

CANADIAN HISTORICAL DRAMA: PLAYWRIGHTS IN SEARCH OF A MYTH

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An interesting feature of the recent flowering of original drama in this country is the prominence of works based on Canadian history. One thinks, for example, of *Striker Schneiderman* or *Colour the Flesh the Colour of Dust* at the St. Lawrence Arts Centre; *The Ten Lost Years* or *From the Boyne to the Batoche* at Toronto Workshop Productions; *1837, The Farmers' Rebellion* at Theatre Passe Muraille; *Walsh* at the Stratford Festival; *Captives of the Faceless Drummer* in Vancouver; and the Donnelly Trilogy at the Tarragon Theatre in Toronto. The list could be much longer. What distinguishes many of these Canadian history plays is not only the generally high standard, but also a mood of questioning and inconclusiveness. This mood suggests that Canadian playwrights are searching, sometimes unconsciously, for significance and form in our past. In an effort to find such form, they sometimes impose traditional fictional patterns inherited from the Old World on Canadian events. At other times, without new patterns, they seem incapable of giving shape to events that do not conform to traditional stereotypes. Part of the fascination of Canadian historical drama, therefore, is the evidence it provides of a continuing search on the part of our playwrights for a distinctively Canadian myth. I would like to examine a small part of that evidence in five plays written over a period of almost a hundred years: Charles Mair's *Tecumseh* (1886), Robertson Davies' *At My Heart's Core* (1950), John Coulter's *Riel* (1962) and *The Trial of Louis Riel* (1967), and James Reaney's *Sticks and Stones* (1973).

Charles Mair's sprawling closet drama, *Tecumseh*,¹ in five acts and twenty-eight scenes, is the work of a poet who had no experience of the theatre and little expectation that his play would ever be staged. The play was undertaken quite deliberately to inculcate a sense of loyalty to Britain and a feeling of national identity, as Mair explains at length in his Preface to the second edition:

Nowhere has judgment been less warped or a people's insight been more clear and penetrating regarding the great question of a United Empire. . . . With all her faults, Canada has ever been true to the high ideal. Even when the mother-country seemed ignobly to falter and fall away, she saw in it the indispensable safe-guard of our common interests and with enlarged confidence in her own future, looks

¹Charles Mair, *Tecumseh, A Drama and Canadian Poems* (Toronto, 1926).

forward to its fulfilment still with abiding faith. For then Canada shall cease to be a dependency and become a nation. Then shall a whole family of young giants stand

“erect, unbound, at Britain’s side —”

her imperial offspring oversea, the upholders in the far future of her glorious traditions, or, should exhaustion ever come, the props and support of her declining years.²

As the title suggests, the play is primarily about the great Shewanee chief who fled to Canada after the defeat of his people by the American army at the battle of Tippecanoe. It deals with Tecumseh’s participation with General Isaac Brock in the capture of Fort Detroit and with his death in the battle of Moravian Town. It seems that Mair was attracted to the story for two reasons. To begin with, the Indian epitomized those qualities of heroism and loyalty which the poet so highly regarded. But of equal importance was Tecumseh’s race. For during his long association with the Indians in the Canadian North West, Mair had become convinced that the image of the native presented in so much American fiction was “villainously wrong.” “I have been surrounded with Indians for fifteen years,” he wrote to his friend and adviser, Colonel G. Denison; “[I] have been present at the most momentous treaties, and have witnessed scenes of savagery and of the most touching pathos, yet I never yet heard the Indian speak but as a sensible, intelligent man, fully alive to his interests and conscious of his rights, expressing himself always in language of remarkable vigour and directness.”³

Part of Mair’s original intention in writing *Tecumseh*, then, was to correct the prevailing view of the Red Man. But he soon found that Tecumseh was not entirely satisfactory as the protagonist of a national epic drama. Few of Mair’s prospective readers could be expected to identify completely their interests with those of an Indian ally whose quarrel with the Americans was fundamentally different from their own. Furthermore, the role of national champion in the War of 1812 properly belonged to the Canadian militia and to the British troops and officers who were ultimately responsible for repulsing the American invaders. As the writing of the play proceeded, therefore, it was the figure of Brock who began to dominate and to embody the “Canadian National tone” at which Mair, at the urging of his friend Denison, seems to have been aiming.⁴ The final result is that Tecumseh and Brock become complementary heroes in the play. The latter is aristocratic, cultivated, courageous, and urbane — a typical Victorian gentleman-soldier. His values are ultra-conservative and completely unimaginative:

²Reprinted in *Tecumseh and Canadian Poems*, p. 80.

