

# Childhood at the Manse

MARY FORD HUBAND

*Where The Saints Have Trod*, Judith St. John. Oxford University Press (London), 1974. 105 pp. \$6.50 cloth.

**W**here *The Saints Have Trod*, the childhood reminiscences of Judith St. John is, in effect, a celebration of celebrations. The author, former chief librarian of the Toronto Public Library, and now curator of the renowned Osborne collection of children's literature, has taken a nostalgic step backward to describe the halcyon days of her girlhood in a Methodist manse in rural Ontario. She catalogues and condenses the high points of her young life through one calendar year during the first quarter of this century. The reader is carried from one precious moment to the next until there is a strong desire (or one feels there should be a strong desire) to envy the life of the preacher's child.

Structured very much like the *Christian Book of Days*, the book begins its celebrations appropriately enough with the first Sunday in January. Through the persona of her heroine, Janie, the author describes the flurry of activity leading into this most important day of the week. The bustle of Saturday comes to fruition in the celebration of the worship service, Sunday school, best clothes, company for dinner, and special events. St. John gives us moments of sharp childlike perception, such as this description of Janie's fascination for the fox fur draped around the neck of the lady in the pew in front of her: "I liked to sit directly behind Old Foxy Eyes who looked real enough to bite Mrs. Bartlett's neck at any moment."

In February, Janie succumbs to scarlet fever, but her recovery seems never in doubt. In March Janie and her sister Elizabeth help prepare the wedding celebration of two parishioners, and gleefully join in the grape juice toasts. Rather like a Leacock figure out of the *Sunshine Sketches*, the happy groom comments: "This has been a gratifying day for me. It is, as you know, my fifth wedding but never have I been married with such style. Some people may think I have been a bit previous in taking another wife so soon, but, as I explained to his reverence when I arranged for this wedding two weeks ago, the late Mrs. Sparkes is as dead now as she ever will be, so I could see no further reason for delay."

June brings the traumatic upheaval of a move to a new parish. The initial disappointments of their new surroundings are soon forgotten as the entire family join in the Pollyanna "glad game" and find delight in the challenge of their new environment.

One of the great events in any church year is the annual anniversary celebration and fowl supper, and this is joyously contemplated, planned, and experienced in October. Janie's new long underwear arrives through the miracle of the Eaton's catalogue service, and she is delighted to be able to wear it to the event. "I was filled with joy and thanksgiving; my unuttered prayer had been answered. I had something new to wear to the Anniversary." St. John's tone here is ironic, but gently so.

The Christmas season arrives, and its special events are carefully marked on the calendar. Aunt Rhoda comes from Montreal, the six poorest parishioners are invited for dinner, there are stories and hymns, the stockings are hung, fruit is delivered to the poor, and father requests, and no doubt receives, a copy of *Roget's Thesaurus*.

The book has no formal plot development; rather, it is a series of episodes joined together in logical time sequence. The characters are lovingly portrayed stereotypes. Janie lacks the dynamic personality and sparkling intellect of L.M. Montgomery's Anne Shirley. She tends to be a little too well-behaved and naive, although her rather charming theology, articulated on the eve of her eighth birthday, has an endearing quality: "Carefully the angels would fold up my seven-year age, soiled and tattered from its year's experience, and bear it up to heaven to my mansion that the Bible said had been prepared for me. When we were dead we could choose every day what age we would like to wear." She is capable too, of flights of fancy. She reveals her own world of enchantment where her best friend is "the squashy cushion on the parlour settee," who talks to her, and comforts her in her own private cubby hole under the stairs.

St. John writes in a crisp and sprightly prose. The book is sprinkled with homilies, bits of poetry and snatches of hymns. She has the wisdom to view pomposity with humor, and the book is often saved from banality by the author's wit.

If there is a problem it is that the book is almost too precious. There are no conflicts in this charmed world. The problems are readily surmountable, and the tensions are few. A pink glow seems to envelop the characters and their celebrations in a protective haze of loving nostalgia. It is an idealized glimpse at a lost world, described in the Afterword by the author's brother, J.B. St. John (who somehow misses the fun) as being of "spiritual vigor, dynamic inspiration, and noteworthy achievement."

From my own experience as a "child of the manse", I know that life as a minister's child is not an ideal existence, in spite of the exposure it offers to the "full life". Tensions exist. There are pressures to perform socially and scholastically, and to shine spiritually. It is a hard life as well as a rewarding one. Obviously St. John understands this, but she has chosen to cast her remembrances in rosy hues. On balance, I would have preferred a few bruises and some tears of anguish, if only to indicate that there is a deeper celebration than that of mere events, and that is of life itself.

Still, *Where The Saints Have Trod* is a gentle and happy book for

seven to ten-year-olds, honest and wholly without pretense, and probably best enjoyed by children if read to them by a person of sensitivity. It is well illustrated in pencil sketches by Robin Jacques.

Mary Ford Huband, a child of the manse, studies Children's Literature at Carleton University.

## Walker's Bridgework

ELIZABETH WATERSTON

*Pirate Rock*, David Walker. Scholastic-Tab, 1975. 227 pp. \$1.00 paper.

David Walker's *Pirate Rock* is about two boys and their adventures in a marvellous high-powered boat in the waters around St. Andrews, New Brunswick. Reading it, after a long trek through rather dull books for boys, I feel that I, too, am moving with something high-powered, something beautifully engineered. This is the effect of David Walker's narrative style.

David Walker is the author of *Geordie*, on which that funniest of Scottish films, *Wee Geordie*, was based. He also wrote *Harry Black*, a best seller of the 1950's, a powerful novel in which memories of escapes from a German prison camp are intertwined with the drama of a tiger hunt in the hill country of modern India. Walker is author also of *Where the High Winds Blow*, another prize-winning novel, vigorously set in the Canadian Arctic and in New Brunswick.

How to classify such a man? Is he a Scottish writer? A Commonwealth writer from India? An Englishman? Librarians have catalogued his work under all these groupings, and then have added a bit of shelf space in the children's book section. As time goes by, David Walker appears more and more as a Canadian writer, and a major Canadian writer at that.

*Pirate Rock*, published in 1969, but now re-issued in an attractive paperback, shows many of Walker's strengths as a novelist. The plot is tight, convincing in its progress, yet surprising in its dénouement. It is the story of the two Kelly boys, who live year-round on the beautiful rugged shoreline of New Brunswick. They are hired by a summer resident, Mr. Becker, to handle his big powerboat when he takes visitors along the island-and shoal-strewn shoreline. They are hired, also, to act as general helpers on the big Becker estate, and particularly in the enclosure where he has a fine collection of wild animals. Becker's step-daughter, Kim, adds to the boys' growing uneasiness about this job. Her hostility to Becker augments their sense that something strange is going on--something involving the sleek boat, the cave where it is housed, and the hollow, whisper-filled knoll above the cave, grimly patrolled by Becker's strongarm henchman. The three young people