

## Female Excalibur as Literary Legacy: Ethel Wilson's *Swamp Angel* and Margaret Laurence's *Fire-Dwellers*

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There are striking connections between Ethel Wilson's *Swamp Angel* (1954) and Margaret Laurence's *Fire-Dwellers* (1969) that hinge on the critical symbol of a revolver. The fate of the weapon illuminates the development of each heroine and the major themes of each novel. This shared symbol of the revolver is itself an emblem of a literary legacy, for the close connections between these two novels reflect the real relationship of mentor and student that Ethel Wilson (1888-1980) and Margaret Laurence (1926-1987) enjoyed during the younger writer's formative years as a novelist in Vancouver between 1957 and 1962.

Margaret Laurence repeatedly credits Ethel Wilson as one of the people who most helped and influenced her as a writer. In a letter to Beverly Mitchell dated 13 April 1977, quoted in Mitchell's book *Ethel Wilson and Her Works*, Laurence recalls her visits to her mentor's apartment overlooking English Bay in Vancouver, where "I visited her from time to time and grew to love and admire her just as I had long loved and admired her writing. She once said to me, 'There is a fountain in you. It will well up.'" Laurence comments: "That was not only the most encouraging thing that had ever been said to me; it was also like a kind of responsibility, a trust. I owe her such a lot. I have since felt that the only way I could in some way repay her was to pass on some kind of encouragement or help, wherever I could, to writers younger than I. That seems to me to be the message that I get from her."<sup>1</sup>

Certainly Wilson and Laurence had much in common: both had been orphaned in childhood, losing their mothers during their early childhood and their fathers when they were only ten; both were married to professional men, Wilson to a physician and Laurence to a civil engineer; both had lived in Africa and England, as well as in Canada; and both loathed the metropolis of Vancouver, while loving the beautiful interior of British Columbia. Both admired British literary progenitors, such as James Joyce, E.M. Forster, and Joyce Cary, who influenced their fiction in various ways; and both cite Sinclair Ross's remarkable novel *As For Me and My House* (1941) among their Canadian influences.

The correspondence of Margaret Laurence and Ethel Wilson confirms their mutual admiration as women and as writers. Ethel Wilson's letters demonstrate her enthusiasm for Margaret Laurence's writing and her encouragement of the younger author. For example, in a letter dated 10 November 1963, Wilson comments on Laurence's African short story collection *The Tomorrow-Tamer* (1963): "I am thrilled—to the point of being a little afraid of being noncritical—by the

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<sup>1</sup> Beverly Mitchell, *Ethel Wilson and Her Works* (Toronto, ECW Press, 1989) 10.

warmth and colour and by words which are the fruit of a natural gift."<sup>2</sup> She responds enthusiastically to her reading of *The Prophet's Camel Bell* (1963), based on Laurence's African journals: "You have a remarkable faculty of observation, perception, intuition of people, their ways, tribal attitudes. . . . Is there anyone in our country who has the seeing and selective eye and the essential power of expression to a degree that you have? I don't know but I think not. You write, Margaret, with a spontaneous freedom . . . that delights me." Wilson raves about *The Stone Angel* (1964) in a 27 May 1964 letter: "To me, this is a *great* book. I believe some people could not read it, because it is the very life of life, and they do not know about life. . . . It has splendour" (SEL 239). On the publication of *A Jest of God* (1966), Wilson writes in a 1966 letter to Laurence, "Your book is *well* written, as all yours are." Upon learning of the Governor General's Award for Fiction being awarded to *A Jest of God* in 1967, Wilson writes to Laurence in a letter dated 10 May 1967, "Margaret darling you receive your well merited Award with no pride and true modesty. You are an *excellent* writer and I'm so proud of you, and of the award and hope so much that your current work pleases and satisfies (?) you. Does writing ever 'satisfy'? God bless" (SEL 249-50). In an 18 September 1969 letter, Wilson responds, "*The Fire-Dwellers* an exciting good name and, I pray, an exciting novel" (SEL 250); "I shall look for *The Fire-Dwellers* and hope to read it," Wilson adds in a 25 February 1970 letter to Laurence. Ironically, the correspondence does not reveal whether Wilson remained well enough to read *The Fire-Dwellers* (1969), the novel in which Laurence acknowledges her debt to her mentor through the revolver that echoes Wilson's Swamp Angel.