³George T. Denison Papers, 837 (96) Jan. 6, 1884, quoted by Norman Shrive, in *Charles Mair Literary Nationalist* (Toronto, 1965), pp. 158-59.

⁴Mair Papers, Jan. 31, 1884, Queens University Library, quoted by Shrive, p. 168.

I stand by old tradition and the past.
 My father's God is wise enough for me
 And wise enough this gray world's wisest men.⁵

Nevertheless, it is Brock who voices the most nationalistic sentiments in the play:

I believe in Britain's Empire, and
 In Canada, its true and loyal son,
 Who yet shall rise to greatness, and shall stand
 At England's shoulder helping her to guard
 True liberty throughout a faithless world.⁶

The image of Canada as a bastion of "true" (that is, hierarchical and constitutional) liberty against the forces of egalitarianism and anarchy threatening from the south is central to Mair's vision in the drama. Tecumseh seems at first to be the exact antithesis of Brock. He is uncivilized in the literal sense that he lacks the artificial accomplishments of city life. But, as Mair shows, the Indian is a natural aristocrat, understanding instinctively what Brock has had to learn. Tecumseh's insistence on boundaries (the product of a "natural" system of order and degree) and his rigid separation of Indians and whites can be seen as another form of "true" liberty — liberty which is overwhelmed in an America that does not respect differences between individuals, classes, and races.

If *Tecumseh* were no more than propaganda for British or Indian hierarchical values and an attack on American republicanism, it would be dull reading today. But Mair refuses to oversimplify the issues involved. Accordingly, the Canadian hero, Brock, is balanced by the Canadian coward, Procter, while the slanderous representation of American riff-raff in the characters of Slauch, Twang, and Gerkin is offset by the respectful portrayal of Generals Hull and Harrison. Even more significant is the criticism implied in the play of the two extremes represented by Brock and Tecumseh. After the surrender of Fort Detroit, Glegg remarks bitterly, "I would old England's victories / Were all as bloodless, ample and complete."⁷ Criticism of the Indian chief is less direct, possibly because Mair felt that the prejudice prevailing among his readers would more than compensate for his rather idealized portrait. Whatever the reason, Tecumseh is presented as a doomed figure whose dream of a united Indian nation west of the Ohio is distinctly Quixotic.

Tecumseh reveals an author singularly unclear about his artistic objectives. Part jingoistic history play, part tragic epic, the work lacks the direct appeal of either. The confused dramatic focus is further distorted by Mair's conviction that in a poetic history play what he calls "the element of woman" is indispensable.⁸ Accordingly, the poet introduces a third hero, a fictitious Englishman by the name of Lefroy whose love for Tecumseh's

⁵*Tecumseh*, p. 161. ⁶*Tecumseh*, p. 143. ⁷*Tecumseh*, p. 174.

⁸Denison Papers, 837 (129) Feb. 1, 1884, quoted by Shrive, p. 171.

niece, Iena, constitutes an important, but completely unhistorical, subsidiary narrative. The superficial purpose of the romantic sub-plot is to provide a contrast in tone to the heroics of the main story. But Lefroy comes to serve a far more important function in the play by embodying the philosophical middle ground between Brock and Tecumseh. He is not, as Professor Shrive suggests, simply an expression of "republican fervour" in opposition to Brock's "authoritarian conviction."⁹ It is true that Lefroy has more than a dash of the revolutionary in him, and that he attacks

the crippled throne
And outworn sceptres and imperial crowns
... fantastic as an idiot's dream.¹⁰

However, Lefroy is equally critical of certain aspects of American democracy. After the overthrow of traditional monarchies, he warns that

