Snow Angels and Monarch Butterflies: Margaret Laurence's Children's Fiction

—Nora Foster Stovel

Margaret Laurence is so famous for her Manawaka cycle of adult fiction—*The Stone Angel* (1964), *A Jest of God* (1966), *The Fire-Dwellers* (1969), *A Bird in the House* (1970), and *The Diviners* (1974)—that most people who read her work are not aware that she also published four books for children: *Jason's Quest* in 1970, *Six Darn Cows* and *The Olden Days Coat* in 1979, and *The Christmas Birthday Story* in 1980. Far from being condescending to children's fiction, as many authors of adult texts are, Laurence frequently expressed great interest in children's literature. In a personal essay, "Books That Mattered to Me," she recalls that as a child she received books—by Robert Louis Stevenson, Arthur Conan Doyle, Mark Twain, Rudyard Kipling, and L. M. Montgomery—for Christmas (239-41). In "Upon a Midnight Clear" in her collection of travel essays, *Heart of a Stranger* (1976), she says she and her children still give each other children's books for Christmas, "because we've always liked good children's books" (155). In her autobiographical *Dance on the Earth: A Memoir* (1989), she recalls her early love of L. M. Montgomery and many other authors of books for young adults (64). In her 1975 interview with Beatrice Lever, Laurence emphasizes the need for more "good children's novels" (32). Indeed, she published four interesting children's fictions herself.

Strangely, her four children's books have been virtually ignored by critics—*strangely* because her adult fiction is so much studied. The only two essays devoted to them are diametrically opposed. In "Mother of Manawaka: Margaret Laurence as Author of Children's Stories," published in *CCL/LCJ* in 1981, immediately after the publication of Laurence's last three children's books, D. R. Letson asserts that Laurence's children's work is fiction that "all our children should read or have read to them. Not only is it artful and entertaining literature, but it is also instructive" (17). Two decades later, Janet Lunn begins her 2001 essay, "To Find Refreshment in Writing Children's Books: A

Note on Margaret Laurence's Writing for Children," with this condemnation: "Margaret Laurence wrote four books for children. The only thing that is interesting about them is that she wrote them at all. They might be called a footnote to her adult fiction and criticism, but they are not really even that. They are irrelevant, not only to Laurence's larger body of work, but to the larger body of literature for children in Canada" (145). I disagree with Lunn's opinion: not only is Laurence's children's fiction relevant to her adult fiction, as I hope to demonstrate here, but it also makes a significant contribution to Canadian children's literature. As a student of Laurence's work who has come to her children's fiction from a study of her writing for adults rather than from the field of children's literature, I am surprised at the dearth of critical attention to her children's books. The fact that most of her children's books have been out of print for many years is no doubt a factor in this neglect. I hope, in this essay, to initiate a fresh debate about Laurence's children's fiction.

Quite apart from the delight that Laurence's children's fiction affords readers of all ages, as my reading of her books to my own children when they were young showed, these children's texts, mostly written at the end of her career, can illuminate her adult novels by reflecting their themes and symbols, especially the quest for community manifested in her adult fiction—the quest often focusing on the emblem of a gift that is lost and then found—and the growing feminism that inspires the emphasis on the empowerment of women that liberates her Manawaka heroines—Hagar, Rachel, Stacey, Vanessa, and Morag—as she progresses from a patriarchal model to a matrilinear mode in these children's works. In the last book she ever wrote, *Dance on the Earth: A Memoir*, Laurence calls herself a "feminist" (4), although she does not define the term: "How long, how regrettably long it took me to find my true voice as a woman writer" (5), she laments. Laurence constructs her memoir in a matrilinear sequence that pays tribute to her mothers—her birth mother, her adopted mother, and her mother-in-law—as well as to herself as mother to her two children and to her many books. We can witness a similar development in her adult fiction, from her male protagonists in her African novel, *This Side Jordan* , to the gallery of powerful female protagonists in her Canadian fiction.

In order to explore Laurence's discovery of her true voice as a woman writer, I will consider her four children's texts in roughly chronological order of composition, tracing a growth in emphasis on gender equality and matrilinear lineage that is symbolized by emblems. Since Laurence's children's books are not well known to specialists and are mostly out of print, I will attempt to sketch the situations briefly in order to clarify the argument.

***Jason's Quest:* "Here Be Dragons"**

Jason's Quest, her first published children's book, illustrated by Swedish artist Staffan Torell, was published by Macmillan in 1970, the year she published *A Bird in the House*, the Canadian collection of short stories about a young girl growing up in Manawaka that she termed "the only semi-autobiographical fiction I have ever written" (*Heart* 8). *Jason's Quest* could also be called semi-autobiographical, for it grew out of her own family community during the decade when she lived in Elm Cottage in the village of Penn, Buckinghamshire, while she was writing her Manawaka cycle. Written to entertain her children, Jocelyn and David, in the sixties, this "animal fantasy" (*DE* 188) was inspired by the underground colony of moles at Elmcot. One morning the Laurences found their lawn dimpled by molehills, and that was the genesis of *Jason's Quest*. Laurence said, "the whole of *Jason's Quest* was given to me just like that—a great and glorious gift" ("Laughter" 46).[1]

Jason's Quest is a delightful parody of classical models of heroism—all male models, of course. Named for the Greek hero who rescued the golden fleece, the young mole hero Jason sets out on a quest for a cure for the ailing ancient city of Molanium—recalling Sophocles' *Oedipus Rex*, where the tragedy is initiated by Oedipus' quest to cure the illness that plagues Thebes. Jason has always been tempted to visit the dangerous land of *Thither*, the world above the ground, and finally he sets off on his great adventure: "Jason felt extremely happy. Nothing was settled, nothing was yet discovered, but it was good simply to be going somewhere, to be on the road to who-knows-what" (29)—recalling Laurence's excitement at the opening of *The Prophet's Camel Bell*—"There you go, rejoicing, as so you should, for anything may happen" (9)—and Rachel's anticipation at the conclusion of *A Jest of God*: "[W]here I'm going, anything may happen" (208).

