PRAIRIE MOSAIC: THE IMMIGRANT NOVEL IN THE CANADIAN WEST

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When Susanna Moodie wrote, "In most instances, emigration is a matter of necessity, not of choice," more than a century ago, she was remembering sadly her own enforced migration to Upper Canada and her often unhappy experiences there. Still, she did note that while the "ordinary" reason to emigrate is the desire of "bettering" one's condition, there does exist a "higher motive" for those who "go forth to make for themselves a new name and to find another country, to forget the past and to live in the future, to exult in the prospect of their children being free and the land of their adoption great."[1] Moodie's ambivalent, and very human, attitudes to settling in Canada have been echoed by many subsequent immigrants in the Canadian West. Even for the first native-born homesteaders the decision to start again on the Prairies was never easy. Robert Stead recalled his own family's uprooting from Lanark County, Ontario, and the journey to southern Manitoba in the early 1880s:

> . . . it meant plunging into an untried country of which [there were] fabulous tales of land that could be ploughed without stumping and stoning, but where the hazards of Nature were in proportion to her prodigality. . . . [I]t meant years of loneliness and perhaps hardship; abandonment of the old familiar scenes around which was wrapped the glamour of . . . childhood; separation from relatives and associates of a lifetime. It takes courage to migrate.[2]

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[1]Susanna Moodie, "Introduction to the First Edition," *Roughing It in the Bush* (1852; rpt. Toronto: McClelland and Stewart, 1964), p. xv.

[2]Robert Stead, "The Old Prairie Homestead," *Canadian Geographical Journal* (July, 1933), p. 14.

Indeed, the first years of pioneering were hard, and for none moreso than the millions of immigrants who were trying to learn a new language and to adapt to a new culture.

The story of the ethnic groups and their settlements in the West has been told often in official histories and personal memoirs. But the immigrant novel, as a genre of Prairie writing, has been either ignored or scantily discussed by critics of Canadian literature.[3] The reasons seem apparent. Few of these novels are held to be of solid literary merit; they are felt to belong, rather, to second-rate popular literature spawned in any new area of settlement. Moreover, there has been an evident reluctance among many critics to investigate books by authors whose native language is neither English nor French. In fact, there are a number of Scandinavian, Ukrainian, German and other immigrant novels about the West which have not been translated and which are virtually unknown in Canada. Yet, both these and more accessible examples of the genre do exist; consequently, there is ample reason for studying them both as literature and as part of the cultural legacy of the nation.

Certainly, even a casual survey of the subject reveals what I shall call the Prairie Mosaic. For, while none of the ethnic minorities has produced a sizeable literature (excepting those of British extraction), each has made its contribution to the multi-cultural identity of the region. My purpose here is simply to offer a thematic and comparative discussion of selected novels from the diverse cultures, with the hope of illustrating certain fundamental preoccupations of the immigrant novel.

I. The Anglo-Canadian Preserve

The crushing of the two Riel-inspired rebellions in the West, in Manitoba in 1869-70 and in the Saskatchewan and Alberta territories in 1884-85, and the completion of the transcontinental railroad, were the two important requisites for White settlement in the West. By achieving the first, the federal government was, in effect, declaring its refusal to allow any single, non-White ethnic group, or groups (such as the métis and the plains Indians), to interfere with western development. By the second, the national government was

[3]One of the few exceptions is Ruth McKenzie who, however, does not confine her study to Prairie writers. See her article, "Life in a New Land; notes on the immigrant theme in Canadian fiction," *Canadian Literature* 7 (Winter, 1961), 24-33.

committing the future economic development of the West largely to forces of private enterprise. The National Policy of Macdonald's Conservatives was carried forward by Laurier's Liberals. The West was to be a colony of the central government; it was to be settled mostly by peoples of European and North American descent, just as had been the case in the earlier settlement of British North America; and the political, economic and social policies governing its development were to be made in Canada and administered by Canadians.

Once set in motion, the settlement of the West proceeded with increasing momentum. Homesteaders were encouraged to take up land in "the last best West": between 1897 and 1912, two million people from Britain and the United States, and another million from other countries, emigrated to Canada, a majority of them choosing to settle in the West. Within two generations, the old roving, buffalo-hunting and fur-trading style of life of the Indians and métis virtually disappeared. The native peoples were forced to adapt to the new multi-cultural pattern of agrarian settlement, to seek uncertain refuge on reservations, or to migrate to less attractive areas (mainly in the park belt or forests in the northern parts of the prairie provinces). Meanwhile, the White hegemony in the West became a fact; the Mounted Policeman became the symbol of its concept of law and order; and English became the *lingua franca* of its new society.

Most of all, the centralist forces which had given birth to the new society continued to dominate its economic life. It was Ontario, particularly, as Professor Lower and others have shown, that benefitted most from the settlement policies of the federal government.[4] Indeed, Ontario's financial institutions and manufacturing and transportation industries all prospered as the Western provinces willingly paid hard cash or mortgaged their future crops to secure the necessities of agricultural growth. But Ontario's imperialism was not just economic; it was social and cultural as well. Many of the settlers in the West in fact came from Ontario farms and villages, bringing with them an Anglo-Canadian heritage. A smug account of this heritage, and of its committment to re-creating western life in its own image, may be seen in Augustus Bridle's *Hansen: A Novel of Canadianization* (1924). At one point in the tale, Hansen, the young hero who is emblematic of the nation searching

[4]See A. R. M. Lower, *Colony to Nation; a history of Canada*, 4th ed., rev. (Toronto: Longmans, 1969), p. 353 *et passim*.

for its soul, interviews Prime Minister Laurier and is told by the great man (fictitiously, of course),

> "For after all, Hansen, it is chiefly Ontario that laid the foundations of social and political life here on the prairies; Ontario with its mixture of people . . . Make it broad, Hansen; Liberal, inclusive. Be practical. That is English. When we get into one *ensemble* on these prairies the conglomerate peoples of Europe and of the United States with the leaven of composite practical Ontario and intensely idealistic Quebec — what a nation we shall begin to have for Canada."[5]

Not all homesteading romances of the period are this explicit about Ontario's role in nation-building, and certainly few are as politically partisan. Still, the view was wide-spread. Ontario-born authors, Ralph Connor, Robert Stead, and Nellie McClung, who, significantly, were the most popular writers on western themes in Canada during the first two decades of the century, helped consciously (and unconsciously) to articulate the Anglo-Canadian viewpoint. Basic to their outlook is the confidence they feel as "native-born" Canadians, inheritors of the West's vast domain which was bequeathed to them by the great "empire builders" (the Hudson's Bay Company and the Canadian Pacific Railroad) of the recent past. British to the core, it is only with exposure to the West — actually living there — that their attutudes become "western."