The Swamp Angel of Ethel Wilson's title is no Louisiana sprite or spirit of the lagoon, although it does have its origins in the South. The epigraph to the novel, quoted from *Webster's Dictionary*, makes the reference clear: "Swamp Angel. An 8-inch, 200-pound . . . gun, mounted in a swamp by the Federals at the siege (1863) of Charleston, S.C." (SA 11). Wilson appends a note: "Subsequently, there was an issue of small revolvers, inscribed 'Swamp Angel.'" This handgun is the brand of weapon found in Wilson's novel, described there as "a small nickel-plated revolver, pearl-handled. On the metal were inscribed in flowing script the words Swamp Angel."<sup>3</sup> The origin of this weapon suggests its symbolic significance in the struggle to abolish slavery—a point that will prove relevant to the novel. It is interesting for Canadians to note that *Swamp Angel* was also the name of the ship that George William Gibson sailed into the inlet in British Columbia, now known as Gibson's Landing, just beyond Vancouver, where Wilson and Laurence made their homes and enjoyed their literary friendship between 1957 and 1962.

In Wilson's novel, the Swamp Angel is the prized possession of Nell Severance, a wise but unwieldy old woman who is the dear friend and mentor of Maggie Vardoe, protagonist of the novel. The Swamp Angel is the relic of Nell's palmier days as a circus performer, member of the Juggling Bigleys. Although Nell's

<sup>2</sup> Ethel Wilson, *Ethel Wilson: Stories, Essays, Letters*, ed. David Stouck (Vancouver: University of British Columbia Press, 1987) 231. Subsequent references are to this edition and will appear in the text after the abbreviation SEL. Ethel Wilson's letters to Margaret Laurence are collected in the Laurence Archives in the Scott Library at York University.

<sup>3</sup> Ethel Wilson, *The Swamp Angel* (Toronto: McClelland and Stewart, 1982) 32. Subsequent references are to this edition and will appear in the text after the abbreviation SA.

gargantuan girth now relegates her to a bedridden condition, she is still able to juggle the handgun, twirling it around her finger. The Angel is also a relic of her happy marriage to Philip, long dead. Nell sleeps with the gun, a potent phallic symbol, pressed to her thigh beneath the bedclothes.

But the Swamp Angel is nevertheless a weapon, if only symbolically or potentially. Nell exploits its lethal potential in an interview with Edward Vardoe, Maggie's hateful husband, whose thrall Maggie has just escaped—for the novel opens with the heroine running away from her husband in Vancouver to a lake in the Cariboo country. When Vardoe confronts the Severance family for information about his wife's whereabouts, Nell replies eloquently in mime: "Mrs Severance twirled the Swamp Angel as if absent-mindedly, then like a juggler she tossed it spinning in the air, caught it with her little hand, tossed it again, higher, again, higher, spinning, spinning. It was a dainty easy practised piece of work, the big woman with the Swamp Angel" (SA 32-33). Vardoe's question—"Can she shoot?" (SA 33)—is never answered, but Nell's virtuoso performance is enough to send him scuttling home. In this scene where the Swamp Angel makes its first appearance, its significance recalls Wilson's epigraph, for Nell uses the gun as an instrument to free Maggie from the "slavery" of this disastrous marriage.

The Swamp Angel is an even more potent weapon for Nell's grown daughter, Hilda, as it has become a complex symbol for Hilda—"the Swamp Angel, the little survivor of three revolvers, which in her adolescence Hilda had grown to hate" (SA 51). First, it recalls the childish humiliation Hilda suffered when she boasted, "my mother can do trick juggling with real revolvers on a real stage!" (SA 50), and her classmates ridiculed her because her mother was a circus performer, her father a vagabond, and Hilda herself a circus orphan.

