Frank Baldanza

The Prince Tours Canadian Fiction

Royal appearances—aside from a range of more mundane concerns—touch primordial mythic and spiritual forces associated with the magic, charismatic *presence* of an august being. A lady examining photographs of the Investiture of the present Prince of Wales at Caernarvon once remarked, "Look, even the Queen's coat gets creased when she sits on it," with the implied assumption that royalty should not be plagued by such everyday irritations. As James Reaney observes in "The Royal Visit," when the King and Queen appeared at Stratford, Ontario, "Everyone had almost a religious experience."[1] And he adds that this aura remained even for those who either failed to be presented or who, like the schoolchild of the poem, were too short to get a glimpse of the royal persons: "I'll remember it to my dying day."

Royal tours inevitably focus on the symbolic function of the monarch in a variety of forms. At the political surface, the monarch is representative of current national and international political, social and economic ideals. Edward, Prince of Wales, on his 1919 tour of Canada, said exactly this in the longest and most effective speech of the ten week tour, at Massey Hall in Toronto on November 4. He said he was not conceited enough to imagine that the tremendous outpouring of affection and enthusiasm was directed at him as a person so much as it was a confirmation of the ideal of Empire, not as a mother country presiding over colonies, but as a democratic alliance of sister nations.

At the civic level, royal tours focus on the self-awareness of a town. Stephen Leacock remarks of a tour of Prince George:

> They read him an address all about the tranquility and loyalty of the Empire, and they purposely left out any reference to the trouble over the town wharf or the big row there had been about the location of the new post office. There was a general decent feeling that it wouldn't be fair to disturb the prince with these things: later on, as king, he would, of course, *have* to know all about them, but meanwhile it was better to leave him with the idea that his empire was tranquil.[2]

Mariposa displayed the same spirit for the touring Edward: "Allegiance! Well, perhaps you remember the address they gave to the Prince of Wales on the platform of the Mariposa station as he went through on his tour of the west. I think that pretty well settled that question" (38).

On the personal level—the home province of fiction—these same concerns blend with a headier mixture of emotions connected with social status, ambition, and sexual drives. These feelings are amply reflected in various novels which make incidental and passing reference to the 1919 and 1927 Canadian tours of the Prince of Wales. As a handsome, glamourous bachelor with a taste for dancing, it was inevitable that women would be especially stimulated by, and should fantasize about, the prospect of possible contact. In his book on the 1919 tour, W. Douglas Newton, the authorized correspondent, remarks that in Winnipeg a rumour circulated that the Prince chose as dancing partners women wearing silver slippers, and long before his arrival, not a pair was to be had in the shops of the city.[3]

Had these eager women only known, a scarlet beret would have been more likely to do the trick. A scene in Katherine Govier's *Random Descent* traces the Prince's visit to Crowsnest, Alberta (not far from Calgary where the real Prince bought a ranch). A month of preparations by the town—including the purchase of a Ford by the city council especially to transport H.R.H., the baking of a cake in the form of Windsor Castle, and the feverish preparations of ten select unmarried town beauties—prove anticlimactic when the Prince's bright smile wilts "like a soufflé cooling" as he assesses the scene. His spirits pick up remarkably when he spots Hattie, the ravishingly lovely young daughter of homesteader stock whose raspberry lips, hazel eyes, and springy yellow curls are topped by a scarlet beret. Edward dances and chats with her exclusively, and is even rumoured to have kissed her by the coat-rack. "A careless hour, for him; for her, the chance that turned her life around."[4]

But the turn-around is toward ignominious obscurity. Hattie has at this point mounted several rungs of the social ladder by her engagement to Stephen Trotter, the scion of the leading family of the town, owners of the local drugstore. The Prince's attentions to Hattie, and consequent slight to Stephen's elder sister Rebecca, who was assiduously groomed for the occasion, exasperate Mrs. Trotter unendurably. A "redoubtable matron of the sort which is distributed one at most to a town," she requires Stephen to break his engagement that very evening. Hattie cries for two days over her lost prince; and she makes a brief show of superior sophistication before returning to her previous boyfriend Gus, a "bad man" and a drifter. She wanders through bungled

and successful abortions to a sudden death from a stroke just when Gus's soldier pension would have granted her a plateau of security. In this case, the afternoon's encounter between "the toast of Europe and the belle of a whistle stop" ruins her life, rather like a mythic maiden driven to madness by a touch from Apollo.