The chauvinistic view that the West was essentially an Anglo-Canadian preserve, a patrimony in which the "foreign" element is suspect, may be seen as early as Connor's *The Foreigner; a tale of the Saskatchewan* (1909). Connor's first novels had glamourized the adventures of White Anglo-Saxon Protestants, innocents burning with zeal, who see the West as a new Eden and who are determined to build a Christian society there. But in his new book Connor turned his attention to the drama of settlement as it affected the New Canadian. In his Preface to the novel he sets its imperialistic, proselytizing tone:

> In Western Canada there is to be seen today that most fascinating of all human phenomena, the making of a nation. Out of breeds diverse in traditions, in ideals, in speech, and in manners of life, Saxon and Slav, Teuton, Celt and Gaul, one

[5]Augustus Bridle, *Hansen: A Novel of Canadianization* (Toronto: Macmillan, 1924), pp. 310-11.

> people is being made. The blood strains of great races will mingle in the blood of a race greater than the greatest of them all.[6]

It would be easy to dismiss Connor's words here as merely the product on idealistic patriotism were it not for the fact that he is so obviously devoted to his "race" theory in the story which follows. The mecca and starting point for this great experiment in nation-making is Winnipeg, "the cosmopolitan capital of the last of the Anglo-Saxon Empires" (11). A century had passed since the city on the Red River had been a small trading post and home to the Selkirk settlers, and it had weathered the boom times and depressions of the railway era to become a fairly secure metropolis. Now its population was made up of people from every corner of Europe, including (Connor tells us) "Galicians," who are ghetto-dwellers of the city's north end during the winter and nomadic farm-labourers or railway workers during the summer. In the ghetto lives Michael Kalmar, a "desperate Nihilist," whose shady Old World history has made him a fugitive in the New. His children, Kalman and Irma, are the heirs of his misery.

Not surprisingly, Connor's characterization of the Galician community is condescending and sententious. As Kalman, Kalmar's son, strikes out for the farther west to make his own way in the country of his adoption, he meets a familiar Connerian character, Brown, who declaims that his object in life is to make " 'good Christians and good Canadians, which is the same thing' " (253). Newcomers to Canada, an ' "undigested foreign mass,' " must be " 'absorbed into the body politic . . . be taught our ways of thinking and living, or, it will be a mighty bad thing for us in Western Canada' " (255). This unabashed moral arrogance is a long way from the first flush of Connor's religious idealism about life in the West. His prescription for assimilation smacks of social engineering of the worst sort, besides being presumptuous and silly. Yet, such xenophobia and anti-Catholicism were not rare in homesteading romances by native Canadians of the time.

Stead's first novel, *The Bail Jumper* (1914), while not so blatantly ethnocentric, reveals an unmistakable uneasiness about

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[6]Ralph Connor, "Preface," *The Foreigner; a tale of the Saskatchewan* (Toronto: Westminster, 1909), n. pag.

First references to novels discussed in this essay will be footnoted; subsequent references will be included parenthetically in the text.

non-British stock. Ray Burton, the hero, is seen contemplating a queue of "men of all nationalities" waiting for their chance to file for homesteads. He is impressed by their patience and good nature, their trust that they will be dealt with fairly by authorities. But, he observes, even though this "human material, combustible as powder, seemed as innocent as dry sand. . . . Once shake that confidence, and you have dropped a spark into what you thought was sand!"[7] In context, the suggestion that New Canadians might prove to be revolutionary in character or less malleable to socialization than the native-born, betrays Stead's usually fairminded attitude towards all prospective settlers. In a later novel, *Neighbours* (1922), however, he reveals a more distressing double standard as he describes passengers on a colonist car. The "foreigners" are hardly individuated except by their massive features and unkempt appearance: "Half-dressed men lolled in their berths, exposing swarthy arms and slabs of hairy chests, and slatternly women shuffled along the aisle, in imminent danger of tripping on their trailing skirts and disrobing themselves. Children whined or babbled. . . ."[8] By contrast, the native-born possess a well-defined "Anglo-Saxon pride", are unafraid of minor officials, know where they are going and what to expect, have enough money to see themselves through emergencies, and are comfortably aware they can always return to their former Canadian homes should they so desire.

To be sure, the novels of Connor and Stead are generally cheerful and optimistic about the settlement process, if naive about actual feelings among people of different nationalities. But on the basis of the views expressed above, it is hardly surprising that many non-English-speaking settlers acquired the conviction that the West was a place where they were expected to live more by sufferance than in dignity.

And what of those peoples: what did they think of "the English"? Perhaps the best-known fictional view is that of Mrs. Grappentin in Frederick Philip Grove's *Fruits of the Earth* (1933), who angrily denounces Abe Spalding's "lording it" over the countryside: " 'Da kommt der grosse Herr! . . . Silent and haughty as ever, looking over the land as if he owned the world.' " There follows another conversation in which she says " 'I can't stand the sight of the great and rich. It wasn't to see them that we came to this

[7]Stead, *The Bail Jumper* (London: Fisher Unwin, 1914), pp. 293-94.
[8]Stead, *Neighbours* (Toronto: Hodder and Stoughton, 1922), p. 28.

country' " and her son replies, " 'Right. . . . We came to get great and rich ourselves.' "[9] There are not necessarily typical responses; still, the following comment of an unidentified westerner probably does suggest the reality of the early days:

> "The whole countryside spoke their own language, Russian or Polish or whatever it was, but you must understand that English was power. The English language was the one you did business in and to know English, if you were Ukrainian, that gave you power. And you know what power gives, don't you? . . . In those days, English gave power gave money."[10]

Undoubtedly, the ethnic writers 'knew' these facts and were, to some extent, preoccupied with them in their books.

