

Jean McIlwraith and *The little admiral*

Wendy Ratkowski Huyck

Résumé: *The little admiral*, roman écrit en 1924 par Jean Newton McIlwraith, met en scène les événements de la conquête de Québec. Il s'agit d'un récit où les valeurs de la guerre et le point de vue pro-britannique sont atténués, nuancés, par les sympathies de l'auteure pour les Canadiens Français. Récit unique, donc, didactique aussi, dans lequel se développe, selon Wendy Huyck, un idéal de réconciliation nationale.

Jean Newton McIlwraith, a Canadian writer born in Hamilton in 1858, had a successful career as a writer/novelist and as an editor/reader for the New York publishers Doubleday Page and Company, and achieved a significant amount of fame before her death in 1938. Today she is almost forgotten. Yet her work in historical fiction for children marked an important stage in the development of a genre which has been graced by later Canadian authors such as James Renaney, Janet Lunn, Bill Freeman, Barbara Smucker, and Suzanne Martel. McIlwraith's *The little admiral* (1924) is well worth a second glance by anyone contemplating the development of Canadian children's literature.

McIlwraith's writing career spanned more than four decades; in that time she wrote for adults a variety of works: fiction, including short stories and four novels, three works for the theatre, and non-fiction in the form of biography and history. Her adult novels were dominated by important themes such as *The curious career of Roderick Campbell* (1901), *A Diana of Quebec* (1912), and *Kinsmen at war* (1927). Always interested in early Canadian history, she became increasingly concerned about the lives of women, their place in society, their abilities, and their relationships with men; and after the trauma of the first World War she concentrated on the concept of war.

Early in her career she also began writing for children and had several stories published in *All the year round* and *Youth's companion*. Two biographies, *A book about Shakespeare* (1898) and *A book about Longfellow* (1900), were written "for young people", as was her history book *Canada* (1899). But *The little admiral* was her most important work for young people. In it she tailored for a junior audience the themes that most absorbed her. It was the first book she had written since *A Diana of Quebec*, the first that is in more than ten years; it was also her first book since World War I. Many male writers, as Peter Buitenhuis demonstrates in *The great war of words*, had glorified war. But unlike H.G.Wells, Rudyard Kipling, Gilbert Parker and others cited by Buitenhuis

huis, McIlwraith represents what may be called a woman's view of war: she demythologizes its glories. In particular she shows how early experiences of war affected French/English relationships in Canada.

The setting of *The little admiral* is Quebec, just before its fall to the British. McIlwraith uses an actual historical event as framework. In her story the young son of a British admiral is captured by a French Canadian, with whom he has a series of adventures until the fall of Quebec and his reunion with his father. While the adventures are fictitious, the actual capture and return of the boy are real.

Both the era and the setting were familiar to readers of McIlwraith's earlier novels, and to readers of other Canadian historical fiction. In *Sounding the iceberg: An essay on Canadian historical novels*, Dennis Duffy comments on traditional treatment of the fall of Quebec. Discussing *The seats of the mighty* (1894), Gilbert Parker's best selling novel about the conquest, Duffy notes the moralistic account given by Parker. This vision, says Duffy, was attractive to other writers who felt "the fall of one regime engenders the redemption that will occur under English rule" (16). McIlwraith, in contrast, while she does not criticize the actual British conquest of Quebec, does criticize the moralistic attitude with which the conquest was regarded and the condescending attitude with which the French have been treated ever since.

The introduction to *The little admiral* sets forth her position and intention:

The story has been written not so much for a prize as for a purpose, to wit, the instilling into young Canadians of British extraction more sympathy for their fellow-countrymen, the French, than is usually displayed.

Is not how it felt to lose Quebec as well worthy of delineation as how it felt to win it? In my early school days our study of Canadian history centred around the death of General Wolfe: "They run! They run!"

"Who run?" asks the dying hero.

"The French, sir. They give way everywhere."

The children of our day grew up believing the French to be a running race. The last war changed all that, but youngsters of this generation might not be the worse for a passing glance at what the capture of Canada meant to Canadians earlier in the country than their own ancestors.

The novel itself focuses on Teddy Rudell, a British admiral's son, ten years old when the story commences. It traces his change in sentiment from a condescending conqueror to a questioning sympathizer. At the outset, Teddy is described as "an ardent little Englishman, naturally filled with glory of being a unit in the expedition destined to humble proud Quebec and transfer the whole of Canada from France to Britain" (11); he is "full of his own self-importance." (10). Like the Scots in McIlwraith's *The curious career of Roderick Campbell*, Teddy has accepted a set of ideologies without giving them any thought. He has a condescending attitude towards the French and is sure that the British plan to take over Quebec is the most glorious event men can im-

agine. When his father takes on a French Canadian to pilot the ship down the St. Lawrence River, Teddy has "made up his young mind that long before they sighted Quebec he should have proved to this Canadian that his country would be far happier under British rule than ever it had been with the French" (15). The pilot agrees that "a change of masters" might not be a bad thing (16), but then gives Teddy his first insight into the French Canadians' feelings when the boy asks why they don't just join the English or remain neutral:

Ah, my little admiral, you know not the spirit of the Canadians. This is our country, won from the savages, from the wild beasts. We have held our ground through the long and bitter winters. We have cut down the trees of the forest to make way for our little farms, to build our log cabins. It is for ourselves and our homes that we fight (17).

