Writing retrospective fiction for children: "Tyed to the particuler truth of things"

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In the vast field of general fiction for children today, there is a sub-category of historical fiction which might be termed retrospective fiction, since it deals with a time within the direct experience of the writer. Retrospective writing can reflect the same characteristics and concerns for the child reader as traditional historical fiction, although often in different ways. In the essay which follows, relevant connections between historical fiction and retrospective fiction will be investigated. The areas of setting and detail, the role of the author, character and characterization, theme and plot, and the child audience will be analyzed with reference to four Canadian works, all regional studies and all written for children and/or young adults. Three of the books — Clive Doucet's *My Grandfather's Cape Breton,*[1] Florence Hammond's *Little apples growing,*[2] and Nell Hanna's *Thistle Creek*[3] — are based on personal experience. Arthur Scammell's *My Newfoundland*[4] is an anthology containing short stories, poems and songs. Six of the fifteen stories are autobiographical, while the remainder of the collection is a product of the author's reminiscenses of Newfoundland life.

Works of historical fiction are set in times past — times of which all readers have no direct knowledge and few young readers any detailed understanding. For most children, a similar lack of understanding would pertain to the settings in retrospective fiction. A notable difference between historical and retrospective fiction on the matter of setting, however, is that some children would be familiar with the locality in the work. Arthur Scammell's Newfoundland villages and social panoramas would be intelligible to most young readers from that province. The geography of Kitchener, Ontario, revealed in *Little apples growing,* while not familiar to most, presumably would be to children from that city. It is even possible that the chronological setting would be known to some readers as well as the physical one, if, as is the case in Doucet's *My Grandfather's Cape Breton,* villages like Grand Etang continue to exist as they have in the past. For children without privileged insights into the localities (and possibly the times) of these retrospective pieces, they would be essentially synonymous with historical fiction. For the limited readership with special insights, their appeal would in part be linked to recognizing familiar landmarks, characters and issues.

Whether the reader of retrospective fiction finds the work familiar or not, as in historical fiction, the setting must be established and supported with the judicious use of detail. Food, clothing, housing and other elements of daily life must enter the story unobtrusively. Also, a certain amount of didacticism is inherent in retrospective writing as in historical fiction, and if the flow and pace of the narrative are not to be impaired, the lessons must be imparted with a deft and even touch.

In Clive Doucet's novel, details range from farm equipment and animals to Cape Breton politics and religion. The critical point here is that such details are vividly, naturally and inextricably linked to the young protagonist's perceptions and self-development. A similarly organic use of detail is evident in Nell Hanna's *Thistle Creek.* The reader is introduced to primitive bathing tubs, Ukrainian dishes, Alberta chinooks and most of the dubious luxuries of a one room school house circa 1927, but always within the context of the daily trials and triumphs of this Canadian Margery Two-Shoes. Scammell's anthology serves as a veritable encyclopedia on subjects such as the varieties of Newfoundland fish, indigenous foods and the equipment common to the fishing trade. Again, such detail is quietly proselytized as a realistic extension of the writer's stories and poems.

Florence Hammond is somewhat less successful in incorporating detail into her setting. There is no paucity of detail in *Little apples growing;* indeed, the reader is treated to minute accounts of exploding furnaces, refractory toilets, balking washing machines and sundry other conspiratorial household accoutrements. We accompany the Hammonds on their vacation via travelogues on the Grand Canyon, Knott's Berry Farm and the Green River Indian Reserve. Addresses, street names and faceless characters descend like a plethora of submitted evidence rather than as background shaped to serve a larger design. It appears that in this particular book of retrospective fiction, the unity and "generall notion"[5] of the work is frustrated by the writer's allegiance to retrospective, literal detail. Hence, the reader neither truly appreciates the experiences of the characters nor discovers the ambience of the period, but expends most of his attention wading through perfunctorily recorded circumstantial documentation.

A further snare particularly open to the writer of retrospective fiction is emphasized by the English writer and critic, Geoffrey Trease, who notes that the writer of historical fiction is often, due to attendant difficulties, "compelled to present something less than the complete historical picture."[6] Florence Hammond's dedication to fact obviously illustrates Trease's argument, but even in the more consciously designed *Thistle Creek,* a similar defect is evident. Nell Hanna, with a reasoned mix of emotion and intellect, meets the challenges and crises of her first teaching post, and an atmosphere of optimism begins to characterize the book. Then, after twenty chapters have been devoted to creating this basically positive mood, the book jarringly concludes with the

suicide of Gerard LePalm, one of Nell's close friends. While this ending undoubtedly reflects the frustrations and tragedies of real life, it is perfunctory and ill-suited in the context of this particular children's book. These examples from the novels of Hammond and Hanna corroborate the implication of the quotation from Sydney which is the subtitle of this essay. Loyalty to historical truth does not necessarily a work of art make.

