

Notes

Communication-Jeunesse a 20 ans

Dans le cadre des événements qui ont marqué le vingtième anniversaire de Communication-Jeunesse (CJ), organisme sans but lucratif, voué à la stimulation et à la promotion de la littérature-jeunesse au Québec, avait lieu, les 27 et 28 septembre derniers, un intéressant colloque sous le thème *Le livre québécois pour la jeunesse, un projet de société*. Près de trois cents participants se sont penchés sur la production littéraire québécoise pour les jeunes. Auteurs, libraires, éditeurs, distributeurs, bibliothécaires, critiques, intervenants en milieu scolaire, illustrateurs et animateurs étaient au rendez-vous, ce qui nous a permis de bien cerner la production actuelle, tout en établissant un bilan de l'évolution récente et en jetant un regard sur les perspectives d'avenir dans cet important créneau de notre littérature. Notons que la production de livres pour jeunes au Québec, qui était de trois titres, en 1970, en atteint presque deux cents cette année. Cette évolution phénoménale n'est certainement pas étrangère au travail acharné des visionnaires qui ont mis sur pied l'organisme, il y a deux décennies, et de tous ceux qui, par la suite, sont venus leur prêter main-forte. Parmi les fondateurs, mentionnons Paule Daveluy, première présidente de CJ, Hélène Charbonneau, Raymond Vézina et Henriette Major, tous quatre présents au colloque, et aussi actifs aujourd'hui qu'il y a vingt ans.

La rencontre avait lieu à l'université du Québec à Montréal, où était présentée l'exposition *La griffe québécoise dans l'illustration du livre pour enfants*, qui nous a donné la chance de constater, une fois de plus, l'immense talent de nos créateurs d'images, sans qui les ouvrages destinés aux jeunes perdraient une grande partie de leur saveur.

Lors de la soirée d'ouverture, Michel Clément, l'actuel président de CJ, prononça une brève allocution, qui fut suivie d'un discours de bienvenue de Yves Lacroix, directeur du département d'études littéraires à l'université du Québec à Montréal. Mais le véritable coup d'envoi fut donné par l'honorable juge Andrée Ruffo, du Tribunal de la jeunesse, qui nous a captivés en nous parlant des enfants de la rue.

Le samedi, les participants pouvaient s'inscrire, selon leurs intérêts respectifs, à vingt-deux ateliers portant sur un vaste éventail de sujets. On a parlé livromanie et livromagie; on a analysé la mutation de nos héros littéraires; on a discuté de l'industrie du livre, des liens qui existent entre école, bibliothèque

et librairie; on a aussi examiné le rayonnement international de nos ouvrages, etc.

Pour clore le tout en beauté, le théâtre "Bouches décousues" a ensuite présenté une pièce pour enfants intitulée *Jouons avec les mots*, de Jasmine Dubé.

Dynamisés par deux jours d'échanges interactifs et de réflexions en profondeur, les créateurs sont repartis avec un stock d'idées renouvelé. Les jeunes lecteurs n'ont qu'à bien se tenir!

Bravo à l'équipe formidable qui a conçu, réalisé et mené à bien ce beau projet, et longue vie à Communication-Jeunesse.

Marie-Andrée Clermont conseil de rédaction, CCL.

Responses: On reading remembered: An English perspective on James MacDonald Oxley.

"Perhaps it is only in childhood that books have any deep influence on our lives" (Graham Greene 13).

One of the formative books of my childhood, spent in Yorkshire in the north of wartime England, was a book by a Canadian writer, James MacDonald Oxley. The book, *Making his way*, had been given to my father as a Sunday School prize in 1912, just after his fourteenth birthday. Although it is subtitled "A tale for boys" and I wasn't in the habit of reading boy's books, I was an avid reader, there was a shortage of books in England in the 1940s and this was near at hand. I must have re-read it many times, sharing over and over again Donald Grant's experiences as he progresses from school to the Ministry.

Earlier the same year my father had been given *The great fight for Canada*, a collection of chapters taken from other works, edited by Herbert Strang; this was another prize for good conduct and regular attendance at Sunday School. Whether this indicates some particular interest in Canada on my father's part or whether it was coincidence or perhaps a wish, a wish to encourage young men to think about emigrating in the years just before the First World War, I don't know. (My father died in 1938 so we never had an opportunity to discuss his youthful reading interests.) However, *The great fight for Canada*, which I've never read although I still have it, is in far worse physical condition than MacDonald Oxley's *Making his way* so perhaps "facts" appealed to my father more than fiction.

The author's name made very little impression on me. I certainly never tried to find any of his other books – *Diamond Rock*, *Up among the ice-floes* and *In the wilds of the west coast* are listed on the title page and perhaps these did not

sound very appealing to an eleven-year-old English girl. Much later, as an adult book collector, I acquired a copy of *The wreckers of Sable Island*, an English edition published in 1911, and in the last few years I have noticed several of his books listed in second hand book catalogues and on the shelves in charity shops.