One tyrant will remain . . .
Whose name is Gold — our earliest, latest foe!
Him must the earth destroy, ere man can rise,
Rightly self-made, to his high destiny,
Purged of his grossest faults; humane and kind;
Co-equal with his fellows, and as free.¹¹

Lefroy feels that America has already betrayed the egalitarian ideals upon which it was founded. Repudiating Harrison's claim that the American West must be opened up as a haven for the poor of the world, he exclaims:

What care your rich thieves for the poor?
Those graspers hate the poor, from whom they spring,
More deeply than they hate [the Indians].¹²

Lefroy's sense of outrage at what has happened in America is intensified by his vision of what society might be. In part, this vision is inspired by the then unspoiled life of the Western Plains Indians. Lefroy tells how, on a trip with Tecumseh, he encountered Indian life in its prehistoric state. What impressed him was the integration of human life with its natural surroundings and the social interdependence which such an existence promoted. With a poet's insight into the evils of industrialization and urbanization, Lefroy deplores the growth of "sordid towns" preferring a life which is

a part of Nature's self,
[Where he can] feel the friendship of the earth:
Not the soft cloying tenderness of hand
Which fain would satiate the hungry soul

⁹Shrive, p. 182. ¹⁰*Tecumseh*, p. 161. ¹¹*Tecumseh*, p. 161. ¹²*Tecumseh*, p. 123.

With household honey-combs and parloured sweets,
 But the strong friendship of primeval things —
 And love that lasts.¹³

I have quoted at length because it seems to me that in Lefroy Mair has created not only a character who is central to *Tecumseh*, but also a character who anticipates some of the themes that reappear again and again in subsequent Canadian historical drama. The significance of Lefroy in the play is that he is equally opposed to American materialistic democracy, to Brock's unquestioning conservatism, and to Tecumseh's proto-apartheid policies of racial segregation. His conception of social order is based on a belief in instinct rather than reason or doctrine. "The world," he states in refutation of Brock, "is wiser than its wisest men."¹⁴ Social betterment, if it comes, will not be the result of the triumph of either city or wilderness over the other, but of a reconciliation of the two. He makes this clear when he responds to the challenge of an American officer in the final battle:

Officer. And what a soulless one are you who leave
 Your place in civil, good society
 To herd with savages; from one extreme
 Falling away unto the basest side —
 The furthest from the humanized world.

Lefroy. Nay I deny it! Further, I would say
 My genius leans, like Nature, to all sides,
 Can love them all at once, and live with all.¹⁵

One reason that *Tecumseh* is interesting reading today when much of the poetic drama of the nineteenth century is cold and lifeless is that Mair has the true dramatist's ability to sympathize deeply with all of his characters. Brock, Tecumseh, even Harrison, all seem right from their own point of view, and each wins temporary approval from the reader. One feels, however, that it is Lefroy who has most completely captured Mair's imagination. For in the educated Englishman's search for a way of life that will combine the best elements of British civilization and savage wilderness Mair has perhaps embodied the nineteenth-century archetypal Canadian quest.

Among the later dramatists who deal with some of the issues touched on by Mair, one of the most thoughtful is Robertson Davies. In *At My Heart's Core* (1950),¹⁶ the playwright presents an imaginative reconstruction of events that might have taken place during the rebellion of 1837. The play is "historical" only to the extent that the characters are named after people who actually lived near Peterborough in the early nineteenth century. Susanna Moodie, Catharine Parr Traill, and Frances Stewart were

¹³*Tecumseh*, p. 92. ¹⁴*Tecumseh*, p. 161. ¹⁵*Tecumseh*, p. 194.

¹⁶Robertson Davies, *At My Heart's Core* (Toronto, 1950).

distinguished Ontario pioneer women. The aspect of their lives with which Davies has chosen to deal, however, is matter which is hidden from the factual historian. The focus on inner action enables the dramatist to grapple with themes which are not confined to a particular time or place. Nevertheless, in treating these universal topics, Davies does reveal certain prejudices (or leanings) which do reflect their regional origins. The title of the play is taken from a poem supposedly written by a Scottish immigrant to Canada which was originally published in the Cobourg newspaper:

I canna ca' this forest home,
It is nae home to me;
Ilk tree is suthern to my heart
And unco' to my e'e.

