John Craig: an under-estimated writer?

John Ferns

Reputations in Canadian literature being what they are, John Craig (1921-82) is an unjustly neglected writer. By this I mean that when Hugh Maclennan, Morley Callaghan and Mordecai Richler, for example, are so widely known it is unjust that John Craig is so little known. The author of six children's novels, which grow in authority as his writing matures, Craig produced almost twenty books during the last fertile decade of his life. Through writing he developed his craft and as he delved more and more deeply into the core of his experience he emerged with several books for adults and children of the quality of *Ain't lookin'* (originally entitled *Chappie and me*).[1]

The crucial book of self-discovery which led to Craig's final maturity would seem to be *How far back can you get?* (1974), a book of reminiscence which simply, and often movingly, describes experiences in Peterborough, Ontario, when Craig was growing up there between the wars. Two of the experiences recorded there led on to two novels which Craig published in 1979. One of these, *The last canoe,* an "adult" novel, presents with moving power the protest of an Indian tribe against further incursions into its land. Members of the tribe undertake suicidal trans-Atlantic canoe journeys to protest their cause to the Queen. The second 1979 novel, *Chappie and me,* grew out of Craig's experiences with a black baseball team that made annual visits to his native Peterborough. A prefatory page to the latter novel reveals both the autobiographical nature and the truth to life of the experience upon which the book depends. "In essence, this is a true story. I know because I was there, / But it is told under the novelist's licence to shape time and place to his purpose. Let it be the more real for that. / In any event, there *was* a barn-storming black baseball team called the Colored All Stars. / And there certainly was a Chappie Johnson. / This book is for him."

We should note from the fly-leaf of *The last canoe* that Craig or his publisher did not regard *Chappie and me* as necessarily a novel for children since Craig is described there as "the author of twenty-two books, among them *The Noronic is burning, Chappie and me* and, for younger readers, *No word for good-bye.*" This raises an issue which must be considered frequently in the criticism of children's literature. Are not the classics of children's literature — *The pilgrim's progress, Gulliver's travels, Huckleberry Finn* — also classics of literature? Whether or not such works were originally written for children or emerged

later as works enjoyed by children, by virtue of their quality they became classic works of universal appeal. *Ain't lookin' (Chappie and me)* is a work of this kind, like W.O. Mitchell's *Who has seen the wind?* Though written about a relatively young person and presenting reality from his point of view, each of these books can be read with both enjoyment and profit by young and old alike.

In my judgement *Ain't lookin'* is Craig's best novel whether for adults or children (better even than *The last canoe* because of its stronger movement towards life). It is worth a thorough critical assessment. It will be useful to move toward such an assessment via a brief discussion of the earlier Craig novels which he regarded as "books for younger readers."

John Craig's first book, *Wagons west* (1955), was a novel for children. It describes the journey that a wagon train of families makes along the Oregon trail. The usual adventure experiences occur — conflicts with Indians, a snake, and a threatened drowning in rapids — before the family establishes a new home in the West. The journey parallels the young protagonist Dick's increasing sense of maturity; he learns to ride, and his learning to shoot saves his sister from a rattle-snake. Craig's simple style, which becomes a strength as his moral concern deepens, courts banality in the early children's novels. Yet, even there, we see the seeds that will bear fruit later. Of the fearful Mr. Treacher we learn that "even though you had to laugh at Mr. Treacher sometimes, Dick knew he was a good man at heart and could be counted on to do his part" (p. 28). At its best, *Wagons west* can be characterised as a simple account of a young boy's growing up.

The long return (1959) is both a development from and an improvement upon *Wagons west.* Here a young Upper Canadian, Thad Cameron, is captured by a roving band of Indians and after living with them and learning their ways he escapes. After many adventures he is reunited happily with his family. The writing in this second children's novel is more vivid and the handling of adventure and narrative more supple and assured than in the first book. Craig improves as a writer here as he begins to master his craft. We also see him initiate the concern which is central to *Ain't lookin'* — the clash of two races and the possibility of human relationship between them. In *The long return,* although Thad grows to love and respect the Indians, he naturally wishes to regain his freedom and return to his parents. His sojourn with the Indians is used primarily as a means of developing our awareness of Indian ways and of presenting Craig's central subject — the need to create a relationship of trust between people of different backgrounds. Unfortunately our sympathy for the Indians is somewhat compromised by their initial kidnapping of Thad.

