

Tay John and Chums

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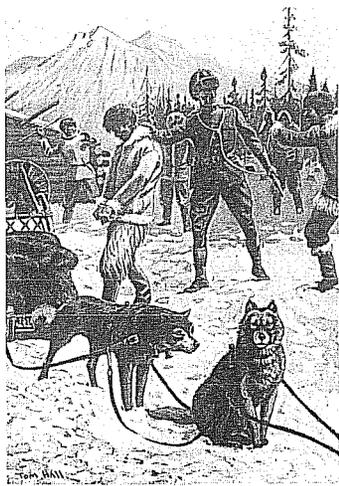
Résumé: S.R. MacGillivray compare ici l'univers romanesque de Howard O'Hagan, écrivain albertain de l'entre-deux-guerres et celui des récits d'aventures qu'on pouvait lire dans les périodiques de l'époque, en particulier la revue *Chums*, qui paraissait depuis 1892. C'est dans le rapport entre le héros et la nature sauvage que se trouvent les plus grandes ressemblances.

When I was a child I spake as a child, I understood as a child, I thought as a child but when I became a man I put away childish things. (1 Cor. 13.11)

Unlike St. Paul, creative writers return again and again to the fertile fields of their childhood to provide us with the recreated fruit of their experience. One of the many Canadian writers who made his childhood experience into something of literary significance was Howard O'Hagan (1902-1982). Born in Lethbridge, Alberta, O'Hagan grew up near and was nurtured by the environment of the Rocky Mountains in which he travelled, guided and worked for a number of years. A university man (he graduated in law from McGill in 1928), O'Hagan was nevertheless most fully alive when he was in the mountains himself, writing about others who had a semi-mystical bond with the mountains, or writing his own fiction, usually about mountains. O'Hagan's best-known work consists of a collection of short stories, *The woman who got on at Jasper station and other stories* (1963), and two novels, *Tay John*, first published in 1939, and *The school-marm tree* (1983). However, despite the polite interest shown in the short stories and the later novel, it is really *Tay John* that now constitutes, and in my view will continue to constitute, O'Hagan's claim to our attention.¹

Like many another boy of his generation, O'Hagan was familiar with such publications for juveniles as the *Boy's own paper* (BOP), begun in 1879 by the Religious Tract Society, and its almost equally successful rival, *Chums*, begun in 1892 and continuing into the early years of World War II until the shortage of paper, among other considerations, forced its demise. Both papers and their many imitators provided stories, games, puzzles, pictures, poems, short essays and helpful hints designed to inspire in their readers a love of adventure, self-reliance, initiative, patriotism, and moral rectitude. And so, no doubt, they did, despite the fact that the reader of more recent sensibilities would be likely to see the adventures as utterly fantastic, the self-reliance and initiative as a dangerous form of individualism, the patriotism as a sometimes virulent form

of racist jingoism, and the moral rectitude as a form of priggish snobbery inclining to religious intolerance and bigotry.



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Among the tales published in *Chums* were a number that purported to deal with life in Canada's West, or "Northwest," as it was frequently called in the text. R.G. Moyles has provided a useful typology of some of the recurring stereotypical characters who in the *Boy's own paper* and the same list might be used to describe those in the stories in *Chums* as well: the hero (usually English or Scottish); the hero's accomplice or sidekick; Indians, some good, many bad; and the rogue or scoundrel (Moyles 41-56). Against a vaguely realized, threatening and lawless landscape, the characters are set in motion, often on a form of quest which tests the mettle of the hero and the values for which he stands.

