# The Pearlie trilogy

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**Résumé:** *Trois romans de Nellie McClung mettant en vedette son héroïne Pearlie Watson reprennent plusieurs facettes de la vie même de l'auteur, telle qu'elle apparaît dans son autobiographie. Le passage à la fiction met en relief la tempérance, l'expérience religieuse, les besoins et le statut de la femme.*

Nellie Letitia Mooney McClung was an activist, an educator, a politician, an evangelist and a writer. McClung the writer produced numerous contributions to serials and newspapers and also published sixteen books. Of these, three were novels intended to appeal to children and young adults. In the genre of sentimental family fiction, these three novels, *Sowing seeds in Danny* (1908), *The second chance* (1910), and *Purple Springs* (1921), form what may be called the Pearlie trilogy: they revolve around Pearl Watson, following her from childhood to young adulthood. The story of Nellie McClung's own growth from childhood to young adulthood is told in *Clearing in the West* (1935), the first volume of her autobiography. Comparing the trilogy with the autobiography, this paper will discuss the way McClung adjusts, and in some ways marginalizes, her own story when she adapts it to the genre of sentimental family fiction. I will also suggest that in spite of the limitations of the genre, Nellie McClung, in creating Pearl Watson, treats the daily life of a Canadian girl in ways that suggest universal concerns.

Certain themes dominate the Pearlie Watson stories: the need for self-definition, the power of an individual to touch other lives in personal and political spheres, the pressure of poverty, the value of hard work, the evil of drink, the power of God, and the dream of equality for women. Pearl is dedicated to the idea that education is the means to improvement, and that humanity is perfectible. These beliefs were also the driving forces by which Nellie McClung ordered her life. The exigencies of fictional form dictated changes in emphasis and outcome, and to some extent a sentimentalizing of real problems. On the other hand, the novels show the way personal conviction and real involvement in social and political causes can infuse new force even into a conventional form.

Nellie McClung was an inspiring woman, dynamic, compassionate, and effective. Pearlie, whose character radiates warmth, energy, intelligence, and love for all living creatures, is unquestionably her creator's progeny.

McClung's first novel, the first in the trilogy, presents Pearl as "an imaginative, clever little girl, twelve years old, who is the mainstay of the family."[1] Pearlie's language is colourful, and her humour is constant and infectious. Throughout the subsequent two novels, Pearl remains lively, loving and earnest. She is intelligent and quick-witted, continually spilling charmingly-turned phrases. Pearlie consistently presents a persuasive voice for a didacticism that might otherwise not have been effective.

Among parallel features linking Pearl and her creator is an emphasis on early poverty. Nellie Mooney was born in 1873 on a subsistence farm in Chatsworth, Ontario; she was the youngest of six children. In 1880 her family was lured by the promise of fertile land to Manitoba. Pearlie, too, grows up in a large family, but, as one of the older children, she mothers her siblings. Like the Mooneys, the fictional Watsons are introduced to us as poor.

The poverty of the Watsons is cheerful; they defy unpleasant reality, in accordance with the conventions of the sentimental family novel. The genre usually trivializes the struggles of the poor. In *Sowing seeds in Danny*, the simplest, most innocent, and most amusing of the trilogy, the Watsons are shown as poor and fatigued by hard work, but their life has something of the enchanted about it. They live in a parked caboose and take delight in their own closeness. Pearlie manages to keep her brothers and sisters clean and happy despite what can only have been an endless battle against dirt and hunger.