The relationship between white man and Indian is central again in Craig's third children's novel, *No word for good-bye* (1969). Here two boys, one Indian, the other white, strike up a friendship during one summer. Their friendship is challenged by a false charge of theft against the Indian boy's brother, a theft which the boys discover to be the work of two white roughs. Simultaneously,

the Indians are being driven from their land. Craig's essential concern, here, is with injustice, with the way in which the weak are oppressed in our society. Though the Indian boy's brother is freed, the Indians nevertheless do not remain on their land. When the white boy goes back to the lake resort at Thanksgiving, his Indian friend has gone, and their summer friendship ends in separation. Craig is no sentimentalist; he realises that not all social ills can be cured.

Confirmation that interracial relationships are the central means that Craig employs to present the need for sound human relationships generally is found in his fourth children's novel, *Who wants to be alone?* (1974), originally published as *Zach* in 1972. Here loneliness is the inevitable consequence of the central character Zach's discovery that he is, perhaps, the sole survivor of a particular Indian tribe. He leaves a reservation in Ontario to search through North America in an effort to discover his lost tribe. What he comes to recognise, however, is that personal relationships are more important than tribal relationships.

This is John Craig's essential point about life. Human beings (whether weak or strong) find meaning and reality (if they find it at all) in relationships with other human beings. This is what Zach learns and it is also what the athletes discover in his fifth "juvenile" novel, *The wormburners* (1975). The sense of team-spirit or group relationship is stressed here as a way of showing what can be achieved by an "under-privileged" group if it works together in a genuine way. *The wormburners* stresses the importance of the poor athletes' belief in themselves which gives them the courage to go out and raise money to support their journey to the national championships and to do well in them. Determination and conviction are important qualities to Craig.

All Craig's major concerns find their best and fullest expression in his final children's novel, *Ain't lookin'* (1983). What is heart-warming and impressive in John Craig is his straight-forward, intelligent humanity, his simple, uncalculating sincerity and truthfulness, qualities which characterise North American life and literature at their best. John Craig's direct championship of simple human verities and virtues is what helps make him more important than many other Canadian writers. The concern we find in *Ain't lookin'* with the need for loving relations between man and woman, and between black and white, is the same concern we find in *Huckleberry Finn* and *Who has seen the wind?*, a concern which characterises the central, moral tradition of the North American and English novel. *Ain't lookin'* adds life to that tradition and that is John Craig's most important achievement.

Ain't lookin' presents Joe Giffen from Trentville, Ontario, riding the rails in late June 1939. He has lost his father, grandfather and girl-friend and has discovered that he will never make the big leagues as a baseball player. One of Joe's childhood pleasures has been accompanying his father (the scorer for the local team) to see Chappie Johnson's Colored All Stars play their annual

game against Trentville. Chappie's team, in the days before blacks were allowed to play in the major white leagues, combines excellent baseball with comic "reams" to entertain the fans of the teams they can beat so easily. It is Depression employment for Chappie's genuine All Stars, many of whom, unknown to white baseball fans, are superior to major league white players.

When Joe Giffen arrives in Alcona, Manitoba, it is to discover that Chappie Johnson's All Stars are playing there. Chappie needs a first baseman. Joe gets his opportunity to play but must don lampblack to hide his white face. Thus he discovers what it is to be a black in the North America of the 1930s. For two months, as Europe moves towards World War II, he tours with the team through western Canada and the northern United States following the social rules:

> Don't stare at any white woman. Don't ask to be given a haircut. Don't contest for space on the sidewalks. Don't sit down on a stool and try to order a beer or a bowl of soup. Know your place. (p. 90)

