

The Pattern of Romance in T.G. Roberts' *The Red Feathers*

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The Red Feathers, a tale of the Beothuk people of Newfoundland, has been hailed as "by far the best" of Theodore Goodridge Roberts' juvenile stories,¹ and the author was not alone in holding that it remains "his most important prose production . . . holding equal appeal for grown-ups and children."² Yet like all the writer's work it has sustained little serious critical attention. Roberts' error, in the eyes of modern critics, is to be guilty of a "romantic view of life."³ For those who seem to feel that Canadian authors at the turn of the century should have been writing regional novels like their American counterparts this comes as a disappointment: "His fiction is largely light and fast-moving action, peopled with conventionally romantic characters, and with only occasionally a glimpse of setting which conveys some of the felt truth of good local colour."⁴ And for others, seeking a "great tradition" in Canadian letters, this romanticism is a sign of triviality; thus John Moss decides that *The Harbor Master* "has no more depth of subtlety than a contemporary comic strip and, like the comics, its self-righteous message is exuberantly clear and simple."⁵

Thus when the Introduction by Martin Ware to the most recent edition points out that *The Red Feathers* is "a romance rather than a novel,"⁶ it would seem pointless to look for serious literary achievement -- to judge from critical authority. The trouble is that since the development of the novel as a genre in the eighteenth century, most people, including some scholars who should know better, have forgotten how to read a romance. Romance is certainly an idealization,⁷ but this does not mean it should automatically be dismissed as mere escapism, a pleasant diversion for the mind fatigued and confused by the complexity of modern life, but dangerously empty should it become addictive. The finest romances make use of idealization to explore and comment upon human behaviour, freed from the exigencies of time and place. As a lover of Malory's *Le Morte Darthur*,⁸ Roberts was familiar with this technique and not only practised it himself but passed it on to one of his own characters, the good magician Wise-as-a-she-wolf. At the sight of the murals which the latter has painted on the walls of his magic lodge, one viewer rhapsodizes, "Oh chief, you have wrought marvellously! Never before have I seen so clearly the difference between the good and the wicked among mankind" (p. 138).⁹ The characters are not drawn in "realistic" terms; rather, they are representatives of a way of life, exhibiting certain well-defined qualities of behaviour, such as courage and kindness on the one hand, vengefulness and selfish ambition on the other. As is typical in romance, the characters fall into two groups, the good and the wicked, and the central movement of the story relates the conflict between representatives of both groups as they try to seize control and make use of the magical red feathers of the title.

At first glance the romance seems little more than an unduly long-drawn-out conflict between good and evil in which the former inevitably triumphs. The superiority of good is demonstrated early in the story when Wise-as-a-she-wolf overcomes his arch-rival, the wicked magician Bright Robe, and transforms

him into a small brown owl for five years. Further conflict between the two would appear anti-climactic. However, what follows this initial confrontation is in fact a thoughtful exploration of both the strengths and weaknesses of human virtues and vices, an exploration that goes far beyond a simplistic assertion that good must triumph over evil.

Wise-as-a-she-wolf is a benevolent magician who uses his powers for the good of others. Thus he keeps his promise to support his protégé Run-all-day in his attempts to rule his clan justly, and he rescues the crippled Wounded Hawk from spiritual despair, reviving in him such appreciation of life's wonders that the injured warrior wins widespread love and respect for his skill in giving expression to his vision through story and picture. Yet these very virtues of loyalty to one's word, care for others, and joy in the wonders of life can also lead to errors in judgement. When old Blowing Fog, with the cantankerousness of age, chooses to disbelieve the magician's statement that he was once known as Highest star, she incurs his wrath: "I do not doubt a person's word until I have proven him a liar" (p. 67) the magician responds proudly, then grows to giant stature and knocks down the lodge in which they are seated. Wise-as-a-she-wolf is clearly confusing the reputation for honesty with its substance,¹⁰ as he himself quickly confesses: "I am sorry that I lost my temper . . . I acted like a braggart" (p. 70). Immediately he sets to work to repair the damage he has caused.

