

*“A Passion to Live in this Splendid
Past”: Canadian and Australian
Autobiographies of Childhood*

THOMAS E. TAUSKY

IN A FASCINATING ARTICLE entitled “Portrait of the Artist as a Young Australian: Childhood, Literature and Myth,”¹ Richard N. Coe uses the autobiographies of Australian writers as a means of defining the responses of that country’s artistic minds to its evolving cultural climate. The essay that follows is an attempt to compare the results of that survey with the conclusions that can be derived from a similar group of English-Canadian works.²

In order to make the experiment as meaningful as possible, I have duplicated Coe’s procedures as much as I can. He includes both works presenting themselves as fiction and those claiming to be non-fiction; I have done the same, on the principle that any childhood set in Canada, whether lived or imagined, may tell us something about our culture.³ He confines his study to the *Autobiography of Childhood and Adolescence*, abbreviated to *Childhood* for convenience, but stretching until “the attainment of maturity; that is . . . the realization by the self of a fully-formed identity” (“Portrait,” p. 126). In Coe’s essay, only the *Childhoods* of persons engaged in the arts are considered. Fundamentally, I have used the same criteria, though in order to achieve a basis for generalization, I have included a few titles in which the narrative extends to later life, or in which the protagonist turns out to be either a journalist or a professional writer rather than an artist in a strict sense.⁴

Before applying the method to Canada, we must see what conclusions Coe reached about Australia. He begins with the

assertion, based on a reading of five hundred *Childhoods* from around the world, that

there are subtle but momentous differences between the *Childhoods* of one culture and those of another. . . . There do begin to emerge certain features, common to a given culture, and at the same time exclusive to it — or nearly so. Recurrent preoccupations and obsessions, which would seem to operate at a sub-conscious rather than a conscious level. . . . (“Portrait,” p. 128)

This pattern Coe calls “myth.” The Australian myth, he believes, has produced a distinguished literature of childhood despite its inherently negative character:

The significant myth of the Australian *Childhood* consists in doubting whether the country in which the child-self grew up possesses a culture at all. . . . Australia in the opinion of all too many Australians, is an enormous void surrounded by suburbia. . . . It is the myth of a love-hate relationship with a non-culture. (“Portrait,” pp. 130-31)

The Australian adolescent, Coe argues, is disturbed by his consciousness of the disparity between the beauty of the Australian landscape and the tawdriness of the human imprint upon it. Loving the Bush, hating the suburbs, the Australian writer may come to conclude, Coe suggests, that “Australia is to be found neither wholly in its ‘magic,’ not yet wholly in its ugliness, but in the two elements taken together, their force of opposition still intact” (“Portrait,” p. 136). In some works, such a synthesis is not thought possible, and the protagonist chooses exile or nihilistic despair.

I have compressed several pages of a complex argument, but perhaps enough has been said for the task of comparison to begin. Do we find any Canadian themes in this outline of Australian attitudes?

At first sight, self-castigation for the achievement of a non-culture may appear to be a familiar pose. Yet a distinction can be made. Though Canada might well be said to be a strong contender for the prize of having a non-culture, our autobiographical writers do not feel obliged to harp on this issue — since they are disinclined to dwell on any concept of Canada, positive or negative. There is an obvious explanation for the fact that

Canadian autobiographers do not often speak of their perception of the nation as a whole: regionalism. As Charles Ritchie, destined to spend a lifetime in the service of Canada, puts it: "I find it hard to think about Canada. . . . Nova Scotia is small enough to understand."⁵ The explanation for the difference between Australian national consciousness and Canadian regionalism needs to be sought in history rather than geography, for Australia's natural conditions are at least as varied as Canada's. Divergent patterns of settlement in the Canadian colonies brought an inevitable result, noted by an Australian poet two years after the Canadian Confederation: "In Canada, they have a nation, but no national feeling. In Australia, we have national feeling in abundance, but no nation."⁶ The Nova Scotian autobiographer writes of Nova Scotia, the British Columbian autobiographer of British Columbia. The word "Canada" is seldom used, and when distant regions of the country are mentioned, a hostile attitude is expressed, as in the very early references to Eastern wickedness in Nellie McClung's *Clearing in the West* and James H. Minifie's *Homesteader*. To be quite accurate, a similar pose is struck in Randolph Stow's *The Merry-Go-Round in the Sea* when the protagonist yearns for Western Australia to be "free," but the novel as a whole dramatizes the Australian *national* experience under the stress of the Second World War, as in the following description: "The street was Australia: sandy, makeshift, innocent."⁷