The pilot goes on to say that because the English are not of the Catholic faith, the church has ordered the Canadians to remain faithful to France (17).

Despite his discussion with the pilot, Teddy has little sympathy for the French. Even when he and two midshipmen go ashore "the occasional sight of deserted home, of the unploughed fields of the banished islanders distressed them not a whit. The trio belonged to the all-conquering Anglo-Saxon race; it was a matter of course that the weaker must go to the wall" (27).

It is only after he is captured by a kindly French Canadian that Teddy's understanding starts to change. Dominique Bonneau, or *La Becasse*, as he is called, is not "the harsh and cruel enemy one expect[ed] to meet in the enemy's country" (128-129), and Teddy must begin to question his ideas about the British and the French. The only reason Bonneau prevents Teddy from returning to his ship is because he needs the boy to transport some gold he believes to be cursed; the boy seems impervious to the effects of the curse. But Bonneau is a kind captor and the two become friends so that "[a]nyone who . . . heard the gay whistling and singing would never have dreamt that it was a prisoner of war and his captor who were passing through the woods" (87).

As he continues to travel with Bonneau, Teddy continues to gain insight into the French. When the man is reunited with his wife and children, Teddy notes that "[f]amily affection seemed to be fully as strong among the French as with the English . . ." (92). All the French Canadians treat him with the respect due to his position in the navy, even as Teddy himself begins to question the honour of the place which he was once so proud of: "As the midshipman hearkened to those earnest evening prayers for protection against the dreaded invader, it began to dawn upon him that to sail up the St. Lawrence upon a conquering fleet was not so gallant an exploit as he had imagined" (97).

These experiences force Teddy to think more about what he is involved with, and by the time of the final battle of Quebec, the boy is extremely confused:

Oh, it was all wrong – *all wrong* – this fighting, no matter which side you are on. There

was always right – there were always good people on both sides. Surely there must be some other way of settling disputes than this marching out of innocent men to shoot and slash one another, rousing bad passions, ruining so many happy homes, making so many widows and orphans and cruelly crippled folk (276).

Sounding suspiciously like Jean McIlwraith in her introduction to the novel, Teddy appears to have changed his attitudes toward the British mission to subdue the French.

At his young age he has also learned what Roderick Campbell, a character in one of McIlwraith's earlier novels, asserts: that there is no clear cut right and wrong, that people cannot be uniformly divided into good and bad, that things in life are not simply black and white, but that "the predominant colour of life was grey" (*The curious career of Roderick Campbell*, 254).

Although Teddy comes to this realization, it does him little good, for McIlwraith demonstrates another aspect of war: that no matter how one feels, in most cases the decision to fight or not is not up to the common individual but to those with power. As Bonneau says to Teddy at one point: "It would take a bigger head than thine or mine to determine the rights or wrongs of this contest. . . . We are both right to fight for our own, to obey the orders of our superiors – that is all our affairs" (147).

The extent to which most individuals have no control over events is emphasized by McIlwraith through the use of the phrase "the fortune of war." This phrase is uttered by various characters throughout the novel and may indicate good fortune or bad fortune but in every case it demonstrates that the events are beyond the control of the common individual. Teddy eventually learns this truth as well; for at one point he sits "waiting for the next turn of fortune's wheel, but there was no use trying to hasten its revolutions" (213).

Although both *The little admiral* and *Kinsmen at war* deal with the idea of war, it is interesting to note the differences between the book written for children and the book written for adults. *Kinsmen at war* is a story about the War of 1812. Although the setting is different, the main male character, Stephen Ellison, expresses sentiments about war very similar to Teddy's. Stephen gets a chance to spend time with the "enemy" while he is a prisoner in Kentucky, and his conclusions are the same as Teddy's:

". . . they are good people these Kentuckians, just like ourselves, barring a superficial difference in accent as well as in manners and customs, due to the climate," he told himself. "They haven't any more heart for fighting than we have. It's our governments that disagreed, that's all, and we are the ones to suffer for it. I'd rather be a prisoner than commanded to burn up the houses of non-combatants. That's the thing that will keep rancour alive long after we are dead and buried. In the naval battles I hear about, the commanders and men on opposite sides are good friends the minute the victory's decided, but these ravages on land – well, I am glad to be out of it!" (*KW* 266).