Then, as Misao Dean remarks in "Voicing the voiceless: Language and genre in Nellie McClung's fiction and her autobiography," McClung infiltrates the typical saccharine formula with elements of political and social commentary.[2] In the transition from autobiography to fiction, the details of poverty are pushed along the continuum until they become more intense – and also less realistic. When the Watson family proves unable to make the final mortgage payment on the caboose, it falls upon Pearlie to pay the debt. She is indentured as a domestic servant to a parsimonious family, the Motherwells. The hardships of this job have already proved nearly fatal to Pearlie's predecessor, an English immigrant girl. Here McClung goes beyond the facts of her own childhood. At the same time, however, she draws on her own later experiences with rural poverty and deprivation to introduce into the novel struggles which were rarely explored in the conventional form, details such as poverty imposed by greed, domestic violence, avoidance of dower rights, institutionalized patriarchy, and the corroding effects of alcohol. She therefore allows women readers to recognize these tyrannies, and, through Pearlie's resistance, she educates readers as to the possibilities of alternatives.

From the beginning of the trilogy, Pearl plays the role of activist on a personal level. When sent to the Motherwells' farm, she influences all the characters whom she meets. For example, she saves the life of a young English gentleman, struggling as an apprentice farmer; for this she is rewarded by the young man's family with a large sum of money, "nearly six hundred dol-

lars" (304). That money, arriving melodramatically at the end of the first novel, is used, as *The second chance* opens, to set up a new life on a homestead on the banks of the Souris River. Pearl has decided that town life is a bad influence on her brothers and sisters and decides to "better their circumstances and give the boys a chance to grow up decent" (71) by moving to the country where hard work and fresh air and a chance to go to school can do good things. Similarly, Nellie Mooney's family established themselves on a homestead on the Souris River and prospered. Eventually, Nellie Mooney would touch and influence the prairie farmers for whom she became teacher, counsellor, advisor, and conscience. But the novel, in making the fictional child responsible for these good developments, attributes more power to her than would normally be available to a young girl in real life.

The pursuit of education is both plot and subtext in the Pearlie novels as well as in the autobiography. Nellie Mooney McClung was an educator in the broadest sense of the word. She worked her entire life to bring literacy and thinking skills to children, to enlighten the isolated with the word of God, and to educate the entire population as to the rights of women. Education was a route to a life filled with self-reliance rather than fearful dependence on father, husband, brother. Education represented a chance for a better life.

Both the autobiography and the trilogy tell us that new worlds opened up and life changed for Nellie and for Pearl when each was eventually able to attend school. Nellie Mooney did not begin school until she was nearly ten. The delay did not retard her progress; neither did the responsibility of staying home until the harvest in order to prevent the cows from eating up the profits. Nellie's progress through school was much quicker than Pearlie's, whose schooling is hindered by her position in the family as rightful helpmate to an overworked mother.

Both the real girl and the fictional one eventually pass through a similar routine, of attending the local rural schools and then going on to Winnipeg to the Normal school. By the time Nellie Mooney was fifteen she was taking her teacher training; she spent the next five years teaching in rural schools. Pearl, too, goes to Normal School and then finds a position teaching in a rural school. Pearl, like her creator, becomes active in her new community, beginning a Sunday school and joining the Women's Suffrage and Temperance movements.

It was through the Women's Christian Temperance Union that Nellie met the senior Mrs. McClung, whom she characterized as "the only woman I have ever seen whom I should like to have as a mother-in-law" (*Clearing* 269). Conveniently, Mrs. McClung was mother to a suitable son. After Nellie returned to Winnipeg to complete high school, she taught again for one year and then she married Wes McClung. In the Pearlie trilogy, Pearl Watson loves and marries Horace Clay, but with considerable more drama than accompanied Nellie's own romance. In *Sowing seeds in Danny*, Pearl saves young Doctor Clay from a moment of terrible weakness. At the end of *The second chance*, Dr. Clay pro-

mises that in three years he will ask Pearl to marry him. Three years less one day later, *Purple Springs* opens. A terrific snowstorm prevents Clay's coming to the farm on the promised day: the delay is symptomatic of the novel. The plot turns on confusions, masked identities, mistaken intentions, overheard conversations. Young Dr. Clay, who has been told by an elderly colleague that he has a terminal illness and may expect to live only a few years, cannot bear the thought that Pearl would marry him only to be left a young widow. Self-sacrificing as he is, he resolves to hide his illness from her. Both Pearl and Clay are consequently heart-broken, yet they stoically carry on. Both become involved in provincial politics, and this involvement is the catalyst for their eventual reunion. Obviously, the demands of romantic fiction had led McClung to add melodrama to her own reasonable romance.

