

# Topophilia: the love of place in Maritime literature

Hilary Thompson

Is there anyone who does not associate the Maritimes with childhood? Perhaps you read *Anne of Green Gables* as avidly as I did as a child; perhaps you spent summer holidays (even one or two) here; perhaps you, or your parents, or your grandparents, are expatriate Maritimers; you may even live here.

The Maritimes is the place where L.M. Montgomery finds her soul, while remembering her childhood.<sup>1</sup> Her nostalgia for Prince Edward Island molds her sense of that place just as writer/illustrator Edward Ardizzone's memories transform the English seaside: I dare say that the imperfections of memory and nostalgia have caused me to make this house with its odd balcony and the beach with its steep pebble bank and wooden greyness look more romantic in my drawings than they really are. But what of that! Surely for the purpose of illustration they are better for it.<sup>2</sup> These memories of childhood by the sea are changed by nostalgia; they are crystalized into the meaningful images of the places which once allowed the writer and the illustrator the freedom to play and dream.

Writing of such places, exploring the sense of felicitous space, has been called topophilia; it is an exercise by which we "seek to determine the human value of the sorts of space that may be grasped, that may be defended against adverse forces, the space we love."<sup>3</sup> In re-examining childhood places, the writer or illustrator reawaken the child within the adult self. East is writing or drawing "largely to amuse the childish part of myself."<sup>4</sup> To do this they must dream and play again; hence they readily recall those places where similar dreaming and playing occurred. Creativity becomes a magical time of discovery when the artist faces imaginative and psychological challenges similar to those experienced as a child.

In Montgomery and Ardizzone the places that challenged the childish imagination were old houses, such as Green Gables (which must eventually be defended in adverse conditions), the sea and its environs, and the rural landscape, so beautiful that it seems incapable of change (as shown in the illustration on the cover of *Ben Loman to the sea*.) These are the essential images of a maritime childhood. And they are those images of place which recur most frequently in contemporary illustrated children's books from the maritimes.

The maritime world is a magical place transformed even by fog in *Fog magic* (1943); it is a place where magical sea-changes occur in *The magic seagull* (1980).

In such a place the imagination is in play and the result is psychological growth: in *Zoom at sea*, “Zoom loved the water. Not to drink — he liked to drink — Zoom like water to play with.”<sup>5</sup> Zoom likes water so much that he decides to follow his uncle’s map and go to sea via a mysterious house owned by a mysterious woman named Maria. Zoom makes a raft, launches it, and goes to sea. He has no fear of the ocean because he knows that Maria is in control of the situation.

Ken Nutt, the illustrator of Tim Wynne-Jones’ *Zoom at sea* (1983) creates grey-toned, soft-edged illustrations to capture the magical changes in Zoom and his playful experience at sea. The continuation of Zoom’s experience is anticipated; more changes will occur:

“‘Thank you for a great day,’ said Zoom as he stood at the door.  
‘May I come back?’  
‘I’m sure you will,’ said Maria.  
And he did.”<sup>6</sup>

Anna Gamble uses similar tactile soft-edged drawings for Lance Woolaver’s *Change of tide* (1982). Both the stories in this book, “The boy who played the guitar with his feet” and “The little girl with the distant dreams,” tell of children who wish to change their lives by fulfilling their dreams. The sea laps at the edge of their contained world. (He lives in an old packing box and she in an old hotel). The image of the sea not only depicts their means of escape from childhood but is also symbolic of the dreams which will change their lives. Anna Gamble has not chosen to illustrate such symbolism, avoiding pivotal points in the story such as this:

The little girl danced a most wonderful dance,  
Like the waves that were dancing at sea.  
The dance did decide  
By the change of the tide  
The question of what she would be.<sup>7</sup>

Gamble has chosen instead to capture the tranquility of childhood. Her illustrations accompany moments of calm, or of gentle emotions like longing or sharing, of getting ready to dance, of getting ready to part. Anna Gamble knows that “. . . intelligent illustrators understand and make use of the contradictory pull of words and pictures, so that the two together tell a story that depends on their differences from each other.”<sup>8</sup> She plays her illustrations against the action of the plot in which there is a storm at sea, the loss of a ship and the death of a friend, and in which there is considerable fear of the future. Thus the illustrations allows us to enjoy the calm before change, the lull before the turn of tide, the waiting and anticipation of future growth.