II. The Saga of Settlement

Many ethnic groups who settled on the prairies never developed a literary tradition of their own. Some kept their native culture alive by erecting linguistic barriers between themselves and the cosmopolitan community surrounding them. Some achieved psychological and social stability by bending to Canadian customs in part while preserving native folklore and beliefs. Some largely abandoned the ways of the fatherland in favour of the North American within two generations. These assimilative patterns, both for the individual and the group, formed the themes of many immigrant novels.

Of course, during the first generation of pioneering, there was often no one, or no time, to create fiction. Letters, diaries, journals, and even newspapers, helped to maintain older traditions even as new ones were emerging. Usually it was not until the second generation that poets and novelists appeared to tell the story of

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[9]Frederick Philip Grove, *Fruits of the Earth* (1933; rpt. Toronto: McClelland and Stewart, 1965), pp. 87-88. Grove, of German descent, was of course preoccupied with the immigrant's plight in a number of his works, notably *A Search for America* (1927), *Settlers of the Marsh* (1925), and several of his best short stories. His work is not discussed here chiefly because, as the self-appointed "spokesman of a race," his larger concern was the "tragic" condition of the prairie pioneer of whatever nationality. A similarly non-restrictive approach to the pioneering process is found in Norwegian-born Martha Ostenson's *Wild Geese* (1925).

[10]Barry Broadfoot, *The Pioneer Years, 1895-1914; memories of settlers who opened the West* (Toronto and Garden City, New York: Doubleday, 1976), p. 309.

migration and settlement. They might tell the story in the native language, using the traditional modes of narrative and imagery of the group. Those authors who wrote in English (or who were translated into English) were able to gain a wider audience and more sympathetic hearing for their people's experience. But until a body of writing about the groups became available, few outsiders could really understand the insider's viewpoint.

Among the first authors to see the necessity of using fiction to inform was the Icelandic-Canadian novelist, Laura Goodman Salverson. In her autobiography, *Confessions of an Immigrant's Daughter,* she stated her purpose in writing as "to make of a personal chronicle a more subjective and therefore sensitive record of an age now happily past. . . . difficult indeed for the immigrant who had the temerity to value his own traditions and dared to dream of justifying those traditions to the enrichment of his adopted country."[11] But, as a novelist, she also showed how kinship and kindred love could assuage the blows of intolerance. Her novel, *The Viking Heart* illustrates these sentiments well. Notably, Salverson uses devices of the saga in her work: while faithfully recording the customs of her people, she raises even the humblest person or act to heroic proportions in a tale of inter-connected incidents concerning the adventures of her pioneer family.

The central character of the novel is Borga, the daughter of Einar Halsson, who brought his family to the Icelandic colony at Gimli, Manitoba, in 1876. Borga's courage in enduring the severe smallpox epidemic which ravages the Icelandic colony and her ability to guide her family in adapting to the ways of the new country while retaining the "Viking heart" and Old World customs make her heroically representative of the best of her people in Salverson's eyes. Indeed, the romantic narrative provides an informative catalogue of Icelandic traits: their God-fearing faith; their difficulties in adjusting to farming after a sea-faring heritage; their love of the arts, especially music, education and philosophy; their shameless sentimentality in the family circle and their generous hospitality towards strangers; their love of merry-making, as in the "Tombola," a prize-giving occasion; and most of all, their Norse spirit which imbues everything they contemplate and do with a serious passion for excelling in life so as to deserve a joyous death. Salverson's

[11]Laura Goodman Salverson, *Confessions of an Immigrant's Daughter* (1939; rpt. Montreal: The Reprint Society of Canada, 1949), p. 9.

characterization is equally varied, if not profound: there are Borga's hard-working parents, Einar and Gudrun; her children, Thor, who becomes a medical doctor and dies in the First World War, and Margaret, who becomes a gifted dress designer and moves to the United States; there is the mad ruffian, Loki, and his refined wife, Anna Fjalsted; the poor widow, Katrine Hafstein, who takes in laundry in order to survive in Winnipeg; the profligate, Ninna Lindal; and numerous others. All these are part of Borga's experience as wife and mother in the land which has provided sustenance, hope, failure and success for her family, and which at last has claimed her son in war. Resigned to her loss, she ponders: "This Canada, which had demanded much of them — it was her country. This peace which was hers he had paid for, just as she had paid a heavy price that he might live . . . What was it that kind-faced minister had said? . . . 'Your son is dead yet liveth, he lives in the life of his country'. . . . 'In the life of *my* country', she whispered to herself. . . ."[12]

The Viking Heart, then, is a saga of nation-building which borrows from Norse poetic tradition as well as from the historical romance tradition of the novel in seeking to document the pioneer experience. In subsequent novels Salverson turned away from prairie themes to revive in fiction legendary and historical adventures of purely Scandinavian content. However, in one later novel, *The Dark Weaver; against the sombre background of the Old Generations flame the scarlet banners of the New,* she returned again to the earlier motif. This time the immigrants are of mixed Scandinavian heritage, Norwegian and Icelandic, and townsmen rather than farmers. The novel is a more concentrated view of the same period found in *The Viking Heart* but the optimism of the former work is replaced by an ominous mood. Indeed, fate, "the dark weaver," is so omnipresent in the lives of her characters that one questions whether they have any free will at all and whether Salverson's vision of a better life for her immigrants is only illusory. To old Halvor, however, an evil fate may be like "the coarse buckram on which we weave our finest pieces,"[13] necessary in the scheme of things so that the soul might measure its conquest of sorrow and tribulation. Even

[12]Salverson, *The Viking Heart* (1923; rpt. Toronto: McClelland and Stewart, 1947), p. 325.

[13]Salverson, *The Dark Weaver; against the sombre background of the Old Generations flame the scarlet banners of the New* (Toronto: Ryerson, 1937), pp. 170-71.

to Greta Holmquist, the heroine and a child of the new world of empirical knowledge, man's destiny is obscure at best.

