

THE STEPSURE LETTERS: PURITANISM AND THE NOVEL OF THE LAND

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One of the earliest fictional prose works set in this country is Thomas McCulloch's *The Stepsure Letters*, first published serially in the *Acadian Recorder* in the years 1821 and 1822, later produced in book form in Halifax in 1862. Much has been made of the puritanical nature of the work and its character as a tale "of the industrious apprentice."¹ Nothing has been said of it as a fiction belonging in the genre of the novel of the land as that genre had developed in Canada. Nothing has been said of *The Stepsure Letters* having more in common with *le roman de la terre* in Quebec than with so-called puritan or calvinist fiction (and the peculiar kind of tale Frye refers to) outside of Canada.

There is no doubt whatever that *The Stepsure Letters* is a work that belongs in the literature with which it has already been associated by critics, because its origins, as so far examined, are not in question. But in both English Canada and Quebec a peculiar relation to the land developed in the nineteenth century that had an effect on much literature, mitigating forces that were at work in Europe and the United States. An admixture of influences peculiar to Canada were exerted by land, climate, cultural forces, and political circumstance. In Quebec the effects of the 1837 Rebellions and the Durham Report were to engender a focus upon the land, fidelity to the Catholic religion, language, and the family occupying and working ancestral ground. In Nova Scotia the occupation of the land began to be focussed upon in the early nineteenth century, also, for practical, economic reasons: the social order needed a strongly secure agricultural sector. But the need was argued for by Protestant Christians of a liberal tendency, many of whom were aware of U. S. power and influenced, as a result of it, towards a sense of communitarian conservatism.

¹Northrop Frye, "Introduction" to Thomas McCulloch, *The Stepsure Letters* (Toronto, NCL, 1960), p. iii.

If T. C. Haliburton, a tory thinker, revealed a strong suspicion of U. S. culture and expansionism, Joseph Howe, a whig, was hardly more hospitable to the ideologies of the southern neighbour. Thomas McCulloch deals closely with the local scene in *The Stepsure Letters*; but he possesses the mixture of liberalism and conservatism seen in the two later and better-known writers, and his fiction is set in British North America less than ten years away from the War of 1812. Calvinist ideas of diligence, thrift, sobriety, prudence, and self-sufficiency are present in his fiction. But some of the strongest motives to money-making, in the new capitalist terms, are not only absent but are inveighed against by Stepsure and the good people in the fiction. The good life is connected to land, piety, hard work, the harmonious family, and an unpretentious evaluation of self. That vision is very different from what developed in the theory of Calvinism in Europe and what was expressed of it by one of its most stereotypical spokesmen in the U. S. A., Benjamin Franklin. *The Stepsure Letters* present a Calvinist view of the world, but a Canadian Calvinist view significantly different than the accepted vision.

The Stepsure Letters, at one level, is a satirical allegory in which a simple human being seeking an undisturbed independence in a more or less pastoral surrounding takes advice from his betters, studies self-sufficiency, marries sensibly, works hard, and, by so doing, provides a satirical comment upon most of the others around him. They are people who attempt to live more mobile, economically complex lives than the protagonist, and they end in ruin and, often, incarceration.

The letters were published twenty-four years before the first serial publication of one of the earliest fictions in Quebec, *La terre paternelle*, by Patrice Lacombe, a work which is said to have launched the tradition of the *roman de la terre*. *La terre paternelle*—more a romance than McCulloch's work—also argues for the simple life of the land man, warns of the dangers of mobility and complex economic dealings, and paints the city as, almost by definition, corrupt.

The novel is famous for the statement in the author's voice at the end of the first chapter celebrating the harmony of life on the land—just before disruption and breakdown enter the novel.

