Prairie Travel Books: A Trip Through Time

ELIZABETH WATERSTON

One of the favorite poems of my Ontario students is a three-verse lyric by James Reaney called "Winnipeg, Seen as a Body in Space and Time." Reading it, we wing our way to the Red River in its earliest days, and watch the metamorphoses of two centuries. We go to an imagined, imaginable place, a Canadian place; and we deepen our sense of the past – a real, Canadian past.

That kind of trip is something most English teachers treasure. Maybe it's one reason why we are in this profession. We relish the opportunity of passing on to children the sense of adventure, of vicarious experience, that is available in literature. And now that the push for Canadian literature is on, we are searching for ways to make a "Canadian trip" possible.

I would like to suggest that one excellent way of enriching a CanLit course is by referring to the travel books on Canada written over the last hundred and fifty years. Here, literally, is a collection of Canadian trips. These first-hand accounts of the way the country looked can lead to a sense of Canadian place, Canadian themes and Canadian issues, which will illuminate the more strictly *literary* content of the course: poems, plays, short stories, and novels.

Travel books – Butler's account of his encounter with Riel, for instance, or Lady Dufferin's account of her first ceremonial visit to muddy Winnipeg – beautifully recreate the particular past of the prairie region. Such a recreation seems very important now, for several reasons.

First, modern mobility has brought into our classes a generation of students who have had extraordinary experiences of different places, but who have never lived long enough in one place to get a sense of roots, of continuity. Second, the immigrants to our country – and many of us have classes consisting almost entirely of newcomers to Canada – have an urgent need to absorb Canadian traditions, Canadian history. Furthermore, even our native-born students, and even those with a long heritage, need the sense of the past for reassurance, for illumination, for stability. The story of "survival" is an inspiring one. Older books tell young people how much we *have* survived, and how and why we survived.

For instance, first-hand factual accounts of prairie life, in the 1850's or in the 1890's, or in the World War One years, all help students imagine how life was in those days, "out West." Travel books may distort the facts for effect, but they lay a trustworthy base for recreating the Western past. A good list of early travellers who dealt with the prairies appears in Gordon Moyles' *English Canadian Literature to 1900* (Detroit: Gale, 1976); there is also an excellent *Bibliography of the Prairie Provinces to 1953* (Toronto, University of Toronto Press, 1956, revised 1973) by Bruce Peel.

In this article, I will name a few travel books that should be easily available, and suggest how they can be meshed with more imaginative writing to give a poignant account of our prairie heritage. The imaginative works – the novels, the poems, the plays, are, of course, our more obvious concern. Short stories about the prairies, such as D.C. Scott's, or Sinclair Ross's; the Manawaka novels of Margaret Laurence; drama about Riel; poem's such as Newlove's: these are our central concerns as literature teachers. But the historic travel accounts work well in class, in conjunction with those works of the creative imagination.

Suppose you were to begin a course in reading by looking at that Reaney poem mentioned at the outset. "Winnipeg, what once were you?" the poet asks; and his first stanza imagines the Red River Valley as it was before the White man came:

> Your hair was grass by the river ten feet tall,
> Your arms were burr oaks and ash leaf maples,
> Your backbone was a crooked silver muddy river,
> Your thoughts were ravens in flocks, your bones were snow,
> Your legs were trails and your blood was a people
> Who did what the stars did and the sun.

Our earliest travellers tell of "that great boundless, solitary waste of verdure": Alexander Henry, travelling the Indian territories in the 1770's; Alexander Mackenzie, moving West and North toward the distant oceans, 1789-1793; David Thompson, around 1800, exploring and mapping the Northwest; Lord Selkirk, moving settlers into the Red River in 1811; and David Harman, going by canoe, by dogsled, and by horseback, through "The Interior of North America," between 1800 and 1819. All moved through a world almost unimaginable to Europeans. Their travel accounts suggest the strange terrain and the uneasy relations between explorers, traders, and native peoples. Selections from Mackenzie, Henry and Company appear in A.J.M. Smith's *The Book of Canadian Prose*, vol. I (Toronto: Gage, 1965). In a literature class, one would move from these travel books to

