French Folktales in Translation

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The Witch of the North: Folk Tales of French Canada, adapted by Mary Alice Downie. Collages by Elizabeth Cleaver. Oberon Press, 1975. 54 pp. $7.95 hardcover.

Tales exchanged by isolated men in 19th century Quebec lumber camps, larded with appearances by Old Nick himself and washed down liberally with "whiskey blanc"—can this bill of fare, translated and beautifully illustrated, really provide an appropriate menu for English-speaking children? Well, maybe, particularly for children with a taste for the ghoulish.

Mary Alice Downie grapples with the problem of adapting a group of somewhat macabre folk/ghost stories, originating with the Quebec "shanty men" (men who spent the winters working in the bush) into appealing reading for an audience of modern, mainly urban and suburban children. She must also contend with the difficulty of writing down stories that were essentially told and retold in smoke-filled rooms on cold winter nights—an atmosphere that was at once part of the stories and receptive to them.

Any endeavour that will make French Canada, its essence and its traditions, more real to English-Canadian children is obviously worthwhile. (This translation/adaptation, one might note, has been supported by grants from the Canada Council and the Onatrio Arts Council.) Unfortunately, images of primitive, superstitious peasants—utterly THEM, THE OTHERS—are likely to be the lasting impression left by these tales. Perhaps making a political/sociological point of this kind is taking a collection of folk-tales too seriously, but one *must* question why stories of quaint, rural, superstitious Quebec remain so popular in English Canada.

Another difficulty faced by Mrs. Downie is that common to presenting any group of oral tales: the need for a linking device, a foreground through which we may be introduced to, and enter into, the world of the stories. The "Witch Canoe" of the title comes from Honoré Beaugrand's "La Chasse Galerie—Légendes Canadiennes" (Fides, 1873) where the tale is told in racy, colloquial language by the lumber camp cook, Joe le bossu (the hunchback). Joe, we are told, had "seen it all" after working the chantiers for 40 years, and needs only a drop of Jamaica rum to loosen his tongue. The atmosphere is set: the story unfolds by the light of a pine log fire whose reddish gleam fitfully illumines, in the half-light, the manly figures of the half-wild woodsmen of the Great Forest. . . .the subsequent departure, over the tree-tops, of the flying canoe seems almost inevitable.

But what do we get in the English version?

"This", said my grandmother, "is a tale that your grandfather experienced himself. I tell it in his own words." It is easy to see why Mrs. Downie has changed Joe into a grandmother, but less easy to see why, having done so, she never allows grandmother to become a person. We never learn anything about her, or her grandchildren who by implication are a third reality telling the tale of "tales my grandmother told me" and no setting of any kind is introduced. This surely was the opportunity, if hunchback Joe had to be abandoned, to link the stories to the world of modern children. But the link is too weak and the chain is never completed.

It is difficult to tell at what age group this book is aimed. It has the look of a book for small children: it is large, beautifully illustrated and firmly bound. Elizabeth Cleaver's collages are a delight—poetic in feeling, rich in subtle colours and shapes, particularly the delicate tracery of tree trunks and branches against backgrounds of blended blues. Yet small children, attracted by the enticing cover, might well be frightened or horrified by the fate of the unhappy girl who weds the devil and disappears in flames rather than remain unmarried on the eve of St. Catherine, or by the murderess's skeleton (and tormented, earth-bound soul) which tries to draw passersby into her iron cage. Older children (nine to ten year olds?) to whom these notes of horror might well appeal, would surely have been better off with Joe the cook.

Thanks to the flatly-depicted grandmother, we are never drawn back into grandfather's often brutal and primitive world, illumined as it was both by genuine poetic feeling and hard liquor. There is no compassion here for ignorant men caught in an often anarchic and cruel past, where virtue was not rewarded and a personal devil was ever ready to pounce when forbidden words were pronounced. The magic of the word—so important to all primitive, inarticulate people—cannot here give us the slightest *frisson.* As a result, the past does not live, and neither its horrors nor its glories have power to really affect the reader. The book, for all its frightening images, is oddly dull.