I have, however, looked in vain for an article in *Canadian Children's Literature* about this man who wrote a book which made such an impression on me – leafing through the pages of *Making his way* in preparation for writing this article, I was filled with nostalgia for the reader I was nearly fifty years ago.

A few years ago, when I was teaching a summer school course on children's literature at the University of Texas at Austin, I took the opportunity of easy access to transatlantic resources to find out more about MacDonald Oxley and to read some of his other books. I now have detailed notes on three of these: *The young Nor'Wester*, originally published as *Archie of Athabasca* (1893), but I soon realised that had I tried to tackle these in my early teens, I would probably not have progressed very far and I would certainly not have read them over and over again. It was a lucky chance that delivered *Making his way* into my father's keeping in the December of 1912.

Information about James MacDonald Oxley was fairly sparse and the best, indeed the only sources, were fairly standard reference works which repeated the same basic facts. He was born in Halifax, Nova Scotia, on 22 October, 1855, and died in Toronto on the 9th September, 1907. He was educated at Dalhousie University, graduating with a B.A in 1874, and at Harvard. He was called to the Nova Scotia Bar in 1878 and practised law in Halifax for five years. He was legal adviser to the Department of Marine and Fisheries in Ottawa between 1883 and 1891, and then joined the Sun Life Assurance Company and became manager of the head office in Montreal.

Encyclopaedia Canadiana says that as well as contributing articles on Canadian themes to a variety of periodicals, he was the "author of a large number of successful adventure stories for boys." And how large and how successful! He may possibly have sold his manuscripts outright to the publisher and therefore not have profited financially from what must have been tremendous sales on both sides of the Atlantic. It is not easy to assess exactly how many different books there were because some of them were recycled under different titles. *Archie of Athabasca* appeared as *Archie M'Kenzie*, and reappeared as *The young Nor-Wester* and *Making his way* also appeared as *Donald Grant's development*. The *British Museum catalogue* lists twenty-six different books, a few of which were possibly non-fiction (*The romance of commerce*) or collections of stories (*My strange rescue: and other stories of sport and adventure in Canada*.) Some of these titles do not seem to have been published in the United States, where most of his books presumably first appeared; other titles, however, are listed in *The National Union catalogue (Pre-1956 Imprints)*,

which do not tie in with titles listed in the *British Museum catalogue*. On the basis of the book's I have read and from the evidence of the titles themselves, it is clear that most of his books were about a boy or boys making good in Canada. Some of them may have been written with the British market very much in mind; many of them have a strong religious flavour and were published by the American Baptist Publication Society in Philadelphia or by the Religious Tract Society in London.

Archibald MacMurchy, writing about MacDonald Oxley in the *Handbook of Canadian literature* in 1906, says that he "entered a new field, writing for the younger generation, a field which he has made particularly his own" (160-161). MacMurchy goes on to say, "It is a good thing that talented Canadian writers are rising up who are willing to make a study of the manners and customs of the denizens of the wide Dominion" and also praises MacDonald Oxley for his vivid descriptions, saying that they were of a high order of accuracy. Archibald MacMechan some years later gave him a much briefer mention, describing MacDonald Oxley as having "written many acceptable stories for boys" and as dealing "with recognizable Canadian life" (*Headwaters*).

By the 1970s, opinions had shifted and in 1976, in *English-Canadian literature to 1900*, R. G. Moyles, while admitting that MacDonald Oxley was one of the most popular writers of boys' adventure stories, accused him of reinforcing to outsiders the long-accepted stereotype of the Canadian way of life – ice, snow, brave rustics countering savage natives, and always lots of adventure and excitement. Moyles takes MacMurchy to task for praising MacDonald Oxley so highly – but then the latter was trying to prove that there was a Canadian literature and in 1906 he hadn't too much to work on. MacDonald Oxley gets slightly more attention in the new edition (1990) of *The new republic of childhood* than he did in the first edition in the 1960s, although it's still obvious that he's not very highly regarded in Canadian literary annals.

Making his way seems to be cast in a different mould from most of MacDonald Oxley's books. It would be nice to think that at the same time that my father was reading *Making his way* in 1912 and 1913, my mother was reading *Anne of Green Gables* because, in fact, the two books have much in common. I think this was why I found it so readable. I cannot honestly remember which of the two I read first. Logic would suggest that I had already read and enjoyed *Anne* when I opened *Making his way*. The latter is set in the "Province of Acadia" and the title of the first chapter, "The home at Rivervale" and the descriptive first paragraph have overtones of Prince Edward Island and Avonlea so I would feel myself to be in familiar territory. Stamp collecting, if nothing else, had given me a good working knowledge of the geography of north-east Canada, one of the treasured items of my collection being the Newfoundland stamp portraying a very small Princess Elizabeth.

Donald Grant is not an orphan; he is the second of a family of seven – six boys and a girl. Mr. Grant is a carpenter and money is in short supply but his

wife is a "proud, ambitious woman" who, because her hopes of material advancement have not been met for herself, now has high expectations for her children, and especially for Donald, who seems to have the most promise. It is the kind of situation which was repeated over and over again in children's literature in the late nineteenth and early twentieth century; but there were enough new twists to keep a young reader reading.