Wise-as-a-she-wolf's love for Featherfoot, the son of Run-all-day, leads to even more serious errors in judgement. He makes him a gift of the red feathers of flight, but since the latter is still an infant he entrusts them to Run-all-day to guard until his son grows old enough to use them. Unfortunately, word of their whereabouts spreads, and when they are stolen by Spotted Seal, it is clear that the good magician made a mistake in assuming that such powerful aids would remain safe in the care of another, however well-intentioned. Wise-as-a-she-wolf then proceeds to compound his error by failing to recover the feathers at once. His thoughts focus fondly upon the infant Featherfoot, whom he is now rearing in his magic lodge, and so his pursuit of Spotted Seal lacks urgency. When Wise-as-a-she-wolf finally catches up with his quarry he finds him slain and the feathers in the possession of a formidable giant. Once more concern for his fosterling holds the magician back. Fearing lest he be disabled in a struggle to regain the feathers and so leave the child uncared for, he decides to recover them when Featherfoot is older and stronger, reassuring himself, "I shall always know where to find them" (p. 218). This allows Bright Robe the opportunity to recover the feathers and, with their aid, to cause widespread mischief once he regains human form.

The third mistake made by Wise-as-a-she-wolf occurs when he neglects his search for Bright Robe to pursue life's mysteries in the southern jungles:

Already he felt in better spirits, reflecting that here would be found some great new things to learn and unfamiliar aspects of truth, even if Bright Robe should continue to slip through his fingers. The fire of the explorer burned within him . . . He would pierce to the heart of this vivid, inscrutable country, and lay bare all its secrets (p. 287).

What in fact he learns is that he must pay dearly for relaxing his vigilance. Wounded by a poison dart, he lies incapacitated for weeks while his enemies launch their invasion of his beloved island.¹¹

In all three instances, Wise-as-a-she-wolf's failure to adhere rigorously to his duty to oppose evil results in pain and suffering to the people he has sworn to protect. His burst of anger against Blowing Fog causes little more than fear and consternation among Run-all-day's clan, but his later lapses lead to warfare and death among his people.

Yet if virtue can *sometimes* prove its own undoing, vice is *invariably* confounded by its own self-destructive impulses. An arrogant lack of caution impels Bright Robe to fight against Wise-as-a-she-wolf, Spotted Seal to be caught by the giant, the giants to fight among themselves, and Black Eagle to invade the island, always with disastrous results. And when Bright Robe out of personal fear resorts to the manipulation of others to achieve his vengeful goals, he soon discovers that the tools turn in his hand, destroying themselves and injuring the user. As a brown owl, the magician arouses the greed of a lynx to encourage it to steal from the storehouse of Whispering Grass against whom he wishes to revenge himself. But his scheme backfires when the animal grows carelessly noisy in its urgency to reach the food. It is driven off by the old woman, and the owl, injured by a glancing arrow, almost falls prey to a hunting fox. His plot to seize control of a village fares little better. Still a powerless owl, he nevertheless promises to each of the rival claimants in turn that he will elevate them to the chieftainship. Their ambition is such that they are easily duped, but eventually their mutual jealousy overcomes their arrogance long enough for suspicions to arise. The truth of the matter is discovered and Bright Robe flees, but not before one of the claimants is killed by a rival. The entire tribe is slain later by a raiding war-party at the evil magician's instigation.

Bright Robe's efforts to stir up warfare within the island once he regains his power are successfully countered by Wise-as-a-she-wolf, so he turns to a different nation, living on the mainland: "He decided that the mountaineers . . . should be honoured by his patronage and used like tools, to his purpose" (p. 257). Yet once again Bright Robe finds that he is betrayed by the wicked attributes which he shares with his proposed victims. Black Eagle, leader of the mountaineers, cunningly exploits the magician's fear of his mighty foe for his own enrichment, as Bright Robe bitterly admits: "For nine years I have been no better than a slave of Black Eagle's, because of fear" (p. 321). Nor is the chief's fierce heart cowed by the magician's empty threats. For weakness he has nothing but scorn, as his taunting of Bright Robe shows. Yet this very scorn proves Black Eagle's eventual undoing when he decides to invade the island. Convinced their opponents are "feeble as old women" (p. 298), the mountaineers attack carelessly, fall into an ambush, and are soundly beaten by Run-all-day's warriors. The survivors are pursued until "not one of those savage invaders returned to his own country" (p. 322).