Stories by such writers as Tom King and S.S. Gordon about the Northwest Mounted Police (seen as not merely a police force but as the instrument of law, justice, civilization and the monarch's rule in a savage, mysterious and anarchic wilderness) were popular. Time and again these stories show that in the pursuit of the lawless, in questing from the known to the unknown, "Another luckless red-coat had crossed the threshold of the lawless land – and even as others had been, he was at Cain's mercy (King, "The Mounted" 643). However, as soon as the killer/thief/abductor had been killed or captured and justice rendered, "Once more the drama of Mounted and Lawless clashing would go down for the annals of wilderness history" (King, "The Spirit" 722,724). In these stories there is never any real doubt that the pluck, daring, courage, fair play, strength and endurance which define the red-coated heroes will triumph even in the face of daunting odds and the dastardly ploys of the villainous lawbreakers. The lawless, savage anarchy of the wilderness, personified in the various malefactors, and usually rendered metaphorically by reference to fearsome predators – the wolf, grizzly and panther are recurring favourites – is brought to order; the way of white British civilization and law is restored, or, it may be re-imposed.

It is in this context that Constable Porter sets off to apprehend the titular hero of O'Hagan's novel. In the episode in question, the Mounties are sent to bring in Tay John for questioning after Julia Alderson, the American wife of an English tourist, intimates that he has sexually assaulted her while the two of them were cut off for a night from the rest of the hunting party by an un-

expected snowstorm. After seeing Mrs. Alderson safely returned to the base camp, Tay John has seemingly vanished into the landscape. Porter is excited at the prospect of life imitating art. For him to be sent to apprehend the elusive Tay John will be "the chance for him to do the kind of thing he had read about – like a story in *Chums*, chasing a half-breed hunter through the mountains" (O'Hagan 150), a real life enactment with himself in the hero's role.

But the apprehension of Tay John is clearly the result of his cooperation rather than of any inherent personal qualities or skills of his pursuers. His various appearances, disappearances and re-appearances make him a man as seemingly magical, at least to white perceptions, in his woodlore as James Rice, "a boy half Delaware, half Irish, a half-caste whose woodlore was so great that there were those who thought it magic," who appears in a *Chums* story by Captain Charles Gilson (Gilson 717, 719). Furthermore, unlike the *Chums* stories, the effect of the "capture" of Tay John, far from being a re-imposition of white European notions of civilization, is rather a re-affirmation of the values of Tay John, the personification of mysterious wilderness. Like Julia Alderson before him, Porter is changed utterly in his perceptions of Tay John as a consequence of his experience in the two days it takes to bring the alleged malefactor in: "Porter implied that, as a result of his two days on the trail with Tay John, life for him had taken an entirely new turn. The hidden was now revealed" (O'Hagan 151).

The collision here between adventures of the imagination, as in the *Chums* stories with which Porter is familiar, and experiential reality, the incidents in *Tay John*, is like that in Conrad's *The secret sharer*, when the young Captain and Leggatt decide that they are not enacting, in the desperate attempt to help Leggatt escape land-based justice, the feature of "a boy's adventure story" (Conrad 180). This seems to be O'Hagan's point too: in order to appreciate fully what Tay John represents we are obliged to transcend the conventionally jejune and move toward an apprehension of the greater reality that has so affected Julia Alderson (O'Hagan 142, 143, 147) and that seems to be the reason for Porter's *volte-face*. Whatever the degree of success in that enterprise, it is clear that there is a direct connection between the imagined Canadian experience of *Chums* and the reality of O'Hagan's novel which uses the *Chums* experience as the base for its own purposes.

There are some other interesting elements in *Tay John* that seem to find their source in *Chums* stories. In both *Tay John* and many of the *Chums* stories the wilderness is presented as beyond the boundary of the rational, the ordered, or the known. Instead, as already suggested, it is an entity of mystery and power. In the *Chums* stories the wilderness is the dark, brooding, menacing presence that it is in John Richardson's *Wacousta*. For the en-garrisoned whites who seek to protect their circle of rational ordered society, the wilderness is the dwelling place of savage beasts and for anarchic humankind. The reference, for example, in *Wacousta* to "the savage scenes and unexplored coun-

tries" and "the gloomy and impenetrable walls of the prison-house [of the wilderness]" (Richardson 286) would not be out of place in many a *Chums* story.