Other changes are effected by a sea-bird in *The magic sea gull*. New Brunswick illustrator Judith Baxter uses quirky line drawings to capture the character

of Maura, the magic sea gull, in Roberta W. Lee's story. Maura changes the orderly "square" life of the Hazen family into a more relaxed "curved" life of hugs and seaside games. She casts spells at night "at the magic curvy hour of three when the moon was round and glowing white"<sup>9</sup> (see p. 30 of *The magic sea gull*). The magic of this change is reflected in the drawings and in the lay out of the pages as well as in the text itself: "Shrieking and laughing, they all swooshed back to the shore with the curvy waves. The cold salty sea made their bodies feel tingly and their hearts feel free."<sup>10</sup> The seashore of the Bay of Fundy is a place to play and change by meeting the challenge of the sea and its creatures.

In this book by Peter Cumings, with pictures by P. John Burden, Farmer, a land creature, is the hero of *A horse called Farmer* (1894) meets the sea's challenge on his extraordinary journey from one end of the Magdalen Islands to the other, culminating in his swim across a wild stretch of sea to reach Entry Island. Perhaps because he is a horse, and not a child, the force of the sea is thrown against him, unprotected.

Burden combines humorous silhouettes with equally funny, yet appealing illustrations of people dancing and of children playing with Farmer at the beginning of the story. As the plot develops so does a more realistic style of illustration. Farmer experiences life: he is taken from home, badly treated, and finally escapes to begin his journey to his island. He grows into a hero as he completes his journey (fig. 1). The singlemindedness of the horse, his determination to return home, is seen in illustrations that centre their intricate patterns of air and waves on the figure of the horse from whom these patterns seem to emanate. Later, in his fear, Farmer loses control of himself and becomes swamped both at sea and in the accompanying picture (see p. 30 of *A horse called Farmer*). "Crashing waves drowned any smells that might lead him home. All he could see or smell was ocean. Farmer was lost."<sup>11</sup>



Fig. 1

The illustrator has captured the intensity of Farmer's yearning to return home despite all obstacles; that intensity is focussed further because the illustrations try to reflect Farmer's strong instincts with visual effects, while, in the text, Farmer relies on his strong sense of smell, sound, and touch for his awareness of place.

The sea has been controlled by Maria in *Zoom at sea*; it has been a source of challenge and growth for the children in *Change of tide*; it has transformed family life in *The magic sea gull*; and it has been the making of the hero in *A horse called Farmer*.

Finally, it is the underwater playground of the inhabitants of the neighbourhood *Down by Jim Long's stage* (1976), who include a young sculpin named Sam. Al Pittman has written and Pam Hall illustrated these verses "for children and young fish."<sup>12</sup> One would think that it would be difficult to humanize fish in both verse and illustrations, but, by exploring the sea bed as if it were a human community of different families, these two artists have succeeded. The use of signposts and place names adds to the humour and incongruity of fish behaving humanly. One, a flatfish named Fred, is lazy; another, Calvin Catfish, dresses up in false whiskers; yet another dreams of vengeance. (see pp. 9-10 of *Down by Jim Long's stage*).

The ugly lonely sculpin from the waters by Jim Long's stage finds happiness in *One wonderful fine day for a sculpin named Sam* (1983). His ugliness is transformed into a modest beauty by the colour illustrations of Shawn Steffler, while the underwater world has leapt to life as if the light of a camera were illuminating it for the first time. The place is still a human-like community beneath the sea and Sam Sculpin, behaving humanly, has found his mate, "Sara, his bridefish, his beloved"<sup>13</sup> (fig. 2).

