

A Victorian Childhood in Southern Ontario

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O Time In Your Flight, Hubert Evans. Illus. by Robert Jack. Madeira Park, B.C.: Harbour Publishing, 1979. 240 pp. \$7.95 paper. ISBN 0-920080-44-8.

Hubert Evans was born in Vankleek Hill, Ontario, in 1892 and grew up in Galt, the setting of this book. Ostensibly fiction, the volume is actually a thinly disguised autobiographical account of the author's childhood experiences around the turn of the century. Though the perspective is mainly that of the nine-year-old narrator, Gilbert Egan, there also is a narrative voice that speaks in a more neutral way about Gilbert's parents and elders. This narrator describes what he sees with a vividness that brings it to life, but also with a self-conscious nostalgia that makes clear that we are looking at figures under a bell jar. This mixture of the immediate and the long view makes the book difficult to categorize. It is as suitable for a literate ten or eleven-year-old who has the patience for the slow unfolding of a narrative as it is for an adult who enjoys fiction which captures the spirit of another time through the use of realistic detail. The author has written both adult and children's fiction, but this surely is the first book he has written that can be categorized as either.

The title of Evans' book is taken from a Victorian recital piece that Gilbert's mother was fond of delivering at church socials and concerts. Described by Gilbert as one of her "sad" pieces, it begins, "Backward, turn backward, O time in your flight, / Make me a child again just for tonight." Mrs. Egan also numbered among her repertoire "exciting" pieces like "Hiawatha" and "The Wreck of the Hesperus." Evans treats the custom of reciting in public as the ordinary occurrence it was in 1899, but the reader is aware of how deliberately the author has selected his material for its unfamiliarity. Similarly, we are intrigued by the complications of camping out in 1899. The Egan family belongings, transported to the campsite in a wagon, included "bundles of bed slats each with their foot and head boards," cupboards, and carpets for beside the beds. The degree of comfort the Egan's allowed themselves places them for us socially (*See Figure 1*).

A man of great rectitude, Mr. Egan resigns his position as science master at the local collegiate over a matter of principle. Mrs. Egan, presented as a woman "with a mind of her own," continues her unflinchingly firm support

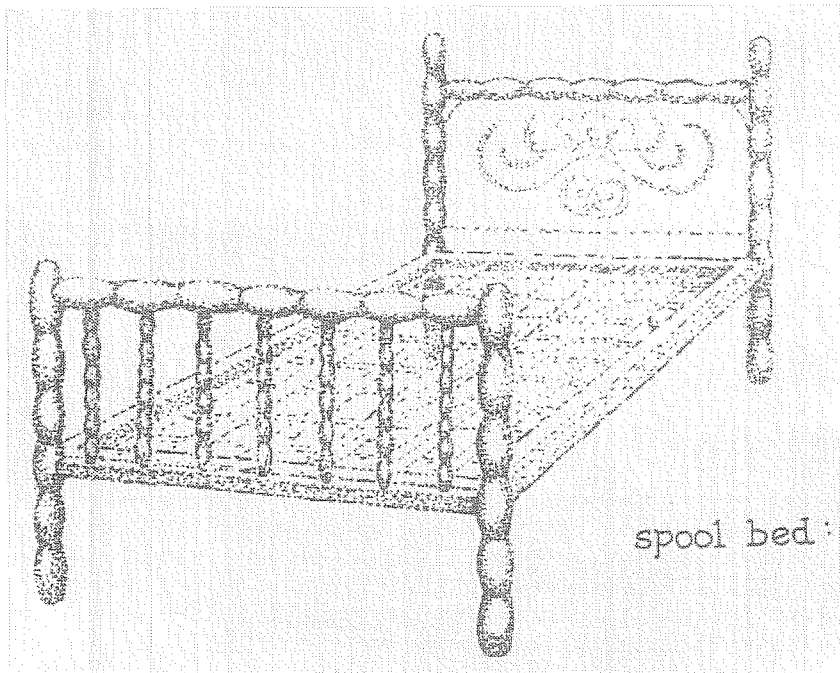


Figure 1.

of her husband and children during the crisis, which ends when Mr. Egan finds a position in Vancouver. As the book closes, Gilbert, an introspective and intelligent boy, wonders whether British Columbia will turn out to be the promised land.

Hubert Evans himself settled at Roberts Creek, British Columbia, in 1920, where he built the house he still occupies and where he and his wife raised their family. Evans, at eighty-eight years old, probably is one of Canada's oldest living writers. He is best known as the author of *Mist on the River* (New Canadian Library, 1954). Set in British Columbia, the book explores the cultural clash between Indians and whites. An earlier novel, *The New Front Line* (1927), out of print for many years, describes the decision of a returned World War I soldier to build a home for himself in the British Columbia wilderness rather than live a life in Vancouver whose values seem alien to him. (Evans himself enlisted in the Great War and was wounded at Ypres.) In addition, Evans has written a series of junior novels about an airedale called Derry, over two hundred short stories and twelve plays. After he turned eighty, Evans published two volumes of poetry, *Whittlings* and *Endings*.

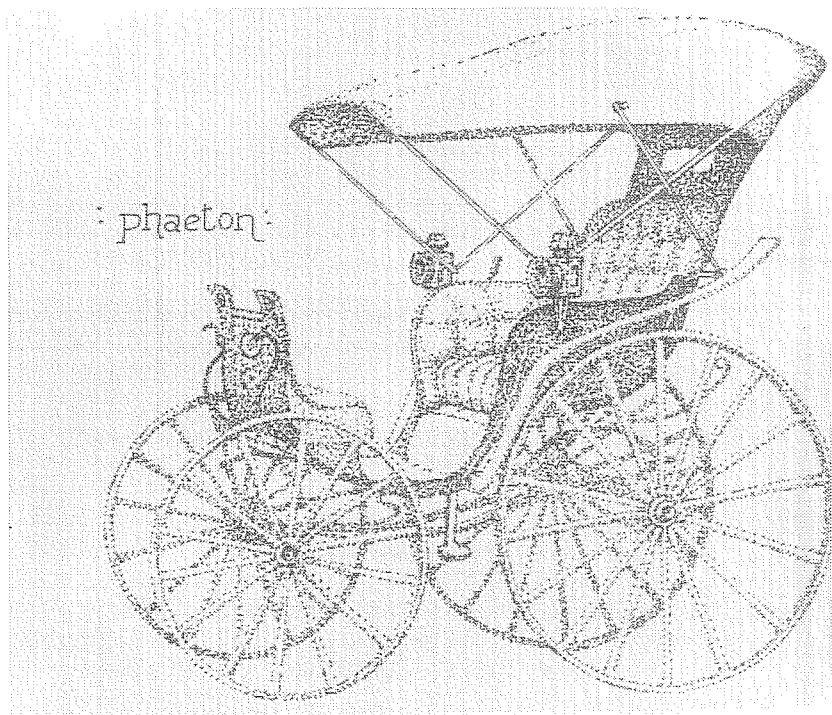


Figure 2.

O Time In Your Flight is beautifully produced with a full-colour dustjacket and thirty-one detailed drawings in black and white of objects that we might not be familiar with, but which are described in the text, for example, a barrel-stave hammock, a cradle scythe, an apple-peeler, etc. (See Figure 2). The jacket is by Frank Lewis and the drawings by Roberts Creek native Robert Jack.

E.L. Bobak has just completed a Ph.D. thesis at Dalhousie University on the Canadian novel of the twenties.