Atlantic Canadian Historical Fiction: Where is the Drama?

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Atlantic Canada experienced the initial onslaught of European explorers and settlers coming to the vast Canadian land mass. The meeting of aborigine and white man first occurred in this region and, almost from the beginning of European interest, Atlantic Canada was a crossroad for British and French imperial clashes. For strategic reasons both countries desired these bits of land jutting out into the Atlantic ocean and, consequently, natives and settlers often found themselves victims of political systems over which they had no control. The way that writers of historical fiction for young people have shown the interaction of individual characters with Atlantic Canadian historical events in a wide range of novels is the subject of this article.

Authors of Canadian historical fiction for children have rarely captured the drama of the past. "By and large, Canadian historical fiction is a succession of failures. Its virtues have been in the reporting of history, its failings have been literary."[1] The attempt to enhance the past through literary treatment has been replaced by the desire simply to relate the history. The literature does not relive the past, but, instead, shows the past. Readers have been bludgeoned with elaborate sets and prodigious action, but what has been obviously missing has been believable and authentic characters. Historical fiction written with Atlantic Canadian settings has not escaped this general fate.

Events of the eighteenth century set the stage for three major historical repercussions that took place in Atlantic Canada and that, in some way, have steered many a writer toward a prosaic venture for young people. These three happenings were the fall of Louisbourg, the expulsion of the Acadians, and the arrival of American Loyalists to the region.

The romance of Louisbourg, that impregnable French fortress in Cape Breton, built after the fall of Port Royal, incited aggressive New Englanders to attack. The attack on Louisbourg was thus a corollary of Old World politics, but it also involved New World participants. J. MacDonald Oxley's *Fife and Drum at Louisbourg* sets the stage for a religious battle. The twin boys, Prince and Pickles, are representative of New England's Puritan stock who sail under the guidance of Parson Moody to quell any signs of Papist dominance in the New World.

In *Prisoner in Louisbourg* by Zilla and Colin Macdonald the attack on Louisbourg by New Englanders serves merely as a rehearsal for the American Revolution. The Puritans in the novel are angry with Great Britain, but they are also angry with France; they solve the French problem first – or at least that is the impression left with the reader. The fall of Louisbourg is just an event foreshadowing the future strength of the thirteen colonies, rather than a significant historical battle.

Neither book presents a picture of what life must have been like for the inhabitants of Louisbourg, since in both novels the inhabitants are posited as the enemy. There are no glimpses of a struggle for survival, only tales of adventurous and quizzical youths from a completely different culture who emerge as heroes. The reader is left with the impression that these Bostonian youths will go on to greater heroism in the cause of their own nation's independence. Unfortunately, adventurism is an all-too-common element in Canadian historical fiction. Dennis Duffy recently has said of Canadian adult historical fiction: "Physical violence provides an example of the intense and the dramatic far easier to portray than psychological stress and upheaval."[2] Nowhere is this more prominent than in historical fiction for young people.

The expulsion of the Acadians, a historical embarrassment which is still prominent in the minds of many present-day Atlantic Canadians because it still incites antipathy in the hearts of Acadians, supplies a highly dramatic incident for fiction writers. These simple farmers who "chose to style themselves 'neutrals' ", have encouraged many a writer to fulfill a creative need. Their "only desire was to live in obscurity, isolated from the trends of the age." They "were fated to be used by both England and France as pawns in the tremendous game of empire-building in North America, a game that continued to be played from the early part of the seventeenth century for over a hundred and fifty years."[3]

A Land Divided is an adventure story by John Hayes with an obvious cast of good guys and bad guys. The bad guys are the extremist, militant Acadians led by Lucien Vaudreuil and the good guys are everyone else. The hero, fourteen-year-old Michael Harvey, weaves in and out of suspense-filled situations with the ease and expertise of a James Bond. The fact that Michael has an English father, a British naval officer no less, and an Acadian mother never seems to bother him. The author, however, manages to depict the pathos of this dreadful situation in the following passage:

> The news of the transport's arrival had quickly spread to the

> outermost cabins of the settlement, and the valley stirred with a foreboding unrest that could be felt in a dozen ways. Wide-eyed children scurried from their homes in the early morning to snatch fearful glimpses of the ships, then raced back to hide behind closed doors. Grim-faced settlers strode bravely to the shore where they stood gazing at the transports with stunned, unbelieving eyes, and stoical old men hobbled down the road, protesting loudly against the coming removal; others flatly refused to believe that they were going to be sent away, scoffing at the patient efforts of their families to explain that this time the English were in earnest.