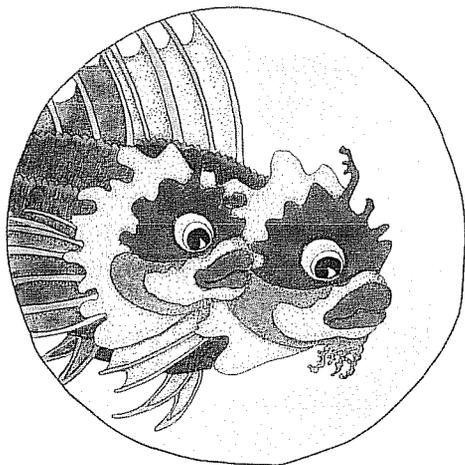


Fig. 2

The old houses in the Maritime Provinces are predated only by the ruins of even older houses where only cellar holes remain. For James DeMille and Julia L. Sauer the cellar hole is source of challenge and adventure, fulfilling the child character's dreams in *Fog magic* the latter and frightening the boys out of their wits in *The boys of Grand Pré School*. In Sauer's *Fog magic* the tragedy of the ruined community of Blue Cove is an emotional loss for the sensitive characters; the past has been reft from the present and the continuous ribbon of time has been ripped. Thus the consciousness of the characters has been disturbed. For Greta to travel back in time, the fog must perform its magic and restore the houses to the ruined cellars; her signpost through the fog is the gable end of a house which was not steady even in her father's time. Greta's knowledge of the magically restored houses in Blue Cove provides a security on which she can build the future; she can emerge psychologically whole into her teenage years. She has, through the images of the restored homes, been able to explore the internal map of her own identity. The container, the closed image of the house, protects memories while at the same time becoming a part of those memories:

This being the case, if I were asked to name the chief benefit of the house, I should say: the house shelters day-dreaming, the house protects the dreamer, the house allows one to dream in peace. . . . Therefore the places in which we have experienced day-dreaming reconstitute themselves in a new day-dream, and it is because our memories of former dwelling-places are relived as day-dreams that these dwelling places of the past remain in us for all time.<sup>14</sup>

The house is then the protector of our dreams and of our playing; within its walls we may choose to imagine ourselves in adventures which are open and uncontained: such as venturing into magical fogs, or sea journeys, or even visiting the land of the Wild Things.

Illustrator Ken Nutt can, with his simple soft grey lines, transform a house into a vast sea in *Zoom at sea*. In such a way, Maurice Sendak, with his gentle strokes of the pen, can change a bedroom carpet into the floor of the forest in *Where the wild things are*. Their styles of illustration allow such magical changes to occur. Because the writers and illustrators of *Fog magic*, *Zoom at sea* and *Where the wild things are* choose to combine the uncontained image of the journey with the protective image of the house, these journeys are not the epic quests of adult heroes but the safer, more controlled, adventuring of children who are discovering the "topography of [their] intimate being."<sup>15</sup>

*Zoom at sea* contrasts the vast power of the sea with the contained world of the old house and its nooks and corners, closets and drawers. The sea pours out of the closets; Maria releases sea birds and animals from pots and cages<sup>16</sup> (fig. 3). Zoom can thus expose and explore, protected, his "secret psychological life."<sup>17</sup>

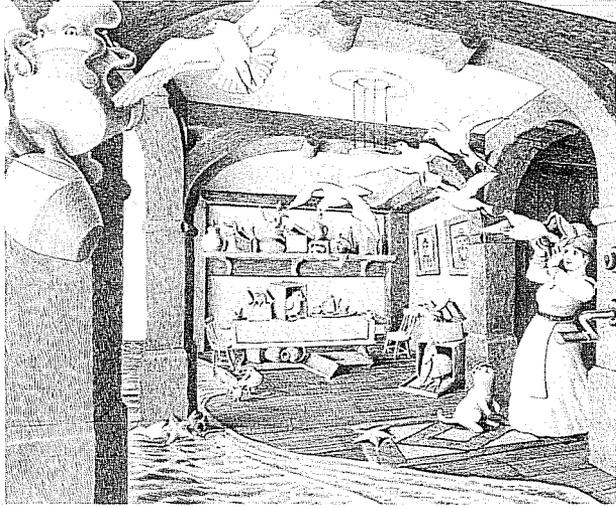


Fig. 3

Old houses are not the only edifices which provide children with the freedom to grow and play in Maritime literature. All over North America the barn has served that same purpose. Children's literature owes much to a part-time farmer of a salt water farm on the Maine coast, E.B. White. *Charlotte's web* expresses his love of the barn as the protector of the animal community; while *One man's meat* comments on life in a human Maritime settlement.

