

JOHN CRAIG

How Far Back Can You Get?

Toronto: Doubleday, 1974. Pp. 225.

John Craig's fiction offers what the Victorians called "a good read." The principal characters are colorful, always moving about and doing exciting things; there is just enough analysis of motivation to make their actions plausible; the plot consists of event piled on sequential event; and the dialogue is crisp, pointed, topical.

Craig's first novel, *The Pro* (Toronto, 1968), is one of the rare Canadian novels about the national sport, hockey. It is also a love story, tracing the star-crossed romance of a professional hockey player, Les Burton, and a television glamor girl, Lori Adams. *Zach* (Toronto, 1972), is a bildungsroman which records the passage from innocence to experience of Zach Kenebec, the last member of an Indian tribe, the Agawas. After leaving his northern Ontario reserve to travel through the United States and western Canada in a vain attempt to find other members of his tribe, Zach attracts a motley collection of loners to him, including an American black drop-out and a young girl rebelling against her Vancouver family's middle-class life-style. As the novel ends, the trio begins a commune near the reserve where Zach was born, with the vague intention of "struggling for truth" together.

Craig has also produced juvenile fiction, including *Wagons West* and *The Long Return*. In 1971 he published two mystery novels, *If You Want To See Your Wife Again . . .* and *In Council Rooms Apart*. Both have Canadian settings, the former in Toronto and around Sudbury, "nickel capital of the world," the latter mainly in Winnipeg, but briefly in the author's home town of Peterborough, in south-western Ontario.

And it is to Peterborough that Craig returns in *How Far Back Can You Get?*, a nostalgic recreation of Canadian small-town life during the depression years of the 1930's. His fictional memoir finds its focus in the farcical and the ludicrous. One story, for example, concerns a fire chief with a penchant for chopping down the front door of every building he is called to, until one day he takes his axe to the door of a home just before finding out that the owner has rung in an alarm

because her pet cat is caught in a tree. Another narrative recounts the predicament of a newspaper editor who is asked to write campaign speeches for two opposing politicians. Yet another tells of a hated police constable who triumphantly discovers an illegal card game yet is frustrated because the dice he must have to press charges have been cunningly dumped into a chocolate milkshake by one of the players.

In the Foreword Craig tells us that "the relationship between the place I've written about here and my home town is approximately the same as that between Stephen Leacock's Mariposa and the real life Orillia, Ontario in his *Sunshine Sketches of a Little Town*" (p. xii). But this collection is no *Sunshine Sketches*, partly because the small town stories he relates are too highly localized. In other words, the rose-colored recollections of hard times make pleasant enough reading, the incidents are often entertaining and the quirks of his characters amusing, but they remain idiosyncratic and atypical, marked by their failure to strike a common responsive chord in those who have not experienced the particular situations he describes. Middle-aged readers who share Craig's background may find *How Far Back Can You Get?* worth their time; others are advised to leave it on the shelf.

Stan Atherton

MAX VON DER GRÜN

Stellenweise Glatteis

Cologne: Luchterhand, 1973. Pp. 326.

In a study entitled "The Worker in Postwar Germany as Portrayed in the Novels of Max von der Grün" Lois Campioni Hagen states that "Max von der Grün's profound understanding of human nature and his ability to combine that understanding with astute observation on the world around him have enabled him to write novels that are both interesting and enlightening, and have

won him the respect and acclaim of the reading public" (Diss. University of New Brunswick 1973, p. 80). Max von der Grün's latest novel *Stellenweise Glatteis* ("Partly Slippery") strongly supports Mrs. Camponi Hagen's statement.

As in his other three novels ("*Männer in zweifacher Nacht*, 1962; *Irrlicht und Feuer*, 1963; *Zwei Briefe an Pospischiel*, 1965) the protagonist of *Stellenweise Glatteis* is a simple and common worker. But Karl Maiwald is more persistent in his fights against the grievances and injustice of capitalism than the protagonists of the other novels (Stacho, Jürgen Fohrmann, and Paul Pospischiel). This simple family man—who in many ways is reminiscent of Michael Kohlhaas—is left alone in his fight against a ruthless enemy; but—unlike Kleist's tragic hero—Karl Maiwald knows how to reach and harm his vicious but vulnerable foe. Possessed with the idea of justice ("... meine Gerechtigkeit. Nur meine Gerechtigkeit." p. 245) he openly challenges and defies the capitalist system; but soon enough he discovers his helplessness and ineffectuality ("Ich habe was in der Hand und kann nichts damit anfangen, das ist zum Verrücktwerden." p. 248) and is forced to withdraw back into his passivity.

This amusing and highly informative story about the fate of the worker in West Germany starts like a typical detective story ("Die Invaliden fanden das Mädchen auf dem Weg. Das halbnackte Mädchen lag mit dem Gesicht im nassen Laub" p. 5). Readers interested in pure event-novels will find soon enough that this mysterious rape-murder case is of no significance to the main plot of the story. (They will have to read through more than two hundred pages about other less suspenseful things till they discover that it was Mustafa, the Turk foreign laborer, and not Angelo, the Italian, who has killed the girl.)