La paix, l'union, l'abondance régnaient donc dans cette famille; aucun souci ne venait en altérer le bonheur. Contents de cultiver en paix le champ que leurs ancêtres avaient arrosé de leurs

sueurs, ils coulaient des jours tranquilles et sereins. Heureux, oh! trop heureux les habitants des compagnes, s'ils connaissaient leur bonheur!²

One of the Chauvin sons leaves to be a voyageur. The father, worried, signs the land over to his elder son who is not competent to run it.* As time passes the father gets out of the habit of labouring, sells the farm he has reclaimed from his son to go into trade and the city, gives large amounts of credit there, is ruined, lives in the basest poverty, and is only restored to the family property by his returning voyageur younger son after the elder son has died.

Both works present protagonists and their families whose characters and identities are shaped by the land. Other surprising similarities exist between the two books, partly because *The Stepsure Letters* doesn't deal with a stereo-typical Calvinist hero any more than *La Terre patemelle* presents characters rigidly in the mold of the *roman de la terre* as envisaged by the Catholic Church and sanctioned by the secular establishment of the time. Indeed, both involve a peculiar mixture familiar in English-Canadian literature and the literature of Quebec: when the social order or established power has made demands that are too heavy, the literature responds by a declaration of individual legitimacy; and when theories of the individual's paramount superiority to the social order grow strong in the society, fiction responds with a declaration of social responsibility and interdependence.

Indeed, *La terre patemelle*, first example of the Quebec *roman de la terre*—a kind of fiction in which communitarian obedience to authority and convention is a primary virtue—offers an individualistic, romantic hero, Charles Chauvin. While Lacombe permits no doubt that permanent happiness is discovered in life and occupation on the ancestral ground, yet the hero who reclaims the lost farm and restores his family to it is the voyageur son. He is the one who leaves in search of adventure and travel. He saves the family from his father's foolhardiness, finally. By the same token, McCulloch has witnessed a fool-hardy and destructive concept of community operating in Nova Scotia: visiting, gambling, showy travel, and neglect of the land. He is, clearly, not against values of community, but he urges that they

²Patrice Lacombe, *La terre patemelle* (Montreal, Hurturbise HMH, 1972), p. 43.

*In *The Stepsure Letters*, too, McCulloch makes clear that the early handing away of land to family is foolish and unnatural (p. 59).

be based on some concept of prudent self-sufficiency. And so a part of his awareness of the needs of the whole society is expressed by his character, Mephibosheth Stepsure, who renounces show and trivial amusement for domestic harmony and sober occupation.

Vincent Sharman sees the hero of *The Stepsure Letters*, however, as a model of the puritanical figure, a judgement Sharman bases on Stepsure's "narrow religious outlook, his rigid self-reliance, his concern with the acquisition of property and money, and on his narrow, social, intellectual, and cultural scope . . ." ³ One must look closely both at Thomas McCulloch as author and *The Stepsure Letters* as novel of the land before making a judgement about the fiction or about the character of Mephibosheth Stepsure himself. For both McCulloch's mind and the *Letters* invite us to see a more complicated work, perhaps, than Sharman suggests is there.

Thomas McCulloch, a mature immigrant of thirty-seven years when he arrived in Nova Scotia in 1803, was an active intellectual, a highly cultured man of liberal disposition, and a teacher whose Pictou Academy turned out men who became university presidents at McGill, Queen's, and Dalhousie. ⁴ He, himself, became the first principal of Dalhousie College in 1838. McCulloch wrote anti-Catholic works and a work defending Calvinism. But he also toiled long for the founding of a non-sectarian college and delivered a surprisingly modern and tolerant lecture on *The Nature and Uses of a Liberal Education Illustrated* at the time of the opening of the Pictou Academy. In that lecture, McCulloch does not emphasize the role and rights of the individual in education, but rather "how a liberal education bears upon the duties of the social state." ⁵

The demands of life around McCulloch in Nova Scotia, as well as his very mixed liberal and conservative temperament, may be what forced upon *The Stepsure Letters* a character who is a very considerable mitigation of the stereotypical hard-nosed puritan challenging a sinful world. McCulloch's fiction, in purpose and in argument, bears strong resemblance to John Young's *The Letters of Agricola*, first published in serial form in the *Acadian Recorder* in 1818, except that Young presents a manual of farming and McCulloch sets his view of

³Vincent Sharman, "Thomas McCulloch's Stepsure: The Relentless Presbyterian," *Dalhousie Review* (Winter, 1972-73), 618.