With the humanizing of animals, the barn becomes the house of the psyche. It is home and protection for Farmer on Entry Island, but, when not properly sealed and tended, it is draughty and strange (see p. 17 of *A horse called Farmer*). In *Chester's barn*, on the other hand, the animals are secure and well cared for. Even the snow keeps out the draughts (see p. 5 *Chester's barn*). Lindee Climo, author and illustrator of *Chester's Barn* (1982), concentrates our attention on the animals of the barn community. She leaves the human beings featureless with their heads turned to watch or work with the animals. The animals are big and powerful, rounded and unconcerned (see p. 17). Sometimes they look out of the illustrations at the reader, or at a point just beyond the reader's left shoulder, but there is no fear in their eyes. Instead we see that they are sure of their place: this barn belongs to them and we are the intruders, the objects of their curious glances. For this reason the illustrations are not soft-edged, they do not tempt us to walk in and pat the animals; instead we are encouraged to allow our eyes to play on the patterns of their world: the straw, the wood grains, the seeds in the feedroom, the shingles, the snow and the dappling of their bodies, the outlines of their wings and fur. Finally, when we leave them, we are reassured that all is in order and is as it should be: "Chester makes one last check: feedroom closed, pens shut, stalls latched; each animal is in its place"<sup>18</sup> (fig. 4).



Fig. 4

The old house and the barn are simultaneously images of ourselves and of our place. While we make sense of ourselves we are also understanding the places that house us, the spaces in which we abide in time. These picture books have captured such images of place in the Maritimes: the old houses and barns of a rural seaside community which protect (*Chester's barn*) the child who is exploring the challenges of his or her world and gaining self-awareness (*Zoom at sea* and *A horse called Farmer*).

"This is the forest primeval." So begins Longfellow's tale of *Evangeline* which depicts images of both wilderness and settlement in Maritime Canada. Our landscape, like that of the rest of Canada, can be thus divided. The magical legends of the Micmac Indians fall within the setting of wilderness, while artists like Maud Lewis, Lindee Climo, and L.M. Montgomery depict our landscape as idyllic rural settlement.

Kay Hill has been adapting legends of the Wabanaki Indians for over twenty years. Her stories, *Glooscap and his magic* (1963), *More Glooscap stories* (1970), and *Badger, the mischief maker* (1965), were all illustrated by John Hamberger. The legends are accompanied by pencil drawings which depict the actions of the stories in a matter-of-fact manner. The interaction of the natural with the supernatural world is an accepted part of the wilderness: the braves in "Badger in danger" speak unconcernedly to the Indian devil Lox, who grows out of the embers of their fire "in the shape of a wolverine with red eyes and snarling teeth"<sup>19</sup> (see p. 33 of *Badger, the mischief maker*).

Another tale of the power of the supernatural is the Micmac legend “La Belle Marie”; it has been retold for children by Joyce Barkhouse and illustrated by Daphne Irving as *The witch of Port LaJoye* (1983). The wild landscape is inhabited by spirits: Glooscap appears in the white mist by the lake; an undulating monster, “like a serpent,”<sup>20</sup> lives in the waters of Lake Minnewauken; a mysterious hand appears from La Grande Source with riches for Madame Granville. La Belle Marie, the heroine, aligns herself with the wilderness, and not with the people of the settlement, by living with the Micmacs and by marrying an Indian. She seems to have other magical powers: she celebrates life and sings her Basque songs and hymns “in an unknown tongue.”<sup>21</sup>