The first and I think best of the stories is "The Witch Canoe" from which the book takes its title. The enchanted canoe, Quebec's variant of the flying carpet, brings with it that authentic sense of mystery—of things half-seen only—that distinguishes all powerful fairy tales. A canoe-load of shanty men after months in that white frozen Quebec forest that swallowed up Maria Chapdelaine's Francois. . . .who cannot imagine that young men, fortified by the official issue rum and plagued by memories of other New Year's Eve parties, would indeed sell their souls to the devil for an evening of life and fun? And having imagined that desperate ride over forest and river, who can see the Quebec bush in reality, in quite the same way? It is forever haunted by more than the ghosts of Huron Indians. One is reminded of the unnamed heroine of Margaret Atwood's *Surfacing* who, surrounded by the implacable Quebec forest, cannot draw the illustrations required for a book

of European fairy tales:

> It's hard to believe that anyone here, even the grandmothers, ever knew these stories: this isn't a country of princesses. The Fountain of Youth and The Castle of the Seven Splendours don't belong here. They must have told stories about something as they sat around the kitchen range at night: bewitched dogs and malevolent trees perhaps, and the magic powers of rival political candidates, whose effigies in straw they burned during elections.

And it is indeed these stories that Mrs. Downie is presenting to us.

The tale of "La Chasse Galerie", though it has European antecedents, is deeply rooted in the land of Quebec, and Elizabeth Cleaver is right, I think, to illustrate the canoeists as haunted, fugitive figures, rather than jolly seekers after fun.

The story of La Corriveau, the caged murderess, is based on a rather horrific incident recorded in Philippe Aubert de Gaspé's "Les Anciens Canadiens" (Fides, 1864). Mrs. Downie introduces it as follows:—

"This is a true story that happened to my late husband who is dead," said my grandmother.

"What happened to your late husband who is dead? " cried José Bedard, the bone setter, who fancied himself as a humorist.

"I'll tell you if you'll be quiet, you lummox! You have a head as hard as a caribou. . . ."

Why have the grandchildren been replaced by José Bedard, who has never appeared before and does not appear again? Is this simple carelessness, or is there some purpose in the shift of foreground? The joke about the "late husband who is dead" seems somewhat too weak to warrant the introduction of a new character.

Mrs. Downie rarely finds a style appropriate to her tales. For instance: "We were flying through the air until that rascal of a Robert managed to slip his bonds off and pull off his gag. Before we knew it, he was standing up in the canoe, paddle in hand and swearing like a pagan. If he said a certain sacred word, our end had come. It was out of the question to calm his frenzy."

Who is telling this story? In whose mouth can one imagine these words? This is an English neither racy nor stylish, and it seems a flat way to treat a genuine tale of "mystery and imagination".

Even while allowing for all the difficulties of translation, or perhaps a less than sparkling original, what child could enjoy chanting:

> Ah! come hither gossip François,
> Ah! come hither, tender piggy!
> Come, make haste, gossip sausage–
> Black pudding, gossip pumpkin;
> From this Frenchman, from this Frenchman,
> I shall make a skating-tub.

Where is the word-magic, the joy of the half-understood and frightening, when a child will hug himself with delight and repeat and repeat? Even a basic rhythm is missing. By the light of: "Fee, fi, fo, fum, I smell the blood of an Englishman" or "Mirror, mirror on the wall, who is the fairest of us all?" this version really will *not* do.

On the other hand there is a poetic (through conventional) feeling to "The Serpent of Lorette" which begins:

> There was a time when Huron warriors were as numerous as the stars in the sky. All the nations of North America trembled before them from the Great Lakes to the lower St. Lawrence. If the Hurons camped beside a lake or a river, what enemy was brave enough to disturb the waters.

Later we are introduced to a beautiful woman dressed in purple silk, whose "garnet eyes shone like stars"–an image to please little girls–and young children should enjoy the originality of the devil's cat, of whom we are told: "Once this same cat was very pious. It lived in a convent near Quebec. The Mother Superior looked after it and gave it milk and fresh fish every day. It was as fat as a priest, with shiny black hair and a melodious purr."

A final, and alas, negative note: almost every story seems to involve drunkenness, despite the introduction of grandmother and children, and much of the fantasy is seen through the bottom of a raised glass. This is surely a crutch for the imagination that children do not need. While not wishing to assume the role of a total abstinence advocate, I really do not think many parents or teachers will appreciate a tale in which, for instance, an alcoholic wife searches the house for her hardworking husband's money, and finally sells her soul to the devil for a year's supply of rum.

Although this book has real value as a collection of old folk tales. I feel the author and publisher have not confronted the elemental question of who their audience is.

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