It is through contemporary accounts in books, newspapers and magazines, through more general historical studies, or through the use of interviews and oral history records that the necessary intimacy with a given period is fostered by a writer of historical fiction.[7] In the four retrospective books under consideration here direct involvement replaces vicarious assimilation of information, an acute memory supplants historical records, and if any written material is consulted, it is probably in the form of personal diaries or journals. While the writer of retrospective fiction then is to some extent released from the obligations of research, it should be noted that once the raw materials are before the author, artistic demands are identical to those for traditional historical fiction. Both the writer of historical fiction and retrospective fiction must be, in the first instance, storytellers. Arthur Scammell, Clive Doucet and Nell Hanna succeed in transcending the confines of literal documentation; Florence Hammond, as demonstrated above, does not do so.

In historical fiction, the characters are either historical personages or invented; in retrospective fiction, they are usually the former, and often the writer himself is featured. In the three novels under discussion and in over one-third of the short stories in Scammell's collection, the primary characters are the writers themselves and the supporting characters are historical figures.[8]

As in the case of the handling of background detail, pitfalls await the writer of retrospective fiction who incorporates his ready-made dramatis personae into a work without due deference to a broader scheme. Again, it is Hammond's *Little apples growing* which best illustrates the point. Numerous characters are introduced who, while they might be instrumental to the development of a certain anecdote — might, for instance precipitate another pique of frustration for the heroine — are never developed in any depth.[9] Names are dropped indiscriminately, much as one meets people in real life, but seldom do these characters assume any emotional identity. Even the two primary figures, Florence and Clare, seem to waft from episode to predicament, demonstrating little more than a cursory link to their environment and experiences.

In the works of Scammell, Doucet and Hanna, on the other hand, the characters are more clearly bonded to their surroundings and to one another. Young Clive is affected, at times profoundly, by those around him, and as his summer at his grandfather's in Cape Breton passes, it becomes clear that the influences of his adopted family and friends will culminate in his returning to his home in Ottawa a far different person. Although most of the characters Nell Hanna encounters in *Thistle Creek* are randomly thrust upon her through

her teaching responsibilities, these figures become extra dimensions to the novel's central theme — the evolution of the rich character of Nell herself. Through the proverb — spouting landlady, Mrs. Borden, Nell (and the reader) sees self-righteous hypocrisy incarnate; through the precocious wisdom of her prize student, Stella Kusiuk, the awful beauty of the Alberta forest country is imparted. Arthur Scammell's characters are similarly a product of their setting and experience. None is extraneous, none is irrelevant to whatever aspect of his vision of Newfoundland is being emphasized. The obstinancy of a character like Jasper Cooper who resists his daughter's "new-fangled notions about grub" is not only a trait of this one resolute Newfoundlander, but suggestive of the unending struggle of those who would make a living at sea.[10] The pathetic existence of eighty year old Amelia Jane White is poignantly worked out against the maritime setting, and she appears as much a part of Little Harbour, Newfoundland, as do "caplin" and "cookers."[11] What can be inferred from these glimpses into characters of the four writers under scrutiny is that in retrospective writing a temptation exists to present characters precisely as they are encountered in real life, and if this temptation is not avoided, superficial, one-dimensional figures can emerge.

One method of avoiding such shortcomings in characterization in historical fiction is to introduce dialects into the conversations of the characters, a technique which adds a verisimilitude to both the chronological setting and to its inhabitants in that genre. In retrospective fiction, dialects are used primarily to recommend a region of the country. Doucet's characters often speak in a mixture of French and English, a hybrid dialect which vividly suggests his Cape Breton ancestry. The dialogue in Scammell's tales is imbued with a Newfoundlandise which quickly and surely transports the reader to that province. Dialect in historical fiction can be a stifling experience for some children, but in the two retrospective works where it is most evident here, the balance between creating a sense of regional and ethnic identity, and allowing the child to advance through the story is achieved.[12]

In a brief but cogent essay on the evolution of historical fiction, the British critic Sheila Ray notes that the attraction of historical novels for children correlates with the presence of at least one character with whom the reader can identify, and that as often as not, this character tends to be an "underdog figure."[13] Clive in *My Grandfather's Cape Breton* clearly echoes this tendency. Young Doucet regards himself as something of an ugly duckling: he is awkward and prone to accidents; he suffers from a guilt complex for failing grade eight; and he is forever breaking things. Clive is flipped off carts, drops sledge hammers on his feet, and is thrown from horses. Grandfather Doucet accepts the boy's awkwardness in good humour, although when Clive falls asleep during the harvest and is nearly mowed under, he receives a stern lecture.[14] Several of Scammell's characters reflect a similar underdog position. Sid Martin's sense of justice and fair play ostracizes him from his father when he reveals

the weaknesses of a neighbour's fishing strategies; Amelia White is viewed as a doting octogenarian by her family and neighbours; a similar role is given to retired Skipper Joe Blackmore,[15] and numerous other characters are set apart from their families and friends, such as the lad in "Hard Cash" and Jim Parsons in "The Culler." Any child suffering through pubescent clumsiness and the inevitable resultant reprimands would find Clive a sympathetic figure and most children would also identify with the characters cited above from Scammell's stories. It seems evident that the retrospective writer can and does exploit the same technique of characterization as writers of historical fiction.

