

*Donald Cameron*

THOMAS RADDALL:

## THE ART OF HISTORICAL FICTION

THE POSITION OF THOMAS RADDALL in Canadian letters is curious indeed. Here is a novelist who has attracted international attention, who has been a professional writer for thirty years, a winner of three Governor-General's Awards and the Lorne Pierce medal for "distinguished service to Canadian literature", a Fellowship in the Royal Society of Canada and honorary doctorates from Dalhousie and Saint Mary's, a novelist uniquely beloved in his native province of Nova Scotia and discussed with respect in any standard work on Canadian literature. Yet in all the reams of criticism of our literature which have appeared within the last ten years there is hardly an essay on his work, and none that approaches it critically with any real degree of rigour or penetration.

Now although Raddall makes the point himself that his novels of contemporary life have been more widely read than his historical fiction, his fellow Nova Scotians appear to love above all his interpretation of their history, and this appears to be revealing about both Raddall and his public. Of the historical novels—*His Majesty's Yankees* (1942), *Roger Sudden* (1944), *Pride's Fancy* (1946), *The Governor's Lady* (1960), and *Hangman's Beach* (1966)—the first is perhaps the most impressive achievement, and it repays careful study.

The historical novel as a genre would appear to be in a condition remarkably parallel to Raddall's own literary situation: it presents, as Ernest Bernbaum succinctly remarks, "the anomaly of a genre flourishing in the world of literary experience, and despised in the world of literary thought".<sup>1</sup> Damned by Brandes as "a bastard species", dismissed by Brunetière in an epigram,<sup>2</sup> the historical novel is widely considered an impossible form. "Either the novel becomes pure cram", writes Leslie Stephen, "a dictionary of antiquities dissolved in a thin solution of romance, or, which is generally more refreshing, it takes leave of accuracy altogether and simply takes the plot and costume from history, but allows us to feel that genuine moderns are masquerading in the dress of a bygone century. Even in the last case it generally results in a kind of dance in fetters."<sup>3</sup> Yet, as Bernbaum points out, a stagger-

ing number of the great novels are in some sense historical works: *Henry Esmond*, *War and Peace*, *The Scarlet Letter*, works by Pushkin, Balzac, Faulkner, and many others. But to find a critic who really looks seriously at historical fiction we must skip all the way from Liverpool, Nova Scotia, to the University of Budapest and the Marxist critic and philosopher Georg Lukács, whose book *The Historical Novel* is almost the only searching attempt to determine the nature of the form.

Lukács' brilliant study regards the historical novel as part of the general growth of a sense of the significance of history which occurred during the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries, a development of which Gibbon, Macaulay, Hegel, and Marx are among the obvious representatives. For Lukács, Scott is the classical historical novelist, the channel through whom the new historical consciousness revolutionized fiction. "What is lacking in the so-called historical novel before Sir Walter Scott", he writes, "is precisely the specifically historical, that is, derivation of the individuality of characters from the historical peculiarity of their age."<sup>4</sup>

To Lukács, the genius of Scott is revealed especially in the structure of his novels. The novels are invariably set at decisive transitional moments in national history; they are full of characters who give "living human embodiment to historical-social types." The principal characters are typical national figures of their periods—bourgeois, decent, average, not passionately committed to one side or the other. Their role is to bring the warring extremes into contact, to allow the reader to view both camps sympathetically, and thus to allow us to feel the tragedy and loss when one side is—inevitably—defeated. The mediocre hero also represents, of course, the compromise and continuity that heal the wounds and allow communal life to continue.

Most readers will be immediately impressed by the parallels with such a novel as *His Majesty's Yankees*. A very average boy, David Strang, is drawn by personality and temperament, as is his brother Luke, to the rebel side of the American Revolution; but he finally acquiesces in the view of the others in his family that the Yankee families in Nova Scotia will have to live with the British king. In the course of this development we have seen both sides intimately, and we have come to appreciate the mixture of motives which drives them. And the setting is certainly an historical turning-point of great significance: the burning ghettos, the New Deal, Apollo 12, and the agony of Vietnam are all implied in American independence.

By his choice of period and hero, in other words, Raddall has put him-

self in a position to show us what it actually feels like to live in the middle of this great historical decision. And he has made full use of this opportunity. David, like Edward Waverley and Henry Morton, does indeed fight on both sides, coming at last to the same conclusions as his fellow-citizens.