The turn to political involvement comes closer to the facts of McClung's next phase. Again, however, there is a significant difference. Pearl gradually becomes active in the suffrage movement. Her politicization is a vehicle for her personal maturation, and gives her a voice for self-definition. Her moment of glory comes when she plays the starring role of the Provincial Premier in a mock Women's Parliament. Playing to a packed audience, she mimics the Premier, satirizes the system of politics which excludes women, and criticizes the government's procedures. At the next election, the government is swept from power. The fictionalized account is a thinly-veiled reminder of a similar incident in which Nellie McClung's starring role was partly responsible for the defeat of Premier Roblin.[3]

From this point on, fact and fiction differ. Nellie McClung's political career went beyond the Mock Parliament of 1914; she had a profound effect on Canadian history. Her many accomplishments included her service as a Liberal M.L.A. in Alberta from 1921-1926 and her role in the "Persons Case" in 1924.[4] Pearl, on the other hand, after her initial success in the Mock Parliament, decides she does not want to personally injure her opponents. She rescues the aged and defeated Premier by uniting him with the wife of his long-lost, dead son. The genre in which McClung was writing here joins her personal conviction about the power of maternal compassion. She assigns to Pearl a sentimental rather than political role; and she lets the fictional character personify her own conviction that feminine maternal understanding, extrapolated beyond the personal into the political sphere, could effect great and important changes in both spheres. Pearl thus exemplifies McClung's position that the power of women was a function of their maternal compassion. In terms of practical action, McClung modified the maternal compassion by the love of a good fight.

In the trilogy as a whole, Pearl's position regarding compassion vs. confrontation reflects a paradoxical attitude towards woman's sphere. McClung, like Pearl, had to struggle against her mother's sense of the proper place for a woman.[5] The struggle of both girls against, and rejection of the subjugation of

women by men lends them a strength which enables them to stand up and raise their voices against the injustices all around them. Even as a young girl, in *Sowing seeds in Danny*, Pearlie has seen that pioneer women work to perpetuate their own struggle:

> Soon the company began to arrive. Bashful, self-conscious girls, old before their time with the marks of toil, heavy and unremitting, upon them, hard-handed, stoop-shouldered, dull-eyed and awkward. These were the daughters of rich farmers. Good girls they were, too, conscientious, careful, unselfish, thinking it a virtue to stifle every ambition, smother every craving for pleasure. (197)

This narrator's comment is in the voice of Nellie McClung, and it is a sad voice, yearning to change the unending cycle of girls sacrificed for their father's dreams. These daughters of rich men suffer because the farmers invest only in more land so that their families could work even harder, struggle harder for the privilege of continuing the struggle.

Pearlie comes to see that there are options for these girls other than marriage. In *The second chance* she explains to her teacher:

> Gettin' married ain't all there is to it, you bet. It's only in books that they say people git married, and leave it like that, for that's when the real hard times begin – keepin' it up and makin' it turn out well. That's the hard part. (290)

It is interesting to note that despite Pearl's modern, astute, and clinically unromantic conception of marriage, all three books of the trilogy end with a happy couple in the golden haze of engagement or with a promise of marriage. Camilla and Jim are engaged at the close of *Sowing seeds in Danny*, Martha and Arthur are engaged, and Pearlie and Horace Clay have an understanding at the end of *The second chance*, and in *Purple Springs* Pearl and Clay are eventually reunited and engaged. Though Pearl clearly rejects the myth of marriage as a solution to a girl's life, the genre through which Pearl moves demands a promise of wedded bliss.