Though John Craig's prose verges, at times, on the journalistic, he sketches in the atmosphere of the late thirties with simple economy: "Trentville had been hard hit by the Great Depression. A third of the men were on relief. ... Nobody turned down overtime in the summer of 1933" (pp. 5, 8). Craig's eye for significant detail finds that bleakness is reflected in the condition of local baseball grounds:

> Never painted, the wood was weathered to a bleached grey; the bench seats were slivery despite all the forms who had squirmed and shifted over them; and the tarpaper-covered roof sagged in both directions like Monday morning clothes lines hung with winter underwear. (p. 6)

In Manitoba Joe sees the Depression ending, but still the threat of frost denies the harvest. Images of cold and warmth are central to the novel's human as well as natural movement. We see the cold of race prejudice and finally of war set against the warmth of human love and the team spirit that characterises Chappie's All Stars, and we know that John Craig's feelings rest with human sharing in loving relationships. Joe notes as he is denied a glass of water and a bite to eat at an Alcona minister's door: "Funny about that: when they'd had hardly anything themselves, most would share it with you; but now that times were getting better, people were becoming more possessive, more protective of what they had" (p. 19).

Joe, however, follows his father who'd "never done an unkind thing in his life" and was "both right and honest" (pp. 23, 24). In Chappie Johnson, he finds a second father. (We think of Abel Magwitch in *Great expectations.)* Becoming a blue-eyed black, Joe is faced with a crisis of identity: "Where had Joe Giffen gone? What had become of me?" (p. 36) "The world I somehow found

myself part of was completely foreign to me, as alien as life on some other planet" (p. 47). Indeed, Joe soon learns that racial prejudice cuts two ways. There are places where whites cannot go; whites cannot eat with blacks. On his first night with the team, Joe sits stubbornly on the bus determined that if he cannot eat with the team behind the restaurant he won't eat at all. His teammates kindly bring him back some food in a bag.

Living with the team, Joe learns that Buck Yancey, for example, is better educated than Joe had imagined black men to be. Buck is self-educated and he and Joe discuss the relative merits of *The red badge of courage* and *All's quiet on the western front.* We see from their discussion how literary judgements are necessarily judgements about life. " 'The real question is: who teaches you to want to read, to learn?' I thought about my father. 'Yes, there has to be someone.' " (pp. 52-53). Buck has read Marx and he and Joe discuss poverty, society, revolution and war. Joe later notes of Buck that the more he becomes involved in discussion, the more natural his speech becomes (p. 109).

The novel itself shifts naturally from the serious to the comic and back again. A wonderfully amusing episode concerns the attempt of fat catcher B.G. Pickett to ride a horse. The horse charges through the team's sleeping camp before dumping B.G. Pickett in the river; the episode ends thus:

> The episode with the horse behind us, there was a kind of gentleness in that mecca of rolling pasture land with the fringe of woods around it, and it was easy to forget the harsh emptiness that lay just beyond the trees. . . . On the All Stars everybody shared and everybody took turns. (p. 59)

It is "harsh emptiness" that Joe Giffen must finally confront and overcome. Sharing, of course, generates the human warmth that animates Craig's sense of human life at its best: "It was always warm where the All Stars were, and wherever that might be was Chappie's home — as they were his life" (p. 70). The stress is upon interrelationships. Yet Chappie needs all his intelligence to keep himself and his team going, whether it involves tipping a border guard or standing up to a cheating gas attendant or a smarmy mayor who tries to underpay him. Here Chappie has counted every spectator at the game. " 'Countin' the people.' 'Oh, I doesn't,' Chappie said, ' 'cept when I knows I can't trust the man' " (p. 76).

Joe shares the black ball players' sense of pride when Joe Louis defeats Tony Galento. "They took part in it in different ways and to different degrees, according to their temperaments, but it was spontaneous, a shared thing, a unifying thing, a joyous thing" (p. 78). But the racial prejudice is a continual threat to the shared warmth of team spirt. Race prejudice is cold, yet "as real as frost in October" (p. 90). When Joe meets a beautiful white girl in Hobblin, Minnesota, on the evening of a rained-out game after he has washed off his lampblack in order to spend some time on his own, he discovers "passion and tenderness" (p. 101). Later, the team returns to Hobblin to play the rained-

out game and Joe hopes to meet Mary Lou again, only to discover that she is part of a racist group that barracks the All Stars and cheers attempts to injure them with wild pitching. The night ends with the team defending themselves with baseball bats against the white hooligans. The sudden switch in Mary Lou's character from tender lover to racist is too sudden and is, in my judgement, one of the few flaws in the novel.

