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

et al), relates the impetus behind its birth in the late nineteenth century to the theory of evolution. This is undoubtedly true. But there is another reason for the enduring popularity of the animal story in Canada: the Canadian preoccupation with the land, the psychological power of the wilderness. Nature for the Canadian, even the urban Canadian, differs from that of the European; it really is red in tooth and claw. We all feel that bears and beavers, moose and muskrat are part of our existence. The Canadian epic has an animal for a hero, an animal who represents not only the dignity of the primitive, but also the struggle for survival in a harsh and indifferent land. The writer of animal stories has a great respect for the wilderness and its creatures. He also has a problem. As Magee points out when he refers to Charles G.D. Roberts' essay, "The Animal Story," few writers of such tales "succeeded in discovering any other distinctive patterns in plots." There is, as Sheila Egoff notes, "a certain sameness, and even repetition of particular incidents, in most animal biographies."

One cannot deny this. Yet the birth, education, maturity, wanderings, domestication, ordeals by fear and battle, and finally death struggle of an animal can be handled with a greater or lesser degree of literary sophistication. The writer's sense of story and his style can refresh any plot; remember, there are few plots to go around no matter what type of story one wishes to write. The nuances are the things to catch the reader's attention. This is why it is a pity that neither of the critics I refer to above mention Frank Conibear in their account of the animal story; in its quiet way *The Wise One*, by Frank Conibear and J.L. Blundell, is a fine example of the animal biography. Conibear, trapper and woodsman who travelled the North West Territories in the 1920's and 30's, knows and sympathizes with the woods and lakes of the wilderness, and it is his knowledge of wilderness signs that gives the book its special nuance. *The Wise One* first appeared in 1949, and now it is available again in an inexpensive and abridged version with illustrations by Michael Bevans. Although suffering in clarity at times because of the abridgement, the shorter version is intense and spare, nicely capturing the mood of inevitability the book reflects. What is inevitable is intrusion and death.

The book begins impressively. Old Baldhead, the eagle, circles high above a miniature winter landscape (to highlight the Canadian sensibility reflected here, contrast this with Old Nog, the heron, at the beginning and throughout Henry Williamson's *Tarka the Otter*); the grand stretch of time and the smallness of life are evident. A lone trapper with his dog sled enters the scene. Old Baldhead goes his way, and we descend to read the signs of the forest with the old trapper. A story of a remarkable beaver and his large family begins to unfold, told by signs left in nature: varying sizes of teeth marks on stumps,

holes in the ice around which are "blood and fish scales", the skeletal remains of a wolverine, six beaver lodges differing in size and with several scars of forced entry. What emerges in the trapper's mind is a story told him by the Indians of a "black beaver, big and powerful and wonderfully wise." The rest of the book fills in the details only sketched by nature's signs.

The plot is familiar to any reader of animal stories. We begin with an "exodus", a departure from home and a search for the real home. We follow a young black beaver as he exchanges "the security of the lodge for the perils of freedom." He will be the heroic wise one, his wisdom a combination of natural intelligence and lived experience. Conibear here follows the pattern first worked out by Roberts and Seton. Like their animal heroes the wise one is also a rare one: the black beaver is "much rarer among beavers than a silver fox is among foxes." He is a beaver of heroic potential like Robert's Red Fox. He will face challenges from loneliness, otters, winter, a wolverine, the Indians, and finally the old trapper. Although an animal, his resourcefulness, his patience, his loyalty, his industry, and his thoroughness offer lessons for human readers. At times the message becomes perhaps too obvious: "The Wise One was no longer the industrious father who had worked with a cheerful enthusiasm and a stern will to keep a stout roof over young heads and to put up a plentiful feed store to satisfy growing appetites." But by the end, the Wise One deserves our admiration; he is a fitting representative of Nature's beauty and strength. His death is both disturbing – after escaping the vagaries of nature, human, animal and otherwise, he dies in the jaws of a cruel machine-made trap – and ennobling. As does all great tragedy, *The Wise One* depicts a suffering that elevates.

The themes of the book are those of all realistic animal books: fate, time, the cyclic pattern of nature, death, survival, man and animal. Unfortunately, the full impact of these cannot be felt in a version that leaves loose ends (e.g. in the chapter "Parenthood" the "trivial" incident that is destined to "bring great unhappiness to the beaver family" is never fully explained). However, what we have is well worthwhile for its unique view of Nature's "mysteries." Although covering familiar territory, Conibear takes by-ways less familiar. The biblical echoes of exodus, search, and arrival at a promised land are lovely and pointed. The beaver's promised land, like all promised lands in this fallen nature, is precious but temporary. Readers of ten and up will have no difficulty appreciating the message.

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