The radical division into Bush and suburb detected by Coe only partially applies to Canada. Canadian *Childhoods* sometimes describe the pioneering stage of settlement, but in general refrain from the rhapsodic descriptions of nature found in Australian writing. We have our suburbs too, of course, but Canadian writers decline to grow up in them. The most common setting for Canadian *Childhoods* is the small town that has been in existence long enough to accumulate traditions and constitute a complex social world. It is within this type of environment that the young protagonists in the work of Blondal, Carr, Laurence, Maynard, Montgomery, Munro, and Torgov shape their lives. Unlike their Australian counterparts, these characters tend to be pragmatists rather than theoreticians: they find the foundations of

their conduct in their observation of the social life around them rather than in the pursuit of patriotic, aesthetic, philosophical, or theological ideas.

Coe finds a pattern of emotional development (or, in his terminology, "myth-structure") in the Australian *Childhood* which, again, does not fully apply to this country. Love of nature comes first, followed by "an uneasy, half-nauseated contempt for Australian 'civilization'"; the ages of Australian young men are therefore:

The happy — often *deliriously* happy — child; . . . the unremittingly earnest High School student, imperious in his avidity for culture and knowledge. . . . the undergraduate-with-a-nervous breakdown . . . and at long, long last, the poet.

("Portrait," p. 140)

In Canadian autobiographies, the child does not usually begin as a lover of nature, nor does she end up as a poet. I have just used a feminine pronoun to indicate another significant difference: only four of the eighteen Australian writers are women, and two of them used masculine pseudonyms; eight of the eighteen Canadian writers are women. In this respect as in others, autobiography is a faithful mirror of wider trends: as has often been noticed, women have throughout our history been prominent in many forms of Canadian writing.

With a few exceptions, the Canadian protagonist leads a more restrained emotional life than the Australian character: it is interesting that the exceptions, in terms of both joy and despair, are the central figures in the works with settings on the two coasts (by Buckler, Carr, and Montgomery) where we also find the greatest involvement with nature. The Canadian character speaks with more detachment than one might expect to find within a genre whose protagonist, a critic has said, "follows unceasingly the call of his own being."⁸ The greater freedom with which the Australian expresses himself may be illustrated by a passage from David Malouf's *Johnno*:

"I'm going to shit this bitch of a country right out of my system," he told me fiercely. "Twenty fucking years! How long will it take me, do you think, to shit out every last trace of it? At the end of every seven years you're completely new — did you

know that? New fingernails, new hair, new cells. There'll be nothing left in me of bloody Australia. I'll be transmuted. I'll say to myself every morning as I squat on the dunny, there goes another bit of Australia. That was Wilson's Promontory. That was Toowong. Whoosh, down the plughole!"⁹

Expressions of distaste that are almost as vigorous are found throughout Barbara Hanrahan's *The Scent of Eucalyptus*, the autobiography of a contemporary painter. Growing up in an Adelaide slum, Hanrahan has unsavoury experiences that to some degree parallel the events described in Alice Munro's *Who Do You Think You Are?* Munro's Rose observes remarkably horrifying events with apparent detachment, whereas Hanrahan sets the tone of bitter indignation in her reflections upon her birth on the first page:

I was offered as a sop to strangers — a sop for hoarded (but unacknowledged) disappointments. I was a prize, presented on an off-chance, that for an instant deceived — tricked them into thinking that real life bore some resemblance to the thing they thought was life: a wan pretence fabricated by newspapers and politicians.¹⁰

Both Munro's other protagonist, Del Jordan, and L. M. Montgomery's Emily Starr long to be writers, but not with the passionate abandon that characterizes Syballa, the protagonist of Miles Franklin's newly resurrected work, *My Brilliant Career*. Like *The Scent of Eucalyptus*, *My Brilliant Career* opens with the anguish of disillusionment, though in this instance it is more artlessly expressed:

Better be born a slave than a poet, better be born a black, better be born a cripple! For a poet must be compassionless — alone! *fearfully* alone in the midst of his fellows whom he loves. Alone because his soul is as far above common mortals as common mortals are above monkeys.¹¹

Canadian characters, often faced with an equally uncongenial milieu, may think such burning thoughts, but they do not utter them. Montgomery's Emily reproaches herself for confiding in her best friend because "it is not a Murray tradition to turn your soul inside out."¹²

It seems reasonable to conclude that Canadian *Childhoods* have neither the particular myth nor the tone found in Australian works within the same genre. We have, however, so far proceeded in a peculiarly Canadian fashion by attempting to define through negatives. The question still remains: is there a Canadian myth which gives our *Childhoods* a distinctive character?