Thus ambitious greed and arrogance prove their own destruction when faced by resolute opposition. Unwariness falls victim to their attack, but stern vigilance counters successfully. Nevertheless, this vigilant opposition to evil is achieved only at the cost of some happiness. When Wise-as-a-she-wolf relaxes and indulges his personal feelings, however worthy, the enemy advances:

It was for love of this child (Featherfoot) that Wise-as-a-she-wolf had postponed the contest with the giant, and by that had lost the magic feathers; and now, for the father-love in his heart, he wanted to keep the child in the safety of the lodge, where the very powers that he had given him were of no use to mankind. (p. 237)

However, the good magician is capable of recognizing his error, and at the sight of the warfare his negligence has allowed, "again he blamed himself for having neglected his duties toward his people" (p. 233).

By contrast, Bright Robe never feels true remorse, though he approaches it on two occasions. On the first, the fear that drives him to contemplate making peace with his enemy also makes him flinch from the thought of how he might be punished by Wise-as-a-she-wolf's justice. And later, defeated and a prisoner in the hands of his adversary, dully aware that all his wicked strivings have brought him nothing but loss, he craves the death his immortality denies him, for the evil in mankind never dies. However, though he pities his foe, Wise-as-a-she-wolf is not blind to his true nature: "I fear you will thirst again for power and blood and mischief" (p. 321). For magic is power and power corrupts. Bright Robe, during his first appearance, declares, "And many another have I killed for less than those red feathers. To regain possession of them now I should consider the speeding of an hundred lives a niggardly payment" (p. 27). Most men are attracted to magic because it gives them power over others, a power they misuse to "serve their own ambitions" (p. 90); by contrast, honest warriors like Run-all-day normally mistrust and avoid magic.

The equation of magic with power is the key to the theme through which the strengths and weaknesses of human virtues and vices are explored in this romance: the dangers of power. Power inspires fear which in turn feeds power. Wicked magicians and ambitious chieftains strengthen their positions by terrorizing others, slaying those who stand in their way.¹² The honesty and courage of warriors like Run-all-day is no protection against their cunning and ruthlessness, as the fate of Jumping Wolf's father demonstrates. They can only be countered by superior wisdom and determination, by the stronger magic of Wise-as-a-she-wolf. Yet the good magician's power also inspires fear, even among those followers who think of him "most kindly" (p. 324), as he himself sadly acknowledges.

Thus magic, although it can be exerted for good by the rare conscientious practitioner, remains a burden that compares unfavourably with the simple pleasures of life, as Wise-as-a-she-wolf constantly stresses. Thus when he contemplates Featherfoot's upbringing he decides, "I must not lead him too far in the knowledge of hidden things . . . or else, in his power, he will miss the happiness that is his birthright" (p. 206). In this romance it is Youth and Love who are the greatest magicians and who create the greatest happiness.

Herein lies Roberts' message to his younger readers, a message which his older audience has already learned. The magic of youth and love bring a happiness denied to those who pursue the magic of power, whether for personal satisfaction or to help others. For the path to power is fraught with danger, as Spotted Seal and Red Eye discover to their cost, and even those who traverse it successfully find that they have been burdened with an equal measure of care and anxiety. Thus at the end both Wise-as-a-she-wolf and Bright Robe, despite their awesome skills, recall with regret the happier days of youth, now lost beyond recall. At times, Roberts presents the joys of youth and love with a sentimentality which cloy the modern palate, as when Featherfoot assures his beloved, "Your love answered the call, and love winged his feet" (p. 318). (Actually, he had help from the Red Feathers.) But such lapses into the kind of writing which Roberts poured out in vast quantities for the magazine market can easily blind

one to his genuine achievements:¹³ a careful thematic structure and a thoughtful exploration of the problems of human conduct in general and of power in particular. These problems can be readily appreciated by a younger audience as it stands on the threshold of adulthood, perplexed by the contradictions of a society where material success seems to favour selfish ambition as much as, if not more than, virtuous adherence to duty; where indeed that very sense of duty so highly extolled can place one at a disadvantage when faced with unscrupulous competition. The inherent interest of this theme, presented with lucid style in a generally well-paced story of high adventure and deeds of magic, makes this book one of the most under-rated achievements in Canadian children's literature.