Other novelists agree that the royal presence is a symbolic structure by which an ordinary human person is invested with nearly divine attributes; the application of these attributes is an abstraction, but the consequences of trafficking with the symbol constitute a judgment on the person or the society which responds to that trafficking.

In Patricia Blondal's *A Candle to Light the Sun*, Ian Ross, the drunkard brother of the town physician, on hearing of the death of George V, remarks,

> knowing that all these millions can come together in such loss, be sad for wondering how we made him yes better than a man in his abstraction, a man incidentally if he chose but we . . . yes knew each of us that here in this muck-hole [Mouse Bluffs, Manitoba, based on the real town Souris], this survival world, he was the cream, finest and best, grade A rust-proof heap-topper and his seed forever. As we made him so he made us. Whatever he was we were better through him.[5]

Robertson Davies' Deptford Trilogy does not present such a rosy view of the effects of the royal presence of the same monarch. Early in *Fifth Business*, the first novel of the series, the narrator Dunstan Ramsay, in receiving the Victoria Cross from King George V, realizes that both he and the monarch are simultaneously playing roles as public symbols that may be entirely accidental in terms of their personal qualifications. His heroic valour, in wiping out a German machine-gun emplacement in World War I, was "rather a dirty job I did when I was dreadfully frightened; I could just as easily have muddled it and been ingloriously killed."[6] And the King, on the other hand, is a short man who must look up at Dunstan:

> We are public icons, we two: he an icon of kingship, and I an icon of heroism, unreal yet very necessary; we have obligations above what is merely personal, and to let personal feelings obscure the obligations would be failing in one's duty." (87)

Dunstan is one of three male protagonists in this trilogy who grew up in the village of Deptford, Ontario; the others are Paul Dempster and Boy Staunton. Dunstan becomes a scholarly authority on saints and their attendant occultist folklore, whereas Paul, as Magnus Eisengrim, becomes a world-famous theatrical illusionist, a practical adept at spiritual phenomena. They are together the carriers of the thematic burden of the novel (along with Liesl—Liselotte Vitzlipützli—a friend

and lover of both). Dunstan as scholar of spiritual miracles contrasts with Magnus as performer of illusions. The third Deptford figure, Boy Staunton, functions as a foil figure to both Dunstan and Magnus, a millionnaire entrepreneur and Establishment bigwig. His son David discovers that Staunton's ethics, as revealed in his sexual life, are to use women—his wife as a social mechanism and his many mistresses as sensual mechanisms—solely for his own benefit. His whole spiritually empty worldly achievement ends in a disastrous and scandalous suicide.

Dunstan early in his career sensed the essential—but in some circumstances necessary—hollowness of both the royal and the heroic icon. Boy Staunton, who stole Dunstan's girlfriend back home and who early shows his worldly acumen, falls prey to mistaking the royal icon for substance. "It was characteristic of Boy throughout his life that he was always the quintessence of something that somebody else had recognized and defined" (114). Or, put another way, "the Stauntons rarely escaped cliché in any of the essential matters of life" (183).

While a law student at the University of Toronto, Boy rejects friends' proffered suggestions about resemblances to various movie idols, before settling on "Edward Albert Christian George Andrew Patrick David, the Prince of Wales" as his model, for his manifold glamour, his common touch, his air of brooding mystery, and his rumoured success with the ladies:

> there were rumours of high old times with jolly girls when he visited Canada in 1919. Flaming Youth, and yet, withal, a Prince remote and fated for great things. Just the model for Boy Staunton, who saw himself in similar terms. (111-112)

One of Boy's great opportunities comes in Edward's 1927 tour, when he serves as an aide-de-camp, even outshining the Prince on a visit to his old school, in terms of personal charm augmented by F. Scott Fitzgerald effects. He names his first child Edward David.