Upon his departure Jason is showered with gifts: his mother, Calpurnia, who fusses over him in a manner that Hagar cannot muster when her son Marvin goes off to the Great War in *The Stone Angel*, gives him a needle and thread, the thread suggesting Theseus and the Minotaur's labyrinth; his sisters Grace, Beauty and Faith, who stay home (like Peter Rabbit's sisters), give him a handkerchief that can be used as a flag; and the Venerable Mole (a parody of the Anglo-Saxon historian, the Venerable Bede) gives him his blessing and presents him with the "Cap of Deeper Thinking"—recalling the cleverness of Odysseus, who is advised by Athena, goddess of wisdom, whenever he finds himself in danger. Similarly, in a crisis, Jason feels a tingling in the Cap of Deeper Thinking that inspires a fortunate premonition that seems intuitive, recalling Laurence's own "famous Celtic second sight" (ix), as her daughter puts it in her preface to her mother's memoir, *Dance*

on the Earth. Later, Jason is presented with a magic umbrella: when he turns the knobs labeled *Onward* and *Upward* (182), he sails safely over the heads of his assailants—presaging ET in Stephen Spielberg's 1982 film.[2]

In this delightful animal fantasy, Jason is joined by an owl named Oliver and two cats named Calico and Topaz, modeled on the Laurence family's own felines (*DE* 174). The traditional male model of heroism prevails, as timid Jason is named Captain of the expedition, and Oliver Owl is dubbed "Chief of Signals," while the female cats are mere beasts of burden who bear Jason and Oliver on their backs: "When the two cats heard about the quest, they readily agreed to join it and to act as steeds for the other two" (20). Calico and Topaz seem to be "before" and "after" stereotypes of femininity. Flirty Topaz, her name recalling Chaucer's foolish knight, is a parody of femininity, concerned with bows and furbelows, but, when it comes to the crunch, this little cookie does not crumble. Topaz is the poet of the group who composes their motto, *"Bash on, bash on in majesty, / And thwart the fouling churls—"* (54), in a parody of the triumphal Easter hymn, "Ride on, ride on in majesty." Laurence also parodies Dumas' three musketeers' motto, as the quartet's rallying cry is *"Four for One and One for Four. / Together till the Journey's o'er"* (55). Calico is an older and wiser cat, whose role is peacekeeper. Laurence gives Calico's address as *"Calico, Elm Cottage, Penn, Buckinghamshire, England"* (42), Laurence's own home address.

Together, the four set off on a quest that recalls *The Wizard of Oz*, for Oliver seeks wisdom, for which owls are renowned, just as the Cowardly Lion seeks courage, which seems his natural right. James King notes, "As in many quest stories, the hero learns that the real discoveries are internal ones" (253); Laurence writes in *Jason's Quest*, "Wisdom has to be learned from life itself" (155). Only the cats have no noble motive for the trip, merely a frivolous wanderlust. Laurence's editor at Macmillan writes in her notes on the typescript: "The Quest seems to have been forgotten in an adventure. Perhaps in the beginning of their trip a brief mention by the cats of their quest to right wrong and also some mention by Jason of his purpose. Otherwise readers will feel that the 'Quest' was only a device to get a group together." Laurence agrees: "True, Calico and Topaz had a right to their part in the quest for noble deeds."[3] And so, "The quest had begun" (29). Jason explains each animal's quest to Winstanley, the traveller they meet along the way who turns out to be a wicked thief: "Jason told him how the four of them had met, and why they were going on a quest, each for his own purposes; Oliver to look for wisdom, the cats to perform noble deeds, himself to find a cure for the mysterious illness that was causing the downfall of Molanium" (34). As Letson rightly observes, "the quest becomes

a search for wisdom and self-esteem" (18)—recalling the journey of Hagar Shipley, who travels to the seacoast in search of wisdom and truth in *The Stone Angel*.

Jason's Quest could be subtitled "Animal Farm Goes to Town" or "Mole in the City," because Laurence's animal allegory is modelled on another literary tradition—the picaresque novel, an episodic narrative that follows the adventures of a *picaro*, Spanish for "rogue," who lives by his wits (Abrams 130–31). Timid Jason is an unlikely *picaro*, but the adventures that befall him recall the trials of Odysseus, Don Quixote, Tom Jones, and other fictional wanderers. His quest is beset by perils: *"Here be dragons"* (32), his map warns. In London, Jason meets many challenges, and he must learn to overcome his self-doubt to triumph over his ordeals. "I will try" (21) is his motto. He succeeds, beginning with the "heroic rescue" (104) of Oliver the owl from a cage in "Nicolette," a Bond Street boutique.

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Jason's heroism in these perilous adventures is rewarded not only with a cure for his tribe, but also with a new love in the form of the charming mole actress Perdita, meaning "lost girl," echoing Shakespeare's romance, *A Winter's Tale*. No sooner is Perdita found, however, than she is lost, true to her namesake, when she is captured by the vicious gang of Blades, young mice hoodlums, led by their lieutenant Jacko and their governor, "G.R." But this is a comedy, and Jason discovers and rescues his Perdita from the lair of the Great Rat. The Purple Petunias of the Petunia Patch, Perdita's nightclub, present each of the quartet with a gift to commemorate their quest: to Jason they give the "Drums of the Night" and the "Trumpets of the Day" (179), recalling the "talking drums" of Laurence's African texts—including "The Drummer of All the World," the first in her collection, *The Tomorrow-Tamer and Other Stories* (1963), and her only full-length critical study, *Long Drums and Cannons: Nigerian Dramatists and Novelists, 1952-1966* (1968), both inspired by her 1951–1957 sojourn in Africa.