In *Purple Springs*, Pearl enters adulthood. Her dramatic and influential role in the women's Parliament is not the only forum for her crusade against the suppression of women. She is warned by a Mrs. Paine against the deadly trap of agreeing to marriage in order to avoid the stigma of being an old maid. Pearlie is troubled by her own reaction to the warning. She asks herself:

> Could it be that she was being called of God to be a leader in a new crusade against injustice? Was it her part to speak for other women? (136)

That Pearl has the courage to question her role in society is symptomatic of the courage she will call upon to influence those around her. She does speak for other women, and she does affect the lives of the women around her. Mrs. Paine, for example, is victimized by her husband and by a patriarchal legal sys-

tem: "The law... gives a married woman no rights. She has no claim on her home, nor on her children. A man can sell and will away his property from his wife. A man can will away his unborn child" (185). Pearl is finally able to persuade Mr. Paine not to sell the family farm. She has made a private point for the case of dower rights. Her author made a more public case for women's rights in a wider sense. Pearl is assigned no such public role.

If there are some paradoxical points in the stance taken by the author and her character with respect to feminist ideals, there is no inconsistency in the adherence of both to two other causes, less in style nowadays, but very urgent in McClung's time. Both McClung and Pearl devote unstinting time and energy in two causes of supreme importance: conversion to the love of God, and extension of temperance.

Of the evils of alcohol, both Nellie McClung and Pearlie Watson are convinced at an early age. In *Sowing seeds in Danny*, Pearlie as the didactic voice of Temperance can recite from the Band of Hope manual, and can use examples of the dangers of drink in the stories she tells to her younger brothers and sisters. At an equally young age, Nellie McClung was involved in a more dramatic example of the dangers of drink. In *Clearing in the West*, McClung recalls attending a first of July picnic, where, during the ox races, a baby was left in her care. Suddenly, one of the oxen, driven by a drunken man, charged at the baby carriage and narrowly avoided killing the child. Alcohol had made a dumb beast of man, making him behave like an animal. McClung incorporates this scene, with some transformation of details, into *The second chance*. At a first of July picnic, again, while a group of drunk men pass by, all "madly beating their beasts into a gallop" (195), Pearlie kneels beside Bill Cavers, a neighbour who has collapsed and is dying from years of chronic alcoholism. The local bar owner stands by, watching the scene. Because he has been converted to religion by Pearl, this man feels distress over his own complicity in Cavers's death. To assuage his guilt, he offers to help the dead man's wife and small daughter. The alcoholic Cavers thus generates a substantial subplot. Cavers, the personification of the dangers of drink, has "a thirst that never faltered....[H]e was not a success as a husband, ...[and a] conspicuous failure as a father" (107). Alcohol damages the entire family, including the child, "so thin and pale" (233). Relief is the emotion expressed when Cavers finally dies and releases his family from the torment of alcoholic abuse. This temperance subplot, so violently developed, is alien to the traditional gentleness of family fiction; it carries a powerful didactic message.

In *Purple Springs*, Pearl, now older and politicized, minces no words on the advantages of Temperance. In her first public speech, in which she outshines her opponent, the local politician, she says exactly what she means:

> That is why the liquor traffic is such a bad thing, and should be outlawed. Individuals may be able to drink and get away with it, but some go under.... If we have this social consciousness, we will very clearly see that the liquor traffic must go! (103)

Alcohol is a powerful evil; God is a powerful good. McClung's trilogy is filled with her belief in the redeeming force of religion. In her autobiography, she recounts her own spiritual "refreshing" when she was "emancipated from all fear" (235). Pearlie experiences no such elevated spiritual awakening; but she relies from the outset on the strength of her religion to get her through the most mundane and the most difficult tasks. In *Sowing seeds in Danny* she explains:

> When I sweep the floor I pretend I'm the army of the Lord that comes to clear the way from dust and sin, let the King of Glory in. Under the stove the hordes of sin is awful thick, they love darkness rather than light, because their deeds are evil. But I say 'Sword of the Lord and of Gideon!' and let them have it!" (106)

Pearl is the spiritual guide for those around her. She is never portrayed as a hero, never glorified for her own sake but for the sake of the God in whom she has perfect faith. Her prayer is unselfconscious and generous. As a child, she prays in a homespun, conversational way. When the young English farm hand is dangerously ill, and Dr. Clay, coming from an operation in which his mistake caused a death, is paralyzed by fear, Pearl drops on her knees and prays aloud to "the One who had never failed her" to "put the gimp back into Doc again; he's scared to do it, Lord, he's just lost his grip for a minute"(270). The doctor revives and saves the young man.