Oh, if the reader could only have heard some of the stories of the transportation, rather than the tale of the fortunate Master Michael Harvey! How much more dramatically the plot could have developed with a militant, or a disbeliever, or an angry young Acadian enlivening each page.

Escape from Grand Pré by Frances Thompson consists of predictable characters and a predictable plot complete with a happy ending. It offers a touch of fantasy to an obviously real and painful situation. On the other hand, *Gretchen of Grand Pré* by Lilla Stirling is probably the best of the historical fiction being discussed here. Gretchen is not an Acadian, but of German stock. She does not travel by water to Grand Pré, but instead treks over rough terrain and she does not encounter hostile humans or enterprising escapades but rather her own fears - which she conquers. The author does not attempt to regurgitate textbook history. She makes the reader aware of the dramatic event by staging a scene after the fact of expulsion, and by placing Gretchen in the burnt environs of a culture massacred by two power-hungry nations. Gretchen is the New World innocent exposed to Old World sins and Gretchen emerges triumphant.

The reason for any group of people fleeing to the adverse climate and rugged terrain of Atlantic Canada has seemed an enigma to some present-day residents of this region. Surely the American Loyalists could have gone to a warmer, more hospitable area. Many did; but many came the shorter distance from New England to Maritime Canada. Esther Clark Wright says of the New Brunswick Loyalists: "It was a hard life, and it was for many of the Loyalists a step backward from the ease and comfort they had inherited, to the toil and hardship of past generations."[4]

David West, the hero of Jean Fritz's *Early Thunder,* refuses to accept the political belief of his parents. Fritz's novel relates an inner conflict which is ultimately resolved when Daniel stands up for his belief and identifies himself as a Whig. In contrast, Jamie Hunter, hero of John Hayes' adventure story *On Loyalist Trails,* does not

question the politics or decisions of his parents; Jamie is more concerned with escape than with the events that make escape necessary in the first place. Unlike David West, Jamie Hunter does not question or doubt, but seemingly enjoys what must have been a disquieting situation. The good guys/bad guys formula persists in this novel as well. The Hunters are pursued all the way from New Jersey to the wilds of Central New Brunswick by the cruel and wicked Galloway. It seems strange that a supporter of the republic would subject himself to a Bay of Fundy winter and to navigating the Saint John River merely to settle a political score. Unfortunately, the drama of the historical event has escaped this piece of fiction.

Son of the Hawk by Thomas Raddall may be mentioned here because it relates a Nova Scotia family's participation in the American Revolutionary cause. Although many Nova Scotians rebelled against Great Britain, in their hearts if not in their actions, this event was initiated in and controlled from New England. A highly dramatic speech comes from one Mr. Salter who sums up what must have been a conflict for many English-speaking people settled along the Atlantic seaboard:

> Mr. Salter's tired old voice said bitterly: "He's right lads. No middle road. Ah, good God, the tragedy, the tragedy! So many people here and in the rest of our America want a middle road and nothing for them but a hard choice in the end. God knows I don't love the king or his rotten Parliament. But to cut ourselves off forever from the British people, the men and women who speak our tongue in every part of the world - no! Not that! Anything but that!

A "hard choice" it was, but so few characters in historical fiction seemed to have made it, or if they did the decision occurred before or after the time-span of the novel. This is very unfair to the reader. The dramatic realizations of the characters have been glossed over in many cases and the individual's inner turmoil has become subordinate to plot and action.