⁴Frank Baird, "A Missionary Education: Dr. Thos. McCulloch," *Dalhousie Review* (Winter, 1972-3), 613.

⁵Thomas McCulloch, *The Nature and Uses of a Liberal Education Illustrated* (Halifax: A. H. Holland, 1819), p. 8.

the land man's social role in a fiction that accumulated through a series of letters that develop the personality of the protagonist and shape other significant characters. The fiction and its characters are defined by the force of the land as moral and economic stabilizer, by Presbyterian theology, and by a very real sense of Nova Scotia's need to develop as a balanced and relatively independent society. That latter need drives much of McCulloch's argument, and it provides a peculiarly communitarian, rather than individualistic, argument in the fiction.

John Young wrote in part to legitimize work on the land, in part to give sound and detailed lessons in agricultural practice. He made his purpose clear in his introduction. I quote at some length because the tone and the description of the way Nova Scotians retreated from work on the land are very similar in *The Stepsure Letters*. Young begins by attacking

the degraded state of the profession of a farmer—the erroneous sentiments entertained regarding the climate—and the gross ignorance both of theory and practice, in which the whole agricultural body was involved.

The contempt in which rustic labour was held [he explains] originated partly in the poverty, meanness and abject fortunes of the emigrants and settlers who were peopling the wilderness, and struggling hard for subsistence with the natural obstructions in the soil. Wherever any of these were so successful or so parsimonious as to amass a little wealth, they were sure to escape from the plough and betake themselves to something else. The keeper of a tavern or a tippling-house, the retailer of rum, sugar and tea, the travelling chapman, the constable of the district were far more important personages, whether in their own estimation or that of the public, than the farmer who cultivated his own lands. He was of the lowest caste in society, and gave place here to others who, according to the European standard of rank and consequence, are confessedly his inferiors. This sense of degradation was perceptible among husbandmen themselves. Such of them as were under the necessity of working, set about it with great reluctance and always under a mortifying sensation of shame. They would blush to be caught at the plough by their genteeler acquaintance, as much as if surprised in the commission of crime: and if they saw them approaching, many would skulk from the field, and plunge into the neighbouring thicket. The children were easily infected with this humbling sense of inferiority; and the labours of the farm were to the young men objects of aversion, as those of the dairy were to the women. Hence the family was brought up with habits and feelings inconsistent

with their station in life, and that respectable class of men, known in England as the ancient yeomanry of the country who were the owners and cultivators of their own lands, had no footing in the province. The profession was considered as abject, low and debasing. The daughter of a farmer the least above poverty, demeaned herself by milking a cow, and was never seen in the potatoe or turnip field. The sons again made little other use of the horses than to ride to church or market; and instead of being accustomed to ploughing, drilling, reaping, composting, and such like operations, they became country school-masters, crowded to the Capital as clerks and shopboys, commenced petty dealers and many of them turned smugglers. The plough was far from being accounted honourable, and the handling of it was an act of self abasement . . .

If the Governor and His Majesty's Council; if judges, divines and lawyers; if the capitalist, and ship owner and opulent merchant; if in short, the classes in the metropolis who were regarded with respect, the members of General Assembly, the magistrates and leading characters in the counties, could, by any means, be united in one plan and animated by one spirit to confer honour on rural pursuits, and give them some share of countenance and support; the agricultural order would at once be lifted from disgrace, and placed on its just level in society.⁶

Just as John Young's arguments made their way, transformed, into *The Stepsure Letters*, so McCulloch's arguments made their way, transformed, into T. C. Haliburton's series of sketches published in the years 1835 and 1836 in the *Halifax Novascotian*. Though *The Clockmaker* advocates the building of a railroad, the development of technology, and the exploitation of Nova Scotia's natural resources—drawing ideas from the burgeoning U. S. A.—Haliburton recognizes a quality of life in conservative, traditional Nova Scotian society that makes U. S. technological culture as repugnant as it is attractive. One might almost say that McCulloch is a Presbyterian liberal touched with conservative ideas, and that T. C. Haliburton is an Anglican conservative touched with liberal ideas. Both—like Patrice Lacombe in an apparently quite different theological dispensation—manifest the dialectic of individual and society in the way that is peculiarly Canadian.