It is an historical irony that the Beothuks did finally succumb to the disaster averted by Wise-as-a-she-wolf. More warlike intruders from the mainland (Micmacs), supported and encouraged by foreign "magicians" with unfamiliar powers (European settlers, particularly the French), pursued them relentlessly until they were slain or absorbed by other tribes.¹⁴ Such a bleak reality tempts one to dismiss Roberts' tale as mere escapism. To do so, however, is to misunderstand the romance genre, which is not concerned with "realistic" portrayals but with more abstract analysis of life forces, and this, despite occasional infelicities, is what Roberts has achieved in *The Red Feathers*. For such old-fashioned virtues -- as loyalty, love, and appreciation of life's wonders -- to triumph in the face of unscrupulous ambition may seem naive in this era of disillusionment. Yet they are virtues that have survived the assault of pessimists and cynics before this, and, as Desmond Pacey remarked, "If such a code is out of fashion, so much the worse for the world today."¹⁵

NOTES

¹Lorne Pierce, *An Outline of Canadian Literature (French and English)*, (Toronto, 1927), p. 41.

²Goodridge MacDonald, "Theodore Goodridge Roberts, Poet and Novelist," *Canadian Author and Bookman*, XXIX (Spring, 1953), 11.

³Roy Daniels, "Minor Poets: 1880-1920," in *Literary History of Canada*, ed., Carl F. Klinck, 2nd ed., (Toronto and Buffalo, 1976), vol. 1, p. 445.

⁴Gordon Roper, S. Ross Beharriell, and Rupert Schnieder, "Writers of Fiction: 1880-1920," in *ibid.*, p. 343.

⁵*Patterns of Isolation in English Canadian Fiction* (Toronto, 1974), p. 123.

⁶No. 127 in the New Canadian Library (Toronto, 1976), p. viii. All references to the text are cited from this edition. *The Red Feathers* was first published in 1907.

⁷See Northrop Frye, *The Anatomy of Criticism* (New York, 1966), p. 151.

⁸See Goodridge MacDonald, "Theodore Goodridge Roberts, Poet and Novelist," *Canadian Author and Bookman*, XXIX (Spring, 1953), 9-12. Like Malory, Roberts chose a subject remote in time, details of whose existence are poorly documented, hence allowing greater freedom to the imagination.

⁹Wise-as-a-she-wolf replies, "The picture is clearer than the real battle, for it is compassed in a glance of the eye" (pp. 138-39). Roberts' experience as a correspondent during the Spanish-American War must have exposed him to some of the horrors he alludes to in *The Red Feathers*: "A fight in an honest cause is a noble and courageous thing; but to picture it one must pass over much of the lust and pain, or the sight of it would chill the heart of the bravest warrior" (p. 139).

¹⁰This concern with the reputation for honesty is mirrored by his protégé, Run-all-day, who uses the Red Feathers, at some risk of their discovery by Bright Robe, in order to prove that he has been favoured by Wise-as-a-she-wolf as he had said.

¹¹This episode recalls Roberts' own experience as a correspondent during the Spanish-American War. He almost died of a fever contracted in Cuba.

¹²The Terror imposed by unscrupulous shamans is discussed by, among others, Selwyn Dewdney, *The Sacred Scrolls of the Southern Ojibway* (Toronto and Buffalo, 1975), especially pp. 144 and 156-60; cf. Ware's Introduction to the text, p. xiv.

¹³In his efforts to make a living as a writer, Roberts' output was voluminous and suffered accordingly. Goodridge MacDonald, "Theodore Goodridge Roberts, Poet and Novelist," *Canadian Author and Bookman*, XXIX (Spring, 1953), observes about one stage of his career that "He would pound out his two thousand word quota of narrative in the morning" (p. 11).

¹⁴See David Jenness, *Indians of Canada*, 5th ed. (Ottawa, 1960) pp. 266-67; cf. *Handbook of American Indians*, ed., Frederick Webb Hodge (Washington, 1907), part 1, p. 142. A striking instance of European treatment of the Beothuks is reported in a letter to the editor of the *Liverpool Mercury*, collected in James P. Howley, *The Beothuks or red Indians: The aboriginal Inhabitants of Newfoundland* (Cambridge, 1915), pp. 96-101, and in H. F. McGee, *The Native Peoples of Atlantic Canada* (Toronto, 1974), pp. 12-19. It is a further irony that Micmac legends, particularly those of Glooskap, may have contributed much of the source material for Roberts' romance: see Ware's Introduction, p. ix.

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