

The Heroine of *The Manor House of De Villeraï*

Kathleen M. O'Donnell

From November 16 to February 8, 1860, there appeared in serial form in *The Family Herald* in Montreal, Rosanna Leprohon's novel, *The Manor House of De Villeraï*. Set in New France during the era 1756-60, the novel describes the years of battle during which time the heroine, Blanche De Villeraï, approaches and answers the main question of her life. Her conclusion, reached at the time of the conquest of Canada, expresses Rosanna Leprohon's view of the French Canadian woman in time of stress and crisis.

The nature of French Canadian women has been examined by many scholars, "their concern being more with the dire effect an omnipresent and omnipotent mother has had on the national psyche than with the women themselves."¹ In *The Manor House of De Villeraï*, the mother figure, represented by only one unhappy mother and step-mother, is not central. The novel reflects the historical reality "that women have played an autonomous role of considerable importance in the formation of our race, and that in this role they asserted themselves with an authority and independence that has profoundly marked our collective memory." The history of French Canada reveals "admirable women . . . surrounded by an aura of prestige and veneration heightened by the solitude of their vocations."² Rosanna Leprohon creates an independent heroine in the tradition of those admirable women of history.

The plot of *The Manor House of De Villeraï* advances in four stages, each one following a battle. The novel opens in 1756, just after the capture of Forts George, Frontenac, and Oswego. Chapters I to IV are set in the interval immediately following that war. The second movement of the novel, Chapters V to XII, describes the attack on Fort William Henry in 1757, and

¹ Susan Mann Trofimenkoff, "Nationalism, Feminism and Canadian Intellectual History," *Canadian Literature* 83 (1979): 11-12.

² Jean Le Moyne, "Women and French-Canadian Civilization," *Convergence* trans. Philip Stratford (Toronto: Ryerson, 1966) 62, 64.

the subsequent return of the soldiers. The Battle of Carillon, which left some soldiers recovering from wounds and others employed in the harvest, introduces the third movement, Chapters XIII to XX. Finally, Chapters XXI to XXV describe the Battle of the Plains of Abraham and first adjustment of the French Canadian people to English rule. Each movement of the novel refers to a historic battle and then deals with Blanche De Villeraï's increasingly strong conviction about her life.

The action of the novel begins "on a dark and wintry afternoon towards the end of December, 1756."³ With her aunt, Mrs. Dumont, Blanche De Villeraï awaits the arrival of Gustave De Montarville, who has been chosen by her deceased parents to be her husband. After six years in France, he returns to Canada. He speaks of French Canadian life of the time:

Many and various were the topics touched upon—his ill fortune which had chained him to a bed of sickness at the very time that his regiment, the Royal Roussillon, with others, had left France for Canada, under the personal command of the gallant Marquis of Montcalm—the brilliant success which had crowned them in the taking of Forts George, Frontenac, and Oswego; and his own bitter regrets at having missed such golden opportunities of winning the military fame and glory so dear to every soldier's heart. Then he reverted to his mode of life on the continent, his college successes and defeats, and—topic most absorbing of all—the then disturbed states of Canada, swayed and divided between the dread of England's fast encroaching power and her confidence in the mighty aid of France; confidence which the sequel so little justified.⁴

Gustave stays in De Villeraï for the Christmas holidays where he meets, among others, Rose Lauzon, the village girl whose beauty captivates him, although he remains true to Blanche. Before leaving for the march on Fort William Henry, Gustave seeks to know the tenor of Blanche's feelings, but she replies only that she will tell him when he next returns to De Villeraï.

A new stage of the novel begins with the description of the expedition to Fort William Henry. The account in the novel corresponded closely to that in François Xavier Garneau's *History*

³ Rosanna Leprohon, "The Manor House of De Villeraï," *The Family Herald* 16 November 1889: 1.

⁴ Leprohon, 16 November 1889: 1.

of Canada. The novelist brings the picture vividly to her readers' eyes.

They crossed Lake Champlain and Lake George on foot, traversing a distance of sixty leagues on snow-shoes, and dragging their provisions with them in traineaux, whilst the snowy ground formed their couch at night—a canvas tent and a buffalo robe being their protection against the biting cold of our northern winters.⁵

Her description adheres to the facts of her source. "The corps traversed Lakes Champlain and George, and made 60 leagues of way, on snow-shoes, with their provisions in sledges, and passing the night on bearskins laid on the snow sheltered by a piece of canvas."⁶

In the novel as in the *History of Canada*, battle is described through to its triumphant conclusion for the French. The novelist adds the detail that De Montarville attends the death of a Canadian volunteer, Charles Menard. This man entrusts to De Montarville his possessions and his final words for Rose Lauzon, whom he aspires to marry even though she has given him no hope. Thus Gustave Montarville returns to De Villeraï with a message to give Rose, as well as his desire to see Blanche.