More important, Hilda feels a sense of sibling rivalry for the Swamp Angel, her mother's pet—the favorite for whom she abandoned Hilda time after time. Over the years its symbolic significance snowballs, as it develops from a sign of hate to an emblem of love, for Hilda's gift to her mother is her own refusal to acknowledge her rivalry and resentment of her mother's little Angel: "Something which was both proud and intuitive had prevented her from bursting into hurt and angry disclosure when she saw her mother habitually toying with the Swamp Angel, the little survivor. Her mother would have looked at Hilda in shocked surprise. She would have said nothing and she would have suffered for Hilda, too late, endlessly, all wasted now, and she would—without fuss but with remorse—have put the Angel out of sight. All its pleasure would have perished, and its company, its memory, would have been lost to her. So the Angel had been suffered to remain as the symbol of years of life gone away, and had so remained, and was, thus, Hilda's unique gift to her mother, although her mother did not know that. And now—did Hilda really care much, any more? Perhaps not. Perhaps it was a source of pride that she held this gift voluntarily in an uneasy reserve of which her mother knew nothing. Yet Hilda could not ignore the Swamp Angel which was her mother's habitual companion" (SA 51). This sibling rivalry focuses further attention on the symbolic significance of the Swamp Angel early in the novel.

A fall affects the fate of the Swamp Angel. When Nell Severance heaves herself out of bed and falls on the pavement, exposing her girth and her gun to a

crowd of passersby, she realizes that she must sever her bond with the Angel. After the fall, a newspaper article exposes Nell as the possessor of unregistered firearms and threatens police intervention. Nell realizes, "it will live longer than I shall," and decides, "I shall lose it and save it" (SA 80).

Nell accomplishes this apparent paradox by wrapping the Angel in a box like a coffin and sending it, as "her deeply significant closing act" (SA 82), to Maggie, with the message, "Maggie keep the Angel safe for me. When I die throw it into the deepest part of your lake. N.S." (SA 82). Nell also writes a letter on crested stationary summoning Albert Cousins, Hilda's suitor, to an interview to ensure "Hilda's happiness" (SA 82). By relinquishing her favorite pet, she has released her real child to a "normal" life of marriage and motherhood. Nell reflects: ". . . the box contained her life and she could not look. Her endeared symbol was gone and she would not touch it any more. I have nothing now but the reality, she thought stoically. . . . The Swamp Angel would be safe. So perhaps would Hilda, and happy. The difference, of course, was that the Angel would be unquestionably safe; while Hilda, being only a human being, would never in life be truly safe" (SA 83). Maggie treasures Nell's legacy of the Angel when she gathers from Nell's letter that she dispatched her toy because "the finger of Death" (SA 128) beckoned and she did not want to be tempted by suicide. Maggie replies, "I am so sure that our ability to throw away the substance, to lose all yet keep the essence is very important" (SA 129). So symbol triumphs over substance in *The Swamp Angel*.

Nell Severance enforces her legacy by a visit to Maggie at Three Loon Lake, where she teaches her spiritual daughter about "the everlasting web" (SA 150) of human community. She quotes John Donne's sermon, "No Man is an Iland, I am involved in Mankind" (SA 150). Maggie takes this lesson to heart in her salvation of the unsympathetic Vera Gunnarsen, the jealous wife of Maggie's employer, Hal-dar.

After Nell's death, Wilson paints a vivid picture of Maggie floating on the surface of the lake as she contemplates the Swamp Angel's significance: "Maggie sits in the rowboat turning the Angel in her hands, and she knows that this little gun has a virtue which was more than pearl and nickel to old Mrs Severance; it has its own properties and its small immortality. That is why she handles the Swamp Angel and looks at it curiously and thoughtfully as she sits there gently moving with the slight movement of the boat on the water in the fine fresh air; and that is why she thinks that this is a rite of some kind which she is about to perform. Just the same, this revolver is far too good to be thrown away. The Swamp Angel in its eighty years or so has caused death and astonishment and jealousy and affection and one night it frightened Edward Vardoe on Maggie's behalf, although Maggie does not know that, and soon it will be gone. It will be a memory, and then not even a memory, for there will be no one to remember it. Yet does the essence of all custom and virtue perish? How can she know? Quick . . . throw that little gun into the lake at once" (SA 156-57).