Jason leads Perdita to Molanium in triumph. Perdita, the beautiful dancer, star of the London Mousedrome, is the classic trophy wife. But she is also wise: she discovers the cure to the illness that plagues Molanium. The song, *"Molanium The Mighty, With Twenty Tunnels Blest"* (23), proclaims the motto, *"Festina Lente! Hasten slowly!"* (188-89), emblematizing the social paralysis that afflicts Molanium. Molanium is still living in the Roman Britain past that Laurence parodies so wittily. Moving to England in 1962, Laurence toured the Tower of London and

other historical sites with her two children and sent home comical accounts of ancient traditions that appeared archaic to a young Canadian woman. Jason realizes, "Molanium has been dying of BOREDOM! … Everything had to change and grow…But Molanium had been afraid to change" (154-55). He explains to the Elders, "You see, we've been living too much in the past…Everything just the same for hundreds of years. Monotony. Everyone sort of lost heart, without realizing it. Sirs, elders and molefolk, that was the invisible sickness—boredom" (186-87). People must adapt to change or petrify. As a sign of their ability to adapt, the mole colony names Jason Mayor of Moleville, where he introduces numerous progressive changes, such as reforming the Mole Council to include Youngers as well as Elders and instituting a scientific research institute called "M.I.S., Moles In Space" (190), decades before Jim Henson's "Pigs In Space." Perdita composes a new motto to suit the new progressive spirit: *"Take A Care, Then Do and Dare"* (189). Thus, we see that, although *Jason's Quest* begins with a male protagonist and two male expedition leaders, Jason accepts the two felines as equals, and his bride, Perdita, helps reform Molanium. Laurence, who rebelled against the restrictions of her wartime small-town home in the Canadian prairies and first experienced traditional Britain in postwar London with her husband, Jack Laurence, in 1950, celebrates change and the freedom that both her African protagonists and her Manawaka heroines seek.

Reviews of *Jason's Quest* were very mixed. Clara Thomas exudes praise in "Bashing On": "This book is a *tour de force,* built on the quest theme, its every detail embroidered with joyful imaginings. . . . When Margaret Laurence's inventive powers and pervasive humour are turned towards such fantasy, the result is a proliferation of details of ridiculous delight. . . . Underneath all this sun-shower of invention, the mythic quest, of course, goes on—good battling evil" (89). But Diana Goldsborough, in the *Toronto Daily Star*, judges the story to be "a tedious disappointment. . . . Never has a children's book seemed so long" (59). Laurence recalls in her memoir that Sheila Egoff, in *The Republic of Childhood,* calls *Jason's Quest* "the most disappointing book in all of Canadian children's writing" (*DE* 189).[4] Janet Lunn concludes her unenthusiastic review of *Jason's Quest* in *The Globe and Mail* thus: "somehow it's a great relief to everyone when the adventure's over" (17). Lunn's view has not changed, as she says in her 2001 essay, "The fantasy is neither original nor particularly imaginative" (147). An anonymous reviewer for *Publisher's Weekly* in 1970 disagrees, however, calling *Jason's Quest* a "fantasy which in its unpretentious way is a triumph…because its author is a triumphant writer" (66). I agree with this last assessment, for the plethora of studies of Laurence's Manawaka cycle attests to

her brilliance as a writer, and I disagree, again, with Lunn: Laurence's animal fantasy is both imaginative and entertaining in its playing with traditional children's literature motifs and parodying of stultified conventions.

Furthermore, Laurence's children's books, while entertaining, focus on themes that reflect the concerns of her adult fiction, as *Jason's Quest* exemplifies. Laurence calls *Jason's Quest* "a frivolous retelling of the 'heroic monomyth': Departure—Initiation—Return" (King 253). Clara Thomas puts it well: "Writing [*Jason's Quest*] Margaret Laurence was at play, but still it contains the themes that were central to all her work: the unexpected finding of courage, one's rightful attitude to the ancestors, and the perilous effects of their over-influence, the unexpected blessings vouchsafed to 'strangers in a strange land,' and the inescapable pressure on every individual to change and grow" ("Saving Laughter" 46). The mythic quality of Laurence's adult work is reflected in her children's fiction, although the good and evil forces of her children's books are external, while the moral conflicts of her adult fiction are primarily internal, as protagonists like Hagar, Rachel, and Morag battle their psychological demons. James King judges that, "in the tragic-comic world of her first children's book, not only are heroes and villains easily distinguishable from each other, but also goodness confronts and vanquishes evil" (253). His allegorical interpretation recalls Clara Thomas' view in her *Canadian Encyclopedia* entry on Laurence of "this joyfully inventive tale" as a "confrontation between the forces of darkness and light" (1181-82).

The Christmas Birthday Story: "Lo and Behold"

The Christmas Birthday Story,[5] the last children's book that Laurence published, indeed the very last book she published before her death in 1987, was actually written in 1960 and was, thus, the first juvenile fiction that Laurence composed. Although it was the first children's book she wrote, the fact that it was lost for almost two decades gave her the opportunity to revise it in preparation for its publication in 1980, and thus it falls between *Jason's Quest* and her last two children's books. *The Christmas Birthday Story* is an example of a gift that is lost and found. "As so often in my writing life, this book was a kind of gift" (*DE* 219), Laurence writes, for when she left Vancouver (and her husband Jack) in 1962, she recalls, "I lost the only copy I had." Years later, in Lakefield, she met a woman who had attended the same church and still had a copy of Laurence's Nativity story and sent it to her: "the story finally came back after having been lost for so long" (*DE* 220).[6] It too was inspired by a real-life situation: when the Laurence family was living in Vancouver—between their return to Canada after seven years in Africa upon the death of her mother in 1957 and Margaret's departure with

her children in 1962 for a decade in England—they attended the Unitarian Church. She was horrified when it was suggested that the children not be told the Nativity story in Sunday school because angels are not real. As she explains in her memoir (*DE* 219), she did not want her children denied their Christian heritage or the Nativity narrative that offers what she saw as basic truths, so she offered to write a version of the Nativity that would be acceptably ecumenical.

