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THOMAS McCULLOCH'S STEPSURE: THE RELENTLESS PRESBYTERIAN

One of the most persistent images in Canadian literature is that of the hard-nosed puritan who inflicts his narrow, but often financially profitable, standards on others. We have only to look at the members of Leacock's Mausoleum Club, at Robertson Davies' gallery of pinch-faced Ontarians, at Earle Birney's Mr. Legion ("Damnation of Vancouver"), or at MacLennan's McQueen (*Two Solitudes*). Thomas McCulloch's Mephibosheth Stepsure, in letters published in 1821-22, provides a splendid reference for these puritanical figures, and provides, consequently, a strong link between writing in colonial Nova Scotia and in Canada after 1867: our modern literary puritans are elaborations on Stepsure—on his narrow religious outlook, his rigid self-reliance, his concern with the acquisition of property and money, and on his narrow, social, intellectual, and cultural scope, all of which may have seemed valuable to some in a pioneer to society, but which many of our writers agree have produced self-made materialistic citizens who have often plagued this country with provinciality.

Thomas McCulloch was a Secessionist Presbyterian minister who came to Pictou in 1803. He started the Pictou Academy, wrote theological treatises attacking Roman Catholicism and defending Calvinism, and he wrote moralistic fiction. He also wrote against the religiously exclusive state-supported Anglican schools and colleges in Nova Scotia, and he wrote the Stepsure letters. McCulloch was a renowned teacher, and, in 1838, became the first principal of the non-sectarian Dalhousie College. He was a man of broad education who spent most of his life actively involved in religion and education—details of which are given in sketches and commentaries by Douglas Lochhead and J. A. Irving in *The Stepsure Letters*,¹ by Irving and A. H. Johnson in the *Literary*

*History of Canada*² and particularly fully by William McCulloch in *The Life of Thomas McCulloch*.³

The original *Letters of Mephibosheth Stepsure* is a compilation of sixteen letters that McCulloch wrote to Acadian Recorder in 1821-1822; they were gathered into book form and published in 1862 in Halifax. Approximately one half of the letters (Letters 1-7 and 15) are satiric sketches; the others are narrations of Mephibosheth's rise from abject beginnings to wealthy maturity as a Nova Scotian farmer who satirizes his unsuccessful neighbors. Stepsure's vision is regional and narrow: it is focused only on his own community, and there is little suggestion that one need concern himself in a new land with anything beyond hard work and the Presbyterian religion. His satiric view is centered essentially on deviations from the individual's proper relation to God. Money is central to Stepsure's life, the acquisition of which seems to be one of the promises of the promised land—if one lives the Good Life.

The weakness of the *Letters* (and the reasons perhaps that they are seldom read) lies in the repetition of the plots of the satires, the repetition of structure (usually that of the idle apprentice),⁴ and the facile moralizing. The satiric characters tend to lack variety. As individual letters, however, some are adequately sustained. Often there is good humour, which Northrop Frye describes as the foundation "of genuine Canadian humour".⁵

The chief values of the *Letters*, however, are in two sophisticated image patterns—of houses and of movement—which run throughout, and in the image of Mephibosheth Stepsure, which although intended by McCulloch to be a satiric norm, is likely to strike the reader negatively, so that Stepsure becomes an epitome of narrow puritan "virtues", a character often to be ridiculed, rather than admired, so thoroughly has Presbyterian McCulloch done his job.

The satiric scenes of the *Letters* are based on the decline of able colonists into various forms of degradation through laziness, vanity, gambling, drinking, gossip, and worldly ambition. Stepsure and other norms are independent, self-righteous, prudent, materialistic, God-fearing, unadventurous, and unworldly men. Hard work, money, and well-cared-for farmlands, buildings and houses are symbols of their successful, religious lives as productive settlers. In the *Letters*, one works hard because "The Deity has endowed man with activity: He has placed him in circumstances, in which activity expended upon industrious pursuits acquires property; and property enables him to enjoy the comforts of life, and to be the friend of every good and benevolent design. . . . It is the industrious and benevolent Christian whom his Lord esteems: the

man who combines religious principles and worship with activity, industry, and diffuse benevolence".⁶ Further, man has been given the ability to work to remove the curse of the Fall, to "curb his vices", and to "protect him from innumerable miseries": "A life without care would not satisfy man; and thorns and thistles, and barren land, were sent to give him something to think about" (Letter 12, p. 103). By labor, man restores "beauty and fruitfulness" to nature; he "gladdens the wilderness and solitary place". It is not Nova Scotia so much, or even Pictou that will, through labor, "blossom and rejoice", but each individual's farmland, each man's home, each man's relationship with God. So long as Stepsure works hard, has a wife, has only a few occasional friends, is not profligate of either time or money, and so long as he follows the dictates of his Presbyterian religion, he is secure.