The early part of the story centres on school and although the school in Rivervale was very different from the schools of my own personal experience, there were enough similarities for it to be easily recognizable. University (Chebucto) is held out as Donald's goal while he is still a small boy, just starting school. He does not achieve this easily but a combination of determination, hard work and a certain amount of help from adults get him there in the end. Like Anne Shirley, he has to teach in the school where he himself was taught before he gets to Chebucto. The community in which he is brought up is strongly Scottish – present-day Scots might well take exception to the fact that the children are taught "English" history. He leads an exemplary life, following the teaching of his parents. In the summer of his graduation he inherits a small fortune, half of which he gives to his father, and uses the other half to go on to "the leading Baptist Theological school in the United States." His family is strongly Baptist although the Rivervale community is predominantly Scottish Catholic (the Catholics are poorly regarded by the author). One of the reasons why I found the book so readable was undoubtedly that it reflected my own ambitions and much of the philosophy being communicated to me by my family and teachers.

Other than *Making his way*, MacDonald Oxley's works were mostly adventure stories much more in the tradition of R.M. Ballantyne, Captain Marryat and W.H. Kingston. *The wreckers of Sable Island* is quite short – or perhaps I have an abridged edition since it was originally published in England in 1904 and my copy is dated 1911. Whatever MacDonald Oxley's original purpose in writing it, its publication in Britain must have been due to the wish to encourage young men to adventure to outposts of Empire. Eric, the hero, is the only son of Doctor Copeland, surgeon-in-chief in the "favourite" regiment of the Duke of York, Queen Victoria's father, and stationed in Halifax, Nova Scotia. The doctor sends for Eric to join him; the year is 1799; Eric, aged fifteen, has been brought up by his grandfather in England, and is the "best type of the British boy" with "brave brown eyes," keen to see the world. He sets off with a fellow officer of his father, who has been home on leave, and their ship is wrecked on Sable Island "less than a hundred miles due east from Nova Scotia." As a result, he has some thrilling experiences before he is reunited with his father.

The boy tramps, or across Canada may also have been written with an eye to the British market since the central characters are two Scottish schoolboys who decide to travel out to China via the New World; they decide to go through

Canada "where they thought they would feel much more at home" "because it was a British colony." The voyage across the Atlantic is not without incident but eventually they arrive in Quebec and the book becomes a guide to Canada, spiced with adventure. The boys find "their inherited contempt for everything French weakening considerably under the influence of their new experience." They walk from Quebec City to Montreal and then on to Ottawa, take the train on to Winnipeg and walk some more, eventually arriving in Vancouver. "Interesting" seems a masterpiece of understatement of the story they will tell their parents when they reach Shanghai.

MacDonald Oxley seems to have been concerned to give a rounded picture of the peoples living in Canada around the turn of the century. His books are packed with information as well as adventure. Archie M'Kenzie, the eponymous hero of the book which was later issued as *The young Nor'Wester*, moves from crisis to crisis, nearly drowning himself, having a brush with a bison, killing a buffalo, being involved with the rivalries between the Hudson's Bay Company and the company for which he works and with the Indians. The young hero of *North overland with Franklin* is Denis Latour, the son of a French-Canadian voyageur and a Cree woman; his talent for flute-playing leads to his being chosen to join Franklin's expedition up the Coppermine River but does not prevent him from being involved in one adventure after another, including saving Franklin's life. The books are peppered with out-dated and very unfashionable views about people of non-British antecedents.

Macdonald Oxley was perhaps more popular in Britain than he was in his native Canada. During my 1987 stay in the USA, I discovered that Susan Coolidge's "Katy" books, which are still widely available in Britain and just as popular as the "Anne" books and *Little women*, are scarcely known in the USA. Although the work of Macdonald Oxley has not survived in Britain any more than it has in Canada, perhaps it was in its time much more popular on this side of the Atlantic, providing a window onto adventure in a vast and exciting country far removed from the experience of British boy readers.

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- . *Making his way: A tale for boys* (first published as *Donald Grant's development*, 1892) London: Nelson, 1901. This copy was a prize awarded to Harold Bannister at St John's Parish Church Sunday School, Farsley, Yorkshire, England, in December, 1912.

- . *North overland with Franklin*. 1907. The title page of the copy in the library at the University of Texas at Austin was missing but it was printed in Oxford. The black and white frontispiece is reproduced, slightly changed, on the embossed cover, which is red/yellow/black and white with the title in gold lettering and the author in white lettering.
- . *The wreckers of Sable Island*. 1891. London: Nelson, 1911.
- . *The young Nor'Wester* (first published as *Archie of Athabasca*, 1893). London: The Office of the *Boy's own paper*, n.d. The book plate in the copy shows that it was presented in 1935 to James Hamilton, pupil of Queen East Presbyterian Sabbath School through the Upper Canada Tract Society.
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