The novel ends, not in a glorious victory either way, but in a resigned compromise. "Davy!", Luke appeals, "You're for liberty." And David replies "I'm done with fighting for a word, Luke. I'm for myself—and Mark and Father and all the rest of us who want to live in some kind of peace on this coast. I'm for fighting whoever interferes with us, whether it's king or Congress or only a bloody Salem pirate flying the Congress colours."<sup>5</sup>

This quality of compromise is also a feature of Scott, the realization that slogans are finally less persuasive than the need to live and love and work: the view that history is a sequence of collisions from each of which a compromise emerges, a *modus vivendi* which pays its respects to both the need for change and the need for continuity. The parallel with Hegelian logic is obvious, and, after all, Hegel's logic underlies Marx's historical dialectic.

It was Hegel, too, who coined some phrases that Lukács finds useful in describing the relation between the leader and the led: one who quietly supports a movement but does not lead it is a "maintaining" individual; the leader of a popular movement is, like his opposite numbers, a "world-historical" figure. The relations between them, Lukács argues, follow a certain set of principles both in life and in the classical historical novel.

In the course of his wanderings, for instance, David meets the leaders of both sides: Richard Uniacke, to take an example, for the rebels; Michael Francklin for the crown. Now the treatment of the world-historical figure is a difficult formal question for historical fiction: on the one hand, such a figure must be realistically drawn to be credible; on the other hand he must display the qualities which give him his historical significance. Lukács points with admiration to the simple solution devised by Sir Walter Scott: Scott simply makes the great man a minor character in the structure of the novel, so that he is seen realistically but only fleetingly, and only on the occasions when he is acting in the role of leader. He may thus appear very human—testy, quirky, or whatever—but his situation in the novel renders it impossible for him to seem trivial.

This treatment of the great man finds an almost exact parallel in the best practice of Raddall. General Wolfe, for instance, is part of the whole historical atmosphere of the novel *Roger Sudden*, which concerns the interac-

tion of the French, the English, and the Indians—and we notice in passing how adroitly Roger is made to live with each of the three groups for a considerable period, as a consequence of the opportunistic game he is playing in the midst of the conflict. But we never knowingly see Wolfe himself until just before the end of the novel, when he is on the way to Quebec. He and Roger recognize each other—a rather grim moment for the hero, since he has years earlier robbed Wolfe at gunpoint without knowing who he was—and Wolfe displays astuteness, a good memory, a recognition of Roger's courage and ruthlessness, and a habit of command no less imperious for being casual. The meeting is one of the novel's most dramatic moments.

The impact of Wolfe—or of Toussaint l'Ouverture in *Pride's Fancy*—may conveniently be contrasted with the brief appearances of Garrick, Sheridan, and Burke in *The Governor's Lady*, where the men of letters, having no particular relevance to the plot, become merely decorative, like period costume. With Johnny Wentworth and Fanny herself, Raddall would appear to make the opposite error, fixing his narrative directly on the “world-historical” characters so that they become, eventually, so much our intimates that we forget their historical significance. Or to carry the comparison one step further, Wentworth is much more impressive in *Pride's Fancy* or *Hangman's Beach*, where he is only glimpsed, than he is in *The Governor's Lady*.

This attention to both the leader and the followers seems to Lukács to make the historical novel a modern equivalent of epic: it displays the totality of a culture's life. The leader is thus seen both as shaping events and being shaped by them, as responding to the aspirations of his followers as well as giving them practical direction. Indeed Lukács stresses the blaze of glory that may emerge in an ordinary man when social crisis brings out potentialities that may surprise even their possessor: an obscure Alabama clergyman is revealed as a spokesman of international stature for an entire race. Margaret Laurence and Wole Soyinka depicted this phenomenon in West Africa; and in Scott the *locus classicus* is the astonishing but thoroughly convincing eloquence of Jeanie Deans. For the novelist, such a phenomenon is a godsend: it articulates the nature of the conflict from the mouths of the humble characters involved. Raddall's work contains numerous such articulations. When the thirteen colonies declare their independence, the revolutionary council of Nova Scotia divides. David Strang wants to patch it up, but old Malachi Salter, merchant of Halifax, sees that compromise is impossible.

“No middle road. Ah, good God, the tragedy, the tragedy! So many people

here and in the rest of our America want a middle road, and nothing for them but a hard choice in the end. God knows I don't love the king nor his rotten parliament. But to cut ourselves off forever from the British people, the men and women who speak our tongue in every part of the world—no! Not that! Anything but that!" (pp. 182-3).

So much for "historical". What about "novel"?