Not all is prejudice and Craig provides us with a couple of convincing instances of white authority behaving with justice and generosity. In Appleton, Wisconsin, Joe's cap flies off during a game and the fans recognise that he is not a black man. The local sheriff arrests him for fraud but Circuit Court Judge Wilbur Clay Calhoun dismisses the charge on the grounds that the term Colored All Stars does not specify a particular colour. Again, after a twister in Saskatchewan in which two of Chappie's players are injured, Dr. Wendel Amys tends them and has to have a fairly nominal charge pressed on him.

Following the injuries, Chappie has to play outfield himself; fifty-four years old and suffering from angina, he drops a catch. "Go back to the bushes, Johnson!" (p. 192) a spectator shouts and Chappie replies, "How far back can you get?" (p. 193). It's important to note here that this is the title of John Craig's reminiscence about his early days in Peterborough (surely the Trentville of the novel) and it suggests the importance of the remark not only for Chappie, but also for John Craig. For, in the novel, Craig reaches beyond a concern with race relations to explore the nature of the essential relations between men and women.

The relationship with Mary Lou was a false start, both for Joe Giffen and for John Craig as novelist. We come to realise that the novel's central concern is Joe's healing of the wounds caused by his father's death, his first girl friend's rejection, the awareness that he will never become a top 'ball player and finally his rejection of Mary Lou. We see that what Joe really needs to assuage his bitterness is a permanent and secure relationship with a good woman. This he finds at the end of the novel with Ellen Marshall.

Ellen watches Joe play in Illinois on Saturday, September 2nd 1939, the Labour Day week-end on which World War II breaks out. She and Joe discover love, as war is declared (Hardy's "In Time of 'The Breaking of Nations' " comes to mind here) and many of Joe's problems are resolved:

> Utter peace, the only sounds, apart from our own, coming from the gurgling water, the fluttering leaves, the waving grass, the scolding chipmunks, the birds. A borrowed interlude, a time out of time. . . . Who was she, and who was I, and how had it come about that we found ourselves alone together on the banks of that little river? (p. 220)

Joe discovers a basis for his life in Ellen's love, but the war and the All Stars' migration south confront him with a dilemma. "There was just the feeling that it was time to go home, to be home . . . duty or patriotism. Truthfully, I both mistrusted and resented the feeling. But it was there" (p. 233).

Joe says good-bye to Chappie. Chappie's last words to Joe, "Oh, we'll keep goin' long as we can . . . long as they let us" and "We'll run 'cross you somewheres, the Stars and me . . . It ain't that big a world" (pp. 243, 245) acknowledge the presence both of larger realities and the prospect of human meetings. Chappie's "we" and "they" suggest larger realities while "the Stars and me" suggests an ideal of unity that the world is not too large to deny.

John Craig has written a simple, humorous and moving novel that stresses the need for human relationships that are both personally complete and socially harmonious. In the face of war, John Craig writes a novel about the need for human love and social harmony.

Enjoyable as a baseball novel for children, *Ain't lookin'* is deceptively simple, yet sounds a deep note of real and sincere human concern that convinces us of John Craig's importance. As a contemporary Canadian writer, he deserves much more recognition than his serious and humorous works have yet received. Let us hope that literary criticism will eventually do him justice. It is our responsibility as critics to cherish the green shoots of life in literature in order to overturn the view that imaginative literature will never appear again. John Craig's *Ain't lookin'* is a genuine green shoot.

NOTES

[1]John Craig. *Ain't lookin'* has been published by Scholastic-TAB, Richmond Hill, Ontario. 1983. 247 pp. $2.95 paper. ISBN 0-590-7ll8l-4. This book was first published by Dodd, Mead, New York, 1979, as *Chappie and me.*

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