I canna ca' this forest home,
And in it live and dee;
Nor feel regret at my heart's core,
My native land for thee.¹⁷

Davies has distilled from this expression of homesickness and alienation a more subtle and complex idea which he uses as the basis of his play. That idea is that regret "at the heart's core" is a kind of danger — what Davies calls the temptation of discontent. The story that the author has devised to explore this theme is set in a backwoods cabin where the three women gather while their husbands are absent fighting MacKenzie's rebels at York. In their isolation, the women are called on by a mysterious Irish aristocrat who has settled near them and whom they have ignored socially for almost a year. In revenge for what he considers to be their snobbery, he deliberately stirs up old memories in order to rob them of their peace of mind.

Davies is not interested in chronicling a social feud much less in writing a conventional comedy of manners. He is telling a moral tale. It is not surprising, therefore, that the Irish visitor, Edmund Cantwell, has many of the diabolical or supernatural characteristics which we associate with tales of this kind. Not only is Cantwell repeatedly referred to as the Devil, but he is explicitly cast as a tempter whose machinations are as much a result of the women's proud conviction that they are above temptation as a purely social vendetta. As Cantwell explains,

I have observed that there is one temptation which only the strongest spirits can resist. It is the temptation of discontent. . . . These ladies will never, I think, know perfect content again. . . . And yet, a little humility this morning, a little charity toward Mrs. Cantwell a few months ago, might have spared them this distress.¹⁸

¹⁷*Heart's Core*, pp. 62-63. ¹⁸*Heart's Core*, p. 84.

The theological connotations are clear and familiar. What is new is the altogether extraordinary concept of sin implied. For it is apparent in the context of the play that Mrs. Stewart's regret for having left the gay social life of Ireland, Mrs. Moodie's ambition to be a successful writer, and Mrs. Traill's desire to excel as a naturalist are all regarded as evil. Mrs. Stewart, with the aid of her husband who acts as a kind of spiritual guide and comforter, comes to realize that Cantwell's temptation is spurious and that

from something which was past he created, only for a few moments, something which had never been. What he roused . . . was not regret, but discontentment, disguised as regret.¹⁹

Strengthened by this insight, Mr. and Mrs. Stewart at the end of the play celebrate a reconciliation, a reaffirmation of their love and of their life together, which they recognize as "victory."

It is not the Stewarts and their rather pat triumph, however, that are of greatest interest in this play. Rather it is the secondary characters, Mrs. Moodie and Mrs. Traill. For in his presentation of these two talented ladies Davies exposes his own divided heart. The arguments with which Cantwell "tempts" these two creative women are never properly answered. Susanna Moodie is rescued from her physical isolation when her husband is given a government appointment in Belleville, and Mrs. Traill seems to solve her own problems by resorting to an exaggerated form of British pluck. But the fundamental issues raised by Cantwell — whether a woman's career should be sacrificed for her husband and the attendant questions of whether the creative or scientific spirits can ever flourish in the inhospitable intellectual climate of Canada — are adroitly skirted by the author. The result is a curious sense of ambivalence in the play which, I suspect, is very close to the author's own attitude. For while his mind tells him that the pursuit of imaginative and scientific truth is the highest human ideal, his heart (or at least his heart's core) suggests that the discontent which drives the artist and the scientist, far from being divine, is in fact diabolical. Like Mair, Robertson Davies seems to be saying that personal contentment and love are ultimately superior to achievements of the imagination and the intellect. In this play, as in his later work, the writer wrestles with the problem of wholeness. For him, personal (and, by implication, national) "virtue" consists of balance. Both conservative and radical stances are "sinful" because they are extremes. Sometimes, too, he seems to regard love as its own justification, seeing it in spiritual or religious terms as a form of charity and humility. At other times, he tries to identify the lovable quality of Canadian life with individuals who somehow escape, or ignore, the dichotomies I have been discussing. In *At My Heart's Core*, for example, the Indian Sally and the Irish ruffian Phelim Brady, in different ways, represent modes of feeling and intuition which are distinct from the English and American stereotypes. But the true embodiment of wholeness in the play is Mrs. Stewart. And it is her combination of strength and sensitivity, intellect and a capacity for