Laurence's version of the Nativity is remarkable for its realism:[7] there is no Annunciation, no angel, and no suggestion of the supernatural. In *Dance on the Earth*, she explains "I had thought the story ought to be understood by young children. I had not, therefore, written of the divinity of Jesus or the Virgin Birth or any of those thorny theological matters, which I as an adult have found difficult, and sometimes quite impossible, to believe in, and which I felt would confuse young children totally" (220). Laurence's Mary and Joseph are true-to-life, down-to-earth people: Joseph is a hard-working carpenter, and his wife Mary is going to have a baby. Laurence writes: "Joseph and Mary were happy because soon they were going to have a baby. They didn't mind at all whether it turned out to be a boy or a girl. Either kind would be fine with them. They just hoped their baby would be strong and healthy." Some readers labeled her emphasis on gender equality as blasphemous. Laurence comments, "Those few and, as it turned out, controversial sentences express much of my own life view and my faith, with its need to recognize both the female and male principles in the Holy Spirit" (*DE* 221). In her foreword to her memoir, she laments that "the Christian ritual is male-oriented…except, of course, for Mary, the one constant—and virginal—representative of our sex" (*DE* 14). She prefers to think of "the female principle as being part of the Holy Spirit," to think of "God the Father and the Mother" (14). She laments her former fear of writing about the miracle of birth. In a sense, her version of the Nativity validates childbirth for all women, as she says in her typescript, "Mary borned her baby that same night"—her coinage "borned" as an active verb emphasizing the importance of birth and motherhood.

Laurence actually composed a "Note to Parents" dated 1978 that she noted should be a "rip-out page so the book will belong to kid," in which she explains that she wanted

> to re-tell the story in such a way that children of our own times might relate their known world to that world of long ago. I have tried to tell the story very simply, in terms that small children could understand readily at this point in their lives, and to emphasize above all the birth of the beloved child into a loving family, and the connection of the holy

child with all children, all people and all of earth's creatures.

She also notes that Helen Lucas wanted her illustrations to be in black and white so that children could add the colours, "and in this way it could be each child's own book."[8] In her memoir she recalls that Fredelle Maynard, author of *Raisins and Almonds*, an autobiographical account of a Jewish girl's childhood in prairie towns, said it was "the only retelling of the Christian Nativity story that she would wish to give to a Jewish child. I felt honoured and grateful" (*DE* 220).

She based her retelling on elements from the two Gospels in which the Nativity is described, Matthew and Luke, taking from Matthew the star and the three wise men, with their gifts of gold, frankincense and myrrh, and from Luke the trip to Bethlehem and the child's birth in the manger. Nature dominates her narrative: the manger is realistic and comfortable, with a lowing cow and an ewe baaing to its lamb.[9] All her children's books—including *Jason's Quest*, *Six Darn Cows*, and *The Olden Days Coat*—feature animals that exhibit some sympathy with human beings, a feature of numerous children's fictions. In fact, the three wise men sound like the three bears: the first is tall with a gold crown, the second is middle-sized with a silver crown, and the third is short with a gold-and-silver crown. This adds to the traditional Nativity tale a folkloric, fairytale quality. To pursue the animal motif, Laurence, influenced by the sojourn in Somaliland recorded in her travel-memoir, *The Prophet's Camel Bell* (1963), rhapsodizes about the camels that play such a crucial role in desert life—a detail not usually found in versions of the Nativity story.

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Drawn by the golden star, the three kings come to Bethlehem to the stable and see the newborn child lying in the manger. Impressed by the child, they offer gifts that turn out to be very practical, as well as emblematic: gold and frankincense and myrrh—the former to help the parents buy clothes for the newborn and the latter to put in the baby's bath. Laurence takes pains to demystify the Nativity narrative for children. She employs vernacular vocabulary, allowing herself only one "Lo and behold" to introduce the birth of the baby. The first two kings prophesy, like the fairies in the Sleeping Beauty story, admirable but realistic human qualities for the infant, qualities he inherits from both his fa-

ther and his mother, while the third king prophesizes that he will be "a wise teacher and a friend to all people" (n.p.).

In her memoir Laurence writes, "The story has been told thousands of times over two thousand years, according to the perceptions and historical era of the teller. I retold it in a way that I myself could understand it and believe in it. Jesus is spoken of as a beloved child, born into a loving family, a child who grew up to be a wise teacher, and a friend to all people. That is really how I think of our Lord" (*DE* 220-21). By portraying the Holy Family as a real human family, Laurence not only brings the Nativity story down to earth, but also sanctifies the concept of the family. As Letson comments, "*The Christmas Birthday Story* is a celebration of love and family. There is no complicating theology, just a stress on the love of parents and the humanity of the Christ child who, in a sense, is an everychild. . . . There is no sexual bias within the family of man" (21). So Laurence's Nativity story reflects her emphasis, in her adult fiction, on the equality of women.

Six Darn Cows: "Going Home"

Six Darn Cows (1979) was written for James Lorimer's beginning reader series, *Kids of Canada*, to which Margaret Atwood contributed *Anna's Pet* (1980). Despite a severely restricted vocabulary, Laurence emphasizes the family community again, but includes more gender equality than she can in the Nativity story.