Ukrainian-Canadian novelists also drew on folk wisdom and superstitition in their sagas of settlement. Illia Kiriak, author of *Sons of the Soil,* was of that first generation of immigrants who had "settled without leadership, plan or aid, on free homestead land a thousand miles wide . . . from Dauphin . . . to Edmonton" and who regardless "of the distance from other well-established settlements" would settle with "people from the same village or district in the Old Country . . . in small communities and throw down their roots in the new land."[14] Kiriak actually led a rather nomadic life during his first years in Canada, criss-crossing the nation to work on the railroads, in stone quarries and in sawmills. His later career as a public school teacher and novelist won him many friends among his compatriots in western Canada, for both as an educator and as a writer he dedicated himself to defending the interests of the Ukrainian community. The outstanding quality of *Sons of the Soil,* indeed, is the deep affection it displays for the peasant farmer's humanity.

The plot of the novel is based on the "memoirs" of a leader of farm families, Hrehory Workun, who dies at the end of the tale and is much lamented. Throughout his life Workun's simple yet determined nature has earned him the respect and trust of his group. His triumphs in the new land are theirs in turn; such is Kiriak's exemplary moral. At one point, Workun remembers the death of a little boy, Semen Wakar, shortly after the group's arrival. Sadly he recalls the burial service but rejoices that the grave is marked by a large cross, "set firmly in alien soil, no longer alien by reason of his death," for "the ancient symbol, which was like a challenge to the empty land, seemed to say that this child and those of his blood were now dedicated to the task of transforming the wilderness into a Christian civilization" (90). Among other incidents developed which bear on the theme of creating a Christian community are those relating to the care and education of children in the traditions of the forefathers. Little attention is paid to formal education (what little of it there is being an object of derision to the young and their parents alike), but many of the descriptions stress the importance of family life. Hence, marriage is vital, and there is some communal displeasure when two young people, not well matched, are wed. Working with the soil is another important value in the lives of these

[14]Illia Kiriak, *Sons of the Soil,* trans. of *Syny Zemli* (Toronto: Ryerson, 1959), p. 174.

folk. No one minds how hard it is, or that it must almost always be done by hand — including threshing by the age-old flailing method. But Workun is filled with enormous pride when he is allowed to thresh his own small harvest of grain on the steam-run machine owned by his rich neighbour, Poshtar. Workun's "joy knew no bounds; it was greater by far than in days to come when his yield ran into thousands of bushels, all threshed by his own machine" (222).

It should be noted that *Sons of the Soil* is a very much condensed version of Kiriak's novel, *Syny Zemli,* first published by the Ukrainian Institute Press in Edmonton between 1939 and 1945. *Syny Zemli* is enormous in scope, describing Ukrainian life in Canada from the beginning of the century until the end of the Second World War. M. I. Mandryka, in his *History of Ukrainian Literature in Canada,* states: "All three volumes in the Ukrainian edition made 1100 pages of print";[15] however, the English version is scarcely one-third as long, and thus it gives an inaccurate impression of Kiriak's themes and style. Unlike Salverson, then, who published her books in English to begin with, Kiriak's saga had to wait two decades to reach a broader audience — and even then in a less than satisfactory form. (At present, two other Ukrainian-Canadian novels about the pioneering period — *Holos Zemli* (1937), by Horone Ewach, and *Bezhatny* (1946), by Alexander Luhowy — have not been translated into English. Considering the size and importance of the Ukrainian population in the West, it is regrettable that their history and literary tradition there are not more widely known.)

Salverson and Kiriak excel as 'folk novelists,' writers who can tell uplifting stories of simple people whose ideal (and ordeal) of group settlement is crowned by success. They also use the novel in an unaffected manner to portray with charm and sentiment the lore and customs of their people. However, their weaknesses are evident: theirs is a closed, in-group kind of narrative, finally misleading about the actual experiences of the group's dealings with Canadians and other immigrants. Something both broader and more realistic was needed.

[15]M. I. Mandryka, *History of Ukrainian Literature in Canada* (Winnipeg: Ukrainian Free Academy of Sciences, 1968), p. 73.

III. Confrontation and Assimilation

Confrontation between individuals or groups was inevitable during the pioneering period, and for a long time after. More often than not the misunderstanding or dispute would be resolved, but the memory would linger. The awkward stages of assimilation were not easily forgotten either. Both confrontation and assimilation — singly or together — provided themes for many immigrant novels.

One of the perennial forms of confrontation, whose roots may be traced well back in North American history, is the social conflict stimulated by the appearance in the frontier community of the English Remittance Man. He is a type, inevitably the product of dozens of real-life anecdotes about the poor younger son of the rich 'governor' who struggles manfully in the colonies to uphold the honour of his name and the glory of Britannia's realm. The young man is always naive and is the butt of practical jokes played on him by other settlers. But it is his insufferable attitude of superiority which earns him the scorn of his benighted inferiors.

Such a type easily finds his place in prairie literature, especially in full-blown satire. One very amusing and unjustly neglected example is W. H. P. Jarvis's *The Letters of a Remittance Man to His Mother.* Reginald Brown is the priggish young Englishman whose epistles from the West Jarvis, a native of Prince Edward Island, makes delightfully double-edged. For example:

> It's the long-suffering, patronizing smile that irritates one most in this country. It conveys such an air of fancied superiority on their part, and is particularly out of place when one considers the light in which we hold them; but the worst of it is, that our opinion of them does not seem to trouble them a bit.[16]

The victim of his own ignorance, Reginald wastes his remittance on fancy guns, imported marmalade, and biscuits. Doused by the scent of a skunk (which he refers to by the English name "polecat"), he is so incensed that he feels he ought to "write a letter to *The Times,* pointing out the dangers arising from present conditions" (45) on the prairies. Jarvis sustains our interest by exposing his gullible hero to the sallies of Canadians, who mock his accent, riding-breeches and plaid jacket. But Reginald has his revenge, as in the following exchange:

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[16]W. H. P. Jarvis, *The Letters of a Remittance Man to His Mother* (Toronto: Musson, [1907]), p. 34.

> "But you must be an Englishman; you talk quite like a gentleman."
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> He looked at me for a moment with a sort of puzzled expression I could not make out, and then he said: "No, I am a Canadian."
>
> "Oh," I said, "I beg your pardon." (63)

Eventually, tired, broke, and hungry, and with his ears spinning with advice he never seems to follow, he finds himself in Winnipeg among an army of the dazed and unemployed. Assured that he may always turn to the Salvation Army for help, he rejects friendly advice and finally does manage to find a job despite the "No Englishmen Need Apply" signs. Reginald even makes a small fortune from an almost-forgotten oil speculation, and so the tale ends happily. But, throughout his satire, Jarvis eschews sober moralizing and does not allow sentimentality to spoil his ridicule.

