

LITTLE ORPHAN AMOS

The adventures of Amos Elliot, Loyalist, Audrey Marsh. Hantsport, Lancelot Press, 1984. 33 pp. \$2.50 paper. ISBN 0-88999-250-9.

Travelling with a group of Loyalist families from New Hampshire to refuge in Nova Scotia, twelve-year-old Amos Elliot loses both his parents during the voyage out, and is assigned to the care of the Carter family, whose three sons are determined to make the young orphan's life even more of a misery than it already is. Various practical jokes are inflicted on him, the worst being the theft of the precious box containing his parents' portrait and their instructions to him in the event of their death. Numbed by his loss, and by the rigours of settler existence, Amos passively endures his lot — until fate intervenes. One of the Carter boys falls in a pool, and Amos, as the only one who can swim, rescues him from drowning. During a subsequent bout of pneumonia, the Carter boy confesses to the theft of Amos' box, and Amos recovers his parents' picture, their parting words of advice, and instructions as to the whereabouts of the family savings. His bravery has also earned him the acceptance of the Carters, and the book ends with Amos looking to the future with something like optimism.

The chief strength of Audrey Marsh's book is its evocation of the hardships of settler life: the heat, the insects, the monotony of the food — and above all the sheer hard work involved in clearing the land and accumulating, often with only the most primitive implements, the materials to build a dwelling to withstand the winter. Yet these are hardships common to almost any settler, anywhere in Canada, at any time: there is little specific feeling of time or place. While the book is entitled *Amos Elliot, Loyalist*, it conveys little sense of the relevant political or historical background: a single paragraph refers to political disagreements between the Elliots and their relatives, and that is all. Only one date is mentioned in the entire book, and that is incorrect — as the result of a typographical quirk, the colonists are referred to as the Loyalists of 1883!

In so short a story, the presence of some rather limp writing detracts considerably from the overall impact. Weeks speed by “as if on wings”, the sick boy's parents are “anxious and worried”, and there is a recurrent tendency to amplify what is already obvious:

“We'll fix that Amos,” said Tom. His brothers nodded. “Ma and Pa don't want him anyway,” he continued. “Dang nuisance.” Unfortunately, Sam had uttered these words right after the meeting to decide Amos' future and Tom had overheard. “We'll have fun,” Tom, the ringleader, had promised his brothers. “We'll have a heap of fun.” Backed by his father's careless words it ought to be easy, thought Tom. “We'll be having a lot of fun teasing Amos.”

The Loyalist emigration was a significant episode in Canada's past, and Audrey Marsh's attempt to bring it to life for the children of today is a laudable one. It remains, however, only sporadically successful.

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MÉTIS FRONTIER LADY

Tell me, grandmother, Lyn Hancock with Marion Dowler. Illus. Douglas Tait. McClelland and Stewart, 1985. 160 pp., \$9.95 paper. ISBN 0-7710-3809-7.

This tale of the settlement of the Canadian West is told so quietly that the epic proportions of its subject matter go almost unnoticed. It is not that pride in country or a sense of achievement are downplayed, but that they are handled as a routine part of pioneer life: without such self-assurance, the opening of the Canadian West would have taken longer, and probably would have been more violent. The role of women, particularly Amerindian and Métis women, was vital; through them early fur traders and settlers were able to adapt to unfamiliar and often severe conditions, and so establish a foothold in this immense new land. As life became more sedentary the Métis women who had grown up between two worlds helped effect transition from one mode of life to another. Their contributions went largely unrecorded and unacknowledged.

Jane Howse Livingston, the grandmother whose story is told by Hancock and Dowler, was a product of this inter-cultural scene. Joseph Howse (c. 1774-1852), the leader of the first HBC party to penetrate the Rockies, is remembered geographically in Howse River, Howse Peak, Howse Pass. When he retired to England in 1815, he left his Cree wife Mary and his family behind, the usual practice among HBC personnel at that time. Howse's son, Henry, established himself at Red River, and there Jane was born in 1848; her mother was Janet Spence, the daughter of Magnus Spence (also with HBC) and of Christiana, a Cree. Jane was the seventh of the couple's thirteen children. In sharp contrast to Amerindian social norms, big families had become the rule among fur traders. Jane in her turn married Sam Livingston, an Irishman who as a teenager had immigrated to America in 1847 to escape the Irish potato famine. Lured west then north by the prospect of gold, he found prosperity instead as a trader and as the first farmer in the Calgary area. Jane Howse Livingston had fourteen children; among her grandchildren is Dennis Dowling, the narrator of this book.

Such a family history provides a natural framework for a personalized recounting of the opening of the Canadian West. Hancock concentrates on better-known aspects of Canadian frontier life, in clear terms, aided considerably by Douglas