I believe there is one motif that emerges in many of our *Childhoods*, and defines their uniqueness. Sooner or later, a Canadian child is reminded, gently or harshly, of a racial or regional inheritance that moulds her being as much as any individual personality traits she may possess. The Canadian autobiographer always tells the story of tradition and the individual talent; moreover, the tradition is often that of another country, not of Canada. If Australian artists confront a non-culture in the sense of overpowering Philistinism, our artists confront a non-culture in the sense of weak national vitality in relation to regional traditions and extra-territorial forces.

It seems appropriate to think of Canadian *Childhoods* as yet another proof of a phenomenon with a long history in Canadian culture, the colonial mentality. Anna Jameson once remarked that "Canada is a colony, not a *country*; it is not yet identified with the dearest affections and associations, remembrances and hopes of its inhabitants."¹³ Such a situation might be expected in 1837, but as we shall see, it is also the prevailing atmosphere in some reminiscences of the 1930's and 1940's.

Australian culture constitutes a useful control in evaluating the uniqueness of our colonial myth. Australia was, after all, a British colony, and strong British influence might be expected to be found there. What one discovers, however, is that the impact of British culture takes quite a different form than in Canadian writing.

The Canadian protagonist may react against English or Scottish inheritance, but there are no allies to be found in the immediate milieu to help out in the struggle. Australian *Childhoods*, on the other hand, reflect the strong aversion felt by large numbers of the Australian populace towards the "Pommy," or affluent British immigrant, a distaste going back in part to the country's

convict origins. One recalls, for example, the satirical portrait of Frank Hawden in *My Brilliant Career*. When he professes love for Sybilla, "that I should be the object of these puerile emotions in a fellow like Frank Hawden filled me with loathing and disgust" (Franklin, p. 63). Alfred Hesketh, in Sara Jeannette Duncan's novel *The Imperialist* is much the same character, presented in a similarly satirical way, but within the Canadian context he is not a force to be easily dismissed: he enters into a commercial and matrimonial partnership with one of Elgin's leading families.

Another Australian *Childhood* which reflects contempt for the Pommy is Donald Horne's *The Education of Young Donald*. Horne's own great grandfather was a remittance man who deserted his wife; consequently, Horne's grandfather "loathed" Poms, and his whole family circle "looked down on Poms almost as much as we looked down on Catholics."¹⁴ Young Donald himself does take pride in tradition, relishing the fact that he could lay claim to one of the first doctors in the colony as an ancestor. But the form his pride takes is worth noticing: "His significance was that he was a measure of generations of my Australianness. . . . James Mileham was the reason why we were so very Australian" (Horne, pp. 42-43). Similarly, Rob Coram, the protagonist of Stow's *The Merry-Go-Round in the Sea* is not happy when he is accused of talking like a Pommy: "Nobody wanted to be like a Pommy" (p. 224). Though brought up to be proud of his Highland blood, Rob also defines his character by the part his family played in the early development of Western Australia.

Of the thirty-six Canadian and Australian authors of *Childhoods* surveyed here, only Lovat Dickson bridges the two countries, and I therefore begin my detailed discussion of the colonial theme in Canadian *Childhoods* with him. Born in Australia, Dickson came to Canada at the age of fifteen by way of Rhodesia and England; he lived in Canada for ten years before moving to England, and ultimately returned to Toronto after a distinguished career as publisher, novelist, biographer, and critic. *The Ante-Room*, the first of Dickson's volumes of autobiography, begins

with a chapter set in Australia, but for two-thirds of its length deals with Dickson's Canadian experiences.