Entering the manor house, he is surprised to see Rose there busily adjusting a cushion cover for Mrs. Dumont's chair. While he is speaking to Rose of Charles Menard, Blanche enters, her face registering incomprehension at the scene. After Rose has left, Gustave tells Blanche the message he has given to Rose. He speaks of the battle and of the life that lies before them.

Very little girlish timidity, still less girlish emotion, did Blanche De Villeraï betray, as she listened in total silence to the burning words flowing from De Montarville's lips, and when at length he passionately prayed her to name even indefinitely the period in which the promises that bound them would be made irrevocable by the Church's blessing, she raised her beautiful eyes to his face and calmly enquired, did he think they already knew, much less loved, each other enough for that.

⁵ Leprohon, 30 November 1859: 1.

⁶ Francois Xavier Garneau, *History of Canada*, trans. Andrew Bell (Montreal: Lovell, 1860) 2: 188.

When Gustave has left, Blanche murmurs to herself about his unsettled heart and her own decision "to suffer a little now in self-love, nay, even in affection [rather] than be wounded deeply and unceasingly hereafter as an unloved, perhaps neglected, wife."⁷

Gustave's unsettled heart leads him to further acquaintance with Rose Lauzon and even a proposal. Rose rejects him with the traditional arguments. "I do indeed like you too well, generous, noble-hearted Mr. De Montarville," softly rejoins the girl, "to permit you to thus rush into what would prove your ruin. Ah! this madness of a moment would be bitterly expiated by a lifetime of regret!"⁸

During the winter season of Blanche De Villeraï's debut at the Chateau de Ramezay in Montreal, Gustave still does not divert his heart entirely from Rose. His feelings are discerned by fellow soldiers. The result for Blanche is a weariness that makes her glad to leave Montreal and return to De Villeraï at the end of the season. Gustave leaves for the defence of Carillon. Their parting has a calm dignity which befits them.

In summary fashion, but with faithfulness to Garneau's *History*, Leprohon describes the military formations, the death of Howe, the retreat of Abercromby, and the victory of the French at Carillon. De Montarville is wounded in that battle. The physician who attends him reports that he has been calling for Rose in his delirium.

At that time, Rose and all the inhabitants of Quebec are concerned about the suffering during the famine resulting from the failure of the harvest. Rose also bears the grief of her father's death. She then leaves her step-mother, and, through the mediation of the parish priest, gains a position as companion to Mrs. De Rochon in Montreal. In Mrs. De Rochon's home, Rose is exposed to the visits of that lady's niece, Pauline De Nevers. One day Pauline De Nevers brings news that Gustave De Montarville is in Montreal. Not long after, Gustave visits Rose and even involves himself in a duel to defend her against disparaging remarks made by a fellow soldier, Count De Noraye.

De Montarville is wounded in the duel but remains confident of Blanche's loyalty.

⁷ Leprohon, 7 December 1859: 26.

⁸ Leprohon, 14 December 1859: 1.

"Too bad!" exclaimed De Cournoyer, laying his hand heavily on De Montarville's shoulder. "Too bad that this brave life which escaped so narrowly at Carrillon should be risked again in so miserable a broil. You too who for so many months have been condemned to an invalid's wearisome inaction!"

"What will your betrothed say, Gustave, when she comes to hear of this affair?" inquired another. "Your name and that of so notorious a fellow as De Noraye mixed up in a quarrel about a pretty girl. The tale can scarcely prove very agreeable to her ears."

De Montarville coloured, but he calmly replied, "Miss De Villerai is too noble-hearted a woman to feel either pique or irritation from such a cause. She is as good as she is beautiful."⁹

That evening he writes to Blanche about the duel. "He was right in his supposition," writes the novelist, "and when Blanche folded up the letter after its perusal, though a slight sigh escaped her, no expression of irritation or annoyance overshadowed her countenance."¹⁰

Blanche's calmness is set against the land's troubles. Chapter XXI of the novel describes the advance of the English, the destruction of Quebec and of the surrounding country, the Battle of the Plains of Abraham, and the death of Montcalm.

During this period, Mrs. Dumont dies and Blanche took a distant relative, Miss De St Omer, to live with her. Together, they move to Montreal where they devote themselves to the care of the poor and ill. On one mission of charity, Blanche contracts small-pox. During her long illness, she receives the care of Miss De St Omer and of Rose Lauzon.