In conversation, Raddall tends to refer to his books as "romances" or "tales", words which suggest that they are unlike realistic fiction. His colourful, muscular style supports the idea; so does his repeated emphasis on the transcendent importance of the heroine to the hero, an emphasis which in *Roger Sudden* leads to a self-conscious use of the image of the Golden Woman. Looking at the seamen of Wapping, Roger thinks

The earth was a great golden woman, many-breasted like one of those heathen Hindu goddess, and about her all these brutal and thirsty children swarmed to suck, to explore, and to suck again. Yet all their sucking and exploring brought them little nourishment, for along their hard road waited a many-handed god to wring them dry—merchants, ship-owners, tidewaiters, crimps, and whores. The moral seemed to be that it was better to wring than to suck, and Roger made good note of it. Nevertheless he was fascinated by the notion of those golden breasts beyond the seas.<sup>6</sup>

By the end of the novel this image has been converted into the concrete woman Mary Foy, and the effect is mawkishly sentimental:

He was startled, seeing not Mary Foy but a Golden Woman made human by some alchemy that had to do with himself, as if he had looked upon her through a warped glass all this time and now in this gloomy place beheld her as she was. Fantastic! . . . and yet . . . and yet there she was. All his yearnings, all his journeys, had brought him infallibly to this place and to this moment. And there was nothing new or strange about it, for surely this was the revelation that must come to all young fools who seek the riches of the world—to find them in a living, breathing woman after all? Eternal quest, eternal answer . . . and eternal fools! (p. 332).

In almost any of the historical novels the hero can be found making extreme comments of this kind, and the nasty noise of construction seems to lie behind them. As E. M. Forster pointed out, death and marriage are the stock endings of novels; and Raddall draws heavily on marriage. In *Roger Sudden* he uses both death and an equivalent of marriage; the *éclaircissement* between Roger and Mary has an emotional impact similar to that of the con-

summation of a love affair. There is indeed a sense of stock pattern about the novels: a young man goes forth into the world to seek his fortune, gets caught up in great public events, and finally retires to one of the coves of Nova Scotia with the girl he has dreamed of. Yet, like many another device, this pattern has become hackneyed because it is useful; and we ought to consider its uses. In passing it should be noted also that in a contemporary novel, *The Nymph and the Lamp*, Raddall is very far indeed from any stock pattern.

What are the uses of this pattern? Here again Lukács on Scott gives us a valuable hint: in Scott, the historical moment means that

certain crises in the personal destinies of a number of human beings coincide and interweave within the determining context of an historical crisis. It is precisely for this reason that his manner of portraying the historical crisis is never abstract, the split of the nation into warring parties always runs through the centre of the closest human relationships. Parents and children, lover and beloved, old friends, etc., confront one another as opponents, or the inevitability of this confrontation carries the collision deep into their personal lives. It is always a fate suffered by groups of people connected and involved with one another; and it is never a matter of one single catastrophe, but of a chain of catastrophes, where the solution of each gives birth to a new conflict.<sup>7</sup>

We feel even public events, that is, as *individuals*; a civil war in Canada would make enemies of specific people we know and love. So it is with David Strang: the Revolution cuts him off from both his royalist and his neutral brother, from his family and town, from Fear Bingay. Youthful rebellion, the need to assert himself, lust for adventure and the upheavals of sex are at least as important in David's motivation as are his overtly political attitudes. From this standpoint the events of *His Majesty's Yankees* are rather like a rite of passage, and they end appropriately with David restored to his context but with his independence established, his manhood proved, his woman secured. The consummation of a love affair brings a certain peace which Raddall characteristically uses as a private parallel to the end of the public conflicts.

Again, it is realized that for most readers the context of nineteenth-century Nova Scotia or the American Revolution will be relatively unfamiliar; another advantage of the romantic pattern is its implicit reassurance that all is not new and strange. We do not have to be told about the feelings of a young man with his way to make. We understand without explanation the love of a man for a woman. And because we *do* recognize something of David's feelings, we follow his career with sympathy and interest, we are sensitive to what affects him. Through this sympathy, the public events make their impact.

Thus we return to public events. With the acknowledgment of certain areas where Raddall is not usually convincing, it should still be argued that his strengths are much more significant than his weaknesses, and that they have not yet been fully recognized. In the description of such actions as the moose hunt with which *His Majesty's Yankees* opens, he is superb. His sense of place is subtle and sensitive. His feeling for the atmosphere of the past is remarkable: here, for instance, is his evocation of the flavour of an evening in Louisbourg:

Dusk at last, and the sea fog creeping in gray wisps between the warehouses, and the scrape of a fiddle somewhere down the Quai, and Breton voices raised in song. A woman's laugh in the alley behind, a slap and a man's voice urgent in the dialect of St. Jean de Luz. A roll of drums from the ramparts beating the retreat. The gray of the dusty windows black at last. A scurry of rats in the silent Magasin de Rodriques (p. 191).

Above all, Raddall has an amazing ability to recreate the past in a way that convinces the reader of its accuracy. The psychology of his characters is rarely modernized; for one thing, he has a fine ear for speech, and he has been quite consciously careful to give to such characters as David Strang an appropriate manner of speaking.