Dickson learned in his youth that loyalty to the Empire had its price. Dickson's father and mother faced bitter opposition to their marriage from both sets of families. The Dicksons were anti-Catholic; the Cunninghams were anti-English, and maintained their hostility despite the fact that both Dickson's father and grandfather had spent years in Australia. Having suffered in Australia on account of his pommy accent, Dickson's father was destined to be patronized in England for being too colonial. The latter blow must have been the more severe, for his loyalties fundamentally were with the mother country. Dickson's summary of his family's values deserves to be quoted at length, for it is a classic statement of the colonial psychology and its consequences:

We were a Colonial family, and were proud of it. We passionately believed in the British Empire, and especially in England. . . . Long before I saw it I had an image of England in my mind, the way in church behind your closed eyes you see the altar and the cross standing at its centre. . . . I am thinking here not only of my own family but of countless others like us who made up the solid, steady, sober, industrious people, the majority of them of Scottish origin who had . . . really built the British Empire. . . .

We played the sedulous ape, always ten or twenty years out of date. . . . We modelled ourselves on England and the English, but could not always prevent our native twang or accent from overlapping our speech; and coming at last . . . to live in England, our reward for two centuries of such loyalty might be a condescending nod from some of the local ladies who had never been a hundred miles from home.¹⁵

One might imagine that laden with this Imperialist baggage, Lovat Dickson would be ill-prepared for Canadian life; the Pommy's son in Australia would be a Limey in Canada. Such did not, however, turn out to be the case. Dickson's family were Nova Scotia colonials before they were Australians, and so he was predisposed to find another homeland in Canada. He is un-Canadian only in the strength of his patriotic feeling. It is characteristic, however, not only of Dickson but of his fellow Canadian autobiographers that emotion is linked with history and ancestry:

My father reminded us that we were Canadian by origin . . . and it thrilled me to think that it was to this beautiful land that my ancestors had come one hundred and sixty years before.

(*Ante-Room*, p. 88)

After some years of drifting, Dickson finds a sense of vocation taking Honours English at the University of Alberta and also writing columns for the Edmonton *Journal*. Happiness is achieved through the conjunction of creativity and identification with his adopted country:

Cold were those nights, but beautiful, and tired though my body was, it pulsed still with the creative raptures I had just endured. . . . I was at home now in this great wide land. I was accepted as a Canadian. (*Ante-Room*, p. 231)

In the book as a whole, identification with Canada is in the end sacrificed to literary aspiration. Dickson is offered the chance to edit the *English Review*, and rejoices in the opportunity to return to the literary centre. Though from one point of view his decision to go to London is both natural and wise (how much scope for his publishing talents was there in the Canada of 1928?), in another perspective he re-lives his family's veneration for England, as the final paragraph of the work reveals:

I looked at the English faces and could have smiled with fond love of them, they were so familiar, so expected, so much a part of the England we all knew from Shakespeare and Dickens. . . . I . . . could have laughed for pleasure, knowing, whatever lay ahead, that I had left the ante-room where the first twenty-five years of my life had been spent and had pushed open, and closed firmly behind me, a door that led into a larger room.

(*Ante-Room*, p. 270)

The "larger room" of the London publishing life is a different image than the "altar" invoked to symbolize the feelings of Dickson's ancestors, but the emotion is just as powerful, if less overtly expressed.

We have five male writers of *Childhoods* born between 1900 and 1910, and all five (Dickson, John Kenneth Galbraith, James M. Minifie, Charles Ritchie, and Wallace Stegner) chose the path of more or less permanent exile. Three of the five (Dickson, Minifie, and Ritchie) selected England as their first destination.

Though, as Coe notes, exile is also a prominent solution in Australian *Childhoods*, the motivation in that environment seems to be different. The Australian chooses exile out of revulsion for his own country; the Canadian chooses exile because the attraction of another country (particularly the mother country) is superior to the tolerated, but tepid, pleasures of his home and native land.

In *Homesteader*, James M. Minifie describes a pattern — childhood in England, adolescence in Canada, a return to England in early manhood — broadly similar to that of Dickson's youth. Minifie's father adapted readily to Canada; his mother, reluctant to abandon the ways of home, delayed joining her husband for years, and never felt reconciled to her Canadian fate. Like most of the non-fictional Canadian *Childhoods*, *Homesteader* is not particularly introspective, so we are left to guess at the effect of divided parental loyalties upon the child; however, an agonized struggle against the elements (e.g., the wind that is a "malevolent demon"¹⁶) is portrayed with considerable vividness, so that Minifie's migration first to the University of Saskatchewan and then to Oxford comes to be interpreted, by the reader as well as by Minifie, as a liberation from enslavement to the land.