Both McCulloch and Haliburton, for instance, repeat the statement that "time is money." Haliburton puts it in the mouth of Sam Slick the yankee salesman who argues for moving about as a way to

⁶John Young, *The Letters of Agricola* (Halifax: Holland and Co., 1822), pp. ix-xi.

make money. Sam Slick is a tricky Benjamin Franklin figure advocating that an ethos of capitalism be introduced in Nova Scotia. The Squire in *The Clockmaker* is deeply suspicious of Sam and so the salesman's message is equivocal, to say the least. McCulloch puts the phrase, "time is money" into the mouth of Mephibosheth Stepsure. But it means something different than when Sam Slick speaks the words. Stepsure isn't endorsing the theories of Benjamin Franklin or Sam Slick. He is arguing that moving about is socially wasteful and that self-sufficiency can be gained by expending labour on fields and crops. He argues, moreover, against using surplus produce to begin granting credit and promises to pay. He will not even entertain the kind of discussion Franklin uses about savings or capital as a basis for the increase of wealth.

Despite Sam Slick's chauvinism, Haliburton doesn't let him advocate that the Nova Scotians should become cheating speculators (as Sam, himself, is). He lets Sam advocate, as Stepsure does, that Nova Scotians employ their time well, become active, work, and engage in prudent development of the wealth around them. For Haliburton fears idleness; so does McCulloch; and so—in Quebec—does Patrice Lacombe. But all fear the philosophical consequences of credit financing, speculation, and what is, plainly speaking, the capitalistic accumulation of wealth.

It is at that very important point that Thomas McCulloch's *The Stepsure Letters* must be re-considered. McCulloch's rejection of stereotypical puritanism as described by theorists like Max Weber and R. H. Tawney, as well as his insistence upon the moral value of the land, place him in company with writers and in a tradition heretofore not acknowledged, for while the *roman de la terre* in Quebec has been carefully considered by francophone critics, a parallel genre in English Canada hasn't been considered at all.

J. S. Tassie analyses the Quebec protagonist in the novel of the land, and there is little he says that does not apply to Mephibosheth Stepsure:

C'est un cultivateur habitant une terre qu'il a héritée de ses pères. Fort du corps, honnête et bon travailleur, il est peut-être un peu avare, d'esprit conservateur, pas trop intelligent ni trop instruit bien qu'un de ses fils le soit grâce aux études conduisant à la prêtrise. Cet homme est secondé par une femme fidèle, aussi robuste et travailleuse que lui. Entourés de leurs nombreux enfants, ils vivent contents sur la terre à laquelle ils se consacrent

corps et âme. Ils demeurent dans les environs d'un petit village qui fournit le seul contact avec le monde extérieur, monde qu'ils connaissent surtout par le truchement des opinions des notables de la région. Ceux-ci sont au nombre de trois: le curé qui prêche les dangers de ce monde qu'ils ne connaissent pas, le médecin qu'on respecte pour sa science bien qu'on ne s'adresse à lui qu'en dernier ressort, et le notaire qui a des idées plus large que les autres et des moeurs parfois moins sûres. Pour le cultivateur et sa famille c'est une vie simple et dure qui mène directement au paradis pourvu qu'on accepte et respecte les normes établies pour le bien de l'humanité selon l'interprétation de l'Eglise.⁷