Six Darn Cows is structured in six parts or miniature chapters that echo *Jason's Quest* by summarizing the quest motif: *Everyone Helps*, *The Gate, Looking*, *The Dark Woods*, *Going Home*, and *Home*. These headings could stand for the sections of Laurence's first Manawaka novel, *The Stone Angel*, in which Hagar escapes first from her husband Bram Shipley's farm near Manawaka and later from her son's city house, wanders in the wilderness in her purgatorial period at Shadow Point, and is finally escorted, a Persephone figure, from the seashore up the hillside stairs and home by her son. The headings recall Laurence's previously noted interpretation of *Jason's Quest* as "a frivolous retelling of the 'heroic monomyth': Departure–Initiation–Return" (King 253).

Set on the Bean farm, the name suggesting growth, the story tells of the quest of two children, Jen and Tod Bean, perhaps modelled on Laurence's children, for six lost cows, reflecting the motif of Jason's quest. The brother and sister—their genders indistinguishable in Ann Blades' simple but vivid illustrations with their bold primary colours—share responsibility for accidentally leaving the gate open and allowing the cows to escape. This motif brings to mind Alice Munro's story "Boys and Girls" from her first collection *Dance of the Happy Shades* (1968): in this story, the unnamed girl from whose point of view the story

is told deliberately opens the gate, allowing Flora, the female work horse that has been consigned to the glue factory, to escape; when the time comes to shoot the beast, her little brother joins the men and participates in the killing in a coming-of-age ritual, while the sister is relegated to the house with her mother because "[s]he's only a girl" (127). Laurence, however, emphasizes the equality of Jen and Tod Bean as they share the responsibility for the loss of the six cows. Hot and dusty on this summer day, they want to go swimming in the river, but remember the maxim, "On a farm, everyone helps." Tod had said, "Those darn cows. I wish they'd just get lost." So, when the cows really do get lost, the children feel guilty for wishing it.

So the kids' quest for the cows begins. Even though it is getting late and the kids are tired, they know they must find those cows. The Bean family is not well off, and they need the cows for the milk that generates their income. The dangers are real: the cows can fall in the river and drown, or they can wander out onto the highway and get run down by a truck. There is nothing for it but to follow the cows into the woods. But the woods look "dark and spooky" even in the daytime, and now it is getting dark. The woods are dangerous: they have "bushes with sharp thorns," and Jen remembers that a neighbour saw a wolf in the woods. Zip, the farm dog, accompanies the kids into the woods.

When Zip growls, they think he's seen a wolf, but when they hear soft wings and a bird call, they realize it is only an owl. Birds are always emblematic of the human situation in Laurence's fiction, such as *A Bird in the House*, and *Six Darn Cows* is no different, for the owl leads the Bean kids straight to the lost cows wandering in the woods. Zip helps them to herd the cows out of the woods and onto the road for home. One cow heads to the marsh with deep mud that could drown a cow—recalling the horses that Laurence's father witnessed drowning in the mud of the Flanders trenches, a fact that she reflects in her story "Horses of the Night" (*A Bird in the House* 141). Jen runs "quick as a rabbit" and catches the cow just in time, pulling its ear to turn it into the road.

Not only does *Six Darn Cows* reflect the emphasis on the quest motif and themes of community and responsibility in Laurence's adult fiction, it also reflects Laurence's use of a moralized landscape—that is, employing features of the terrain to symbolize elements of the story's themes. For example, the woods recall Hagar's purgatorial period at Shadow Point, as she, in turn, reflects the wandering in the wilderness of her biblical namesake; the river that is enticing and dangerous recalls "The river [that] flowed both ways" (11), symbolizing the interconnections of past and present in *The Diviners*; the farm recalls the pioneers of the Manawaka novels,

especially the Shipley farm of *The Stone Angel* that represents Bram's attempt to cultivate the land; and the road and the open gate reflect the journey of life and the importance of going home. The importance of Laurence's use of landscape in *Six Darn Cows* is reflected in *Kids of Canada: Teacher's Guidebook* (1981), which includes questions and topics for discussion on each section of Laurence's text, including a board game complete with a map of the terrain, titled "Finding the Cows."[10]

Despite the simplicity of the narrative, Laurence's emphasis on feminism and enlightenment prevails, for she informs the story with a matriarchal note. As they kids walk along the dark road, they see a light flickering in the darkness: it is their Mum, Meg Bean—"Meg" being a short form for "Margaret"—with a flashlight to lead them home. Rather than berating them, however, Meg commends their courage, calling them "brave kids."

The story ends with everyone "safely home"—the cows in the barn and the kids in the house—reflecting the traditional home/away/home pattern of children's fiction.[11] This pattern is also found in Laurence's adult fiction, for she believes, to quote T. S. Eliot's *Little Gidding*, "the end of all our exploring / Will be to arrive where we started / And know the place for the first time" (222). Similarly, the children return home with a new understanding of their responsibility. The kids' Dad, Dan Bean, is also home from his part-time job fixing TVs in town to supplement his income as a farmer, and they all sit down to dinner together. Their dad says, "I'm proud of you. . . .You did well." Dan sings a song to celebrate their fortune in their family—like the songs that conclude *The Diviners* (481–90), Laurence's last Manawaka novel, a few years earlier in 1974.[12] Laurence ends *Six Darn Cows* on an affirmative note: "Jen and Tod felt happy. And the next day, it was still summer," echoing the last sentence of Maurice Sendak's 1963 children's book *Where the Wild Things Are*: "and it was still hot."