The sermons of Parson Drone provide the most specific religious background in the *Letters*, but the whole of the book is strongly inclined toward religion. Mephibosheth's name comes from II Samuel, 9, where he is David's servant, and provides the proper implication of kingly and holy approval of his character. Stepsure's lameness—that is, his inability to perambulate the countryside to tavern or to neighbor, and his inferiority to those who can dance and are whole—is, symbolically, favoured. His lameness makes his "step sure" because he realizes his limitations as a fallen man and realizes what is required to make him whole again: adherence to Presbyterian doctrine and biblical injunction to keep him from following the paths of frivolity, vanity, and worldly ambition which have attracted the satiric victims of the *Letters*. His motto, as a satirist, is "I will laugh at your calamity; I will mock when your fear cometh" (Proverbs, 1, 25). It is Wisdom who will laugh and mock.

As a rogue, Stepsure is relentless in advancing himself over his spendthrift neighbors. He and his wife are a "homespun couple" to whom "time is money", and they are fawned upon by the storekeeper, Mr. Ledger, because they pay cash for their goods; they sell their farm produce only to "those whose payment gave me no trouble", although they are willing to "help a poor settler beginning in the world". Stepsure sells at a reasonable rate and is concerned about the quality of his goods. He raises only what is saleable. He keeps all his farm tools in good order and *never* lends them and *never* borrows from others. He never over-works his "cattle" or his fields; he "labours for profit" (Letter 14, pp. 118-121).

Stepsure's precision and rationality, his habit of over-simplification, his self-righteousness, his materialism, and his individualism, are not, however,

softened by his sense of humor, by his free use of low imagery, or by his graceful style, and he emerges as an unsocial, self-centered, and priggish materialist:

"I have a pair of lame legs—I stay home—I mind my own affairs—I wear homespun, and I have become wealthy by farming". (Letter 4, p. 125)

The most interesting techniques by which McCulloch satirizes those who fail to live productive lives is apparent in patterns of houses and of wasted movement. These images, furthermore, are paralleled by images of the norms: Stepsure's simple log home is cheerful, full of contentment, is efficiently managed, unpretentious, neat, snug. Satiric victims' houses are (or become) decrepit. Stepsure's relative immobility, because of his lameness, parallels the gallivantings of wastrel neighbors.

The exteriors of pretentious houses in Stepsure's district conceal poor workmanship, shoddy furniture, and unhappiness. Jack Scorem (Letter 2, pp. 14-20) begins as an excellent wood-chopper who has a good wood-lot. To show the world that "he had begun in earnest" (Letter 2, p. 14), he buys the materials for a large house—using credit, one of McCulloch's most frequent satiric targets. The house with its "white cupboards and green corners and window facings" has "a very pretty appearance", but it is unfinished inside. Partitions and ceilings are only loose boards. Winter comes and there is no protection for the animals because proper shelters were never built: the lumber went to build the house. Jack's crops have suffered because of the time he spent building the house. He receives more credit from Ledger, the store-keeper, and goes deeper into debt because the more he earns to pay off the debt, the richer he feels, and the more gowns, ribbons, laces, and rum he and his wife buy to keep up appearances. He does not work on his house or his crops, but cuts wood to sell to Ledger, who exports it. Jack and his wife make more trips to buy from the store. The debt increases and Jack mortgages his farm to Ledger who is, in turn, indebted to Mr. Balance. The years pass and the house deteriorates—the paint disappears, windows are broken and filled with "a plentiful supply of old hats, trousers, and the like; at the same time keeping out the cold, and proving that those within had once worn clothes" (Letter 2, p. 19). The interior of the house has also deteriorated; the loose boards forming the ceilings and partitions have become looser. Discontentment within the house prevails as Jack is unable to provide for the needs of his many children. The physical condition of the house parallels the decay of the marriage, of the welfare of the children, and of Jack's morality. He becomes a drunkard and goes to jail for his debts. "Before I left home", Stepsure says, "his little boys

were at my house, asking a few potatoes to keep them from starving" (Letter 2, p. 20).

Mr. Pumpkin has a similarly impressive exterior to his house, but again, there is nothing finished inside it: the family lives in one corner of it; "pigs, dogs, carts, and fowls, all make use of it too"; Pumpkin's daughters' finery hangs around the house on nails and pegs in the walls. Pumpkin has no foresight. His methods of farming waste his time. The family at last remove the clothes that stuff the broken windows, to wear them; they tear of the clapboards for other uses.

