless One" comes close to betraying this vice.

Eyes of the Wilderness is a good-looking book, but the illustrations are a disappointment, for they do nothing for the text. There is one to each story, and the animals are shown as though they were stuffed and mounted. This is the easy way to draw: we could have done with some action pictures. When Roberts first published, his artists liked to show the stag at bay, the fatal fight, the narrow escape. Now we play it safer, but we rather miss the point.

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Variations on a Plot: Frank Conibear's Story of a Beaver

RODERICK MCGILLIS

The Wise One, Frank Conibear and J.L. Blundell. Illus. by Michael Bevans. Scholastic-TAB Publications, 1980. 159 pp. $1.95 paper. ISBN 0-590-71023-0.

At least one genre of prose fiction belongs to Canada: the realistic animal story. William Magee, in his essay "The Animal Story: A Challenge in Technique" (available in *Only Connect*, edited by Egoff