Gustave De Montarville is still active in the army. The French have retreated to Montreal. "Three powerful armies," however, "were now directing their march towards Montreal, one from Quebec under General Murray, another from Lake Champlain commanded by General Haveland, and a third (the largest and most formidable) from Oswego, under General Amherst." Governor De Vaudreuil with his council decides that, "a capitulation, which should protect both the interests of the

⁹ Leprohon, 18 January 1860: 78.

¹⁰ Leprohon, 25 January 1860: 1.

people and the honour of the troops, was preferable to a fruitless and unavailing defence."¹¹

After the capitulation, Gustave De Montarville conveys the news to Blanche and asks her to accompany him to France as his bride. Slowly and surely, Blanche answers that she will leave him free to marry Rose who loves him and whom he loves. For herself, she says that she may eventually marry if she meets someone she can love and respect. But in the end Blanche remains alone, "calmly happy."

Admired, courted in society, worshipped by the poor whose friend and benefactress she pre-eminently was, honoured for her rare mental gifts by men of the highest intellect as well as social position, her life was one of those rare careers of exemption from care which fall, alas, so rarely to the lot of earth's children. When the close of that pure blameless life came, truly might it have been said her end was peace.¹²

Gustave and Rose never return to Canada though their children do, to inherit the lands which Blanche bequeaths to them.

Blanche De Villeraï's decision evolves with Canada's history. Her first meeting with Gustave as the husband chosen for her takes place at the time of his return to Canada for military engagement. Blanche quickly brings him to an awareness of Canadian life in the domestic sphere.

"You are not at Versailles, nor in the Faubourg St. Germain now, Mr. De Montarville. We Canadians are more rugged than the polished people from whom we have sprung, and care little for flattery. Another thing," she quickly but naively added, seeing he was about interrupting her, "'tis quite unnecessary that, because we two are engaged, we should be always acting an overstrained, artificial part towards each other. I will dispense with daily flattery and whispered compliments, whilst you will be equally generous and allow me all the latitude I am willing to extend to yourself."

Gustave feels "tempted to order his *carriole* and brave the mountains and snow drifts before him, which he inwardly vowed

¹¹ Leprohon, 25 January 1860: 1.

¹² Leprohon, 8 February 1860: 102.

less cold and frigid than his beautiful fiancée."¹³ Their future is no more certain than that of Canada.

Blanche next speaks to Gustave after his return from the capture of Fort William Henry. She speaks of their lives against the background of a war which may have to end before their personal happiness can be pursued.

"And how long, Blanche, is this period of probation you have just fixed on to last?" he questioned, vainly endeavouring to conceal the annoyance and mortification his countenance as well as his voice plainly indicated.

"That depends on circumstances," she rejoined with a slight but indefinable smile. "Perhaps till the war is over."¹⁴

Blanche does not see Gustave again for more than a year as he is fighting at Carrillon and then recovering from his wound in Montreal.

Blanche's nature has gained strength and independence during that interval. She is not disturbed by Gustave's account of his duel over Rose in Montreal. She seems completely dedicated to the suffering of others at that time.

The year's harvest entirely failed. In several parishes, hardly enough grain was reaped to provide seed for the next crop. Cereals, which promised well as they grew, gave small returns or none, owing to the flooding summer rains. It was feared that the country would have no bread at all by the coming January...

Early in April, the daily ration of the Quebec people was reduced again, and fixed at two ounces of bread daily, with eight ounces of bacon or cod-fish. Men began to fall down in the streets with hunger.¹⁵

Amidst such conditions, Blanche's thoughts and feelings are directed to the lives of others.

Finally, after the Battle of the Plains of Abraham, she is asked by Gustave to accompany him to France as his wife. She declines to marry him, saying that Rose alone can make him

¹³ Leprohon, 16 November 1859:1.

¹⁴ Leprohon, 7 December 1859: 1.

¹⁵ Garneau, 92.

happy. Blanche maintains that she can live well under whatever rule prevails in her single state.

In portraying her heroine as a single person, Rosanna Leprohon, an Anglophone novelist, reminds us of a traditional role played by women throughout the history of French Canada. Jean Le Moyne writes of the women of Canada's past that "the greatest of them, whether in religious orders or not, were single women, like Jeanne Mance and Jeanne Le Ber, or widows. . . ." ¹⁶ Blanche De Villerai continues her works of charity worthily in her role as seigneureuse.

Carleton University

¹⁶ Jean Le Moyne, 64.