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Wilfred Eggleston: Frontier Novelist

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Prairie Symphony, Wilfred Eggleston. Borealis Press, 1978. 271 pp. $10.95 paper. ISBN 0-660-00124-1; $15.95 hardcover. IBSN 0-660-00101-2.

An insightful critic of Canadian literature and one of the most important Canadian journalists of the first half of the twentieth century, Wilfred Eggleston is not generally remembered for his two novels of the Canadian prairies. The first of these, *The High Plains,* was written and originally published in the mid- 1930s and subsequently republished in 1975. Eggleston's second novel, *Prairie Symphony,* was written a decade later, but, unlike *The High Plains,* remained unpublished for over thirty years until 1978.

Prairie Symphony recounts the childhood, adolescence, and young adulthood of Christopher Niles, who from his very early school days aspires to be a poet. An orphan, Christopher is brought up by his uncle, who farms in the desolate southeastern part of Alberta known as the Palliser Triangle. Christopher is a misfit, too sensitive for the harshness of farm life, and he is constantly subject to the abuse of his cousins, who perceive him as a burden and who scornfully reject him as a "book worm" and "teacher's pet". Eventually driven to leave the farm,

Christopher goes off to achieve his ambition of becoming a great poet. Unfortunately for Christopher, the realities of drought and depression lead to inevitable failure. But from his failure comes new life, as Christopher sheds his romantic misconceptions to take an active role in the social and political affairs of the suffering farmers, and gains, as a result, a new understanding of their heroic struggles.

As well as vividly portraying life on the Alberta prairies, Eggleston's *Prairie Symphony* is important for anticipating his views about Canadian literature, as he later expresses them in his critical work, *The Frontier and Canadian Letters* (1957). Eggleston argues in this work that the slow development of Canadian literature was the direct result of an adverse physical environment. "It was not so much that the literary flame died out," he says, "as that the intellectual and imaginative faculties were diverted into other channels, in the process of challenging the physical obstacles and of mastering the frontier environment".[1] As well, Eggleston argues that the problem of a limited number of native writers was compounded by the existence of only a very limited reading public; simply put, too many people were working too many long and difficult hours to be worried about reading of any kind.

Christopher Niles struggles to achieve his literary ambition under these adverse conditions, and, on several occasions, there are found in *Prairie Symphony* the views expressed in *The Frontier and Canadian Letters.* At one point, for example, Christopher queries his editor friend Martin Blackwater about why there is no literature of the Canadian prairies. "Because this is a frontier", Blackwater answers, "We're still in the colonial stage". And a few paragraphs later, he directly challenges Christopher when he says, "If you want a native poetry, youngsters like yourself will have to start producing it".

Although not as obviously autobiographical as *The High Plains, Prairie Symphony* also incorporates events and conflicts of Eggleston's own life. Like Christopher, Eggleston was brought up on a farm in southeastern Alberta, although Eggleston's childhood, unlike that of his hero, was a very happy one. Eggleston, too, had no real love for farm life, and left the family homestead while still in his teens. Similar to Christopher, Eggleston squeezed three years of high school into a few months, taught in a one-room prairie school, and was early attracted to writing. Eggleston had his mentor, W.A. Buchanan, at the time editor of the *Lethbridge Herald,* and, similarly, Christopher looks to Martin Blackwater, editor of the *Judith River Record.*

Most important, however, is the way Eggleston experienced in his own life the same conflict between the ideal and pragmatic as does the young protagonist of *Prairie Symphony.* Eggleston himself had aspirations to be a writer, as his two novels and book of poems, *Prairie Moolight and Other Lyrics* (1927) indicate. But from what he writes in his memoirs, *While I Still Remember* (1968), he was also drawn to the more immediate excitement of journalism. Although Eggleston took

the second option, he did not do so exclusively, and he always retained an interest in creative writing and got enjoyment and satisfaction from it. Quite clearly, it seems, Eggleston recognized the nature and extent of his talents and chose wisely; put rather bluntly, *Prairie Symphony* is a good novel but not a great one, while Eggleston's achievements as a journalist are of the first rank. Significantly, it is this need to see one's aspirations and abilities in the proper perspective that constitutes a major theme of *Prairie Symphony*.

Christopher's growth is for the most part revealed in his relationships with three people: Carlin, his talented, older brother; Gail Morrow, an attractive young teacher who boards at the same farm house as Christopher; and Stephen Heller, the editor of the *Alberta Farmer* and a key figure in the United Farmers of Alberta. It is how Christopher sees each of these people and what they stand for that serves as a signpost to his own development as a person.

A violin virtuoso as a child, Carlin is Christopher's idol; he embodies the artistic ideal after which Christopher quests, someone totally committed to his art, who urges Christopher to do the same. He becomes, furthermore, even more influential in Christopher's life after he prematurely dies, for, then, in Christopher's mind, he becomes a true romantic figure, another Schumann or, even better, a John Keats. Only towards the end of the novel, when Christopher finally hears the symphony his brother wrote, does he realize that Carlin was not a creative genius; he was merely a good craftsman who could write imitations of the true masters. In realizing that his picture of Carlin is a romantic delusion, Christopher wonders whether his view of the world, and particularly his own poetry, might also be a delusion. Christopher comes to see that, while he might, like his brother, become a capable craftsman, he is not Byron or Wordsworth, and that he will have to make his mark on the world in some other way. That his brother's composition is called "Prairie Symphony" is not a coincidence, for what Christopher must do in writing the script for his own life is not make the same mistakes as his brother; he must make sure that his life is one of real substance and not a dream or, worse yet, a second-class imitation.

