

SHOUT CANADA TO THE WORLD?

GRAHAM CATHCART.*

"SHOUT Canada to the World." This caption heads a recent report of a Gallup Poll taken on the question "Do you approve of having the Canadian Government spend money to give other countries a true picture of Canada?" Sixty percent of the votes were affirmative. I should certainly have voted Nay if the picture of Canadian life (written by Canadians) currently spurting from our national media of expression—radio, press, and magazines—is true. What should we think of an artist back from a sketching trip with pictures of the village dump heap, a funeral with an open grave in the foreground, or a water colour of a manure pile?

This is the pictorial equivalent of the themes chosen today by young Canadian writers, particularly those who write for broadcasting. I have just listened to a short story by one of them, featuring a sadistic husband who decides to murder his wife, a thoroughly repulsive invalid dominated by her craving for fattening food in spite of the doctor's warning that her life depends on rigid dieting. There is of course the other woman, her husband's secretary. The husband hits on the idea of injecting an overdose of the medicine his wife is taking, into her favourite chocolates, before he goes out for the evening. We hear him in the wash-room busy with his ghoulish work. When he returns late in the evening, hoping to find his wife a corpse, she greets him with the news that she has found a way of resisting temptation by giving the box of (poisoned) chocolates to the secretary. That diverting tale is not an exception. Another gem concerned a locomotive fireman injured in a train accident, lying in hospital in the semi-conscious haze induced by morphine when the torpor wears off. We are given a look into his mind as the nurse comes into the ward, of his feelings about his work and his boss, etc. It did have the merit of ending happily (which is taboo in most radio stories) but the whole thing seemed to me silly, dull and trivial. For several years my work brought me into close contact with railway men. As I listened to the radio story and recalled my friends amongst such men, I could find little resemblance between them and the man in the story.

Another of these broadcasts gave us a caricature of

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motherhood, built round a 'freak' woman hated by both her daughters. One of the daughters ends in the Montreal jail, where we leave her jumping up and down on a double-decker bed (quite a feat) waiting to be bailed out by the Sailors' Union. I apologize for not giving a more connected account of this one, but my attention flagged.

Such women exist of course, but why dramatize them? Why not build a story round a mother whom I met in one of the Prairie Provinces. She had twelve children, everyone of whom loved and respected her. They were all self-reliant and adventurous—people one would be glad to know. Their experiences in struggling to meet the difficulties of depression and eight years of drought would make good listening. Were they downhearted? No; they were too busy to dramatize their troubles. One of the older boys fell seriously ill. I went with him in the ambulance, which finally took him to hospital 60 miles over the sort of roads one finds on the prairies during the March thaw. When at last the doors of the hospital opened to admit him, my relief was so great that my knees nearly buckled under me. Later, recovered, the lad told his mother he had enjoyed the drive in the ambulance immensely.

I do not want to labour the point, but before we leave radio drama and short stories I must mention a series given during the summer and written—we are expressly told—by a *young* Canadian reporter. It concerned people not in the news. The one I heard opened in the office of a Public Health Nurse serving a rural community. We overhear her telephone conversation with someone who tells her that a child whom she has believed to be suffering from some skin infection was simply so coated over with dirt that the skin appeared diseased. After this bright introduction to rural life we are whisked off in the nurse's car to visit her patients. The first is a man of twenty-five with shriveled limbs. He is assumed to have had infantile paralysis during childhood, but his parents had made no attempt to have him treated. They felt themselves lucky because only one of their children was ill while many of the neighbours had several children below par. There is a school girl waiting for glasses which do not arrive, and a man in pain who postpones going to the doctor in spite of all the nurse's persuasion. The nurse evidently has a dark suspicion of the sort of picture the youthful reporter will paint, for we hear her say as she bids him farewell: "I expect you've a pretty poor idea

of our health out here! I wish you could see the Well Baby Clinic. It's great." Well, there are two sides to every question, and I will not dispute the veracity of this reporter's story. But having lived in a very poor rural community and having seen what co-operation and friendship and compassion can do to relieve these distressing situations, I wish very much that the credit side of the story could be emphasized.

"Lay off that tonic you're giving my Frankie," said a mother, laughing; "since you had his tonsils taken out he's a new boy and he doesn't need any tonic. I just can't keep up with his appetite now!" It had been so simple to put young Frank on his feet . . . His mother had nothing but what she made by sewing in spite of impaired eyesight. Someone had given me five dollars. Thirty-five miles away a missionary-hearted doctor in charge of a small hospital said in answer to my telephone call, "Bring him along. I'll do the operation free if you can pay the hospital bill." Someone lent his car. The gasoline and the hospital bill came out of the five dollars, and we had a healthy, happy boy instead of a listless half-invalid. There is a bright side to rural nursing, but apparently the radio reporter missed it somewhere along the way.

Just one more example, before we close. Some months ago we were given "The Leaders were all Drunk, and They Wanted War." It was crude writing. Sound effects gave us the clink of whiskey bottles rolling on the ground beside the "leaders" who wept in maudlin helplessness because "all the people" (meaning the entire population) were leaving the land. Led by a mystical figure bending under a load of pain and sorrow, they gradually disappeared behind a "black curtain" where, we were expressly told, "there was nothing." No hope of their finding things a little brighter over yonder! Nothing like that. In the lurid darkness descending on a depopulated world, the drunken leaders huddled, in despair and whiskey as the curtain went down.

I have tried to avoid exaggeration in summarizing these stories. There was literally not one redeeming feature in any of them—at least none that I can recall. None of the characters made the slightest effort to fight against the temptations that assailed them or to combat the evils that oppressed them. On the contrary, I received the impression, as I listened, that both writers and the characters they created wallowed in their

misery, as I have watched a water buffalo wallow in the half-stagnant ooze that passes for a river in tropical lands.

I wonder why young Canadian writers seem to prefer the fantastic, the sordid and the macabre? Do they hope to make their listeners feel guilty that such people and such situations as they depict exist at all? Possibly. If so I wish them success in their endeavours. But if that is the way they propose to "sell Canada" to the world, they would serve the Dominion better by silence.