¹⁹*Heart's Core*, pp. 90-91.

self-sacrifice, that Davies seems to admire most. If the vision of natural superiority embodied in this backwoods lady seems a little too romantic, a little too Shavian for the mid-twentieth century, it should be emphasized that it is modified by more than a dash of Shavian irony. For when Stewart exclaims that "women are the greatest single force against rebellion in the country,"²⁰ we can sense, I think, the ambivalence of an author still divided in his attitude to at least two of these fascinating subjects.

Rebellion, of course, is the classical subject for historical drama and it is understandable, therefore, that the comparatively few genuine rebels discoverable in Canada's past have been somewhat over-exploited by our dramatists. This is particularly true in the case of the Métis leader and religious fanatic, Louis Riel, who is rapidly becoming something of a Canadian folk-hero. Riel has been the subject of three plays by John Coulter (*Riel*, *The Crime of Louis Riel*, and *The Trial of Louis Riel*), an opera by Harry Somers, and a documentary drama, *From the Boyne to the Batoche* at Toronto Workshop Productions. I shall deal only with Coulter's work since it illustrates in a particularly striking way, it seems to me, the tension between historical "fact" and the playwright's search for a myth to contain and explain such facts.

The first part of *Riel* (published in 1962 but written in 1950) deals with the Red River Rebellion of 1869-70 during which Riel set up a provisional government in what was to become the province of Manitoba, and attempted to protect the rights of some 15,000 Métis and white settlers in the area against the incursions of the central government and its various representatives. Riel arrested and then executed an Ontario protestant by the name of Thomas Scott. Scott's "murder," as it was subsequently called, earned Riel the undying enmity of Orange Ontario (including that of Charles Mair who himself narrowly escaped death in the rebellion) and did much to obscure the real issues behind the insurrection. Coulter's Riel is not the bloodthirsty Indian of nineteenth-century accounts of the rebellion,²¹ but a kind of peasant hero-martyr caught between, and destroyed by, fanatical extremists. On one side is O'Donoghue, a rabid Irish Catholic who wishes to bring in Fenian help from the United States to set up a completely independent country. On the other is Thomas Scott, an Orange Ulsterman so hysterically antagonistic to Catholics that he is incapable of rational behaviour in their presence. Coulter suggests that the positions of Riel and Sir John A. Macdonald are not irreconcilable. Hopes of an accommodation between the two are destroyed, however, by the Old World hatreds and prejudices to which the majority on both sides still cling.

Part One of *Riel*, then, might be described as Canadian history in Irish costume. The conflicts which seize Coulter's imagination are the Protestant-Catholic, English-Irish ones with which he himself is intimately familiar. Although these conflicts do play their part in the Riel story, it seems to me that the similarities between the Canadian and the Irish situations are not at all exact. One difference is that whereas Manitoba was a

²⁰*Heart's Core*, p. 86.

²¹See, for example, the anonymous *The Story of Louis Riel, The Rebel Chief* (Toronto, 1885).

new, relatively open society in the nineteenth century, Ireland was burdened with some four hundred years of sectarian strife. Coulter's own Irish background leads him to see the West not as a last stronghold of a "natural" social order (as Mair does in *Tecumseh*), not as an area of total anarchy (as it appears in some representations of the American "wild" west), but as an arena in which essentially Old World battles are restaged. An even stronger tendency to interpret Canadian history in terms of European mythology is evident in Part Two. The second half of the play takes place some fifteen years later during the North West Rebellion and concludes with Riel's trial and execution. It focuses on the Métis leader's developing religious fanaticism and culminates in the trial in which Riel's sanity becomes the main question at issue. There is much in the historical documents to justify regarding Riel as a religious fanatic, possibly even a religious mystic. But I feel that much of the uniqueness of Riel's case is lost sight of in Coulter's treatment of it as a saint's legend. Such treatment is only partially justified. Riel seems to have viewed himself as a prophet. He implies as much in his final speech at his trial which Coulter paraphrases as follows:

One day perhaps I will be acknowledged as more than a leader of the half-breeds — as a leader of good in this great country. All my life I have worked for practical results. If I have succeeded, after my death my children will shake hands with the Protestants. I do not want those evils which exist in Europe to be repeated here. There will be at last a New World.²²

But Coulter presents the story against a background of European (as opposed to Indian or French Canadian) Catholicism and introduces embarrassing parallels between the lives of Riel and Christ. By creating Riel as a kind of half-breed Saint Joan, Coulter obscures other aspects of his personality which are possibly more significant.

Some suggestion of those other aspects is presented in Coulter's later play, *The Trial of Louis Riel*,²³ produced in 1967 and published the following year. In this work, the dramatist concentrates on the final trial and incorporates into his play many passages from the actual courtroom proceedings. Among such passages is the Chief Prosecutor's description of Riel:

As we watch and listen to the prisoner, what do we see? . . . we see the civilized man in him struggling with the Indian. We see the cunning, the greed, the superstition, the cruelty of the one. And the ideas and large political conception of the other.²⁴

²²*Riel* (Toronto, 1962), p. 115.

²³John Coulter, *The Trial of Louis Riel* (Ottawa, 1968).

²⁴*Trial*, p. 60.

Here the witness is hostile, and his prejudices are obvious. Nevertheless, he puts his finger on precisely those qualities which I think make Riel of continuing interest to the Canadian imagination. For Riel embodies in fact many of those contradictions which we have seen explored in the dramatic fiction of Charles Mair and Robertson Davies. Riel is a product of those tensions between tradition and revolt, authoritarianism and radicalism, mysticism and practicality, which seem central to much Canadian drama. Furthermore, he combines these characteristics in a particularly complicated way. Superficially he seems to be the archetypal revolutionary — the leader of an oppressed minority against unrepresentative government, the champion of regional autonomy against indifferent centralized authority, the advocate of personal inspiration against the claims of a traditional priesthood. But, like so many other Canadian heroes, Riel is less radical than he at first appears. He rejects republicanism and the assistance of the Irish Fenians, preferring to advance his claims as far as possible by constitutional methods within the framework of the British Empire. Thus he succeeds in antagonizing both the revolutionaries and the priests in his own faction, as well as the Protestants and the central government ranged against him. In the end, Riel stands alone. Like Lefroy, he attempts to embrace both sides and is left empty-handed.

Social and spiritual isolation is also a very important theme in James Reaney's *Sticks and Stones: The Donnellys, Part One* (1974).²⁵ Reaney's talent as a poet has been evident for many years, but his reputation as a dramatist has grown more slowly. In early works, such as *The Killdeer* or *The Easter Egg*, he revealed flashes of genius, but these were largely overshadowed by his clumsiness with, or indifference to, conventional dramatic structure. Undaunted by the lukewarm reception of these plays, Reaney spent several years working out his own theories of drama with young actors in London, Ontario.²⁶ The result of this work was a series of scripts in which the poet experimented with improvisation, children's plays, and other techniques inspired by Oriental theatre and modern technology. This stage in the playwright's career culminated in the highly successful *Colours in the Dark* produced at the Stratford Festival in 1967 by John Hirsch. That play established Reaney as a theatrical poet of striking originality, but one who remained apparently indifferent to the ordinary conventions of stage narrative. *The Donnelly Trilogy*, of which *Sticks and Stones* is the first part, is Reaney's first major dramatic work since *Colours in the Dark*, and it shows a significant advance in technical finish. The play combines elements of folk-lore, ritual, fantasy, and historical fact into a celebration of courage and the unyielding human spirit. In form it might be described as a kind of latter day miracle play. It is religious in that it presents human actions in a larger, spiritual framework. But paradoxically it celebrates, not the deeds of a saint, but those of a family traditionally regarded as wicked.