Wallace Stegner's *Wolf Willow* portrays the Saskatchewan landscape in much more favourable terms. Since Stegner has spent all of his life in the United States except for a few childhood years, his place in a study of a Canadian tradition may be questioned. *Wolf Willow* is, however, entirely concerned with Stegner's Canadian experience, a part of his life he took to be crucially formative: "a good part of my private and social character . . . [has] been scored into me by that little womb-village, and the lovely, lonely, exposed prairie of the homestead."¹⁷

As the last quotation indicates, Stegner had two sorts of exposure to the Canadian West. In the winter, his family lived in a little community in the Cypress Hills, where "we were almost totally Canadian" (*Wolf Willow*, p. 81); in the summer, they lived right on the Montana border, where all the influences were American. The result was a sense of cultural uncertainty:

Winter and summer were at odds in us. We were Americans without the education and indoctrination that would have made

us confident of our identity, we were Canadians in everything but our sentimental and patriotic commitment.

(*Wolf Willow*, p. 84)

Later in the book, Stegner relates that his youthful search for a usable past temporarily led him to identify with his Norwegian ancestry (*Wolf Willow*, pp. 111-12). In bestowing his fundamental allegiance upon other lands, Stegner acts in a truly Canadian fashion. He was encouraged to do so by the Canadian educational system, which implied through its curriculum that a significant history and culture were only to be found elsewhere: "Education tried, inadequately and hopelessly, to make a European out of me" (*Wolf Willow*, p. 24). It was only in retrospect that Stegner came to discover the absorbing interest of the rapid historical changes that swept over the Cypress Hills. *Wolf Willow* itself, as much an historical account of the region as a personal autobiography, documents the topographical and human character of a neglected part of Canada, so that subsequent generations need not suffer from the cultural inferiority complex that afflicted the youthful Stegner.

More than Stegner, Charles Ritchie and J. K. Galbraith in the days of their youth had opportunities to develop a strong impression of the distinctive nature of their Canadian communities. Yet, even more than Dickson or Minifie, Ritchie and Galbraith display a whole-hearted acceptance of exile. Ritchie's early diaries, collected under the title *An Appetite for Life*, reveal an eager adolescent held back by the colonial atmosphere of his life in Halifax. Ritchie is surrounded by a variety of loyalties, and the result, just as in Stegner's case, is cultural bewilderment:

As for Cousin Susie . . . she is a bit crazy on the subject of our Loyalist ancestry as if the American Revolution had happened yesterday. What we all believe in is the Empire, but my father, when he was alive, believed in Canada. . . . My mother's family were against Confederation and wanted Nova Scotia to be on its own as part of the Empire. I find it hard to think of Canada.

(*Appetite*, pp. 33-34)

Living in English country house style with his widowed mother, Ritchie very naturally develops the regional and international, but not national, loyalties characteristic of the Canadian *Child-*

hood protagonist. He feels at ease reading Rupert Brooke and mixing with a steady stream of English visitors, but becomes distressed when his colonial manners are mocked — when, for example, some fellow King's College students gather to observe him mount his horse after classes. It takes a dose of England to cure Ritchie of his pseudo-English self-consciousness. Indeed, it turns out in the course of his hilarious social adventures at Oxford that he has become more of a patriot abroad than he was at home. Awaiting punishment for a carouse, he reports:

Some of our acquaintances enjoy prophesying the most dire consequences for us, that we shall end up in Wormwood Scrubbs, disowned by our families, or have to emigrate to the colonies. Someone said "to Canada." So I said, "That would suit me as I come from there anyway, and moreover, Canada does not happen to be a colony," They said, "What's the difference? It's part of the Empire isn't it?" That is all they know about Canada.
(*Appetite*, p. 151)

Both Ritchie and Dickson portray efforts, conscious or unconscious, to achieve personal identity by shaking off the ill effects of what might be called tribal identity (the tribes in question being Nova Scotian loyalists and Scottish Empire-builders respectively). Galbraith also writes of a tribe in *The Scotch*, but unlike the others he gives no sense of an inner struggle. His tone of ironic detachment is so strong that it is hard to imagine this writer of a *Childhood* was ever young. One can hardly go farther in the line of superciliousness than this passage:

As just noted I am engaging in this exercise in social anthropology principally for my own benefit. Others may wonder why they should concern themselves with the manners, customs and behaviour of the Canadian Scotch, commonplace or curious, in this particular region at this particular point in history. I confess that this question has also crossed my mind.¹⁸

Despite making claims for himself as a social anthropologist, Galbraith does not explicitly address an elementary question raised by his title: was the sub-culture of his youth a pure Scottish export, or was it radically altered by becoming "Scotch" (i.e., an adaptation of Scottish culture to Canadian conditions)? In any event, the implication in Galbraith's account is that for a Man

of Standing (his term), there is no middle ground between membership in a quaint regional culture and membership in an international elite — we hear a surprising amount about Galbraith's duties as U.S. ambassador to India in a book nominally about Dutton.