The hero of English-born Bernard J. Farmer's *Go West, Young Man* is also a fool, but he is saved at last by the love of a good woman. Peter Cochrane emigrates at a bad time (during the Depression) and his picaresque adventures in Winnipeg, "the bum's mecca, the drain, the cesspool of the floating population of the West"[17] do not endear this up-dated Remittance Man to his new home. He drifts from job to job, growing more and more despondent as his prospects dim and the rough knocks of unemployment and hunger take their toll. "It was every man for himself in Canada" (227) is the conclusion to this grim, if hackeyed, story.

Ironically, it is the "every man for himself" attitude of Major Bayliss which proves his undoing in John Herries McCulloch's *Dark Acres*. McCulloch, whose Scottish pride is evident in his historical romance of the Selkirk Settlers, *The Men of Kildonan* (1926), may have taken a secret delight in portraying the misfortunes of a pig-headed Englishman. In any case, Bayliss is temperamentally unsuited to be a pioneer. "He was not a man of importance, and never had been. . . . [He] lacked flexibility, and the capacity of make friends. . . . Bleak, curt, humourless, and stubborn, he fell into that vast category of impressive-looking mediocrities who ride to hounds in England."[18] This unlikely farmer arrives in Calgary and is hoodwinked into buying poor land — the "dark acres" — which, though better suited for ranching than farming, is in the midst of a

[17]Bernard J. Farmer, *Go West, Young Man* (Toronto: Nelson, 1936), p. 187.
[18]John Herries McCulloch, *Dark Acres* (London: Moray, 1935), p. 13.

hail belt. The rest of the story is predictable: though warned by his neighbour, an affable Scot, to sow his fields to oats and barley instead of wheat and to hedge his bets by keeping livestock, the Major angrily refuses, isolates himself from the district, is hailed-out and, after enjoying a brief run of luck speculating on wheat futures, loses his investments and much of his property. Certainly, not all "green Englishmen" fared as badly in immigrant fiction — Wilfrid Eggleston's *The High Plains* (1938) is a testament to Anglo-Saxon good sense and pluck in coping with the demands of western agriculture — but the number of their failures was proportionately higher than for farmers of other ethnic groups. (It should be noted, however, that while the capriciousness of Prairie weather provided dozens of novelists of the homesteading era with incidents to pad out melodramatic plots, the hazards of hail-storms, prairie fires, floods, and insect infestations were real, and pioneers of all ethnic groups suffered from such calamities. All the more reason, indeed, why, from an early stage in the history of western society, the necessity for the foundation of co-operative ventures for the handling of grain crops and for the furnishing of credit, goods and services, was foreseen. These ventures helped to alleviate the worst effects of natural hazards as well as to create greater harmony among the many different peoples of the region.)

But the problems of assimilation in the Prairie world were just as real in the villages and cities as on the open plains. Here, too, the novelists saw signs of both hope and despair. Magdelana Rasheviciite-Eggleston, a writer of Lithuanian ancestry, shows in *Mountain Shadows* how her heroine overcomes inter-ethnic prejudices in her Alberta town when she gains a new appreciation of her own heritage. As one character tells her, " 'You don't know it, but you are the bridge between the old world and the new, and the strength of the new world depends on you. You are the Canadians of tomorrow.' "[19]

Such a statement of hope is nowhere to be found in John Marlyn's *Under the Ribs of Death*. Sandor Hunyadi, a descendant of Hungarian immigrants, thinks the solution to his problems lies in becoming as anglicized as possible in order to succeed in modern Winnipeg. The theme for this powerful novel may be stated in a word: survival. But Eli Mandel has commented on the novel's complexity:

[19]Magdelana Eggleston, *Mountain Shadows* (London: Heinemann, 1955), p. 205.

> From one point of view [the novel] looks like a penetrating comment on the theme of intolerance, an 'ethnic' or 'protest' novel about the consequences of discrimination and poverty in our society. From another point of view, it seems to be a sociological novel, a criticism of commercialism and materialism. And the reader might well ask whether the initiation plot is not hopelessly divided between two separate aims and further unduly complicated by the father-son quarrel which occupies the early section of the work. But it is precisely in seeing the link between the themes of intolerance, materialism, and the quarrel of the generations that Marlyn is most perceptive.[20]

The "link" between these themes is expressed through images of survival. The language is harshly naturalistic, yet used symbolically at the same time. It is as though the author wants us to see with double vision, not myopically, but with two clear foci; each separate vision complements the other, producing a compelling metaphor of incipient growth and ominous destruction. A brilliant example of this kind of imagery occurs as the young Sandor compares the cool ease of the indulgent, rich English he works for with "the mean and dirty clutter of the street" where he lives — a street "crawling with pale, spindly kids, green-nostrilled, their mouths agape in the hot fury of play" and its "battered houses with the scabrous walls and the shingles dropping and the walls dirt-stained and rain-streaked; like a silent herd of monstrous beasts stricken with some unnamable disease, slowly dying as they stood there, their members rotting and falling from them" (74). Or, more pointedly, life in the dismal ghetto is as mysterious as the "blood-red blossoms" of Mrs. Hunyadi's geraniums: "How [the plant] had ever managed to survive at all was a mystery. . . . Sometimes, they forgot to water it. . . . His mother had tried to grow other things, delicate fragile things with subtle odours and gracious forms, but one season on Henry Avenue and they were dead. Only the geraniums survived" (87). Sandor's survival in the business world (as "Alex Hunter") is doomed, however, for unlike the tough, resilient geraniums he is unable to take root in the prosperous South End of the city among the Anglo-Saxons he envies, imitates — and hates.

With *Under the Ribs of Death* we have travelled a considerable distance from the world of Connor's *The Foreigner.* Instead of being a New Eden for the immigrant, the West is still very much a Fallen

[20]"Introduction," *Under the Ribs of Death* (1957; rpt. Toronto: McClelland and Stewart, 1964), p. 9.