The primary theme of all three novels in this group of retrospective works is the development of character in the protagonist. Scammell's themes vary from tale to tale and poem to poem, although in a general sense, his dominant motif is the effect of the sea and a Newfoundland existence on the lives of men and women. For the purposes of this study, let it be emphasized that, as in much historical fiction,[16] the themes of these works are elucidated with an eye to the specific social conditions in each region of the country. Clive Doucet learns to appreciate the simplicity and vibrant beauty of country life, the stability implied in the changing of the seasons, the value of true friendship and the gentle wisdom of his grandfather within the social context of Grand Etang, Cape Breton Island. Although most readers might wish for a more substantive relationship between the characters and social backdrop in *Little apples growing,* Florence and Clive are portrayed primarily as responding first to the depression, then to the war years and finally to the relative prosperity of the fifties and sixties. Social realities such as the isolation of Nell Hanna's school, the ethnic diversity among her students and the poverty of many of the area families provide a framework for the heroine's maturation in *Thistle Creek.* The social conditions of Scammell's Newfoundland permeate all three sections of his anthology. The competitive nature of the fishing industry, the inevitable death and suffering associated with the occupation, the paradoxical attractions of the sea and the irrepressible humour of the islanders are all dramatized against the economic and social facts of Newfoundland life.

The larger than life heroes and heroines like knights, pirates and queens common in historical fiction written for younger children are by and large excluded from retrospective writing due to the autobiographical connections. Also, there is a certain complexity of emotion inherent in most retrospective works — a complexity unsuitable for very young children. Given these facts, it appears that most retrospective fiction (including the four books analyzed here) are intended for the same specific audience as most of the historical fiction written today — namely, to children over the age of ten.[17] In the cases of *My Grandfather's Cape Breton* and *Thistle Creek,* one might imagine an ideal readership consisting of adolescents from fourteen to seventeen years old.

Significant parallels and differences do obtain between historical and retrospective writing for children. In the matter of setting and background

detail, regional references dominate in retrospective works. Also, because of the autobiographical link in retrospective writing, there is a tendency merely to catalogue events rather than to incorporate them into the overall fabric of the piece. At the same time, the writer of retrospective fiction is prone to the historian's complex, who, according to Sir Phillip Sidney, sees "the particular truth of things" at the expense of "the general reason."[18] Hence, the retrospective writer must ensure that characters are developed within the context of an organic structure. Plot and thematic consideration in retrospective writing reflect a deference to regional exigencies, and particularly to the social and economic realities of a given area. Finally, it is the older child who is most likely to relate to the stories, characters and themes of restrospective writing.

NOTES

[1]Toronto: McGraw-Hill Ryerson Limited, 1980.
[2]Canada: Reeve Bean Limited, 1972.
[3]Ottawa: Borealis Press, 1978.
[4]Montreal: Harvest House, 1966; 5th rpr. 1976.
[5]Philip Sidney, *An apologie for poetry* ed. Evelyn S. Suckburgh, (Cambridge: University Press, 1951), p. 17.
[6]"The Historical Novelist at Work," *Children's literature in education,* 7(March, 1972) 11-12, quoted in Zena Sutherland, Dianne L. Monson and May Hill Arbuthnot, *Children and books,* 6th ed. (Glenview, Illinois: Scott, Foresman and Company, 1981), p. 381.
[7]See *Children and books,* p. 370.
[8]All three novels under consideration, as well as six of Scammell's fifteen short stories, are presented through first person narration.
[9]See, for example, the crew of morticians in Chapter XI or the bevy of repairmen in Chapter XXII.
[10]See *My Newfoundland,* "Fish and Brewis," pp. 20-29.
[11]See *My Newfoundland,* "Mail Day for Amelia," pp. 47-51. Amelia is something of a Newfoundland counterpart to Margaret Laurence's Hagar Shipley in *The stone angel.*
[12]It should be noted that Scammell appends a glossary of terms to *My Newfoundland.*4
[13]"Historical Fiction" in *Children's fiction: a handbook for librarians* (Leicester: Brockhampton Press, 1970; rpr. 1972), pp. l04, 108.
[14]See *My Grandfather's Cape Breton,* p. 125.
[15]See *My Newfoundland,* "Trap Berth," "Mail Day for Amelia" and "Sea Feaver."
[16]See Ray, pp. l08-09.
[17]See Ray, p. l07. The age group of the intended readership is to some extent suggested by the fact that only one of the works, *Little apples growing,* is illustrated.
[18]*An apologie for poetry,* p. 17.

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