

## REAL "CANADIAN LITERATURE"

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WHAT is the use?"—is the slangy, banal, but intensely expressive ejaculation that leaps to one's thoughts regarding "Canadian literature" in connection with the reception which Martha Ostenso's *Wild Geese* has had from the press and people of the Dominion. How can a country expect to develop a literature of its own, when public appreciation of the most striking and by far the best literary work that any one of its children has yet done is so lacking as it has been in this unique case? *Wild Geese* is distinctively a Canadian novel which, on its intrinsic merits, would have had a remarkable welcome in any other civilized or comparatively civilized country in the world. When viewed in the light of the fact that its author is a young and inexperienced girl of twenty, of Swedish parentage, whose conscious life has been restricted to Manitoba, only Dominie Sampson's favourite expression "Prodigious" adequately conveys the wonderment of it. One circumstance alone possibly explains, if it does not excuse, the indifference and neglect which it has encountered in the land of its production. It is that the book, handsomely and without dispute, won a prize of \$13,500 offered in the United States, for which 1389 American and Canadian writers competed. There is something in prize-winning which seems to repel. One neither desires nor admires even a "prize baby." So it is probable that many who saw the book when offered for sale simply said, "Oh, a prize story," and "declined" on something like *Main Street* or worse, without further enquiry or interest.

But where were our literary critics, the authors and finishers of our "Canadian literature," that no voice of theirs was heard in grateful recognition? So far as I am informed, not one of them has spoken. After Louis Hémon's *Maria Chapdelaine* had been printed in Paris, and hailed as it was in France and England, they were loud enough in praise of that book, which well deserved all that could be said in laudation of it. But *Maria Chapdelaine* was in no sense "Canadian literature," although it was unquestionably real literature. It was exclusively French. Its author was merely a passing visitor to Canada. His errand here was the collection of material for publication in France. He was

accidentally killed in Quebec. Otherwise, he would probably have returned to his native land and completed his career there. He was a mature, experienced, and solidly as well as artistically educated man. The author of *Wild Geese* is little more than a child in years. She owed her education, as far as it extended before she sat down to write, to the common school of Manitoba, to whose boundaries her experience also was limited. And she was probably hampered at the outset by the Swedish tongue of her home. Yet she has written a story of the most remote and unlikely part of Manitoba, which in local colour, character delineation, psychological insight and dramatic power, equals in all respects Louis Hémon's masterpiece, and in many ways transcends it.

*Maria Chapdelaine*, while faithfully descriptive, no doubt, of the backwoods life of the family and circumstances it depicts, is really a poetic idealization rather than an accurately drawn picture. *Wild Geese*, on the contrary, is as realistic as Zola's *La Terre*, of which it is strongly reminiscent, although it is most unlikely that the young school-teacher author had ever read a word of *La Terre* or other of Zola's novels, either in the original or in translation. Its realism, however, is as delicate as Zola's is usually gross, and sometimes revolting. *Maria Chapdelaine* is a superlatively beautiful sketch in black and white. *Wild Geese* is a vivid painting in nature's colours, with nature's perspectives and local dimensions scrupulously observed, without hint of photography, and throbbing throughout with real action and real life.

The title of the book may seem frivolous at a first glance. It, as well as the prize-winning, may have been a handicap in the market. But it is well and rationally chosen, as the reader sees in the end. It is suggestive of the scene and season of the story, as well as of the unity of time, place and action which is observed. The time is a single, summer school-term, between the coming and going of the migrant birds. The place is Northern Manitoba, in the lake district, with its mixed foreign, native-Canadian and aboriginal inhabitants. It is the fabled home of thunder. It was from Lake Manitoba that the province took its name—"Manitubah," God's voice. The action centres around one homestead, and is confined to one rural school section. The title further suggests the temporary and special purpose of the settlers—to get possession of land for their immediate use, rear a family, make money as quickly as possible, and flit to more genial climes. The authoress was a school-teacher when she won her rich prize. In

all probability she had actually spent a summer among just such people and scenes as she portrays. She outlines the landscape with broad splashes of colour and bold indications of surface. She depicts character with the fine lines and touches of miniature art—all without effort, or apparent seeking after effect. Her *dramatis personae* reveal themselves naturally by word and gesture. They live, not merely before, but with the reader.

The action opens in the primitive, prairie farm-house of Caleb Gare, the central and main figure of the novel. The new teacher has come, with the northward spring flight of the wild geese. Lind Archer is her name. She has driven from Yellow Post, the nearest railway station, with the Indian mail carrier. She finds Amelia Gare, Caleb's wife, bustling about her kitchen, in pretended preparations, but really to fill in time until her husband's arrival for the evening meal. Judith, aged seventeen, and Charlie, the younger daughter and son of the Gares, are milking the cows and coming in and out of the house repeatedly, without other reason than to "have a look" at Lind. Martin, the slow and dull elder son, "had cleaned the stable so thoroughly that it looked unnatural." Ellen, his twin-sister, is playing the organ, "by ear." Thus are most of the principal characters introduced in the opening paragraph, with few more lines than there are names. Judith, the ostensible heroine of the piece, although there is a fine thread of romantic love between the teacher and one later to be introduced to run through the story, is the first to be formally presented. It is done with telling strokes:

Presently the outer door swung open. Judith had come in again. Lind Archer saw her against the dim light of the lantern that hung by the kitchen door. She had a great, defiant body, her chest high and broad as a boy's; her hair was wild-locked and black, and shone on the top of her head with a bluish lustre; her eyes were in sullen repose now, long and narrow; her lips were rich and drooped at the corners. She wore overalls and a heavy sweater, and stood squarely on her feet as if prepared to take or give a blow. Judith approached Lind with a heavy, swinging stride. Lind thought she had never before seen such vigorous beauty.