World in Marlyn. But, it is not just the fifty-year interval separating the publication of these books, nor even the differences in perception between the two novelists, which makes the distance seem so great. After all, Kalman's situation in the former book is not so unlike Sandor's: both boys are children of Winnipeg ghettos, and both are abused by the society in which they grow up. And Marlyn's cynicism about the injustices of North American society is no more convincing, finally, than Connor's optimism about the brave new world the Prairie offers its citizens. What is ultimately significant, and tragic, about the two novels — and others like them — is that they remind us how uncertain, how full of illusion, and how imperfect the life of man really is, immigrant or not.

IV. The Outsider Mentality

Sandor-Alex's dilemma of identity serves to introduce the next theme I wish to consider: The Outsider Mentality. Some immigrant fiction illustrates the almost existential isolation experienced by newcomers to the West, an isolation which is profoundly psychological and which effectively cuts off the individual from the community. Maurice Constantin-Weyer's *Un homme se penche sur son passé* translated as *A Man Scans His Past)* and Frederick Niven's *The Flying Years* are good examples of the theme.

Un homme se penche sur son passé is part of the French author's "Epopée canadienne," a series of novels based on his experiences in the West.[21] The plot is adventurous, episodic, with many thinly-sketched characters of French and Celtic heritage; still, it is more a routine idyll of restless wandering than a document of life in the region. The hero-narrator is not only *déraciné,* but he also scorns the Anglo-Saxon army of settlement, which he believes is causing the death of his beloved prairie In company with his side-kicks, a métis named Napoleon and later a French trapper, Paul Durand, he travels widely through border country, prairie, barren

[21]The series included six novels of which *Un homme se penche sur son passé* was the last. Several of the novels were exposed as guilty of exaggeration and misrepresentation by Donatien Frémont; cited by Norah Story, *The Oxford Companion of Canadian History and Literature* (Toronto: Oxford, 1967), p. 187. See also Gérard Tougas, *Histoire de la littérature canadienne-française* (Paris: Presses universitaires de France, 1964), pp. 129-31, for further comment.

lands and forest, relishing the last days of the free life of the plains, always keeping one step ahead of settlement and the law. He is an intellectual-solitary, always on the edge of other people's experience, seeing them, himself, and "Kind Nature" in an ironic light. The rank smell of civilization assaults and embitters him throughout his journey. But Nature has taught him her own harsh lessons: "For Life and Death, eternally bound to each other, perpetuate themselves in that astonishing garland of joy and pain . . . woven in perfect proportion. Such, indeed, was the very theme of Nature. It is both marvellous and terrible. Whenever we escape from the artificial fabric of civilization we run against a world that sees only with the eyes of murder and of love, and no one can say which of the two is more deadly."[22] Thus Constantin-Weyer exposes a familiar paradox, one which, however, at the end of his hero's journey, he is unable to resolve satisfactorily. The hero is left on the sidelines of events, paralyzed by his outsider's mentality.

Essentially, Constantin-Weyer's novel exhibits a sometimes lyrical *essai* on the uncertainties of human progress. Niven's *The Flying Years,* an equally episodic romance, is yet more solidly grounded in the actual history of the region; in this sense, it resembles Rudy Wiebe's *The Temptations of Big Bear* (1973), a remarkably evocative novel of the forceful disinheritance of the Indian by the White man. *The Flying Years* is part of a trilogy about Scottish life in the West — including British Columbia — but, as McCourt suggests, Niven was "spiritually an alien" even after many years residence in Canada, and to the end of his life he remained a Scot at heart.[23] Indeed, one senses that Niven transmitted his own sense of being an outsider into the lives of his characters.

Angus Munro, Niven's hero, lives a long, adventurous life in the West, from the mid-1850s to the early 1920s, from the time he is orphaned in Red River as an adolescent until, in his eighties, he reminisces about the changes the Flying Years have wrought. The novel, then, is a chronicle of the growth of the Prairie world from the days of the fur trade to the boom years of agricultural settlement. Throughout, Niven displays a firm grasp of scene and atmosphere. And, everywhere in the narrative, an image of Scotland as a

[22]Maurice Constantin-Weyer, *A Man Scans His Past,* trans. Slater Brown (Toronto: Macmillan, 1929), pp. 192-93.
[23]Edward McCourt, *The Canadian West in Fiction,* rev. & enlgd. ed. (Toronto: Ryerson, 1966), pp. 54-55.

"kingdom of the mind" serves as a connecting motif, revealing the sentiment in Angus's nature. The West, of course, stirs him greatly from youth, but it is always coupled in his mind with memories of his homeland: "There was no impression of a cloud over life there as at Loch Brendan, but a sense of freedom to the point of wildness."[24]

Angus's first marriage to the Cree girl, Minota, her death because of the white man's disease, and his knowledge and respect for Indian life, make him sympathetic to the plight of the native people. His own vivid memories of the Highland Clearances ignite his anger at the injustice of their removal to reservations, especially in the light of privileges of settlement granted to such sects as Doukhobours and Mennonites, as well as to the growing thousands of other white men. Angus himself serves as an observer of the defeat of the native peoples. In one of the most terrifying passages in the novel Niven portrays the hopeless revenge of a band of Indians, stricken by small-pox, who ride into a Hudson's Bay fort to press the swollen pustules on their diseased faces and limbs against the factor's body, and on the walls and doors of the buildings. One young chief, "very vain, known as Handsome Man," when he "saw his bloated features in the glass, began to weep, then put his rifle-butt to the ground, withdrew his moccasin before those inside could see what he was about, and pressed the trigger with his great toe" (99). When the band departs, their voices are heard "keening high and plaintive, singing their death songs" as they fall in death, one by one, from their horses; that night "the air of the prairie was heavy with the odour of the Great Sickness, and on the rolling hills by the river banks . . . rose the ululating laughter of the coyotes" (100). The coming of prairie schooner, moving *"out of sight of land"* in a "marine adventure . . . rocking, lurching, over the long rolls, their canvas hoods to be seen twinkling like the sails of a ship at sea" (129)— signals the ultimate loss of freedom for the native peoples. The Scot looks on with troubled feelings.