In *Tay John* the wilderness is capable of transforming perceptions and of defeating utterly the arrogant intentions of those like Alf Dobble, the American entrepreneur, to name it, contain it and so domesticate it for commercial purposes (O'Hagan 253). In O'Hagan's work, human enterprise must show the same courage and perseverance displayed by James Rice and his dog, Mike, in the *Chums* story, "The quest of Running Bear": "They had traversed the heart of the wild, they had stood face to face with death. The chase had been a long one, but they were victors, and they knew it, and were pleased with themselves and the world" (Gilson 719). But it must also act successfully in concert with the presence that is the wilderness. Here the wilderness as an entity resists and, indeed, transcends the pitiable human efforts that seek to reduce it to a false humanized order by imposing names, cutting trails, building ersatz European resorts in its midst, ripping its entrails for precious metals (O'Hagan 91) or any other imperialistic activity. After the Rorty brothers are dead, Lucerne has disappeared, the Indians have seemingly embraced their fate, and the whites have taken their money-grubbing activities elsewhere, the wilderness remains: implacable, mysterious, powerful. It is not something to be reduced to conventional notions of rational control and order, but rather something to inspire in the responsive few a recognition of the absurdity of human pretension arrogance. It is a presence which can inspire with the wonder of new creation – "for a country where no man has stepped before is new in the real sense of the word, as though it had just been made. Up in those high places you even think you can *hear* the world being made" (O'Hagan 80).

Another interesting echo between novel and juvenile paper is heard in Jackie Denham's account of the encounter between Tay John and the grizzly and that between Major Bold and a bear in a *Chums* story entitled "Face to face with a bear." In the latter, two friends, Mr. Jack T__, the narrator, and his friend, Harry Vane, are hiking in the mountains of the Austrian Tyrol when, across a chasm that is one hundred feet deep and a quarter of a mile wide, they catch sight of a bear about to confront an unsuspecting man. Jack would warn the man of the approaching danger, but Harry, fearing a debilitating panic on the part of the man that would ensure his death, warns Jack into silence. The encounter, then, becomes a silent pantomime, much like the encounter between Tay John and the grizzly in Jackie Denham's account. In both stories, the witnesses are forced to watch in silent fascination while the drama is played out.

Again, it is the differences between the two accounts that are instructive. In *Tay John* the hero's killing of the bear and the ritualistic aftermath serve to secure Tay John's identification with the wilderness and its values. Furthermore, the whole action indicates his recognition that his continued existence

and survival are predicated on his continuing obedience to, and respect for, what the wilderness is. Jackie's elevation of Tay John to mythic figure of light, confronting the elemental forces of darkness in a manichean struggle for supremacy (O'Hagan 99), misses the point, and argues more for Jackie's psychological need for a human, if mythic-human, figure with which to confront and "conquer" what he sees as the dark, irrational savagery of wilderness. In this, Jackie reveals himself to have been a former reader of *Chums* and to have imbibed and maintained its values. In "Face to face with a bear" the focus is typically on the response of the man to the sudden and imminent danger and on the way he comports himself. In this case, irony is generated by the fact that the man who freezes in abject terror (in light of the result, the best of all possible responses: the bear sniffs at him in curiosity and then simply ambles off as the man collapses in a senseless heap) turns out to be the much-decorated-for-valour hero, Major Bold ("Face to face" 813).

A final incidental feature shared by O'Hagan's work (with only noteworthy exceptions) and the stories of the North American wilderness in *Chums* is the curious malevolence attached to the colour red. The singular exception to this in *Chums* is the red of the Mounties' tunics. Quite aside from the racism expressed in such pieces as "The Red Indian at home," which proclaims that "of the races as a whole the distinguishing characteristics were cunning and cruelty" ("The Red Indian" 160), the villains of various *Chums* stories are almost invariably nicknamed "Red."² It will, of course, be recalled that in *Tay John* the elder of the two Rorty brothers is Red Rorty, who attempts to shout his sense of order on the wilderness, tries to foist his version of Christianity on others, and rapes the Shusway woman, Hanni (O'Hagan 13-4, 22-4, 26-7). O'Hagan's red-coated Mounties, like those in the *Chums* stories, are the agents of white European values, but they embody those values in O'Hagan's wilderness setting in a way which makes them seem limited, or worse, simply irrelevant. Far from being heroes central to the action, the Mounties seem rather spectators with an occasional walk-on part in a much larger drama. Furthermore, in his handling of the Indians, O'Hagan in no way romanticises the Shuswaps either as noble children of nature or as howling savages. They are shown to be the human victims as much of their own increasing laziness and materialism as they are of the white man's rapacity. The fact that the man they insist be their leader leaves them in a meadow far from their "promised land" while he pursues his own human destiny is surely comment enough on their tendency to allow others to create their reality for them and to embrace values that are alien to them.