Another noted Canadian ironist is Stephen Leacock; however, Leacock writes with uncharacteristic passion in the *Childhood* parts of his disjointed autobiography, *The Boy I Left Behind Me*. In describing his childhood, Leacock emphasizes the burden of English class stratification and its consequences for Canada. In England, the Leacocks were an affluent family with a long history; in Canada, Leacock's mother was determined to carry on as if nothing had changed, despite a decline into genteel poverty. Like Susanna Moodie forty years before, Mrs. Leacock had the hired help eat apart from the family. Stephen was given a tutor after a brief exposure to the local school because "my mother was haunted with the idea that . . . we might side-slip and cease to be gentlemen."¹⁹ Leacock loved his mother and yet came to have an intellectual distrust of her social principles. His version of the exile motif was not to return immediately to his mother's country (though, of course, he later wrote *My Discovery of England*) but rather to store up powerful feelings of affection and contempt for both England and Canada. For example, in "Greater Canada: an appeal," a product of Leacock's years as an imperialist lecturer, these personal tensions are given an outward projection. "I . . . am an Imperialist because I will not be a Colonial," is the bold claim, but "Independent, we would not survive a decade" is its accomplishment.²⁰

The six Canadian *Childhoods* just discussed are all non-fiction, and all were written by successful men. Autobiography tends to be produced by those who at least consider themselves successful, and with some notorious exceptions like our own F. P. Grove, is somewhat limited in imaginative freedom by the need to record fact. These factors mute the tragic possibilities inherent in regional claustrophobia and colonial thinking. Yet, in several of these works, the autobiographer is aware that he might not have escaped. Here, for example, is a reflective passage from Minifie's *Homesteader*:

It appalls me now to reflect on how critical are the decisions adolescents have to make on such inadequate foundations of experience and understanding, and how susceptible these decisions are to the winds of chance and circumstance. I have been forever grateful to my father for the prescience he showed in extricating me from my emotional urge to sacrifice my future on the altar of bucolic domesticity, and family solidarity. (p. 209)

For most of the autobiographers we have been considering, exile is the only alternative to regional stagnation. The Canadian writer of fictional *Childhoods* imagines a wider range of possibilities. In fiction as much as in non-fiction, however, regional and ancestral ties are both major means of self-definition and a major barrier to self-liberation. In turning to fiction, I wish to emphasize again that my concern is with stories of childhood in Canada, not with the relationship of fiction to the writer's literal personal history.

Like Dickson and Galbraith, several women novelists are primarily concerned with the Scottish heritage of consciousness, determination, caution, Puritanism, pragmatism, and fierce racial loyalty. Margaret Laurence has mined this racial lode throughout her writing career. Her work that falls within the *Childhood* genre, *A Bird in the House*, is distinctive for its exploration of Celtic antagonisms within the family. Vanessa, the protagonist, is made to feel the hostility between her mother's Irish family, and her father's Scottish blood. Grandmother MacLeod, the choric voice of Aunt Edna informs us, "believes the Irish are good for two things — manual labour and linen-making."²¹ She gives her grandmother a present which provides indoctrination in Scottish history, morality, and pride:

I had been hoping for her cairngorm brooch on my tenth birthday, and had received instead the plaid-bound volume entitled *The Clans and Tartans of Scotland*. Most of it was too boring to read, but I had looked up the motto of my own family, and those of some of my friend's families. *Be then a wall of brass. Learn to suffer. Consider the end. Go carefully.* I had not found any of these slogans reassuring. What with Mavis Duncan learning to suffer, and Laura Kennedy considering the end, and Patsy Drummond going carefully and I spending my time in being a wall of brass, it did not seem to me that any of us were going to lead very interesting lives. (*Bird in the House*, pp. 46-47)