Illustrator Daphne Irving chooses to depict all the magical moments in the plot: the whirlpool of Lake Minnewauken (cover), the appearance of Glooscap in the mist, the hand in La Grande Source, the magic circle of the medicine stone, the lonely Marie wandering over the dunes in her bridal costume as if she could commune with spirits (see p. 37), and the celebration song of the supposed witch (La Belle Marie) as she burns at the stake (see p. 45). Flowing water-colour illustrations catch the shifting magic which inhabits the landscape; they ignore the hills or town where the action occurs. Irving’s colours are unnatural oranges, reds, and brooding greys which suggest the unpredictable wildness underlying the plot, both in Micmac magic and in the Christian paranoia of the settlers.

Contrast with these Indian legends a folktale of New World settlement retold by Carole Spray and illustrated by Kim La Fave. *The mare’s egg* (1981) is a tall tale of a simpleton who tries to hatch a colt from a pumpkin. He struggles to carve a clearing in the wilderness (see p. 4). His fecklessness and gullibili-

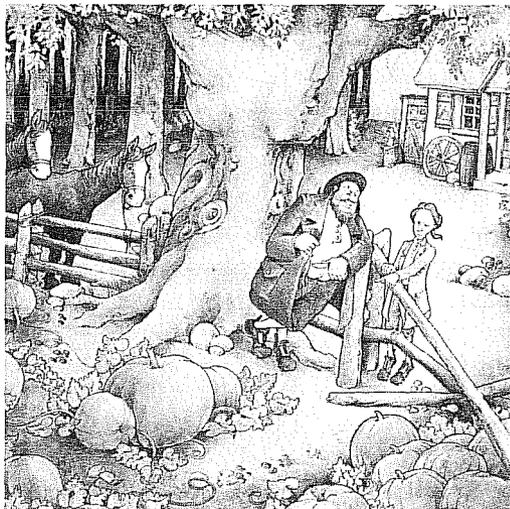


Fig. 5

ty, however, make him the butt of a practical joke. The cartoon-like caricatures of human figures capture the animosity, veiled in trickery, which the settlers feel towards this simple lone man. The thick eastern woodlands and the unkindness of his community combine to reinforce our garrison image of the wilderness as a hostile place where puny human beings must struggle to survive.

After such a threatening wilderness it is natural to long for settlement and security. One turns in one's dreams to see rural life as an image of stability. Whether such a stable time existed either in history, or in the personal experience of artist Maud Lewis (1903-1970), is doubtful. Nevertheless, Lewis painted prolific and idyllic pictures of life in rural Nova Scotia. Later, in 1979, Lance Woolaver set his verses to her paintings for a series of picture books for children, beginning with *From Ben Loman to the sea*. The paintings depict life in her own community: the ferry comes through the Digby Gut; a youth and a child travel by horse and buggy, while others journey by car, carriage, ox wagon, fishing boat and ketch; the children play in the schoolyard; the farmer ploughs his field and tends his stock. Throughout the story the pictures are orderly: they freeze time as if it could never change in this rural settlement. Lance Woolaver has written his accompanying verses from the point of view of the onlooker, of a young man who is observing his home for the last time. These pictures comprise his farewell look at the innocent place of his youth, for he is going to sea, to the freedom which proves "cold and careless"<sup>22</sup> in contrast to his mother's kitchen and his father's arm. The nostalgia of the speaker is shared by the reader who remembers this image of rural landscape from paintings he or she created as a child: so orderly, so peaceful.

A similar nostalgia for childhood innocence and a romantic view of the rural community returns one to the work of L.M. Montgomery. In 1983 Deirdre Kessler adapted *Anne of Green Gables* for younger children. Entitled *A child's Anne*, it was illustrated by Floyd Trainor. In contrast to Maud Lewis's work, the descriptions of the rural community, so abundant in the prose of Montgomery and the monologues of Anne, are omitted from this text in which the episodic plot is the focus of each short chapter. For this reason, the illustrator has depicted the drama of each episode in his pictures and, to heighten the drama, has frozen the character's movements (see p. 13 of *A child's Anne*).