But Judith, notwithstanding her exterior, has much gentleness and affection of nature, which comes out in response to kindness. She is her father's antithesis, and constant, if intimidated, opponent. It is around their antagonisms that the action largely develops. The key to the family mystery is the mother, Caleb's wife, the real heroine of the story. The other children, although excellently

indicated and playing well their parts, are minor figures. Caleb fills the foreground. This is his description, as he enters:

At first Caleb seemed to be a huge man. As he drew into the centre of the kitchen, Lind could see that he was, if anything, below medium height, but his tremendous shoulders and massive head, which loomed forward from the rest of his body like a rough projection of rock from the edge of a cliff, gave him a towering appearance. When attention was directed to the lower part of his body, he seemed visibly to dwindle. He had harsh gray hair that hung in pointed locks about his head, a weedy tobacco-stained moustache, and startling black brows that straggled together across the bridge of a heavy, bony nose. His eyes were little beads of light that sought Lind out where she sat in the lamp glow of the other room. He did not speak until he had hung his hat and coat on a peg, and had washed himself at the sink. He did not so much as touch a comb to his ragged hair.

This pen-picture suggests actuality rather than fancy. Evidently the original of it somewhere and sometime sat as a model to the young artist. When Caleb at last speaks to his wife, not even then to the teacher, "his voice surprised Lind." It is so unlike the man. "It was remarkably soft, almost a purr." It was with that voice, seldom raised, only a little more emphatic at times, that he overawed and enslaved his family. The secret of the wife's unresisting submission to the seemingly gentle but always brutal tyranny of Caleb over her and the household was unknown both to their children and to the neighbourhood. That secret is the *leit motif* of the book. It is conceived and sustained with a power and effectiveness most wonderful in so youthful and inexperienced a writer. It is linked up skilfully with the love story of the teacher and a later, health-seeking visitor to the settlement.

The dwelling of the Gares, with its two ground-floor rooms and its unfinished "loft" in which curtains served as partitions for the sleeping apartments of the teacher and the young people of the family, is briefly but clearly pictured. Caleb's interest is entirely in his outbuildings, his lands, his crops, his stock, and in the adding of field to field and farm to farm in his insatiable craving to extend his ownership. He has the unscrupulous land-hunger of the proverbial French peasant. His original nationality is not stated, but he is unmistakably Canadian-born. His type is not unfamiliar in the countrysides of the Dominion. His wife's nationality also remains undisclosed, although there is a suggestion

of Old Country home conditions much superior to those of her married life.

Icelanders, Swedes, half-breeds, a Russian, play more or less important and always interesting parts in the drama. They and their surroundings, ambitions, superstitions, trials and peculiarities are all clearly sketched. The love story of the teacher and her hero is as prettily as it is naturally and simply unfolded. The blighted love of Ellen for her half-Indian wooer is pathetically suggested. But it is around Caleb, his wife and Judith, that dramatic and psychological interest revolves. The seduction of Judith by her admirer, a young Swedish neighbour, if that can be called seduction which simply happens in the sweep of the current of primeval instinct, is of strikingly original and artistic literary conception and execution. It is so told that the ordinary reader scarcely perceives that what had to be has been, as the natural consequence of events, conditions and character. This incident is the more effective because of the delicacy and skill of the narration, and because the participants are inexperienced children of the wilds.

The successes of Caleb in land-grabbing, his despicable schemes against his neighbours, his petty hypocrisies, his purring, relentless, domestic tyrannies, the lingering pangs of pre-marital jealousy which he suffers, his vindictive torturings of his memory-crushed wife, are masterfully delineated. The fierce, natural antagonism between father and younger daughter, culminating in violence with all but fatal consequences, is painted with sure artistry and minute, local verisimilitude. The *denouement* is tragic in part, pitiful in part, but not wholly unhappy. It could not be otherwise if true, as it is, to circumstances and the conditions of life in which the plot is cast. Truthfulness is the distinguishing characteristic of the book. There is not an incident in it which might not have happened in the surroundings, not a character introduced which might not have been a logical product or part of the conditions. That is why I hold that *Wild Geese*, written by a real Canadian girl, wholly "made in Canada" although of foreign parentage, is our first and only piece of real Canadian light literature, that is, Canada's foremost contribution to English literature. I am not forgetting that other novels have been written and printed in Canada, by Canadians. But, are they literature? And, are they Canadian? Most of them, it seems to me, are mere "yarns" about puppets and things supposedly Canadian, but which might as well have been designated "Roosian, or Turk or French or Proosian, or perhaps I-tal-ian." I am leaving poetry out of consideration; but fugitive bits of more or less pretty verse can

scarcely be regarded as constituting a national literature. Might not by far the greater part of our so-called poetry perish from off the face of the earth to-night, without causing a feeling of loss to anyone or finding serious mourners tomorrow morning? Is anything that has yet been written in or of Canada, apart from *Wild Geese* and *Maria Chapdelaine*, at all likely to find readers anywhere, a hundred or even fifty years hence? The United States may have been a little—a very little—better off than we, up to this time. But they can boast of nothing to equal either of the two Canadian books named.

*Wild Geese* in setting, in character and in action, is a drama of the absolutely primitive and rudimentary. It might have been of record, in essentials, anywhere, and at any time since pastoral and agronomic life began. The only pity is that its singularly gifted author is unlikely ever to produce another such book.