The main events evolve around Karl Maiwald's struggle against the crushing and overwhelming power of the capitalist system. It all begins when this passive and peaceful citizen discovers that the management of the plant in which he works is secretly recording all the talks that take place between the workers. After gaining the support of his peers and of his union, he develops into a very aggressive and determined fighter. And although he wins a few rounds, he ends up bitter and

disenchanted—due to lack of interest among his fellow workers, the political reasonings of the labor union, and the indifference of the media and the general public. While telling the story of this simple everyday hero, the author, a confessed socialist ("Ich bin Sozialist—wenn Sie die Weltanschauung meinen und glaube auch, daß die Zukunft des Menschen, will er sich nicht ausrotten, im Sozialismus zu finden ist." Camponi Hagen, p. 7), touches upon many explosive political and social questions such as the deplorable situation of the foreign laborers in West Germany, the corruption of the labor union, the cowardice of the media, and the opportunism of the Communist party. He also deals with some of the other problems of our times: loneliness, alienation, and alcoholism.

There can be no doubt that Max von der Grün is a very dedicated and informative writer ("Eine Literatur, die mir keine Information gibt, halte ich freilich für überflüssig." Basler *National Zeitung*, March 31, 1973). But in spite of the seriousness and immediacy of the problems he encounters in his novels, Max von der Grün is always aware of his function as an entertaining storyteller. The fact that two of his novels *Irrlicht und Feuer* and *Zwei Briefe an Pospischiel* were adapted for the screen testify to this fact (Paul L. Walser predicts that *Stellenweise Glatteis* will also find its way to the screen; *AZ-Tribune*, Zürich, March 30/31, 1973).

It is possible that enough has been said about Max von der Grün and his role as "critic of the Workers' world" (Heinz Ludwig Arnold in *Der Spiegel*, 12 March 1973, p. 138) It is now time to examine his novels from the literary—and not just from the political and social—point of view. His language (which oscillates between everyday plainness and the vulgarity of the saloon), his characters (who vary from stereotypes to well-rounded individuals), and his motifs (which are at times hollow and static, at others laden with conflicts and dynamics), all these things should be thoroughly investigated by scholars and literary critics.

In an interview with Franz Josef Görtz (*National Zeitung*, March 31, 1973), Max von der Grün has said that he would like to write a story of a suburb a la Faulkner. There are indications in *Stellenweise Glatteis* (the life on the two different sides of

the "lange Straße"), that he will one day succeed; but the four novels which he has written so far all indicate that freeing himself from the people and the problems he knows best might not be an easy venture.

S. Elkhadem

ANDRÉ LANGEVIN

Dust Over the City

Translated from the French by J. Latrobe and R. Gottlieb
Toronto: McLelland and Stewart,
1974. Pp. 215. \$2.50.

André Langevin's second book *Poussière sur la ville* was originally published in 1953. His other books are *Évadé de la nuit* (1951), *Le temps des hommes* (1956), and *L'Élan d'Amérique* (1972). He has received literary prizes for three of these works (*Le temps des hommes* is the exception), and *Poussière sur la ville* was actually chosen by *Le Grand Jury des Lettres* as the best book to have appeared in Canada between the years 1945 and 1960.

It would be presumptuous to attempt to do justice in a brief review to a novel that has been studied by some of the best critics of French-Canadian literature (e.g. Marcotte, Bessette, and Major). However, the recent publication of this novel, in an English translation, by the publishing house of McLelland and Stewart (in their New Canadian Library series), means that the novel will be made available to a much wider, non-French reading public. Consequently, it would be as well to introduce the translation to that public, in the hopes that they will be moved, one day, to read the book in the original French.

In *Dust Over the City*, Doctor Alain Dubois, who practices medicine in the small mining town of Macklin (Thetford Mines), brings his recently acquired wife (Madeleine), to live with him. The marriage is a rough one from the start, the partners being completely incompatible. Madeleine, a girl who has been elevated from the lower working class by her

marriage, soon finds a truck driver (Richard Hétu), who is more suited to her sexual and emotional capacities. Alain, not wishing to hurt or condemn her, forces himself, with the aid of a regular supply of alcohol, into a complacent attitude. Eventually, the lovers meet regularly in the doctor's home under the watchful, jealous eyes of the doctor himself. Alain may be capable of tolerating this situation, but the town is not. Richard Hétu is guided by the local priest into a marriage with a former girl friend, and, when Madeleine hears of this, she takes a taxi to Richard's home. There she wounds him with a pistol shot, and, immediately afterwards, takes her own life. Alain is advised to move, but he decides to remain in Macklin and to dedicate himself to the medical needs of the town in order to force the townfolk to eventually accept him.

A basic retelling of the story does not reveal the complex themes which abound. These include the problem of suffering (both mental and physical), solitude, death, infant mortality, justice, and what has been called "la bonté de Dieu." There seems to be some influence of the French Existentialist writers, and in particular, of Camus. As in *La Peste*, by Camus, the town is very much a world apart. In fact, in *Dust Over the City*, Macklin becomes one of the main protagonists and is personified to such an extent that the narrator speaks of it in the following terms: "Every Sunday the inhabitants of Macklin dined as well as their priest and doctor did. Then they digested. It looks funny, a town digesting. With a slightly better attuned ear, one might hear a low belching everywhere" (p. 97).

It is very rare that a translator is able to follow his original in every detail. In this case, the translators have attempted to avoid some of the major difficulties by employing a skillful yet technically inaccurate paraphrase. This is seen quite readily when the original is compared with the translation.

Une grosse femme, l'oeil mi-clos dans la neige, me dévisage froide-ment. Je la regarde moi aussi, sans la voir vraiment, comme si mon regard la transperçait et portait plus loin, très loin derrière elle. Je la reconnais vaguement. Une mère de plusieurs enfants qui habite dans le voisinage. Cela dure une