Whether you write fiction or whether you write history, if you're writing honestly you have to have a constant regard for the truth. I've always said that nobody has a greater regard for the truth than the honest writer of historical fiction, because he knows how one can be made to resemble the other. And it gives him a pretty sharp eye for what's false, or what is badly stated, in the record of the past.

Of course the attitude of the critics has been largely brought about by what I might call the prostitutes of the historical novel, the writers of costume pieces. Kathleen Winsor, I suppose, is the outstanding example. Now she did make some study of England in the time of Charles the Second, the kind of clothes people wore, the houses they lived in, and so forth. But where she fell down, of course, was in her dialogue. The only way you can find out how people talked is to read the letters and diaries that they wrote, see how they spelled the words, because they're liable to spell them the way they pronounced them. And she hadn't bothered to do that. She had her people speaking a very stilted kind of language, that was never heard at one time in one place in England or anywhere else, and she gave it up after a few chapters and after that just had her characters talking straight Californese.

Well, she had sex on every second page and the book was a tremendous success. But of course the whole thing was false, even though she had started

out with some study of the time and the people. No: if you're going to interfere with the truth, with history, to the extent of introducing some fiction into it, you owe history something for the liberty you're taking, and that is, to make sure of your facts. Then your reader is not only going to be entertained by a story, but he's going to learn something true about the time of which you're writing.<sup>8</sup>

What is the final effect? What can the historical novel hope to do? Two things, I suggest: I have already discussed the first, the vivification, as it were, of history. In an interview he gave me some months ago, Raddall described the second aim of the historical novel in this way:

It is interesting, and I think important, to go back over the past and not merely write a costume piece, but to deal with some phase of history where something important in human destiny was being worked out, and to study the lives of the people who were connected with it, and to bring out the small details of their lives which gradually led to these decisions, these actions. And in that way you can make clear to the ordinary reader why these things took place.

It is here, of course, that the historical novel uses its ability to see the past in the light of the present: it selects, from the welter of material which confuses any of us about the historical trends of our own era, those trends in the past which *did* in fact prevail; it makes clear what in the past constitutes the necessary and sufficient conditions for the situation in which we find ourselves in the present.

In the end, ought we not to drop the façades of rational analysis and admit that the books we admire are usually the books we love? We do not love books merely for their intellectual pleasure any more than we love women for their minds only. Raddall, as has already been noted, is loved in Nova Scotia; and the reason is certainly not that he follows brilliantly the principles of the classical historical novel. *Hangman's Beach* is nearly as popular as *His Majesty's Yankees*, but the later novel is not nearly so impressive a work of the historical imagination as the earlier. No: Raddall is loved because he expresses the feeling of Nova Scotians for their land, its history, its people; if he is romantic, so—in their way—are they. Nova Scotia, key to Canada in the French wars and the American Revolution, has history in the bones of its people, and it is that quality to which Raddall speaks.

If we in Canada are ever to know who we are, we will have to know how we got here. And the achievement of Raddall, it seems to me, is that more than anyone else he has dramatized for us the continuity between our present and our past, he has shown us the forces that shaped us. We call



these forces history; but, as Raddall never forgets, history is based on geography, on passion, on accident, and on destiny. In the last analysis, Raddall's command of the techniques of historical fiction is used to say something unfashionable but profound about his land and his people, and no doubt that is why they feel that he speaks for them. What man who has known and loved Nova Scotia can fail to be moved by the last words of *His Majesty's Yankees*?

But our sons would never give themselves wholly to anything but this rocky homeland on the sea's edge, where life is a struggle that demands a man's utmost and will take no less, where beauty alone is bountiful, and only death comes easily; where courage springs from the eternal rock like the clear singing rivers, like the deep-rooted forest itself.

#### NOTES

1. Ernest Bernbaum, "The Views of the Great Critics on the Historical Novel," *PMLA* XL (1926), p. 440.
2. Quoted by Bernbaum, p. 438.
3. *Hours in a Library* (New York, 1875), p. 192.
4. *The Historical Novel* (1937), trans. Hannah and Stanley Mitchell (London, 1962), p. 19.
5. *His Majesty's Yankees* (1942) (Toronto: Popular Library, n.d.), p. 396.
6. *Roger Sudden* (Garden City, N. Y., 1944), p. 39.
7. *The Historical Novel*, p. 41.
8. Interview with Raddall at his home in Liverpool, N. S., August 26, 1968. I am very grateful to Dr. Raddall for his hospitality and kindness in the preparation of this essay.

### LEAF-BURNING RITUAL

*Derek Crawley*

I am more alive for raking of dead leaves.  
 Blood and mind beat faster at this funeral rite  
 Of red flame standing in black ash  
 The dust of Fall still withering  
 In multi-coloured glory  
 The beauty of destruction.