> In due time—how *could* H.R.H. have known?—a christening mug came from Mappin and Webb, with three feathers and *Ich dien* on it. David used it until he graduated to a cup and saucer, after which it stood on the drawing-room table, with matches in it, quite casually. (127)

The cup is supplemented by yearly monogrammed Christmas cards from H.R.H. Boy even goes so far as suggesting the Prince is David's God-father, though this is not true, another instance of fantasizing the icon.

Boy's identification with the ill-fated Prince takes on a decidedly sexual character in succeeding years as his own marriage turns dull and troublesome and he makes frequent visits to discreet Montreal

matrons. When George V died in January of 1936, Boy expressed none of the regret of Patricia Blondal's Ian Ross because he foresaw Edward VIII's court as

> the gayest, probably, since that of Charles the Second .... If he had ever read any of those psychologists who assert that a crowned and anointed King is the symbolic phallus of his people, Boy would have agreed whole-heartedly. (185)

As the Abdication Crisis looms, Boy reads it as a battle between the Young Men and the Old Men (Stanley Baldwin), with every intention of joining the " 'King's men' who would, in an unspecified way, rally to the side of their hero and put his chosen lady beside him on the Throne" (185). But during the Christmas of 1936, just following the agonizing abdication broadcast, his own marriage blows apart when his wife discovers a note from a Montreal mistress in a coat pocket and attempts suicide.

Boy Staunton's ultimate demise is one of the most compelling mysteries that draw the reader through the three volumes of this long narrative. We know in *Fifth Business* that he drove his Cadillac off a pier into the Toronto harbour, but the antecedent developments make it uncertain whether it was suicide or murder. Our uncertainty is complicated by a performance by Magnus Eisengrim at the Royal Alexandra Theatre two days after Boy's funeral. His son David asks publicly for the cause of his father's death and Magnus's murky oracular answer from the stage, which precipitates a heart attack for Dunstan, continues to echo. The mystery continues through *The Manticore* and *World of Wonders* as various narrators in these novels develop their own theories about the death. Only at the end of the third volume do all the factors in his suicide come clear. While they are too complex for us to survey at this point, we can observe that the catalytic factor, revealed only several pages before the end of the volume, has to do with the Prince of Wales icon.

Boy made an unfortunate second marriage to a fiercely ambitious wife. His failure to gain a seat in a general election showed him as an aloof, imperious, sour-mouthed Coriolanus figure, quite at odds with the Prince of Wales image as a champion of the common man who, on his 1919 tour, shook so many tens of thousands of hands that he had to switch to his left hand for medical reasons. Then when Boy's wife pulled political strings to obtain the Lieutenant Governorship, he began to sense, during a London fitting for robes of office, that this ceremonial post would enslave him to a debilitating round of official appearances and banquets; it would totally annihilate his freedom of choice and his self-image as a dashing young playboy. Again, he shows

a personal inability to make accommodations that are commonplace of royal duty.

At this point, a number of ghosts from his earlier life return to haunt him; sensing himself up against the wall, he suddenly sees a parallel between himself and the Prince of Wales, in a portentous conversation with Magnus:

> "The Prince of Wales," he said; "he was my friend, you know. Or rather, you don't know. But many years ago, when he toured this country, I was his aide, and he had a profound effect on me. I learned a great deal from him. He was special, you know; he was truly a remarkable man. He showed it at the time of the Abdication. That took guts."[7]

He decides on suicide as his own abdication from the impending Lieutenant Governorship.

