

David Lodge

*Paradise News*

London: Secker & Warburg, 1991. Pp. 294

Reviewed by Nora Foster Stovel

Lodge lovers are in for a treat with his new novel *Paradise News*. Professor of Modern Literature at the University of Birmingham for two decades and author of important critical and theoretical works, such as *Language of Fiction* (1966), *The Novelist at the Crossroads* (1971), *The Modes of Modern Writing* (1977), and *Working with Structuralism* (1981), Lodge is best known to the general reader for his entertaining novels, including *Ginger You're Barmy* (1962) and *How Far Can You Go?* (1980), and to the academic reader for his delightful academic satires, such as *The British Museum Is Falling Down* (1965), *Changing Places* (1975), *Small World* (1984), and *Nice Work* (1988). *Paradise News* follows the great Lodge tradition.

Beginning rather like Chaucer's *Canterbury Tales*, *Paradise News* opens with an eclectic collection of Brits assembling at London's Heathrow Airport for a Travelwise package tour to Hawaii, the earthly paradise of the title. When one Travelwise agent, Leslie Pearson, surveying the motley crew, asks in perplexity, "What are they *after*?" his assistant, Trevor Connelly, offers, "The free esses, innit? . . . 'Sun, sand and sex,' Trevor elaborates with a smirk" (4).

Bernard Walsh, a former parish priest who has lost his faith and now teaches theology at St John's College, Rummidge—described as a "religious supermarket" (29) offering every brand of belief—is the figure of the Pilgrim Chaucer or Lay Lodge. He is not after the free esses, at least not consciously. A good samaritan, Bernard answers a call for help from his estranged Aunt Ursula, the family rebel or "Black Ewe," a GI bride who has not been seen or heard from in thirty years, now dying of cancer in Waikiki. Ursula, a game old bird, suggests that, if Bernard ever writes a family history, he title it *Strained Relations* (21).

Discovering that Travelwise package tours are the most economical way to travel, Bernard sets off with his querulous aged parent (who has never been in an airplane before, and whose medal of Our Lady of Lourdes foils Heathrow's security system) to Ursula's bedside. Unexpected perils befall these highly unseasoned travelers. Bernard's father steps in front of the wheels of Yolande Miller, dark skinned divorcée and professional counsellor. But it is an ill wind indeed that blows no good, and Bernard's errand of mercy bears unexpected fruit.

Not an academic satire like Lodge's recent novels, *Paradise News* may lack the sharp satiric bite of *Small World*, but it pokes gentle fun at canned Hawaiian culture, contemporary tourism and the ubiquitous American way of life, including the hazards of getting "lei'd," of package tours and of driving on the right side of the street. It is to Lodge's oeuvre what *The Loved One* is to Waugh's social satires—more cynical and less amusing, but still good fun.

Lodge's preoccupation with religion plays a central role even in *Paradise News*. Parallels are found between theology and tourism, as Bernard Walsh compares notes with fellow-traveler Roger Sheldrake, author of *Sightseeing*, who is taking the travelwise package tour in order to "deconstruct" tourism: "I'm doing to tourism what Marx did to capitalism, what Freud did to family life. Deconstructing it" (62), because "It's the new opium of the people" (62). Sheldrake's thesis is that "tourism is the new world religion" (61) because "sightseeing is a substitute for religious ritual. The sightseeing tour as secular pilgrimage. Accumulation of grace by visiting the shrines of high culture. Souvenirs as relics. Guidebooks as devotional aids" (61). "To save the world" (63) is his modern mission because "Tourism is wearing out the planet" (63). For example, "The footpaths in the Lake District have become trenches. . . . The Mediterranean is like a toilet without a chain" (63).

Sheldrake is collecting instances of the word *Paradise* in Waikiki, such as "Paradise Roofing, Paradise Used Furniture, Paradise Termite and Rat Control" (131). Bernard thrills Sheldrake by discovering *Paradise News*, source of the novel's title, on the news stand, but it consists mainly of advertisements for restaurants, such as "The Great Wok of China, The Godmother, and It's Greek To Me" (68), as well as an advertisement for a book called *How to Survive the Break-Up of a Relationship* (68). Bernard notes this ad because he has just broken his engagement by failing to respond properly to the vision of "the white zeppelins of flesh" of his fiancée Daphne's unveiled breasts—"a spectacle for which forty years of celibacy had left him quite unprepared" (25). But this failure is to be redeemed, when Bernard finds an unlikely Confessor. *Paradise News* might have been titled *Paradise Postponed*, although another character, down on Hawaii, suggests instead, "Paradise stolen. Paradise raped. Paradise infected. Paradise owned, developed, packaged, Paradise sold" (143).

Lodge offers a travelogue as well as a theological treatise, as Bernard opines that the isolation of Hawaii, "pulsing like a star in the black immensity of the ocean" (66), is "what makes it a rather mythical place, in spite of all the crowds and the commercialism. . . . Like the Gardens of Hesperides, or the Fortunate Isles, in classical mythology. The winterless home of the happy dead. They were supposed to be on the extreme western rim of the known world" (132). And indeed, Hawaii is quite literally "The last resort" (141). Bernard finds too that "The isle was full of noises" (105).