Thomas McCulloch's protagonist receives the land he owns from Squire Worthy, a man whose name sounds as if it may have come from a novel by Henry Fielding, and who is, indeed, a squire from a conventionally conservative world. As McCulloch puts it, Squire Worthy, "was a man very different from the squires of the present generation. There were then no offices of profit, nor expenditures of public money, which, in these days, make honour the ladder to advantage . . ." ⁸ Like the later Euchariste Moisan of *Trente Arpents*, Stepsure is an orphan. But unlike Moisan, Stepsure learns from the minister (le curé) and the Squire/magistrate (le notaire) where his values should be placed, and so he founds, on the land given to him by the Squire, a basis for morality, reasonable comfort, and a religious life. The life Stepsure shapes is not that advocated by what we have come to think of as stereotypical Calvinism, though Tawney's description of the direction of Calvinist theology reveals some characteristics easily visible in *The Stepsure Letters*.

Covetousness, if a danger to the soul, is a less formidable menace than sloth. So far from poverty being meritorious, it is a duty to choose the more profitable occupation. So far from there being an inevitable conflict between money-making and piety, they are natural allies, for the virtues incumbent on the elect—diligence, thrift, sobriety, prudence—are the most reliable passport to commercial prosperity. Thus the pursuit of riches, which once had been feared as the enemy of religion, was now welcomed as its ally.⁹

⁷J. S. Tassie, "La Société à travers le roman canadien-français." *Le Roman Canadien-Français*, Archives des lettres canadiennes, Tome III, Montreal, Fides, 1964, p. 156.

⁸*The Stepsure Letters*, p. 61.

⁹R. H. Tawney "Forward" to Max Weber, *The Protestant Ethic and the Spirit of Capitalism* (New York: Scribners, 1958), 3.

The differences in Stepsure's life and values from those stated by Tawney are more significant than the similarities. Stepsure doesn't choose the most profitable occupation; he doesn't engage in commerce to gain "commercial prosperity" as a way of life, his fundamental goal is not the pursuit of riches. As an orphan, he cannot show great fidelity to family. But his loyalty to the Squire, the parson, and the Widow Scant—kinds of moral, spiritual and economic benefactors to him—cannot be questioned. So far is he, indeed, from concentrating on money-making that he takes the Widow Scant into his home when he is married.

Our worthy old parson used to observe, that wherever Widow Scant was, there would be a blessing along with her, and therefore as I had married the daughter, it would have been foolish to have left the blessing behind . . . I enjoyed her conversation daily; and, instead of those grudgings and grumbings, which, in this country, are usually found at family consultations about how the old people are to be kept, making the widow comfortable was my principal enjoyment.¹⁰

McCulloch has stepsure say in the same section:

I have now a large farm: I have also every comfort which a farmer should desire; and, as times go, I cannot be called a poor man; for, as you know, I lately bought Bill Scamp's farm for my son Abner.¹¹

But the effect of the information is not to suggest that farming is the best way to pursue riches. Rather it is to suggest that a prudent farmer can be comfortable, assist his children, and do works of charity and goodness.

Max Weber, seeking to settle upon a definition of "the spirit of capitalism," turns to a document he praises for an "almost classical purity."¹² Weber quotes at length from Benjamin Franklin such statements as the following:

"Remember, that money is of the prolific generating nature. Money can beget money, and its offspring can beget more, and so on. Five shillings turned is six, turned again it is seven and

¹⁰*The Stepsure Letters*, pp. 82-83.

¹¹*Ibid.*, p. 82.

¹²Max Weber, *The Protestant Ethic and the Spirit of Capitalism* (New York: Scribners, 1958), p. 49.

three-pence, and so on, till it becomes a hundred pounds. The more there is of it, the more it produces every turning, so that the profits rise quicker and quicker."¹³

Weber concludes that while the careful making of one's way in the world is not a new thing, Franklin was not merely articulating a concept of *astuteness* in business, but a new and peculiar *ethos*, the spirit of capitalism. It is the sense of capitalistic ethos that is missing from *The Stepsure Letters*.