Boy Staunton reached the absolute pinnacle of worldly success as Eastern urban society understands such terms, but he died an unhappy and perplexed suicide in large part because, unlike Dunstan Ramsay at the Victoria Cross ceremony, he took the outer appearance of royalty as literal spiritual substance. He even died with the idea that Edward VIII would be happy after his heroic abdication, an assumption belied by Timothy Findley's treatment of the Duke of Windsor in *Famous Last Words*. Indeed, to whatever degree the historical Edward may be judged by Dunstan Ramsay's criteria as inadequate ("to let personal feelings obscure the obligations would be failing in one's duty"), Boy's own spiritual and ethical inadequacies led him to back the wrong horse, though he was not very good even at that bet.

Adele Wiseman's Hoda, of *Crackpot*, is the opposite of Boy Staunton not only in sex but in every other possible way. This woman, whom Margaret Laurence calls "one of the greatest characters in our literature," is also obsessed by the icon of the Prince of Wales, but she is the daughter of poverty-stricken, severely handicapped Russian-Jewish immigrants in Winnipeg.[8] Poorly educated, the butt of ridicule, enormously fat, she becomes the local prostitute of a poor section of town, seeming to specialize in accommodating groups of teen-age boys, brimming with lust, who would accept any easy woman for a first experience.

Every feature of her life would horrify physicians, psychologists, sociologists, and other norm-setters; but in point of fact, Wiseman presents Hoda as embodying the highest spiritual integrity admired by Dunstan Ramsay of the Deptford Trilogy: the Fool-Saint. Ramsay's ideal Fool-Saint is Mrs. Dempster, the Baptist minister's wife whom Boy Staunton possibly launched into madness by hitting the pregnant woman with a rock imbedded in a snowball. This blow precipitates the

premature birth of the charismatic illusionist Paul Dempster, alias Magnus Eisengrim. And when Boy drives his Cadillac off the pier, he has this same stone in his mouth, suggesting delayed guilt for the portentous outcome of a childish prank.

The idea of the Fool-Saint is first introduced in the Deptford Trilogy by a Roman Catholic parish priest who warns Dunstan that the concept is a Jewish one, and that the primary fault of these saints is a lack of prudence. Just as prudence was the cornerstone of Boy Staunton's career, Hoda shows none whatsoever. The ideal of the Fool-Saint, perhaps most eloquently stated in Corinthians 1:25-31, confounds and reverses all the values of the worldly, the respectable, and the socially dominant; the Fool-Saint practices basic spiritual virtues in a radically simple way. A trenchant irony in comparing the two novels is that Mrs. Dempster's foolishness is signaled by her easy acquiescence in copulating with a tramp who told her he desperately needed this relief; such acquiescence is Hoda's profession, and she is proud of the service she offers. She is the terror of the public health bureau, which she visits for periodic VD check-ups for her open, easy, boisterous bonhommie when awaiting her examinations.

Hoda's initial preoccupation with the Prince of Wales begins in a schoolyard game when other children beat and ridicule her for her differentness; after they have gone, she mounts the hill alone and declares herself THE QUEEN OF THE CASTLE:

> Well, so what. Even if the kids did call her fat and didn't want to play with her . . . . he would know. The Prince of Wales would know who was born to become his queen.
>
> And he wasn't the only one who would know what she was really like, under the spell of fat she couldn't escape and sloppiness she couldn't control, like the Frog Princess and Beauty and the Beast and the Ugly Duckling and Cinderella too. All kinds of girls who thought they were the fairest of them all would get a surprise some day, when the young prince who was ripening in his long-chinned, pale-eyed, nondescript, special kind of noble beauty would come from over the seas and not even notice them at all. (40)

This gives folkloristic corroboration to the religious idea of the Holy Fool. Her choice of the Prince of Wales is undoubtedly drawn from the patriotic wartime raptures of her favourite teacher, Miss Flake, who regards the royal family as nearly godlike.