The same weakness appears when we turn from stories centred on the three focal topics - Louisbourg, Acadia, Loyalists - to stories of more general reference. Moments of dramatic significance occur among ordinary people accomplishing mundane tasks for little reward. These dramas of daily routine surface persistently in a geographical region that is in opposition to human habitation; a land of ragged coastlines, densely-treed areas and climatic conditions often unfit for any type of work or agricultural endeavor. The people of Atlantic Canada were, historically, an agrarian people plagued with hard work, boredom and lack of money. They always managed a

subsistence level, but not much more. This was hardly the reward foreseen by European immigrants to the New World and it is little wonder that Atlantic Canada was merely a brief stop-over point for many new settlers. As soon as they heard of better opportunities and more hospitable climates elsewhere they left the region. Historically, man-made conditions have also hampered the Atlantic region often to a greater extent than have the geographical barriers. Privateering along coastal regions both frightened and intrigued the local residents, depending on who was doing the privateering. One-company towns, sunk in the rut of primary industry and absolute monopolistic rulers, complicated the life of many simple folk and encouraged them to be as imaginative and crafty as their employer was greedy and inhumane.

Privateering was a way of life in Atlantic Canada. The Maritime inhabitants were either living in fear of New England privateers or were anxious to join their own privateers and experience the romance of travel and adventure usually unavailable any other way to ambitious young men of the regions. According to John Leefe, "privateers were to the Atlantic Provinces what the militia was to Canada. They provided a means of defence managed at the local level and supplemented an economy whose trade patterns had been disrupted by the many wars in which Britain found herself engaged during the eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries."[5]

Upon first glance, none of this seems to relate directly to the precocious Jamie Cameron in *The Trouble with Jamie.* However, the reader is aware of a tremendous personality change as Jamie develops into a mature, reticent young man after four months of privateering. Upon reflection, the reader can discover the reason for the change. The tyranny of the nineteenth-century British sea captains and the boredom of spending long days on a seemingly endless ocean add to a convincing gradual change in Jamie's personality.

Another novel about plundering at sea, Joan Clark's *The Hand of Robin Squires,* presents the wicked, cruel and greedy traits of sea-faring looters. Nova Scotia is considered a treasure graveyard, a place handy for hiding a fortune. The only Canadian landsmen mentioned are the nomadic Micmacs. Even the innocent if somewhat naive Robin Squires returns to England. Atlantic Canada provides a setting for this plot, but the action could have occurred anywhere along the eastern coast of North America.

A comparison of the Old World with the New World appears in two novels by Gordon Cooper, *A Second Springtime* and *Hester's Summer,* which tell the story of the English orphan Hester Fielding who is adopted by the Clark family of Nova Scotia. The stark, strict

and conservative England has been replaced by the open, simple and pragmatic Nova Scotia where opportunity abounds for the bright and the ambitious. Class consciousness and "knowing one's place" evaporates in this rustic setting. However, there is nothing indigenous to Nova Scotia in these novels; no drama of Atlantic Canadian significance is enacted. One hardly sees Hester as the prototypical immigrant, especially as an immigrant coerced into a new life in rural Canada.

Newfoundland and Labrador, those most dramatic of geographical regions in Atlantic Canada, have not escaped the attention of historical fiction writers. On the contrary, many novels for young people have been set in this area of "poor soil and wretched climate",[6] where there has been an "enormous capacity to absorb hardship without sinking into despair and the deep conservatism which assures survival but may indicate an inclination to absorb change rather than to initiate reform."[7]

The reader is exposed to the mere subsistence of livelihood for Billy Harding and his family in *Sawtooth Harbour* by Jean Hayes Feather. Fishing supplies the staple food and principal income. If the catch is bad then living conditions will be severe the following winter. In both *Sawtooth Harbour* and *The Black Joke* by Farley Mowat the characters must contend with domineering merchants who might or might not buy the fishermen's catches. Peter and Kye, the junior crewmen on "The Black Joke", use ingenuity and craftiness to outmaneuver the feudal lord of their village, Simon Barnes. *Lukey Paul from Labrador* by Adelaide Leitch portrays the hardships endured as the result of transactions with a dishonest fur trader. Young Lukey Paul is saved only by combining his imagination with the skills of his Eskimo friend, Mosessee.