As published in serial and gathered into book form in 1862, the work contains sixteen letters. Numbers one to seven and fifteen are essentially satirical sketches. The remaining letters deal, essentially, with Mephibosheth Stepsure's biography: his rise from the status of an orphan sold at a public auction to the position of an independent land man seriously talked about for the position of magistrate. The satire is consistent: those who remain on the land, labour, live frugally and self-sufficiently, and follow Divine purpose are contented, economically secure, and assured of their eternal future. As Parson Drone puts it:

Time stands in relation to eternity. The duties of this life, also, are a step to a better; and he who neglects them, neglects both body and soul. It is my duty to impress upon your minds, that you now belong to this world, and ought to act consistently with the present stage of your existence.¹⁴

Those who gamble with credit, whether to engage in trade or to gain domestic supplies; those who spend time running about, whether to visit, to trade, to take pleasure riding horses, or merely to be seen; those who forsake the land for almost any reason; those who play at cards, drink, swear, fight, and seek amusement before fulfilling their duties lose religion, respectability, and the enjoyment of happiness, and they usually end as the guest of the sheriff.

The end of Stepsure's apprenticeship is marked by an offer by the Squire—as a reward for fidelity—of either money or a wood lot. Significantly, Stepsure sees the uncleared land as “by far the best offer.” The work he does and his success as a land man are certainly intended to show the moral basis of a life on the land. But more: McCulloch wants to show, as a continuation of *The Letters of Agricola*,

¹³Ibid., p. 51.

¹⁴*The Stepsure Letters*, p. 33.

that even a lame orphan, applying himself to labour on ordinary land can prove that agriculture may be a successful and satisfactory occupation. With irony that is characteristic, the author makes his point clear. He has Stepsure declare that

during the whole of my life, I have never had the least reason to complain of my returns. Many of my neighbours, it is true, have not been so successful. Still they are in general very good people, and very helpful to one another. Indeed, if they did not help each other, their life would be very miserable. I am always at home, looking after my affairs, and never fail to have good crops; but my neighbours so often meet with bad land, hard labour, and poor returns, that they are obliged to spend much of their time in mutual visits, for the purpose of unburdening their minds, condoling and keeping each other in heart.¹⁵

When he seems to be preaching, almost self-righteously, Stepsure is, rather, making very clear how the life of a land man, lived sensibly in Nova Scotia, can bring the same rewards it brings anywhere else. He is not so much making Benjamin Franklin's case as he is arguing the same case as John Young. Indeed, it is Benjamin Franklin who insists money must be invested, must be "turned." Stepsure only seems to echo him. When he says that "money in a man's pocket doing nothing is mere lumber,"¹⁶ he does so as a prelude to the account of Mr. Gypsum's complete ruination after he gets money to invest and is destroyed by storm, legitimate trade, smuggling, drink and inaccurate commercial predictions.

McCulloch's purpose is to argue for the legitimacy, morality, and viability of the land life: from the appropriate use of land flows the possibility of the good life. That is John Young's argument in *The Letters of Agricola*, and McCulloch agrees, even to the point of repeating Young's call for agricultural societies. Stepsure refers to "the society which Saunders and a few others have begun, in order to improve the agriculture of the town."¹⁷

Stepsure is frugal, a little parsimonious (peut-être un peu avare, as Tassie says), self-dependent, pious rather than spiritual, and concerned with economic security. But he is described better by J. S. Tassie than by Max Weber. He is more a man of the land in the Canadian tradition than he is a puritan hero in Weberian terms or in

¹⁵*The Stepsure Letters*, pp. 70-71.

¹⁶*Ibid.* p. 27.

¹⁷*Ibid.* p. 123.

the practice of Benjamin Franklin. Seen in the context of the novel of the land, he is neither primarily an industrious apprentice nor a "hard-nosed puritan."¹⁸ He is, rather, a character who provides a model of practical behaviour, fidelity to the land, familial tranquility, religious faithfulness, and economic prudence. He is evidence that the vocation of the land man, pursued with seriousness, can bring personal success and public security. Religion and political economy, the aspirations of the individual and the needs of the community come together in the genre and—in *The Stepsure Letters*—create a protagonist who is quite literally the salt of the earth.

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¹⁸Sharman, p. 618.