Hoda justifies her sexual initiation—in which Morgan wins her in a crap game on the agreement that the winner will pay her what he gained—on the metaphor of princely knights fighting for a lady's favour. Later boys qualify only as temporary lovers: "But she really didn't love [Morgan] all the time either, like she loved Stanley, for

instance, last year, and like she would love the Prince of Wales forever, when he came" (111).

The fantasy runs through many details—that despite aristocratic distaste for fatness, the Prince of Wales will pick her out easily in the crowd and learn she is his eternal one-and-only. In some versions, his mother and father (in a curious, distorted prediction of Edward's later history) separate the lovers to prevent a threatened civil war over his marrying a commoner and a Jew; in other variants of the dream, she becomes another Queen Esther, a saviour of her people.

The ambiguity with which she indulges the fantasy is quite clear in her mind: "Why shouldn't she dream of being the lucky one for a change? Dreaming is different from expecting" (129). In the actual event of the royal appearance in Winnipeg in 1919, a policeman's helmet suddenly interposes between Hoda and the Prince, as she frantically shouts from the crowd " 'I'm here! I'm here!' " (130). Though she knows "the country was full of cops and teachers and capitalists [who] always fixed things so people didn't get a chance," she still thinks it unfair the Prince wasn't given the opportunity to see her, even if he had ridden by without recognizing her as his great love.

Hoda later bears a child without ever realizing, until the pains begin, that she was pregnant: her own theory was that each of a man's deposits in the womb was one part of a baby, and if one slept with the same man regularly, the parts would add up to a complete child; but if one had a variety of partners regularly, as she had done, none of the parts will fit together and therefore one will not become pregnant. The horrendous experience of her unaided delivery explains why, in her dazed and painful state as she deposits the newborn boy at the nearby Jewish children's home supported by her rich Uncle Nate, she leaves this note: "TAKE GOOD CARE. A PRINCE IN DISGUISE CAN MAKE A PIECE OF PRINCE, TO SAVE THE JEWS. HE'S PAID FOR" (158). What she wrote in nearly hysterical distress embodies the Queen Esther legend along with her theory of impregnation, now modified to say that several men can deposit bits of a baby similar enough to each other that a whole child could result. And given the number of her customers, who could say one of them was not a prince in disguise? It is not until after her convalescence that she learns the plethora of rumours this note stimulates in the Jewish community, with her foundling son nicknamed "the Prince."

Wiseman is most convincing in allowing this fantasy of an accomplished alliance with a prince to wax and wane in Hoda's mind, but the fantasy persists. A fuzzy newspaper photo of the foundling reminds her of a photograph of royal progeny. She regularly deposits anonymous contributions at the orphanage addressed "FOR THE PRINCE."

The horrendous climax of the novel, when Hoda's son David brings a group of orphanage boys to her for their first sex, is acutely ironic since he plans to finance their initiation with the anonymous monies she has sent. David's first bungling attempt at intercourse, before Hoda knows who he is, fails due to premature ejaculation. But David stays on after the others have left, to really cash in.

Hoda now faces her most acute trial as Fool-Saint as she realizes this boy's identity. Should she tell David she's his mother and perhaps wound him irreparably from the shock of learning his parentage so traumatically? Should she simply send him away without an explanation, and perhaps wound his self-esteem, since he's ashamed of his odd navel, the result of her ignorant home delivery? Her moral sanctions heretofore have been rather like Huck Finn's—if an act made you feel good, the act was good, and if it made you feel bad, it was evil. After her epic anguish, she decides to go on with the encounter, even though it makes her shudder with nauseating revulsion, because it is literally the only thing she can do for him. Her success at affording David a successful sexual initiation is richly justified for both of them: "Afterward he talked a lot. He'd never talked as much to anyone in his life before as he talked now, lying close beside her, feeling her along the length of him" (253). Not only is this his first profound human communication as an orphan, but it is also Hoda's one golden chance to commune with her child.