V. Tradition and Change

The heroes of Constantin-Weyer's and Niven's novels are clearly outsiders, observers of the settlement drama rather than actors within it. But, in a curious way, their anxiety is shared by characters in other

[24]Frederick Niven, *The Flying Years* (1935; rpt. London: Collins, 1942), p. 18.

immigrant fiction who view the transition from one country or way of life (tradition) to another country and way of life (change) with mixed feelings, to say the least, or profound discontent. Historically, assimilation was accomplished with remarkably little rancor among groups; what the novels can show us, however, is the often disturbing effects on sensitive individuals within a family or community.

Not surprisingly, it is the religious heritage of the group which supplies the focal point for concern in a number of these novels. In Christine Van Der Mark's *Honey in the Rock* (1966), the German Brethren-in-Christ farmers who settle communally in southern Alberta are sustained by their fervent protestantism. It provides a bulwark for them against the material hardships they must face together in the new land. As Jud Zwick says in his lay sermon:

> "But food and water's not enough . . . That don't feed the soul. But the land that's promised is a land of honey too. Even if the land seems like a rock. . . . a desert rock, still there's honey in it. We've got to find that honey. We must open our eyes and see it. The honey is there all right, but it's up to us to find it. Even in the hardest life . . . Brother, Sister, there's sweetness! Now we'll sing a song about this honey. There's Honey in the Rock."[25]

Van Der Mark thus portrays as idyllic the role religion plays in re-inforcing and directing the group's values. It is far otherwise for Rudy Wiebe's second-generation Mennonites in his early novel, *Peace Shall Destroy Many*. In this novel the encroachment of the secular world on the faith of the community (particularly during the conscription crisis of 1944) poses real problems. The fact that Wiebe grew up in a Mennonite colony similar to the one he describes — in the thinly-populated Meadow Lake district of northern Saskatchewan — lends authenticity to his narrative.

The chief characters in the story are Thom Wiens, a young farmer whose growing religious scepticism separates him from his family and the colony, and Deacon Peter Block, a strong but bigoted leader of the community whose rigid policies ultimately spark Thom's revolt. Their antagonism is reminiscent of generational squabbles in other prairie fiction, except that in Wiebe's view it is not only the

[25]Christine Van Der Mark, *Honey in the Rock* (Toronto: McClelland and Stewart, 1966), p. 21.

individual's but the community's survival that is threatened. The Deacon reminds his flock of their escape from "the terror of Russia," of their coming to settle peaceably in Canada in the twenties, of the tenets of their faith — personal discipleship in Christ, pacifism, and communal solidarity — and he challenges the young to maintain these customs. At first, Thom is content with the communal farming life and religious order: in the spring he feels "the ground warming with expectation, the ripeness of the earth's belly pushing itself up . . . Lying there, he felt doubts settle in his mind like mud in the hollows of the spring-soaked land."[26] But as he considers the Deacon's challenge he grows restive. He ponders the ancient life of the Indians on the plains and reads with dizzy horror the punishment inflicted on Prometheus by Zeus. And then he thinks of his own life on the plains: "A man might go crazy in this sun: it seemed he was already, trying to fit heathen stories into Christianity. He shuddered in his sweat" (85). The war news on the radio increases his anxiety. Throughout the year he wrestles with his pacifist code, and then with barely suppressed excitement resolves to enlist: "To move at last in harmony with all the world. After the summer of futile and . . . evasive thought and action, the answer in his blackened mind seemed reasonable, finally" (220). Thom's decision is made easier by the war-time crisis. Others in the community, such as the moderate Pastor Lepp, desire changes without the destruction of essential beliefs. Peaceful changes are complicated, however, by external forces — public education requirements, for example — which introduce unwanted worldly influences. Unhappily. Block's stubborn opposition to changing realities only results in miseries for his people, as for instance when his daughter-in-law delivers a stillborn baby because the Deacon had refused to allow her to be given modern medical attention. Wiebe's symbolism is abundantly clear: inaction such as this does indeed "destroy" the future of the group.

Adele Wiseman's *The Sacrifice* reflects religious tensions among Jewish newcomers to the West. Wiseman's work is not a 'Prairie' novel in the true sense; its narrative is so intensely ethnic, so exclusive of the social and natural patterns of the region, that to restrict its expression of an ancient and universal theme would be misleading. Even so, the flight of Abraham the butcher and his son Isaac to Winnipeg from the nightmare of death-camps and programs

[26]Ruby Wiebe, *Peace Shall Destroy Many* (Toronto: McClelland and Stewart, 1962), p. 13.

in Europe, is clearly presented as a journey into exile rather than to a promised land. Isaac asks his father, " 'Who awaits us?' ", but his answer is only a silence: "Who awaited them? What awaited them? It did not really matter whether they stopped here, blindly, or went blindly on to the other city for which they bought tickets."[27] In short, for Abraham and Isaac, even in the new land there is no respite from the tragic ordeal of their Biblical and racial forebears.

But it is not only the religious traditions which meet with stress: the folklore, indeed, the very specific ethnic identity itself, is threatened with extinction in a society which steadily becomes more a melting pot than a mosaic. Vera Lysenko, whose *Men in Sheepskin Coats; a study in assimilation* (1947) was a controversial study of the gradual loss of the native Ukranian heritage,[28] published a novel, *Yellow Boots,* to further illustrate the threat. In introducing the novel she writes:

> Over the years . . . people learned to conform, to yield much of their peasant tradition, since there was so little they could interpose against the robot uniformity of industrialization — only a few symbols of an outmoded life, a carved chest, a folk song, a pair of yellow boots. The old song-makers were dying, the hands that once wore tapestries now tended machines, the treasures of folklore were forgotten. For all those whose forefathers suffered the anguish which the immigrant must endure when he is called on to surrender his ancestral rites, this story of a girl's search for music is offered as a reminder of their lost inheritance, and to preserve for them something of the old beauty.[29]

The story of Lilli Landash's attempts to preserve the traditions of the past against the "robot uniformity of industrialization" in North America is angry in tone. A lonely girl from a large family, Lilli displays an intense love for her heritage from an early age, and after leaving her home in a little prairie town to become a domestic

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[27]Adele Wiseman, *The Sacrifice* (1956; rpt. Toronto: Macmillan, 1968), pp. 4-5. See also John Moss's discussion of the novel as an example of "the mentality of exile" (*Patterns of Isolation in English-Canadian Fiction,* Toronto: McClelland and Stewart, 1974, pp. 80-104).