²⁵James Reaney, *Sticks and Stones: The Donnellys Part One*, in *Canadian Theatre Review*, No. 2 (Spring 1974), pp. 40-114.

²⁶These years are described by the author in "Ten Years at Play" reprinted in *Dramatists in Canada*, ed. W.H. New (Vancouver, 1972), pp. 70-78.

At first sight, the actual events of the Donnelly story seem to offer unpromising dramatic material. The play recounts the fate of an immigrant family "who came out from Ireland in 1844 to Biddulph Township 18 miles from London, Ontario, and were nearly annihilated by a secret society formed among their neighbours 36 years later."²⁷ The period of the Donnellys' settlement in Biddulph was marked by sectarian violence, riots, arson, murder, intimidation, and endless litigation. Most of this ceased in 1880, and it has been generally assumed that the extermination of "the Black Donnellys" was the reason. Reaney inverts this popular legend, transforming the Donnellys into the innocent victims of circumstance and conspiracy. According to Reaney's version of the story, the Donnellys are moderates (like Riel) who are caught in the middle of Old Country feuds and who, because they refuse to join either side, are isolated and finally destroyed. Mr. and Mrs. Donnelly and their crippled son, Will, constitute a centre of opposition to the ambition, greed, and opportunism of their strongest neighbours and represent, Reaney seems to suggest, the only element of courage and sensitivity that has not been driven from the township.

In turning the traditional story on its head, the poet stoops at times to embarrassing sentimentality. Not only is Will a cripple, but he is also something of a musician and poet as well. (He is given a violin for his twelfth birthday and lives often in his vivid imagination where turnip knives are swords inscribed with magic letters). Consequently, when Will steals, it is only because he wants a horse upon which he will not feel lame, or because he needs to buy special shoes so that the city boys will not jeer at him in the schoolyard. The historical accuracy of these details is of less importance than the prominence they have been given by the playwright. For of all the dramatists I have discussed here, Reaney is the most explicitly conscious of the essential mythmaking function of the historical dramatist. To emphasize the fragility of historical "truth," Reaney introduces into his play a travelling medicine show version of the story in which is presented a "viciously biased melodrama" showing the Donnellys as lurid, Grand Guignol stereotypes of popular folklore. In this way, the poet can bring together two images of the same character. During a performance of the medicine show, "Mr. Donnelly. . . turns on the showman to correct one of his errors and we. . . get a chance to compare the 'False Donnelly' with the 'Real Donnelly.'"²⁸ The device is arresting. It is one of the many ways in which Reaney creates a sense of timelessness which is one of the most striking characteristics of the play. But it is no less spurious for that. For by presenting the traditional view of the Donnellys in caricature, the dramatist discredits earlier versions of the story and implies that what he presents is the truth. In the theatre, however, the nature of "truth" is shadowy. It is less relevant to ask which of the two interpretations of the violent conflict between the Donnellys and their neighbours is accurate than to speculate about why Reaney thinks his own version of the story is more "real" than the one he denigrates.

²⁷*Sticks and Stones*, p. 42.

²⁸*Sticks and Stones*, p. 72.

In *Sticks and Stones*, the Donnellys symbolize those few individuals who dare to stand alone and repudiate the values of the society around them in favour of a higher, more imaginative ideal. As Jennie explains at the end of the play, the Donnellys were persecuted

Because [they] were tall; [they] were different and [they] weren't afraid.²⁹

The Donnellys' sense of integrity is a rebuke to their neighbours who lack the courage to stand alone against intimidation and widespread corruption. The final vision is romantic in that it sees the Donnellys' opposition to their neighbours as springing from a larger destiny. In response to the final question "Why was I a Donnelly?" Jennie replies:

Because from the courts of Heaven when you're there you will see that however the ladders and sticks and stones caught you and bruised you and smashed you, . . . from the eye of God in which you will someday walk you will see . . . that once, long before you were born, you chose to be a Donnelly and laughed at what it would mean, the proud woman put to milking cows, the genius trotting around with a stallion. . . . You laughed and lay down with your fate like a bride, even the miserable fire of it. So that I am proud to be a Donnelly against the contempt of the world.³⁰

It is unfair, perhaps, to quote this passage out of context. Its rather cloudy rhetoric gives a distorted impression of the play which is much more spare and original, on the whole, than this single speech might suggest. What is particularly interesting about *Sticks and Stones* is the way in which Reaney has given to historical events a sense of timeless significance. What he presents to the audience is less a story than a ritualistic ceremony. The fate of the Donnellys is never in question. If that fate fails to evoke in us the same sense of catharsis we experience in other "history plays," it is only because we cannot quite believe in the high destiny Reaney attributes to his characters.