Maggie fulfills Nell's final wish and flings the Angel into Three Loon Lake in an eloquent gesture that emphasizes the importance of this personal rite: "Maggie did not drop the Swamp Angel over the side of the boat into the water. She stood in the boat and with her strong arm she threw the Angel up into the air, higher

than ever Nell Bigley of the Juggling Bigleys had ever tossed it. It made a shining parabola in the air, turning downwards—turning, turning, catching the sunlight, hitting the surface of the lake, sparkling down into the clear water, vanishing amidst breaking bubbles in the water, sinking down among the affrighted fish, settling in the ooze. When all was still the fish, who had fled, returned, flickering, weaving curiously over the Swamp Angel. Then flickering, weaving, they resumed their way" (SA 157).

Perhaps some of the resonance of this powerful image derives from its origin in Ethel Wilson's own life. In a note appended to the manuscript of *Swamp Angel*, and quoted by David Stouck (SEL 87), Wilson recalls: "Was it because we ourselves had a little revolver inscribed with the words Swamp Angel which had belonged to my husband's grandfather and to someone before him; and because in my enraging and unforgivable folly we have lost it irretrievably? Or was it because, once, I had to make a decision, alone, and tossed a small and lethal looking steel revolver from a high rock into the sea so that it should do no more harm? I assure you, it was a delightful and unique sensation, tossing a strange revolver up into the sky and seeing it fall down into and through the blue ocean—or did the book arise because [sic]" (SEL 87). The parallel with the fate of Excalibur, the enchanted sword of King Arthur, the legendary leader of the Britons, is apparent in this graphic portrait, with its suggestion of Avalon. The echo of Malory's *Morte D'Arthur* raises intriguing suggestions about the role of Nell Severance and of the Swamp Angel in the novel, for Arthur's dying command to Sir Bedivere is to throw his sword into the lake, where an arm rises out of the water to receive it. In his Introduction to the New Canadian Library edition of *The Swamp Angel*, David Stouck comments: "The reminder of Excalibur in this gesture and of the grail in Maggie's yellow Chinese bowl suggest a specifically Christian dimension to Maggie's quest, as does her instinctive act of compassion in kneeling and rubbing the feet of both Mr Cunningham and Vera Gunnarsen when they come out of the cold waters of the lake."

The Swamp Angel has the last word in the first New Canadian Library edition because the initial New Canadian edition follows the original 1954 Macmillan, and omits the rather banal paragraph that concludes the 1955 American edition published by Harper, the source of the current New Canadian Edition—making the quotation above the conclusion of the novel.

Laurence's literary legacy from Wilson is best symbolized by the revolver, featured in *The Fire-Dwellers*, which reflects Nell's Swamp Angel specifically. The general parallels between the *Swamp Angel* and *The Fire-Dwellers* are marked. Stacey MacAindra, the original fire-dweller, like Maggie Vardoe, longs to escape from Vancouver, "jewel of the Pacific northwest" (FD 10), to a lake up north in the cool Cariboo, like Maggie's Three Loon Lake. Both heroines are strong swimmers, ladies of the lake if you will, like their creators, who relish swimming out alone into the open water. Both women are survivors who provide salvation for others. The most significant, specific parallel, however, remains the revolver featured in *The Fire-Dwellers*, which reflects Ethel Wilson's Swamp Angel so clearly.

Stacey's legacies from her father, Manawaka mortician Niall Cameron, are firewater and firearms—appropriate for a fire-dweller. Following his funeral, Stacey rescues two souvenirs of her father's fate—his silver flask and his revolver—both mementos of the Great War. Like her father, Stacey is addicted to alcohol—especially whiskey, the spirit of her ancestors—the fluid with which Niall Cameron embalmed himself in the ironically named "Cameron Funeral Home"—the mortuary in the basement beneath the equally moribund Cameron family home upstairs. Stacey's secret, however, is not so much the gargantuan gin that she conceals in the deep blue cave of her Mixmaster, as the handgun that she has hidden in her own basement as a potent symbol of death or suicide, the great escape.<sup>4</sup>

*The Fire-Dwellers* portrays Stacey Cameron MacAindra living in Vancouver with her husband Mac and their brood of children during the bomb scare of the early 1960s. Stacey's recurring nightmare is her fear of fire. She dreams that her four children are trapped in a forest fire, but she can rescue only one, while she can hear the voices of the others calling to her from the flames (FD 31). She is threatened by a nuclear holocaust, like the one that leveled Hiroshima. Stacey hoards her father's revolver against the time when she must dispatch the merciful bullet that will release her children, burned beyond recognition by radiation, from their suffering. Finally, she realizes that she could not kill them but can only comfort them, assuring them that "everything would be all right" (FD 179).