Nowhere does life along Newfoundland shores seem more precarious than in *The Dangerous Cove* by John Hayes. Here the inhabitants are visited often by the Devon Captains who demand that the locals leave. The Devon ships want sole command of the lucrative fishing bank. This story informs the reader of the insecurity resulting from constant invasion and the lack of local government in seventeenth century Newfoundland. But the strong coastal people manage to outwit their attackers and become stronger for it. In many ways these hearty souls exemplify those characteristics found in the region as a whole, or so the reader is led to believe by the writer of this piece of juvenile fiction.

Tales of the ordinary events of the past have probably been better presented in fiction than have the ramblings about the "text book"

past because writers of the latter have often become entrapped by battles, politics and famous people. However, all writers are fascinated with adventure: Lukey Paul is a stowaway, Billy Harding is a proficient trap fisherman, Robin Squires single-handedly rescues an imprisoned Micmac friend only to be captured himself, and nurse Hester Fielding rises to great professional esteem in the aftermath of a mining disaster. These episodes are wonderful to read, but the characters have no lasting value. They are cardboard characters only; little of the inner self appears. Age and sex are primarily the two character traits that vary from novel to novel. The characters' response to events does not produce any significant dramatic explosion. The sense of reality of these moments is missing. Where is the doubt, fear, pain and anger? Contrary to the apparent belief of many writers of fiction for juveniles, young people can comprehend these characteristics of man's nature. They have experienced the anguishes of human nature, perhaps not from the same causes as have adults, but nevertheless they are aware of powerful emotions.

In the absence of worthy characterization, what have writers substituted for a dramatic effect? Traditionally, writers of Canadian historical fiction have submerged their stories in the facts of history. The novels reek of important people, events or things. Doctor Wilfred Grenfell apears in both *Lukey Paul from Labrador* and *Sawtooth Harbour*. But here the juvenile reader's experience lets him down because he may not have heard of Grenfell. If the great-hearted doctor is an unknown personality to the young reader, the reason for exposing Grenfell in literature has been lost, especially since he does not emerge in a literary sense in either novel. Readers learn many tales about Grenfell the famous doctor, but they are given very little insight into Grenfell the man. Similarly, Paul Revere is a friend of Eben Chadwick St. Jean de Gervais in *Prisoner in Louisbourg*. But he is merely mentioned in passing and, except for displaying mildly interesting details about shoe buckles, little is revealed of his personality. All these novels are filled with glimpses of governors, military leaders, the famous and the infamous, but these characters only add to the setting of the event rather than to the drama of the situation.

It is as if Atlantic Canadian historical fiction for young people has suffered through a series of bad actors, players entrenched in melodrama. Not enough has been demanded of the readers. It is assumed young people will only read them as adventure stories. Characters are kept simple, events of the past are restricted to those probably most recognizable, anything suspected of being remotely controversial is left out, and action reigns supreme. As a result, historical fiction has suffered. The Atlantic regions abound with the

richness of the past, but the attempt to capture for young readers a representation of the past through historical fiction has not yet been successful.

NOTES

[1]Sheila Egoff, *The Republic of Childhood*, 2nd ed. (Toronto: Oxford University Press, 1975), p. 98.

[2]Dennis Duffy, "Nouvelle(s) France: An Impression," *Queen's Quarterly* 88 (Spring 1981), 50.

[3]Lawrence Henry Gibson, *The British Empire before the American Revolution*, quoted in N.E.S. Griffiths, *The Acadian Deportation: Deliberate Perfidy or Cruel Necessity* (Toronto: Copp Clark, 1969), p. 49.

[4]Esther Clark Wright, *The Loyalists of New Brunswick* (Fredericton, 1955), p. 219.

[5]John Leefe, *The Atlantic Privateers* (Halifax: Petheric Press, 1978), p. v.

[6]David Alexander, "Literary and Economic Development in Nineteenth Century Newfoundland," *Acadiensis* 10 (Autumn 1980), 3.

[7]P.A. O'Flaherty, *The Rock Observed*, cited by David Alexander in "Literary and Economic Development in Nineteenth Century Newfoundland," *Acadiensis* 10 (Autumn 1980), 7.

NOVELS DISCUSSED

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