It is obviously impossible from the few plays studied here to draw any very valid conclusions about Canadian historical drama as a whole. Nevertheless I am struck by certain features these plays have in common and by characteristics which do not, on the face of it, seem to be appropriate to the genre. Accordingly, I would like to conclude with a few generalizations which might serve as a kind of prolegomenon to the far more detailed study of Canadian historical drama which I hope will some day be written. Perhaps the most striking peculiarity of these works is the kind of hero they celebrate. These plays do not record the triumphs of national champions such as Aeneas or Henry V. They focus on the defeated, the impractical visionary, the defenders of lost causes, the failures. In most of these plays, the strong, the self-confident, the

²⁹*Sticks and Stones*, p. 113. ³⁰*Sticks and Stones*, p. 113.

courageous but uncomplicated characters are regarded with suspicion, or relegated to positions of secondary importance. The qualities these dramatists admire are not the assertive and belligerent ones usually extolled in epics of war and politics. They are the more passive virtues of instinct, imagination, and self-sacrifice. To a certain extent, this emphasis may be owing to the climate of the times which makes the unqualified admiration of brute courage difficult if not impossible. Nevertheless there is an elegaic, even devotional, mood to these plays which does seem to me to be curious. The most striking examples of the tone to which I refer are *Riel* and *Sticks and Stones* in which the central figures are presented as latter day martyr saints. But even *Tecumseh* and *At My Heart's Core* reveal a predilection on the part of the authors for scenes of patient martyrdom rather than heroic defiance. Mrs. Stewart's relinquishing of irrational desire is charmingly stoical, and the romantic Lefroy is condemned at the end of the play to a loveless search for a wilderness Utopia.

The shift of emphasis from public to private issues in these plays inevitably affects the way in which conflict is presented. It is an interesting characteristic of these works that in them strife is frequently resolved, not by direct confrontation, but by strategic retreat. Lefroy and Tecumseh both disappear at the end of the drama in which they figure. Mrs. Stewart triumphs by refusing to be drawn into conflict. Even the Donnellys and Riel, whose battles with their enemies are most direct, are shown to be fighting for ideas which their opponents cannot fully understand. The need of Coulter and Reaney to turn their protagonists into figures who are crushed between opposing extremes rather than into champions of one side or the other is evidence of the way in which these dramatists tend to avoid the simple polarization of issues characteristic of historical drama at its simplest. Closely related to this temperamental desire to avoid direct conflict is an interesting syndrome which might be described as "xenophilia." Whereas much historical drama is based on a hearty dislike of foreigners, these dramatists are strongly drawn to the exotic stranger. Tecumseh and Iena are the best illustrations of this attraction in the plays discussed, but it is evident in all of them. Phelim Brady in *At My Heart's Core*, Riel himself, and Will Donnelly could all be classed as foreign to the central Anglo-Saxon Canadian tradition. Each of these characters embodies an alternative to that English tradition and represents qualities which are presented as superior.

If there is a single characteristic which could be said to unite the visions presented in these five plays, it is possibly the desire for inclusiveness. Unlike conventional historical dramatists who celebrate the establishment or defence of national boundaries, these Canadian playwrights are assimilationists. They regard with distrust the physical and spiritual obstacles that separate people, and seem to long for a Utopia in which such divisions would disappear. To the extent that it is possible to discern a "Canadian myth" in these plays, therefore, that myth might be described in part as a search for a workable synthesis of authority and liberty, intellect and intuition, self-assertion and sacrifice.