The Olden Days Coat: "A Family Heirloom"

Laurence's best-loved children's book, *The Olden Days Coat*, reflects her Manawaka fiction and her own life more clearly than any of her other children's books—no doubt because it was a fiction that did not involve a limited vocabulary or a familiar narrative to restrict her imagination. Neil Besner, in "Canadian Children's Regional Literature: Fictions First," judges that *The Olden Days Coat* is "typical of Laurence's fiction" in terms of her "recurring explorations, evocations, and invocations of time, memory, and the work of the imagination," for all her fictions "invoke the imagination and its powers to teach, transform, instruct, and delight" (20-21). Sheila Egoff, in *The New Republic of Children*, writes, "A slight and gentle story, beautifully written, is Margaret Laurence's

The Olden Days Coat (1979). It is the most successful of her four books for children, chiefly because it is closest to her adult books, linking, as it does, the present with the past by bridging generations" (252).

The last of her children's books to be composed, it also reflects the growing feminism evident in her adult fiction which is echoed in the matrilinear lineage and emblem of the story. A story focusing on the gift of a family heirloom, *The Olden Days Coat* is also Laurence's gift to her friends and their families, a celebration of the community of writers that she called her "tribe," because the ten-year-old heroine Sal is named for the daughter of Laurence's dear friend from her Lakefield days, Jean Murray Cole, and the book is dedicated "for my friend Tamara Stone who is ten this year," the daughter of Laurence's life-long friend and fellow novelist Adele Wiseman.[13]

Like *The Christmas Birthday Story*, *The Olden Days Coat* is set at Christmas. Christmas is an important season for most Christian families, and Laurence remembers the family traditions that she continued at Elmcot in the essay "Upon a Midnight Clear" in her collection of travel essays, *Heart of a Stranger* (1976), where she celebrates "the sense of God's grace, and the sense of our own family and the sense of human community" (156). *The Olden Days Coat* opens on a typical Canadian Christmas scene: "The snow outside Gran's house was fine and powdery, and it shone in the late afternoon sun as though there were a million miniature Christmas lights within it." Sal considers "lying down in the fresh snow and sweeping her arms to and fro to make a snow angel"—like "the angel with spread wings" (*The Stone Angel* 81) the widow Hagar imagines making—but she thinks better of it because "the snow looked so good as it was, with not even a footprint in it," and so she decides to leave it untouched. But Sal is to find something better than a snow angel. Maybe angels are real after all, because Sal is to discover a flesh-and-blood angel in the snow.

Sal is feeling "depressed, miserable, and sad" because this is the first Christmas of all the ten Christmases of her life that she will not be spending in her own home with her special Christmas tree decorations—the silver bells, the Santa Claus, and the gold and blue glass peacock. Sal's grandparents had always spent Christmas at Sal's house in town, and "Sal didn't want things to change." But things do change, as Jason learned: Sal's Grandad has died, and her Gran wants to spend this one Christmas in her own house where she and Grandad lived so long. We wonder, in fact, whether this may be her Gran's last Christmas. Just as she does in her Manawaka novels, Laurence shows Sal beginning to understand that other people have feelings like her own.

Bored, and ashamed of it, Sal goes outside to play. Since the village streets are deserted on Christmas day, she wanders into the shed behind the house,

opens the trunk and pulls out the old photograph albums. Leafing through the family portraits—like Morag Gunn in "River of Now and Then," the opening section of *The Diviners*—Sal comes across photos of her Gran as a young girl standing on the steps of the brick house. Surprised by the old-fashioned style of Gran's frilly dress and high-buttoned boots, Sal is reassured by her Gran's own eyes and smile beaming back at her.[14] Sal chortles at the styles of bygone days and then wonders whether her jeans and T-shirt will look strange to some other kid in the future. In a sudden epiphany, Sal contemplates the phenomenon of selfhood and the changes wrought by time:

> What a strange thing Time was. It went on and on, and people came into it and then went out again, like Grandad. There was a time when she, Sal, had not even existed, and now here she was, and would grow up and maybe have children of her own. Maybe someday she would even have a grand-daughter. It was as hard for Sal to think of herself being old like Gran as it was to think of Gran having once been ten years old.

Vanessa MacLeod, the heroine and narrator of Laurence's Canadian short story collection, *A Bird in the House*, contemplates identity and mutability, birth and death, in a similar manner when her brother is born alive after her sister died at birth in the short story "To Set Our House in Order": "I thought of the dead baby, my sister, who might easily have been I . . . . I thought of my brother who had been born alive after all and now had been given his life's name" (60–61). Time is the theme of Laurence's last novel, *The Diviners*, as seen in her subtitle, *The River of Now and Then*.

Sal's epiphany of identity is about to be tested. Under the photograph albums lies an old navy coat with a red sash, an olden day's coat, a Red River Coat named for the Selkirk settlers' colony of Assiniboia in the Red River Valley of Manitoba in the early nineteenth century. When Sal puts it on, she becomes a time traveler who is transported back to the olden days of the village when her Gran was a girl. Sal's trance is reminiscent of the trances entered into by the Somali storytellers that Laurence celebrates in her first book, *A Tree for Poverty*, published in Somalia in 1954. It also gives us insight into the way Laurence herself, a self-styled "Method writer" ("Time" 157), found herself possessed by her characters, like Hagar Currie, the olden days heroine of *The Stone Angel*, from whom Laurence claims in her memoir she took dictation (DE 156). Time-travel fantasy is, of course, a conventional trope in children's fiction, going back to E. Nesbit, with innumerable subsequent examples. Laurence's use of the trope recalls Philippa Pearce's novel, *Tom's Midnight Garden*, in which a boy living

with an old woman enters the garden of her childhood (now an ugly urban scene) and plays with her there as a child. Although such fantasy motifs do not enter into the realist mode of Laurence's adult fiction, her sense of history is omnipresent.