In *The second chance*, another neighbour comes to Pearl for solace in his bad hour. Out in the fields, she gets on her knees, clasps her hands and prays to God: "Even if he lets go of You, keep your grip on him" (158). Later, this man is "saved" at a Sunday meeting organized by Pearl.

Pearl's prayers become less specific and more reverent, more elastic, more universal, as she grows up: In *Purple Springs* she whispers,

> It's a good world.... God made it, Christ lived in it – and when He went away He left His spirit. It can't go wrong and stay wrong. The only thing that is wrong with it is in people's hearts, and people's hearts can be changed by the Grace of God. (74)

Evangelism and the Grace of God do redeem many a wayward minor character in all three novels. In the first novel, the stingy Motherwells, touched by the grace of religion after a period of heartlessness, become active in the church.

There is a historical imperative behind the unity of various reforms and religion in the Pearlie trilogy. The Canadian feminist movement as a political force had an evangelical aspect because it often operated within the parameters of organized religion and because it was linked to issues such as temperance and social reforms. Throughout the trilogy, Pearl Watson's causes, like those of Nellie Mooney McClung, were Temperance, God, and reform of the unjust position of women. Nellie McClung was dedicated and Pearlie was

created in order to touch, impress, and change the lives of those by whom they were surrounded.

In a larger sense, the line between autobiography and fiction has become blurred because both McClung and Pearl use stories as tools of persuasion. There is a strong sense in the trilogy of Pearlie as a story-teller, just as there is in *Clearing in the West* an emphasis on McClung as a writer. Much as McClung dramatizes her own history in the trilogy, Pearlie uses story-telling to construct her own sense of self. Both use narrative as a didactic as well as an entertaining form. Nellie McClung wanted to convert readers to her own beliefs; she uses the narrative voice of a sympathetic and admirable character to speak for her. Pearlie is a lovable character; the trilogy is memorable because of her. Her engaging humour makes topics of the author's day seem timeless. Pearl speaks from the heart, voicing ideas that filled her author's mind and issues that occupied her days. Doing so, she lifts a traditional genre from the formulaic and sentimental to a surprisingly effective and personal pitch.

NOTES

1 Nellie McClung. *Sowing seeds in Danny* (Toronto: Thomas Allen and Son, 1965 reprint) ix.
2 Misao Dean, "Voicing the voiceless: Language and genre in Nellie McClung's fiction and her autobiography," *Atlantis*, 15 (1) (Fall, 1989) 66.
3 Veronica Strong-Boag, introduction, *In times like these*, by Nellie McClung (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1972) xi.
4 The McClungs moved to Edmonton in 1915 and in 1921 Nellie began a five-year term as Liberal M.L.A. In 1924, she and four other Alberta women initiated the Person cases, which challenged section 24 of the B.N.A. Act. Section 24 said that only "fit and qualified persons" could sit in the Senate, and that women were neither fit nor qualified. The Supreme Court of Canada, following especially absurd judicial reasoning, upheld the section. The women appealed to the highest appellate court, the Privy Council of England. The women, and all women, were awarded the case in 1929. After this, women could be legally considered "persons": the first woman senator was appointed in 1930.
5 Veronica Strong-Boag, introduction, *In times like these*, by Nellie McClung (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1972) viii.
6 Strong-Boag viii.
7 Candace Savage, *Our Nell* (Saskatoon, Sask.: Western Producer Prairie Books, 1979) 19.

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