Both boy and young man realize that people's differences are superficial and

that in most cases the common person does not want to fight but is at the mercy of his government. The main concept of war is similar in both the novels, but in *Kinsmen at war* the theme of war does not dominate the book as it does in *The little admiral*.

A reviewer of *Kinsmen at war* says that "the principal theme is a pretty love story" but also that "[b]y actual description or by allusion it is remarkable how much of the war Miss McIlwraith gets on canvas" ("Fine"). In fact, the two are closely linked and the theme of war itself is no less important than the symbolic love union. Like *The little admiral*, *Kinsmen at war* deals with the concept of war, of right and wrong, and of the powerlessness of the individuals. At the same time McIlwraith adds a love plot and ideas about women which were largely absent in the children's novel.

In *The little admiral* the position of women is only briefly touched on. The idea of female self-sacrifice, seen earlier in McIlwraith's novels *The making of Mary* (1895), *The span o' life* (1898) (written in collaboration with William McLennan), and *A Diana of Quebec* (1912) is mentioned again here. Marceline, a little hunchbacked girl, is adopted by Bonneau's family when her grandfather, a cruel miser, dies. Bonneau explains to Teddy that she would have been welcome earlier in any of the families in the area but "she thought it was her duty to wait upon her old *grandpère*, though he would hardly grant her food or clothing" (LA 59). The defencelessness of women is acknowledged by Bonneau's concern for his daughter Marie who has gone in search of Marceline: "'twill be unpleasant to say the least, for any modest maid to pass camp after camp of idle soldiers from every province of France. Curse their white coats and bold manners!" (LA 96).

The only romance in the book is between Marie Bonneau and Hector Macfarlane, a member of one of the Scottish regiments. Their relationship is not developed in any depth, however, and their marriage is merely symbolic of the way in which McIlwraith idealizes English and French living peacefully together in Canada, bridging the gap between different cultures and languages.

Another idea seen in McIlwraith's earlier books for adults is the idea of class. It is very clear throughout *The little admiral* that Teddy is of an upper class. When he and two other midshipmen go ashore they are carried on the backs of three regular seamen, "as it was not fitting that young gentlemen of the frigate should wet their feet or soil their silk stockings and shoe-buckles, wading across the mud-flats to the shore" (LA 24). As mentioned earlier, Teddy was treated with respect by the French Canadians: "Everywhere he was treated as an honoured guest, and the best of the rude fare was placed before him. The habitants even ceased their groaning over the arrival of the dreaded British out of deference to the little admiral" (100-101). Even the French officers, who are shown to be as honourable as the British, treat Teddy with respect.

Although the presence of these ideas about class and women is worth noting

to demonstrate the continuity in McIlwraith's writing, they have little significance in this book, overshadowed as they are by the primary theme of war, and the loss of Quebec in particular. By showing how the French felt about the loss of Quebec and by writing her books for children, McIlwraith hoped to create a generation of English Canadians who gave respect to their French counterparts in order to create a stronger nation.

In his *CCL* article "Canadian historical fiction: A survey" David W. Atkinson gives a description of good historical fiction:

Good historical fiction must be more than an entertaining story or an accurate account of history, whether it turns to familiar or unfamiliar events of the past. A good piece of historical fiction will express a moral message that is relevant today yet not out of place in the historical context of the novel. Not surprisingly, this moral message has often been related to very fundamental themes like loyalty, honour, love, and courage. A really good work of historical fiction, however, will go beyond this simple moral dimension, and one can find many examples of Canadian historical fiction for young readers that do confront complex and difficult moral issues (37).

Certainly McIlwraith's discussion about war in *The little admiral* contains a moral message that is no less important now than it was in the years following the first World War. Likewise the book can still prove valuable as a way of helping children perceive the diversity of cultures within our boundaries.

The manuscript of *The little admiral* won the 1923 Hodder and Stoughton prize novel award of \$500. Yet it was, as she says in her introduction, written "not so much for a prize as for a purpose. . . the instilling [of] sympathy". The introduction also poses a still-relevant question:

The French Canadians will always be with us, and if a strong nation is to be built up with their help, is not a better understanding of their point of view essential to our national development? (7-8)

Here she echoes her own concluding statement in *Canada*, the children's history book published in 1899; in it she also asserts that Canada will be a stronger country with a successful union of English and French Canadians:

The strongest nations have been built up with a mixture of races, and the time is at hand when French and English will remember only that they are Canadians, will glory alike in deeds that the ancestors of either tongue have done upon this continent, and resolving not to be unworthy of the noble heritage left them, will look hopefully into the future (247).

The unity of the country was obviously a concern of Jean McIlwraith's, and she believed that political strength, like personal strength, lay in compromise and reconciliation.

Wendy Ratkowski Huyek did her M.A. thesis on Jean McIlwraith. She lives in Hamilton and works as a technical writer for ShawWare, Inc.