Sal opens her eyes on a village that more resembles the pictures in the albums that she found in the trunk from her grandmother's girlhood than the village of today. In fact, the village sounds like Hagar's Manawaka, Laurence's mythical microcosm based on her birthplace, Neepawa, Manitoba. Sal recognizes the village by the church, but her Gran's house is nowhere to be seen. Lost in the past, Sal longs to get back to the future long before the film of that name, recalling the line at the end of *The Diviners*: *"Look ahead into the past, and back into the future, until the silence"* (477).

This Christmas gift recalls the desk Margaret's father, Robert Wemyss, built for her on the Christmas before she turned ten, the last Christmas of her father's life.

As Sal wanders down a country road, searching for her family, a swan-shaped sleigh painted bright crimson with gold swirls, drawn by two horses jingling with bells, draws up beside her.[15] The driver, a girl about Sal's age, greets her with a broad grin and warm brown eyes. When she introduces herself as Sarah of New Grange Farm and asks the young stranger about her family, Sal is confused because she knows she must not tell a lie, but realizes that she cannot tell the truth. Sal is saved from her moral dilemma when she catches sight of a flash of blue and distracts the driver, who explains that the bird is a blue jay and that jays often follow her to take bread from her hands. She explains that she is allowed to take out the cutter alone because "Papa knows I'm as good as my brothers with the horses." Sal is impressed: "A girl who could tame birds and drive a team of horses." Sal is delighted when Sarah offers to take her for a ride in the sleigh.

Sarah explains that she has just visited her friend's house to show off her early present, and Sal says that her family has the same tradition of opening one present on Christmas Eve. Sarah shows Sal the gift—a beautiful box carved by her father with a Monarch butterfly painted by her mother and an inscription on the underside: "*To Sarah, from her loving parents.*"[16] Sarah says, "I shall cherish it always. I'll hand it on…to my children and their children." This Christmas gift recalls the desk Margaret's father, Robert Wemyss, built for her on the Christmas before she turned ten, the last Christmas of her father's life—a loss she describes in

her memoir *Dance on the Earth* (55). Sal knows it is a butterfly because her father had told her on a visit to the village last spring that Monarchs were called that because they were "the kings and queens of all the butterflies."[17]

When Sarah invites Sal home to visit her family at New Grange Farm, Sal panics, because she knows she cannot go, but she cannot explain why, either. Again, Sal is saved when a shower of icicles, sharp swords of frozen water, falls from a tree branch and startles the horses, which plunge forward, sending the precious box flying into the snow as Sarah reaches for the reins. When Sarah finally draws Brownie and Star to a halt, Sal offers to search for the box. Sure that she will never find the small box in the deep snow, Sal is drawn to it by a blue jay searching in the snow—just as the owl leads the Bean kids to the cows. As she hands it to Sarah, Sal forms a desperate plan.[18] The olden days coat transported her into the past, and so the Red River coat must take her back to the future. As Sarah drives the sled away, Sal slips out of the coat and tosses it into the back of the sleigh, where it will travel to New Grange Farm: "It would travel through history until—."

Everything goes black, and Sal opens her eyes to find herself sitting on the floor of the shed with the photograph albums spread out around her. In the bottom of the trunk, she sees a navy-blue coat with a hood and red sash. Just as she is about to try it on, her father's voice booms into the shed, waking her from her reverie and inviting her to open her early present.

Entering the house, she sees that her parents have decorated the Christmas tree with the peacock and the silver bells and the small Santa, her own decorations from home. When her Gran, with her snow-white hair, her hands gnarled like tree branches, but her smile and brown eyes as warm as ever, asks Sal which present she wants to open, Sal surprises herself by saying Gran's. When Sal unwraps the gift, she sees a carved wooden box painted with a Monarch butterfly. "'I've been saving it,' Gran said. 'Your Grandad and I didn't have a daughter, but your Dad and Mother gave us a very fine grand-daughter. I've kept this to give you the year you were ten. My father carved it and my mother painted it, and they gave it to me the year I was ten.'" Sal sees the inscription, "*To Sarah, from her loving parents*," and realizes she has been named for her grandmother because Sal is short for Sarah. She blurts out, "Gran, it's beautiful. I'll always cherish it." The words echo in her head, but she cannot remember who said them. She only knows that she will remember this Christmas all her life. Gran calls the box "a family heirloom" and explains that she almost lost it in the snow the very day she was given it. When Sal asks how she found it, Gran smiles a faraway, but very close, smile and says, "I never could quite remember, afterwards." As

Letson observes, in *The Olden Days Coat*, "Laurence provides a Christmas story which provides a lesson in love and rebirth" (20). The family heirloom recalls the plaid pin Hagar gave her son John, who traded it for the Tonnerres' hunting knife in *The Stone Angel*, Laurence's first Manawaka novel—two emblems that are reunited by Pique Gunn Tonnerre, who inherits both from her parents, Morag Gunn and Jules Tonnerre in the last Manawaka novel, *The Diviners*, knitting the Manawaka cycle together.

Thus, *The Olden Days Coat*, more than any of her children's books, reflects the emphasis on the matrilinear heritage that we find both in Laurence's memoir, *Dance on the Earth*, in which she celebrates all her mothers and their legacy, and in her Manawaka novels, in which Rachel and her sister Stacey accept their aging mother in *A Jest of God* and *The Fire-Dwellers* and Morag and her daughter Pique are finally reconciled. All four of her children's fictions reflect the emphasis on the importance of community in her adult fiction, as well as the focus on an emblem, a gift that is lost and then found, in her Manawaka cycle. In fact, the parallels between Laurence's children's books and adult fiction suggest that there may be more in common between the two types of literature as Laurence produced them than is generally thought, and they may also imply that Laurence absorbed themes and motifs from children's fiction that informed and enhanced her adult fiction. For example, the home/away/home pattern recalls "the 'heroic monomyth': Departure—Initiation—Return" (King 253) that reflects theories of Joseph Campbell and Carl Jung and that applies to both Laurence's adult and children's fiction.