the imaginative work of Duncan Campbell Scott: the haunting poem "At Gull Lake, August 1810" or the strange and beautiful stories, "Labrie's Wife," "Spirit River," and "Expiation." The stories are available in Glenn Clever's edition of *Selected Stories of Duncan Campbell Scott* (Ottawa: University of Ottawa Press, 1972) and the poem in Klinck and Watters' *Canadian Anthology* (Toronto: Gage, 1966, 1974). Two excellent novels deal with these early days, W.F. Butler's *Red Cloud* (1882) and W.A. Fraser's *Blood Lilies* (1903), but they are not widely available now. In their place one might round off an attempt to recreate the first days of the white man's entry into the West by looking at Paul Kane's *Wanderings of an Artist* (1859) available in several recent editions, including the beautiful (and expensive) book, *Paul Kane's Frontier* by Russell Harper (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1971). Paul Kane's pictures capture the people "who did what the stars did and the sun."

But we should move beyond the earliest days. Our more dramatic past begins later in the nineteenth century, around the time of the Riel Rebellion. The travel books of this period are easier to get. Many are available in Coles' collection of "Canadian Facsimiles," old books produced exactly as they first appeared. Students reading Milton and Cheadle's *North-West Passage by Land* (1865) in this form, can imagine the contemporary reader in London, England – or in London, Ontario – wondering at the sense of space, of sky, of flatness, the sense of a land largely without markers, human or geographic. Better still, reading William Francis Butler's *The Great Lone Land* (1872), students have an eye-witness introduction to the great issue of the day, the rising, when (to quote Reaney's poem again) "Your people / Had a blood that did what a star did and a Son."

William Francis Butler, Irish-born soldier, travelled from the West first as spy, then as medicine man, and as law-enforcer. The adventures he stirred up, and lived through, were matched by the vigour of his prose, strong in its suspense, vivid in description, flashing with wit. Butler first penetrated into Manitoba via the Red River, from Duluth and Saint Cloud. His orders were to find out the extent of American sympathy with Riel, and to estimate the chances of Fenian invasion from the States. He skirted Fort Garry where Riel reigned, parlayed (on his own terms) with the insurgent leader, then struck up along the foaming Winnipeg River, up the seven portages to Rainy River. At Rat Portage he could stand, in lonely glory, and wave to General Wolseley, as the expeditionary force swept by in great war canoes. He made his report to Wolseley, then returned with the Force to quell the rebellion at Fort Garry. Few passages in Canadian literature are stronger than Butler's story of his encounter with Riel.

We can move from Butler to modern recreation of the Rebellion. Coulter's two plays on Riel are stirring drama; for classroom use I would prefer Don Gutteridge's "Riel: a poem for Voices," available from Van Nostrand. Poems like John Newlove's "Big Bear Poems," in *Black Night Window* (Toronto: McClelland & Stewart, 1968), would complete the Riel unit.

The Riel rising, of course, was tied almost coincidentally to the coming of the Railway. Here again, travel books help recreate the excitement of a crucial Western moment. George Grant's *Ocean to Ocean* (1873), Sandford Fleming's *England and Canada* (1883) and Lady Dufferin's *My Canadian Journal* (1891) are all available in cheap reprints, and all are excellent. From them you could move to Pierre Berton's modern version of the *National Dream* or to E.J. Pratt's classic poetic version in *Towards the Last Spike*. But even Berton and Pratt cannot match the excitement of a first-hand view of the early railway, the sight for instance, recorded by Lee and Clutterbuck in *B.C. 1887,* of a resident agent of the C.P.R., "riding his handcar, accompanied by two large black Newfoundland dogs . . . gliding along the tracks, in his uncanny machine, with long black coat-tails flapping in the breeze and an incongruous solemnity pervading his countenance."