Loopy's house, on the other hand, is "a little log hut, covered with spruce bark" (Letter 9, p. 73). Loopy and his wife are merely lazy: they are doomed *before* they begin. They wear finery, but the house is dirty and uncomfortable. Pigs share the house; the furniture is broken; the dirty dishes remain on the table "amid scraps of pork or fish and piles of potatoe skins". On the nails in the walls hang the family's fine "gowns, petticoats, and trousers", which none of these homes is without.

The particular vitality of these satiric scenes in which the house provides the central image is due to their vivid detail. The symbolic function of the house is quite powerful throughout. It is a metaphor for the soul. Stepsure is the ideal Presbyterian settler; his house, his marriage, his land, his crops, orchard, and animals are all as well-managed as possible by fallen man. Stepsure will be able to answer with surety "the injunction of his Master [and] say at His appearance, *"I have been glorifying thee upon earth; I have been finishing the works which thou gavest me to do"*" (Letter 13, p. 114). Stepsure's house symbolizes the perfection of earthly endeavor; it parallels, with its limitations brought about by man's fallen state, the Heavenly House.

To Stepsure, every unnecessary step away from home is a step toward spiritual deterioration: visiting, frequent trips to Ledger's store, to the tavern, to Halifax, and to jobs off the farm, result in "going to Mr. Holdfast's house", the jail. The tavern is a house on which Stepsure expends considerable satiric energy. Mr. Soakem's success as an affable tavern keeper brings about his ruin: "From the hurry of travellers . . . family prayers and graces would be sometimes hurried over, and sometimes omitted"; his children are left to look after the tavern when their father, Soakem, goes abroad "to maintain his reputation", to show "how a gentleman ought to behave" (Letter 3, p. 27). The children neglect the inn; travellers stop coming and the inn becomes a "habitation of the wicked". Soon, Soakem's only comfort is liquor; he goes

to jail; his children are "drunken vagabonds", and his daughters, "pert, idle hussies without industry and economy". Soakem ends in jail "poring upon the cards, and the grog before him" (Letter 3, p. 28).

The solidity of the home and the contentment of the family are lost in Soakem's case because of his ambition to be rich. His deterioration is marked by the extent of his wanderings, first away from farming to innkeeping, away from innkeeping to gentlemanly visiting, and finally to jail. Images of movement away from home are metaphors for the dispersal of energies, which properly unified, ultimately acquire the pleasure of the Lord. Hard work for the body, religion for the soul, and education for the mind, produce the paradise on earth, the happy home, well-kept lands and orchards, and money. It follows that an honestly thriving farmer will please God; Stepsure's readers are under religious pressure to succeed.

The vain ambition of Hector Shootem leads him to join the local militia as a captain in officer's finery, although when the pigs steal his trousers, his wife has to make him another pair from one of her petticoats. Their poverty does not deter Hector from spending his time away from his fields, attending to military affairs which are excellently ridiculed in the mock-heroic Battle of Scorem's Corner in which the militia successfully routs a herd of pigs. They are the same pigs that later, in revenge, steal Hector's trousers from the clothes line. Because his duties are *away from home*, Shootem has no money to pay his debts, and Mr. Catchem, the sheriff, "begged him to accept a lodging in his house" (Letter 13, p. 113). Other acquaintances of Stepsure's travel to the mill, the store, the blacksmith's, to others' woods to cut timber, instead of to their own woodlot, and to various houses to preach fundamentalist sermons and to proselytize.

Mr. Gypsum, who owns a good farm to begin with, puts his extra money into ships exporting gypsum and importing gin, tea, and other luxuries into the community. Soon he becomes involved in smuggling and when storms wreck his ship, which in turn wrecks his own unmended dyke, his land is flooded, and Gypsum lands in jail. Had he stayed home and mended his dyke and grown crops on the reclaimed land, he would not have lost all his assets. Importing luxuries into the pioneer community breaks down the society because such luxuries create a shortage of money for essentials and create a need to visit in order to show off fine new clothes, ornamented watches, ready-made boots, whips, and spurs; gin and brandy and tobacco also demand social occasions. Although these goods improve the appearance of the town

in general, Stepsure ironically notes, and of the church congregation in particular, they increase the debts owed by those who succumb to vanity. Only Parson Drone and few others refrain from indulgence in "superfine": "Home-spun and homely fare were to be found only with a few hard-fisted old folks, whose ideas could never rise about labour and saving" (Letter 1, p. 7).