[28]When published, it was reviewed by Watson Kirkconnell (perhaps somewhat harshly) as "subtle communist propaganda; cited by Mandryka, *op. cit.,* p. 111. But Mandryka tends to agree with this judgement and dismisses Lysenko's contribution to Ukrainian-Canadian literature rather curtly.

[29]Vera Lysenko, "Author's Foreword," *Yellow Boots* (Toronto: Ryerson, 1954), p. v.

servant in Winnipeg she soon eams a widespread reputation as a concert singer. The yellow boots which she wears on special occasions are a striking reminder of her heritage; they had belonged to her mother, and had been made by her grandfather in the Bukovinian (Rumonian section) Ukraine. Lilli finally returns home for a visit and is made much of by her suddenly-proud relatives. She is invited to parties where she is both admired, and condescended to, by friends and acquaintances who think her ideas and costume quaint. Lilli, in turn, is struck by the different life-style prosperity has brought her family and saddened by the growth of materialism in their lives. Lilli has lived in the city too long to be happy again in the country. And yet it is from the country, from the pioneer's experience, and from the beauty of the prairie itself that she has drawn inspiration for her songs.

A similar alienation from the adopted home and wistful nostalgia for the European roots is expressed in Edward McCourt's *Home is the Stranger* and *Walk Through the Valley,* revelations of the Irish experience in the West. Norah Armstrong, the heroine of *Home is the Stranger,* is disturbed by " 'the terror of infinite space' "[30] on her husabnd's farm in Saskatchewan after the Second World War. To her the prairie looks menacing, "like a region from which the hand of God had been withdrawn before the act of creation was complete; the foundation was there, but nothing lifted above its flat uniformity except a few bleak ridges, miles away, . . ." (32). The enthusiasm she had felt for the West before her marriage rapidly dissipates, and her disillusionment leads her into an affair with a fellow Irish expatriate, Brian Mallory. Now as she compares Ireland to the West, Norah feels there was a way of life for her at home whereas there was "none in the West, only a feverish preparation for that tomorrow which, when it came, was not important in itself but only because it anticipated the day after" (127). She dreams of having a new home built, quite different from the stolid, unimaginative farm house, and of filling it with Irish literature. Still, she sometimes wonders if she is not being "Phoney Irish," as Mallory was labelled by another woman, a person without roots in either the old or the new land who yet spends his time pining for the old country. It is a long time before Norah can overcome her fear of the prairie and of the isolation it imposes. But she does, and she also achieves a reconciliation with her husband.

[30]McCourt, *Home is the Stranger* (Toronto: Macmillan, 1950), p. 51.

Learning to make one's "home" in the West is Michael Troy's challenge, too, in *Walk Through the Valley*. The novel is set in Alberta's foothill country in the late twenties, during one summer when 14-year-old Michael is forced to learn the truth about his father. Rather than the romantic folk hero of Irish mythology the worshipful son has always imagined him to be, Dermot Troy is an embittered farmer whose escapades with a notorious whiskey runner lead eventually to his death in a skirmish with police. The boy's adolescent trust had been earlier jolted by his belief that his father was a coward and a traitor, but, before his death, Michael learns the truth and gains a renewed respect for Dermot's courage. The gradual acceptance of these realities by the boy is paralleled by his growing understanding of the rough mountain and prairie country. His father had once told him that it was a " 'misbegotten land' " in which there was " 'no sense of anything that endures,' "[31] and where even the fabulour Finn McCuil, one of Ireland's legendary symbols of strength and perseverance, would find it hard to survive. But, as time passes, Michael begins to see both the magic and the horror of the ancient landscape, "where wind and water and time had fashioned strange . . . shapes out of the earth itself — turreted castle and lovely misshapen pillars and green distorted images . . . like the prehistoric monsters [and] where unimaginable evil stalked and the peace of God had found no way to enter in" (208-09). By coming to terms with the land's unrelenting nature Michael is finally able to understand his father's unfulfilled dreams as heroic. As he stands beside Dermot's grave with the other mourners, the meaning of their lives in the new land becomes clearer as well:

> In another age, another land, the people would have lifted their voices in wailing lamentation, a cry that shivered to the tingling stars like the one in the poem about King Arthur's dying; but now they bowed their heads and composed their faces in the set lines of ordered sorrow, and the women cried a little and wiped away the tears with their handkerchiefs, so that Michael, even in the moment of bitterest pain, had felt a kind of ecstasy in the recognition of his father's greatness. (218)

What are the dominant traits of the literature we have been considering? First, it is a popular form of narrative, whose tone (as the above passage suggests) is to a large degree elegiac — expressing

[31]McCourt, *Walk Through the Valley* (Toronto: McClelland and Stewart, 1958), p. 147.

both a lament for the vanquished past and hope for the living present. The contrasts made between traditional rituals of older societies and the newly-minted, simple ceremonies of the frontier are implied in a number of the novels we have discussed. And, third, the faith and endurance of people who have weathered the storms of change, overcome linguistic barriers or the hostility of others, and prospered, are also inherent in the passage and found throughout the genre.

Whether the story is about the homesteading era or life in the farms and cities of the modern West, the immigrant novel is preoccupied above all with mirroring the tough realities of re-locating in a foreign land. As we have seen, the novel reveals the uncertainty and fears of the newcomers and the often blind complacency of the established settlers. The evolution of the form of this fiction from simple tales into something like the saga or 'family novel' and later into the sociological examination of the protagonist and his milieu, was an unplanned but natural development, in accord with the moral purposes of the genre. But it is pointless to evaluate this writing as mature art; instead, it is storytelling which grows out of real-life tribulations and victories, generating its own heroic structures — icons of identity for the individual and the group — and which contributes to the region's cultural mosaic.

Yet, the immigrant novel may be many things at once — memory, entertainment, almanac, history, allegory, satire — almost the gamut of literary responses to the facts of human existence. It shows us, as nothing else can, something of the actual experience of pioneering in the early years. It gives us a unique perspective on the customs and sensibilities of diverse peoples. Moreover, it provides serious testimony to the often damaging impact of North American materialism on community life — of native-born and immigrant alike. Finally, the immigrant novelist is an effective barometer of the social temperature; he is someone who sees and reports on the ideas and emotions that accompany an age-old human adventure.

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