A wealth of reprints can help us build up a sense of the great period of immigration when the west was opened to waves of new Canadians, thanks in part to the railways. We might bring into the classroom books such as two new collections offered this year: *A Flannel Shirt and Liberty: British Emigrant Gentlewomen in the Canadian West*, ed. Susan Jackel (Vancouver: University of British Columbia Press); and *Letters from a Young Emigrant: A Record of Emigrant Life in the Canadian West*, ed. Ronald Wells (Winnipeg: University of Manitoba Press).

As we move into the twentieth century, we find a period in Western history less glamorized, but very well worth re-examining and re-assessing. Those were the years when Winnipeg sprung so surprisingly into city-size. We can recover those lost years with one of the greatest of travel writers, Rudyard Kipling, as he writes in *Letters to the Family* (1906):

> It was the spirit in the thin dancing air – the new spirit of the new city – which rejoiced me. Winnipeg has Things in abundance, but has learned to put them beneath her feet, not on top of her mind, and so is older than many cities. None the less the Things had to be shown – for what shopping is to the woman, showing off his town is to the right-minded man. First came the suburbs – miles

on miles of the dainty clean-outlined, wooden-built houses, where one can be happy and so warm, each unjealously divided from its neighbour by the lightest of boundaries. One could date them by their architecture, year after year, back to the Early 'Nineties, which is when civilisation began; could guess within a few score dollars at their cost and the incomes of their owners, and could ask questions about the new domestic appliances of to-day.

"Asphalt streets and concrete sidewalks came up a few years ago," said our host as we trotted over miles of it. "We found it the only way to fight the prairie mud. Look!" Where the daring road ended, there lay unsubdued, level with the pale asphalt, the tenacious prairie, over which civilisation fought her hub-deep way to the West. And with asphalt and concrete they fight the prairie back every building season.

Kipling's Canadian travel book takes us closer to the too-familiar world presented in James Reaney's third Winnipeg stanza: The "body" of the city is now that of

A Boneyard wrecked auto gent, his hair
Made of rusted car door handles, his fingernails
Of red Snowflake Pastry signs, his belly
Of buildings downtown; his arms of sewers,
His nerves electric wires, his mouth a telephone,
His backbone - a cracked cement street. His heart
An orange pendulum bus crawling with the human fleas
Of a so-so civilisation -

Yes, that is *our* civilization, and in many ways it is a civilization we share with most modern countries. Yet Canadian life seems to us unique, because it is overlaid on a past that is unique. Our roots go into a new northern soil; our voices sound in air that resonates still with the voices of our predecessors.

Winnipeg - or the prairies - or any part of our Canadian experience - can be best "seen as a body in space and time" with the enriching help of readings in past travellers' reports. And perhaps such a "seeing" may ultimately produce new Reaneys, new Wiebes, new Gutteridges, new writers to name the creatures and places of this new Canadian world. That world, as described by Rupert Brooke, the last of the great travel writers, in *Letters from America* (1916), is a world still waiting for its artists, to give it "individuality and a soul":

It is that feeling of fresh loneliness that impresses itself before any detail of the wild. The soul - or the personality - seems to have indefinite room to expand. There is no one else within reach, there never has been anyone; no one else is *thinking* of the lakes

and hills you see before you. They have no names even; they are only pools of water and lumps of earth; some day, perhaps, to be clothed with loves and memories and the comings and goings of men, but now dumbly awaiting their Wordsworth or their Acropolis to give them individuality, and a soul. In such country as this there is a rarefied clean sweetness. The air is unbreathed, and the earth untrodden. All things share this childlike loveliness, the grey whispering reeds, the pure blue of the sky, the birches and thin fir-trees that make up these forests, even the brisk touch of the clear water as you dive.

Elizabeth Waterston is a Professor in the Department of English, University of Guelph. She has contributed an entry on "Canadian Travel Literature" to the forthcoming Oxford Companion to Canadian Literature.