Stacey finally confesses her fears to her lover, Luke Venturi, a Father-Confessor figure. He inquires, "What did you plan to do with [the revolver]? Or rather, whom? Yourself, when the Goths' chariots and the final bill came in, or when some evangelist corporal decided this is the way the world ends not with a whimper but a bang?" (FD 179). Stacey informs Luke, however, that she has rejected "pre-mourning" in favor of the affirmation of life. As a symbol of her "change of heart," she hurls the handgun into Timber Lake, scene of some of the happiest moments of her life, in an action that eloquently echoes Maggie's final act. She describes the scene: "We went to Timber Lake that summer with the kids. I took the revolver along and went out one night by myself and threw it in the lake. I never told Mac. He always used to say I shouldn't worry—that it was useless, and of course that was right. Maybe he worried, too, for all I know. But he never said" (FD 179-80).

Mac is worried because he knows Stacey's secret. After Mac's old war buddy Buckle Fennick is killed in a crash after playing chicken with his rig once too often, Stacey and her estranged husband speak to each other honestly and openly for the first time in the narrative. Mac gives voice to his underlying fear that Stacey will fulfill her "death wish," like her friend Tess Fogler, who has just attempted suicide. Mac asks her what she did with her father's old war revolver. Since she has confided her fears to Luke, she can now confess to Mac. Just as her action of throwing the revolver into the lake is a rejection of her deepest fears, so her expression of those fears to her husband is her greatest acceptance of him thus far. Following this first frank interchange between them, husband and wife truly make

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<sup>4</sup> Margaret Laurence, *The Fire-Dwellers* (Toronto: McClelland and Stewart, 1969) 179. Subsequent references are to this edition and will appear in the text after the abbreviation FD.

love, not war, for the first time in the narrative, consoling each other for their fear of fire: "She moves towards him and he holds her. Then they make love after all, but gently, as though consoling one another for everything that neither of them can help nor alter" (FD 279).

In her original typescript of *The Fire-Dwellers*, Laurence had Stacey speak her fears to Mac in her own halting words, but the manuscript demonstrates that she chose to cut Stacey's direct speech and replace it with the following summary: "Slowly, Stacey tells him how she felt then and how she came to realize there was no use keeping the gun" (FD 279). In the original, Mac responds, "I'm glad."<sup>5</sup>

Both Wilson and Laurence portray their protagonists rejecting the revolver, for both writers believe that suicide is no solution to despair and violence no resolution to conflict. Both authors portray woman as nurturer, not killer: Stacey is devoted to her children, as Laurence was to hers. Although Maggie has lost her beloved husband Tom and dear daughter Polly in the war, she nurtures Mr. Cunningham and Vera Gunnarsen and any other suffering fellow creatures who are in need of her ministrations.

Latterly, Laurence was outspoken about violence in essays such as "Open Letter to the Mother of Joe Bass," in *Heart of a Stranger* (1976), and about nuclear arms in articles such as "Canada and the Nuclear Arms Race" and "A Constant Hope: Women in the Now and Future High Tech Age," collected in her memoir, *Dance on the Earth* (1989). Laurence's inclusion of Wilson's Excalibur motif is a potent symbol of her rejection of weaponry and violence as a solution to despair.

Maggie's Swamp Angel and Stacey's old war revolver are symbols of a literary legacy and telling examples of intertextuality. The eloquent echo of the voice of Ethel Wilson's *Swamp Angel* reinforces Laurence's revolver symbol, causing Stacey's secret to reverberate as resoundingly through *The Fire-Dwellers* as the gunshots that punctuate the dramas of Ibsen and Chekov, reflecting in turn the relationship of mentor and protégée that these two women writers enjoyed.

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<sup>5</sup> The Typescript of *The Fire-Dwellers* is in the Margaret Laurence Archives in the Mills Memorial Library at the University of McMaster in Hamilton, Ontario.