The suggestion here that there are points of analogy between O'Hagan's *Tay John* and some of the material published in *Chums*, with which O'Hagan like almost every other youth of his generation in the Empire was certainly familiar, is far from suggesting that he "cribbed" or simply re-wrote boys' stories' material. In fact, as has already been noted, the points of difference

between the two bodies of material are more significant than those of similarity. What is really at issue is not that in *Tay John* O'Hagan offers a world view based on his own experience which is quite removed from that offered by *Chums* for its readers. It is not too fanciful to suggest that O'Hagan, like David Thompson before him, provides the reader with a different perception of what the European mind would re-order according to its informing moral, social, and political ideas (Thompson).³ In O'Hagan's view of the same human and natural landscape, what is required is a new set of feelings and perceptions, a new way, if not of ordering, at least of apprehending the experiential reality of that world and the human enterprise in it. The notion that O'Hagan is really revealing the impossibility of any valid mythology to account for human experience seems highly unlikely (Davidson 30-44), but he would certainly have agreed with Frank Scott's poetic statement that in Canada we have "a new soil and a sharp sun" (Scott 37), and that what is needed is an indigenous mythology to embody that reality. The distance between the view of the Canadian wilderness and those in it offered by some of the *Chums* stories and that provided in *Tay John* is the measure of what O'Hagan has done to point us toward that mythology. Nevertheless, the fundamental point remains: in order to move toward his vision of the human experience, O'Hagan has returned to the experiences of childhood, among which were the stories in *Chums* of the Canadian wilderness, as the base from which to work. Whatever case can be made for moving from childish things, it is clear that O'Hagan, like many of his fellow artists, benefitted from a continuing tie to that fruitful period which provided the essence of what the later man and artist could turn to his novelistic advantage.

NOTES

- 1 Despite the polite notes and reviews accorded the other writings, it is really *Tay John* which has provided the fullest commentary in recent years. See, for example, Michael Ondaatje, "O'Hagan's rough-edged chronicle," *Canadian literature* 61 (Summer, 1974), 24-31; Margery Fee, "Howard O'Hagan's *Tay John*: Making new world myth," *Canadian literature* 110 (Fall, 1986), 8-27; Arnold E. Davidson, "Silencing the word in Howard O'Hagan's *Tay John*," *Canadian literature* 110 (Fall, 1986), 30-44; Arnold E. Davidson, "Being and definition in Howard O'Hagan's *Tay John*," *Etudes canadiennes* 15 (1983), 137-47; Ella Tanner, *Tay John and the cyclical quest* (Downsview, Ontario: ECW Press, 1990).
- 2 One who is not is Red Macintosh, also known as "Red Fox", a Hudson's Bay Company Factor in Eric Wood's serial story, "Brothers of the wild," *Chums* 28 (1920). Of those who are, we might note the titular "heroes" of S. Walkey's, "Red Hand the Half-Breed," *Chums* 11 (1903), and "In the grip of Red Shark," *Chums* 9 (1900-01). Other "red" villains include "Redfish" of Hidden in Canadian wilds," *Chums* 15 (1906-7) and a gang of Mexican desperadoes known as "The Red Riders" in Julian Linley's story of that name in *Chums* 28 (1920).
- 3 See especially Chapter VI, "Life among the Nahathaways."

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