Most of the illustrations have an interior setting in the various houses of Avonlea, but the landscape is not forgotten. Floyd Trainor packs the windows with blossoms, leaves, trees, and with animals of all kinds. There is so much food for the imagination outside those windows and off the porch! Finally, it seems symbolic that Anne and Gilbert are removed from the road on which they walked and talked at the end of the novel and are depicted in a field full of the patterns that live outside the windows of Trainor's earlier illustrations.

The idyllic rural landscape of the Maritimes, like the images of the magic wilderness, may never have existed, yet both images of place remain in Maritime

illustrated children's books. They are reinforced by the visions of artists like L.M. Montgomery and Maud Lewis.

Images of old houses, capacious barns, seaside beaches and bays, together with pictures of an idealised rural countryside, capture both the challenge and the security of the places where we are free to day-dream and play, both as adults and children. They are protective shells from which, and in which, we can face tests and trials that enable us to grow and change. Thus the fear of change is controlled, though it cannot be eradicated completely. At the edge of our contained world the sea and the wilderness provide other images of epic quests, of journeying to unknown lands, of facing fear of things beyond our experience. In the Maritimes these images balance those of warmth and security.

#### NOTES

- <sup>1</sup>L.M. Montgomery, "Prince Edward Island," *The spirit of Canada*, 1939. (Quoted in F.W.P. Bolger, *The spirit of place*, Toronto, Oxford University Press, 1982, p. 1).
- <sup>2</sup>E. Ardizzone, "Creation of a picture book," *Only connect*, edited by Sheila Egoff (Toronto: Oxford University Press, 1980), p. 295.
- <sup>3</sup>G. Bachelard, *The poetics of space* (New York: The Orion Press, 1964), p. xxxi.
- <sup>4</sup>Ardizzone, p. 298.
- <sup>5</sup>T. Wynne-Jones, *Zoom at sea* (Toronto and Vancouver: Douglas and McIntyre, 1983), p. 1.
- <sup>6</sup>Wynne-Jones, p. 29.
- <sup>7</sup>L. Woolaver, "The little girl with the distant dreams," *Change of tide* (Halifax: Nimbus Publishing Limited, 1982), p. 12.
- <sup>8</sup>Perry Nodelman, "How picture books work," *Image and maker* (LaJolla, California: Green Tiger Press, 1984), p. 7.
- <sup>9</sup>R.W. Lee, *The magic sea gull* (Hantsport, Nova Scotia: Lancelot Press, 1980), p. 18.
- <sup>10</sup>Lee, p. 39.
- <sup>11</sup>P. Cummings, *A horse called Farmer* (Charlottetown: Ragweed Press, 1984), p. 30.
- <sup>12</sup>Al Pittman, *Down by Jim Long's stage* (St. John's and Toronto: Breakwater Books, 1976), title page.
- <sup>13</sup>Pittman, *One wonderful fine day for a sculpin named Sam* (St. John's and Toronto: Breakwater Books, 1983), p. 25.
- <sup>14</sup>Bachelard, p. 6.
- <sup>15</sup>Bachelard, p. xxxii.
- <sup>16</sup>If one extends the image of the container, as Bachelard has done, to include wardrobes, then one could make a similar claim for the world of Narnia in C.S. Lewis' *The lion, the witch and the wardrobe*.
- <sup>17</sup>Bachelard, p. 78.
- <sup>18</sup>L. Climo, *Chester's barn* (Montreal: Tundra Books, 1982), p. 31.
- <sup>19</sup>K. Hill, *Badger, The mischief maker* (Toronto: McClelland and Stewart Ltd., 1965), p. 32.
- <sup>20</sup>J. Barkhouse, *The witch of Port LaJoye* (Charlottetown: Ragweed Press, 1983), p. 11.
- <sup>21</sup>Barkhouse, p. 39.
- <sup>22</sup>Woolaver, *From Ben Loman to the sea* (Halifax: Nimbus Publishing Limited, 1979), p. 29.

*Hilary Thompson teaches children's literature and children's theatre at Acadia University. She has written poetry and plays for both children and adults.*