McCulloch satirizes those who are never content to stay in Nova Scotia and work, and who put the blame for their lack of success on the land. They feel the same about Nova Scotia as did some of the early United Empire Loyalists who called the colony "Nova Scarcity". McCulloch's characters prefer Ohio to Nova Scotia, or the Cape of Good Hope, or Botany Bay where their hopes lie in cheap labor, the "white niggers" that they feel the British government sends for the benefit of the vanity of "genteel families like the Goslings" (Letter 1, p. 11). Other colonists prefer Upper Canada, or "some other country better worth living in" (Letter 14, p. 124).

Against these images of debilitating movement and deteriorating houses are the security of Stepsure's house, Parson Drone's church, and Stepsure's lameness. The satiric picture is not complete with decay and movement, however. Poor religious education and observance, the misuse of credit, evangelism, uncleanness, discontentment in marriage, and the usual puritan sins of drinking, gambling, fighting, lying, and dancing, are satirized with vivid, often effectively low imagery, and, frequently, a biting, ironic, superciliousness on Stepsure's part. For instance, Stepsure's townspeople resemble pigs in their quarrels, and get themselves "beat and abused like pigs [and] return to the same place and company with as much eagerness as if nothing had happened" (Letter 14, p. 116). Concerning education, Stepsure explains: "Our people, indeed, do a great deal for the instruction of youth. . . . They are initiated into the mysteries by having tea-parties and frolics for their little companions. When our youth get a little further on, the boys are taught to get upon the mare and go errands, and also to read and write a little . . ." (Letter 15, p. 127). The need for domestic abilities in a pioneer society is ignored by families who send their girls to Mrs. McCackle: for their husbands, these girls will be able to "paint flowers and make filigree work . . . sing and dance delightfully . . . and play upon the pianoforte so well, that in frolicking times old Driddle is now often out of employment" (Letter 15, p. 127). To these girls and their instructress, it is a perversion of common sense to imagine anyone except the vulgar washing clothes, scrubbing floors, or preparing a meal.

Stepsure is harsh with his neighbors, but he does not agree with trying to reform by corporal punishment. The local school teacher Pat O'rafferty,

teaches by flogging and giving a pupil a black eye, and Stepsure disapproves. Parents who are poor examples for their children also come under his wrath. Besides gallivanting, parents teach their children through slack Presbyterianism to follow the wrong preachers. Parson Drone teaches, but few come to him; instead they chase after Mrs. Sham, Mrs. Clippit, Parson Howl, and Yelpit, all of whom are independent preachers. Their converts, according to Scantocreesh, Stepsure's friend, are "fit for nothing else but singing hymns and cheating" (Letter 15, p. 128). They are of no *use* in the world.

The place of education in the life of the contented religious person is important; for it is, to Parson Drone, basic to the human constitution to be curious and to desire knowledge; "When the mind is not adding to its stock of information, it becomes dissatisfied" (Letter 14, p. 117). He says that Nova Scotians are, because of their low level of education, unable to use their minds to any worthwhile advantage; their curiosity drives them only to "travel about the town to learn what their neighbours are doing" and to talk about Snout's pigs (Letter 14, p. 117).

But Mephibosheth Stepsure himself claims to be learned, alert, happy, witty and contented. He may seem to be opportunistic and to gloat over his neighbors' misfortunes, over even their sufferings, but he feels that he will be ready, when the Lord comes, to inhabit the better Mansion.

When Stepsure parades his own virtues, or when Parson Drone is sermonizing, irony is absent, and the narrative plot becomes tedious. The metaphor falters, and instead of Mephibosheth as the favored servant of David, or as the voice of Wisdom, or even as fallen man making the most of his limitations, we get in the non-satiric letters a self-righteous, miserly materialist. In one sense, the sure step of this satirist is his undoing; his unadventurousness may produce good crops, but it also produces repetitive letters. There is a tendency to melodrama in the satires; there is a general lack of variety in imagery and plot. However, the *Letters* deserve a place in Canadian literature because of the image of the relentless puritan that is so important in our writing.

NOTES

1. Toronto: McClelland and Stewart, New Canadian Library, 1960, 150-159.
2. Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1961.
3. Truro: The Albion, 1920.
4. Northrup Frye, *The Stepsure Letters*, iv.
5. *The Stepsure Letters*, ix.
6. *The Letters of Mephibosheth Stepsure* (Halifax, 1862), Letter 13, p. 181. Hereafter references to this work will be given by Letter and page number in parentheses in the text.