Even more influential in Christopher's life is Gail Morrow, who generates in him his first awareness of love and sexual passion. Naively Christopher believes he must ignore his feelings and live a life of celibacy; he must remain totally committed to his goal. Only when it is apparently too late and Gail is leaving does Christopher realize his mistake, that, like the Lady of Shalott, he is living in a world of shadows. Even his verse, he comes to see, is not concerned with the joys and sorrows of flesh and blood people, but is, as one critic says, simply "descriptions of nature and emotional and spiritual responses to nature's grandeurs". As well as Gail's obvious attractiveness, she is a much more pragmatic person than Christopher, and continuously

finds holes in his romantic idealism. Great poetry, she tells him, will not help the struggling farmer, and she very obviously deplores Christopher's unjustified arrogance, although never to the point where she ceases to find him attractive. Christopher must learn, as indeed Gail repeatedly stresses to him, that there is something heroic in the struggles of the common man.

The most significant individual in Christopher's life is Stephen Heller, who rescues Christopher from almost certain death after he is struck by a train during a snowstorm. But much more than this, Heller saves Christopher's spirit, which seems finally broken after his failure to find a publisher for his long poem, *Domain of the Bison,* to which he had devoted all his energies under incredibly difficult conditions. It is this effort, which, more than anything else, reveals Christopher's unrealistic view of the world. Repeatedly Christopher is told that long, epic poems à la Longfellow are unfashionable, but he goes ahead anyway, believing that his work will be the exception. Heller, however, forces Christopher to look realistically at his life, making him see that fulfilment can be achieved, not only in writing poetry, but in other less selfish and more common ways as well. This lesson Christopher learns first hand from doing humble jobs for the United Farmers, which bring him, much to his surprise, a sense of accomplishment far greater than he had ever felt from publishing a poem in an obscure poetry magazine.

Prairie Symphony is a very readable book, especially for one familiar with Alberta of the 1920s. But it is not a work without faults, most of which are structural and stylistic. Eggleston divides his novel into two parts, subtitled "Solo" and "Ensemble". While the two parts reflect the shedding of Christopher's artistic egotism for a new, less selfish concern for others, they create a rather unsettling break in the book. This break misleadingly suggests that Christopher's transformation is more sudden than it is, and, in general, disturbs the sense of psychological process around which the book is structured. This is not, moreover, the only place where one finds such psychological clumsiness. A conflict rages within Christopher between his love and desire for Gail and his commitment to his writing. While Eggleston generally treats this struggle with sensitivity, he becomes needlessly obvious when he expresses it in a clumsy dream sequence in which Carlin and Gail debate the relative merits of the two paths open before Christopher.

There are a number of other problems as well. Sometimes, the novel becomes excessively preachy, when Eggleston, the social reformer, speaks through his characters. We should, however, perhaps forgive Eggleston here, for the plight of the farmer in the face of government indifference was a crucial issue of the times. Eggleston's language, too, sometimes lets him down. The novel begins rather limply, for example, because Eggleston tries too hard to capture in words the special call from the muse Christopher has apparently experienced. Finally, Eggleston's use of literary allusion is at times too obvious. At the very

end of the novel, Christopher finally decides that his life is incomplete without Gail. Unfortunately, Eggleston compromises the impact of this decision with needless and very commonplace references to Arcadia, the Elysian Fields, and the Gates of Lyonnesse. After having so gloriously described the natural wonders of the Alberta prairie, which can provide all the allusions he needs, such literary references are both artificial and unnecessary.

Yet despite these weaknesses, *Prairie Symphony* is still a thoughtful, sensitive treatment of the struggles of a young man living in difficult times. Although Eggleston finally settled in eastern Canada, he remained a man of the prairies, and is at best in *Prairie Symphony* when describing these prairies and man's struggle to live on them; he poignantly captures the vastness of the land, the cruelty of winter cold and summer heat, and the aching longing of the farmer, who looks to the sky every morning, hoping for rain. Another strong feature of the novel is its historic accuracy, which is not upset by the fictional elements of the story. Eggleston is very careful, as a journalist ought to be, to portray accurately the social and political conditions of the depression years. And also because he is a good journalist, Eggleston is a clear, concise writer, well aware of the need to maintain reader interest. Thus the well-paced plot of his novel is not inappropriate for juvenile readers, who will well understand the growing pains experienced by Christopher. At the same time, a more mature adult reader will appreciate *Prairie symphony* for its portrayal of the conflicts in Christopher's life, which are not unlike conflicts we all must inevitably resolve.

Notes

[1]Wilfred Eggleston, *The Frontier and Canadian Letters* (Toronto: Ryerson Press, 1957), p. 81.

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