Bernard does not view the American way of life as Gatsby's "pap of life," source of the "milk of wonder," as Philip Swallow did in *Changing Places*. Rather, paradise seems to have soured for Lodge, as Bernard complains, "Everything is too big in this country: the steaks, the salads, the ices. You weary of them before you can finish them" (131). Visiting the beach after touring nursing homes for Aunt Ursula, Bernard feels like "a tongue-tied prophet who had come back from the kingdom of the dead, as if I should give a message or utter a warning, but did not know what to say—except perhaps, 'Use a sunblock with a protection factor of fifteen'" (130).

But perhaps religion and the free eses are not as polarized as they appear. Bernard is reviewing a theological treatise for *Eschatological Review* that

In later chapters, Thompson sets out to demonstrate that the pioneer woman gradually became "an archetype of the Canadian consciousness and also a recognizable Canadian literary character type" (59-60). In her attempt to prove her point, Thompson shows the pitfalls of a purely thematic approach. To make her thesis fit, she resorts to a selection of texts which can hardly be said to be representative of Canadian fiction. Most noticeable is Thompson's omission of the literature concerned with prairie pioneers, and the suspicion arises that this gap exists because the suffering female characters in the works of authors such as Grove and Ross have very little in common with the relatively self-confident women of the Traill tradition.

There is, however, no shortage of pioneer women for Thompson's project. If the available characters don't fit the definition, Thompson finds further examples by describing "a new version of the pioneer woman, a pioneer woman on a new frontier" (61). While Advena Murchison of Sara Jeanette Duncan's *The Imperialist* (1904) may with some good will be accepted as a pioneer of feminism in the Traill tradition, this definition can hardly be applied to the female characters of Ralph Connor to whose novels Thompson devotes a whole chapter. As Thompson herself admits, Connor's typical "good woman" "would be a powerful force anywhere" (96), independently of pioneer conditions.

Thompson's book closes with an examination of some of Margaret Laurence's protagonists as "contemporary versions of the pioneer woman" (112). In Laurence's writing, the connection to Traill is closer than anywhere else in Canadian fiction, and Thompson uses this opportunity to recover some of the territory she lost in the weak chapters on Duncan and Connor. Eventually, Thompson arrives at the thematic angle that has shaped so many considerations of Canadian literature: "Laurence's definition of *survival* is, in effect, a reworking of the definition of successful pioneering as proposed by Traill" (136; my emphasis). The question remains, however, whether Thompson's definition of the pioneer has not become too vague to be useful at all: "courage, resourcefulness, pragmatism, an ability to accept adverse circumstances with equanimity, and the strength to act decisively in the face of discomfort or danger" (113). These traits are so general that it is difficult to understand why they should suffice to define the specific pioneer woman of Canadian literary and social history.

Taken individually as analyses of emancipated female characters in Canadian fiction, the five chapters of *The Pioneer Woman*--except, perhaps, the one on Connor--are quite good, but the coherence Thompson attempts to construct is so questionable that she defeats her own purposes.

declares that "The God of process theology is the cosmic lover" (29). "Is there sex after death?" becomes a major question for the afterlife. Bernard realizes, "For my parishioners, I was a kind of travel agent, issuing tickets, insurance, brochures, guaranteeing them ultimate happiness," for "The Good News is news of eternal life, Paradise news" (153).

Bernard, the Progressive Pilgrim or errant knight, reaches his sacred shrine and discovers his holy grail, and his quest is well worth following in the pages of this entertaining novel, for in *Paradise News* David Lodge brings us *the good news*.

Elizabeth Thompson

*The Pioneer Woman: A Canadian Character Type*

Montreal: McGill-Queen's University Press, 1991. Pp 199. \$34.00

Reviewed by Axel Knoenagel

In 1972, Margaret Atwood's *Survival* attempted to demonstrate the relevance of Northrop Frye's "garrison mentality" concept for carefully selected Canadian texts. Thompson's study uses the same thematic approach to the literary material, but the text attempts to show that the fight for survival in the inhospitable Canadian environment produced not only the victims and partially mutilated survivors Atwood focuses on. On the contrary, the pioneer woman that Thompson describes in her study as the product of the successful fight for survival in the Canadian wilderness is a positive creation, "a self-assured, confident woman, one who adapts cheerfully to adverse circumstances, one who is capable and active in an emergency, one who plays a vital role in pioneering" (4). To prove her point, Thompson has selected examples from 150 years of Canadian literature, but her selection--writings of Catherine Parr Traill, Sara Jeannett Duncan, Ralph Connor, and Margaret Laurence--raises doubts about the suggested general validity of this "Canadian character type."

In Thompson's presentation, this typical Canadian character is the consequence of the English lady's adaptation to the requirements of the Canadian frontier. Thompson identifies Catherine Parr Traill's self-created bush lady of *The Backwoods of Canada* as the literary prototype of this figure. Surprisingly, Thompson ignores the wider cultural and national implications of her suggestion. When she argues that "what Traill has done in essence is to rewrite and revise the definition of a feminine ideal so that it becomes compatible with a backwoods Canadian setting" (24) and calls this figure "unique to Canada" (3), she overlooks that the forces shaping this figure are the same that Frederick Jackson Turner named as those of the frontier, "the line of most rapid and effective Americanization." Thompson thus undercuts a significant aspect of her argument, but this should not lead one to overlook Thompson's achievement in identifying the modernizing aspects of Traill's writing.