The encounter is rich in princely ironies. In despair at his initial failure, David alludes to his princely blood as no use to him, and Hoda reproves him for lying, when it is she alone who is responsible for the whole fantasy. Later, as David pleads for her acquiescence, he says "Prince" is really the name of a dog, and as an orphan, he has always been treated as a dog by everyone. It is probably this speech which finally influences Hoda to allow him to open her kimono.

In the denouement, we see David coming full circle, back to Hoda's initial, archetypal schoolyard beating and her compensatory Prince of Wales fantasy. Under Hoda's tutelage on subsequent visits, David develops a reputation for physical endowment as sexual athlete that is not entirely justified, but he is willing to go along with the legend: "he was nevertheless, like any young prince, not beyond the temptation to pretend as well to some more special attributes of the divine" (263). David cannot have seen the size of the codpiece on Henry VIII's armour in The Tower, but it would reduce his own boasting to blushing modesty.

Since he is called "Prince" and "King David," a group of gentile boys attacks him, trying to force him to admit there was only one Prince of the Jews, Jesus Christ. When he refuses, they beat him just as

they beat Hoda as a child. He feels that at least in his relations with this whore, there are no pretenses, but then he also senses she is attracted by some "made-up stuff" in his mysterious background,

> and he began to wonder whether it would matter to anybody if the real person disappeared altogether, for all they knew him, or cared, or for that matter if he never emerged, but remained smothered under everybody's make-believe, including his own. (264)

In social terms (though we must not push this assertion to ridiculous lengths) Ian Ross and Boy Staunton on the one hand and Hattie and Hoda on the other hand represent archetypal responses to the royal icon.

The two men are power figures, however debauched, one representing Toronto affluence, the other Mouse Bluffs' leading family gone to seed. Both come to grief because of the social power of the icon. Ian was gassed in World War I, as a volunteer in the cause of Empire, and now passes his days in a wheelchair in a fetid summerhouse, drinking compulsively as he discharges shafts of withering, cynical irony about everything except the King. (The younger generation of bright young men in Mouse Bluffs, represented by Darcy Rushforth and David Newman, refuse service in World War II, partly because of Ian's example—a substantial erosion of Empire or even Commonwealth loyalties.) We have already seen an intimate connection between Boy Staunton's spiritual emptiness and his moral ignorance as a result of his adulation for the Prince of Wales, who was the direct motive for his suicide. Both Ian and Boy are public figures in their own spheres, and both hew unquestioningly to official dogma about royalty.

Hattie and Hoda, one teetering on the edge of respectability, the other hopelessly outside any social acceptance beyond surreptitious back-alley fumblings, fantasize the royal icon in distinctly private terms of the fairytale Prince Charming's intervention in their drab, desperate lives. Hattie, who actually does fascinate the Prince during an afternoon dance, loses her precarious hold in the social hierarchy as a direct consequence of his attentions. Hoda, who even fails to see the Prince in the Winnipeg mob, ironically nurtures herself and her abandoned son on the myth. The buoyant and redoubtable force of Hoda's spirit transforms the Prince Charming myth into a compensatory sense of her own worth, even in the face of nearly universal social condemnation. Mrs. Dempster, the Fool-Saint of the Deptford Trilogy, has at least one recorded miracle to her credit; Hoda has a delighted and loving readership.

NOTES

1. *Poems* (Toronto: new press, 1972), ed. Germaine Warkentin, p. 53.
2. *Sunshine Sketches of a Little Town* (Toronto: McClelland and Stewart, 1982), NCL #15, pp. 126-7.
3. *Westward with the Prince of Wales* (N. Y. and London: D. Appleton & Co., 1920), p. 165.
4. (Scarborough, Ontario: The New American Library of Canada, 1980), p. 122.
5. (Toronto: McClelland and Stewart, 1976), NCL #125, p. 19.
6. *Fifth Business* (New York: Penguin Books, 1977), p. 86.
7. *World of Wonders* (New York: Penguin Books, 1977), pp. 310-11.
8. *Crackpot* (Toronto: McClelland and Stewart, 1978), NCL #144, p. 8.