It has been my hope, in writing this essay, that it may inspire some critics of children's literature to consider Laurence's children's fiction more carefully than heretofore and that it may also lead some critics of Laurence's writing to pay greater attention to this interesting, but largely neglected, aspect of her oeuvre. If it could succeed in bringing more of her children's texts back into print, that would make the endeavour worthwhile.

Notes

[1] Quoted by Clara Thomas in "Saving Laughter"(46). Laurence called in the local mole-catcher to exterminate the pests (*Dance on the Earth* 189). Laurence describes Elmcot in her essay,"Put Out One or Two More Flags" in *Heart of a Stranger*, 107-12.

[2]Margaret Laurence and Adele Wiseman often ended their letters to each other with their college slogan, "Corragio! Avanti!", meaning "Courage! Forward!" See Lennox and Panofsky.

[3] Laurence's notes on revisions to Jason's Quest are in Box 2, File 11 in the McMaster University Laurence Archives. Her Macmillan editor has three typed pages of suggested revisions, most of which Laurence accedes to in several hand-written pages of inserts.

[4] Sheila Egoff writes, in *The New Republic of Children* (1975), "Not even Margaret Laurence could meet the rigorous demands of animal fantasy. In fact her widely acclaimed success as a novelist makes her one book of fantasy for children, *Jason's Quest* (1970), the most disappointing book in Canadian children's literature" (81). In *The New Republic of Children* (1990), Sheila Egoff and Judith Saltman say: "… Margaret Laurence's *Jason's Quest* (1970) offer[s] only counterfeits of animals and parodies of humans; there is insight into neither. Margaret Laurence, for example, was satisfied with a simple transference of human externals to the animal world…The result bears more resemblance to a cartoon than to a genuine fantasy" (265).

[5] Laurence's typescripts of *The Christmas Birthday Story* are in the York University Archives. The original single-spaced typescript, with the name "Philip Hewett, Unitarian Church, Van, circa 1960" written at the top of the first page, has a note at the end reading, "1960—slightly revised 1978." The second typescript is double-spaced and incorporates some insertions handwritten on the first typescript. References to changes in the text will be to these typescripts. The story was also published in the newspaper, accompanied by Helen Lucas's illustrations. All references will be to the unpaginated book publication.

[6] Laurence explains the history of the book to Malcolm Ross on 10 August 1980: "[written] when my kids were 4 and 7. I lost my only copy in 1962 when I moved to England with the kids, and only found it 3 years ago, when I discovered quite by accident that it was still being used in the Unitarian Church Sunday School in Vancouver. I got a copy, re-wrote it to some extent, and asked the Toronto artist Helen Lucas if she would do the pictures" (King 361).

[7] Laurence wrote to Jack McClelland on 9 August 1980: "the little book may be condemned by the same rednecks who condemned *The Diviners* as blasphemous, because Mary and Joseph don't care whether their baby turns out to be a girl or a boy. Actually, I hope that doesn't happen—what a hell of a way to sell books. I've had enough of being called nasty names" (King 361). Laurence's 4 November 1980 letter to McClelland proves her fears were founded: "Wow! Was that ever a stinker of a review in the Globe last Saturday! That same babe, Jacquie Hunt, whoever she is, did a review last year of THE OLDEN DAY'S COAT, and said substantially the same thing—text terrible, pics great" (King 362). Such negative reviews of her children's books discouraged her.

[8] This typed "Note to Parents" with handwritten annotations is in the Margaret Laurence Archives in the Scott Library at York University.

[9] Laurence inserted the animals' vocalizations into the typescript by hand. The ewe seems to be reassuring the lamb that "Everything is all right," recalling Stacey's mantra in *The Fire-Dwellers*.

[10] *The Kids of Canada: Teacher's Guidebook* (1981) contains no publication information, but appears to be printed by an educational facility and not to be by Margaret Laurence herself.

[11] See Perry Nodelman and Mavis Reimer, *The Pleasures of Children's Literature*, 197.

[12] James Lorimer suggested that Laurence record the song, and a record with the story and song was circulated for promotional purposes (DE 218).

[13] *The Olden Days Coat* was first published in Weekend Magazine. Later, Laurence revised it, and it was published by McClelland and Stewart in 1980. It was made into a film by Atlantis Films, with Megan Follows as Sal. The National Film Board made a documentary film, with Laurence reading parts of the story aloud. Unless otherwise stated, all references will be to the unpaginated 1980 McClelland and Stewart book publication. It has been republished by Talon Books.

[14] Laurence omitted the following passage, which recalls the aged Hagar looking in the mirror: "Were the eyes the only thing about a person that didn't change? And yet the eyes of the girl in the photograph looked different, too. This girl hadn't yet known all about everything that would happen to her, everything that was still in the future. Maybe that's what made the difference."

[15] Laurence recalls in her memoir how *The Olden Days Coat* was inspired by a ride in an antique cutter owned by Dr. H. E. Gastle near Lakefield (*DE* 218). In her acknowledgements to *The Olden Days Coat,* Laurence notes that his sleighs and horses provided the inspiration for her story.

[16] This inscription was inserted into the manuscript by Laurence in longhand.

[17] This sentence is also inserted into the manuscript in longhand.

[18] Laurence rewrote much of this section, as her annotated typescript demonstrates.

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