The gloomy atmosphere created by the family racial feuding, together with the sombre influence of the Depression and disturbing encounters with death, darkens Vanessa's youth, and she also comes to lose faith in the heroic romance of her early literary efforts. *Pillars of the Nation*, about pioneers, suffers a setback when Vanessa realizes that her tyrannical Irish grandfather was a real-life pioneer. A fur-trading story reaches an impasse when Vanessa has to ponder the likelihood of her heroine, Marie, being able to marry either Radisson or Groseilliers:

Marie would not get out of the grey stone inn. She would stay there all her life. The only thing that would ever happen to her was that she would get older. Probably the *voyageurs* weren't Radisson and Groseilliers at all. Or if they were, they wouldn't give her a second glance. I felt I could not bear it. I no longer wanted to finish the story. (*Bird in the House*, p. 178)

In a brief epilogue, Vanessa returns to Manawaka for the first time in twenty years. She has evidently had more success than Marie achieved in getting away from a confining milieu, but the very fact that she could imagine, and be disturbed by, Marie's imprisonment in the stone inn is her translation of the fear of permanent incarceration within the massive Connor brick house.

L. M. Montgomery's Emily Starr also does not escape until the final pages. For her, as for Montgomery's more famous heroine Anne Shirley, the decision to break away is complicated by a powerful attachment, not shared by Vanessa, to the district in which she grew up.

Emily, an orphan like Anne, needs all her considerable determination to succeed in two endeavours: winning the hearts of her sceptical Murray relatives, and achieving recognition as a writer. Her task is rendered especially difficult by her relatives' aversion to art, and by their habit of making Emily's renunciation of her literary ambitions a condition of their good-will. When Emily's chief guardian, Aunt Elizabeth, demands a pledge that she give up writing, Emily imagines that all the Murray ancestors support her Aunt's Philistinism:

The dead-and-gone Murrays looked down accusingly from their dark frames. *They* had no sympathy with flashes and Jimmy-

books and Alpine paths — with the pursuit of unwon, alluring divinities. (*Emily Climbs*, p. 80)

The conflict within Emily between dedication to art and family loyalty reaches its climax towards the end of the middle volume of the trilogy. Emily has a free choice, to remain with her family or to pursue literary glory under favourable conditions in New York. Unlike the protagonists of most *Bildungsromane*, she chooses to remain. It would take more space than I have here to analyze the complex circumstances of the decision in detail; in essence, however, Emily's course of action seems to reflect Montgomery's own willingness to give considerable weight to the claims of family and region. In the final volume, Montgomery has events justify her heroine's choice: Emily's fiction gains respect and fame because of her intimate knowledge of Island society. Yet this triumph is slow in coming, and in the meantime Emily is frequently shown in moments of despair, as in the following passage:

I feel a great and awful weariness — not of body or brain, but of feeling, coupled with a haunting dread of the future — *any* future — even a happy one — nay a happy one most of all, for in this strange mood it seems to me that to be happy would require more effort — more buoyancy than I shall possess.²²

The essential flaw of the tradition-bound characters in all the *Childhoods* we have been examining is neatly summarized in a concluding page of Patricia Blondal's *A Candle to Light the Sun*: "My search was only a disguise, a cloak, for my desire to live in another. . . . While I look for another's place, my own dies for want of me."²³ The speaker, perhaps ironically named David Newman, comes to this realization very belatedly after nearly destroying himself in an attempt to model himself on Old World values and a man who incarnates them. Newman has what seems to be typical parents, within the *Childhood* form, for a Canadian writer: his mother is a genteel Englishwoman reduced to poverty who clings to the ways of her native land; his step-father is a retired English soldier whose contention is that Sergeant-Majors made the Empire. David repudiates his step-father, but in doing so he becomes attached to an aristocratic family in decay which,

more insidiously than his parents but no less harmfully, undermines his self-confidence.

Newman's hero is Dr. Gavin Ross, a respected figure in the town of Mouse Bluffs, Manitoba, partly by virtue of his marriage to the granddaughter of the town's founder. Like Dan Ainslie, the Scottish doctor of Hugh MacLennan's *Each Man's Son*, Gavin Ross represses emotion and denies love:

Proud strong man, he had always seemed remote from Mouse Bluffs, ministering to its sorrows and its joys, but never sharing in them. Always journeying out of Glasgow. Glasgow. It was characteristic of the man that no one knew more of his past than this word. (*Candle*, p. 226)

David's voluntary enslavement to Dr. Ross and his liberation from bondage are brilliantly portrayed in the novel's opening and closing scenes. In the first few lines of the first chapter, "the old man" (Dr. Ross), "standing on the steps of the old house" gives David a message to carry announcing the death of George V. David has a vision of mystical union with his immediate and remote heroes:

In his mind he had a sense of things falling away, the entire town peeling off into the black prairie wastes, leaving him and the doctor alone, still looking at each other but not seeing man and boy, familiar parts of the town's body, not seeing as before, parts of the King now. (*Candle*, p. 14)

David's sense of self is associated, not with dreams of the future, but with idealizations of the past, of the Imperial order, of a dying world. For his continuing loyalty to Dr. Ross, David is rewarded by neglect, autocratic efforts to direct his career, repudiation and finally abuse. After Dr. Ross suffers a stroke, David asks him whether he remembers the night the old King died, and Dr. Ross writes in reply "What king?" (*Candle*, p. 313). Realizing at last that the unshared memory signifies an unshared bond, David at the end of the book is freed from the burden placed upon him by the Imperial heritage and its local representative when the novel opens.

I have been engaged in tracing the damaging effects of overly zealous immersion in English and Scottish traditions. A small

number of *Childhoods* deal with a related problem: the emotional difficulties faced by children of other racial stocks who have to sort out the relationship of their heritage to the cultural mainstream.

In the four works I have been able to find (Laura Goodman Salverson's *Confessions of an Immigrant's Daughter*; Fredelle Bruser Maynard's *Raisins and Almonds*; Morley Torgov's *A Good Place to Come From*; Mordecai Richler's *The Street*) the process of finding one's individual response to the claims of differing and often antagonistic cultures is invariably painful. To barricade oneself within the inherited culture is to risk narrowness and missed opportunity; to venture outside that world is to risk the solitude of rejection by both the majority and the minority culture.²⁴

An eloquent defence of loyalty to one's own ancestors as a means of creative inspiration constitutes the central theme of Salverson's autobiography. Everything in Salverson's life seems to have led to such a conclusion. In Iceland, her mother was the daughter of a celebrated minister, and her father the intellectual son of a landed farmer. Her father's restlessness and misleading promises of wealth made by the Canadian government brought her family to Canada. In Winnipeg, the Salversons' welcome to Canada consisted of exploitation and severe destitution. Her father was reduced to "frozen despair"; writing for Icelandic periodicals was "the one thing that kept him alive."²⁵

From her father, an iconoclast in Icelandic society, Salverson learned respect for the writer's vocation; from her mother, a more conservative believer in the spirit of the sagas, she acquired that "passion to live in this splendid past" (*Confessions*, p. 236), which I have taken for my title. Salverson's description of her mother presents her as a living incarnation of the age-old Icelandic temperament:

She was a woman descended from an ancient family, stiff-necked, righteous and unbending in their unconscious pride . . . They knew no compromise, those headstrong clansmen, and that unyielding quality has characterized their descendants.

(*Confessions*, pp. 50-51)

Salverson therefore absorbed the ethic of the sagas through the

direct example of her mother's personality as well as through her mother's re-telling of the saga stories. Salverson herself seems to have remained an Icelander in spirit, judging by the amount of space Icelandic history takes up in her book. The kindling of her imagination through the sagas is contrasted favourably with a temporary transformation during an interlude in Duluth, Minnesota. Yielding to the American pressure to assimilate, she briefly chose to idealize the Pilgrim Fathers instead of the Norsemen, but soon found herself distressed by doubts about her parents.

Maynard and Torgov, two of the Jewish authors of autobiographies, endured less physical privation than Salverson, but also seem to have had less access to the cultural resources of their tradition. Maynard's father was the isolated store-owning Jew in a succession of prairie towns; the "thirty to forty families" that made up the Jewish community of Torgov's Sault Ste. Marie did not create a "Jewish world"²⁶ because they failed to provide the institutions of Jewish cultural and social life. Both protagonists accordingly felt alienated from but attracted to the world of the Gentiles. Being outsiders, both writers were also intensely aware of their fellow outcasts in other immigrant communities. Maynard sought to keep the approval of her Gentile friends by joining in the persecution of a Chinese shop-keeper; Torgov's friendship with the family maid gave him a fascinated glimpse of the immigrant slum in Sault Ste. Marie, and of the violent antagonism between the Ukrainian and Italian national groups.

Maynard has an interesting essay-chapter on the imagined world of the school readers. As Stegner also observes, these volumes encouraged their impressionable audience to espouse the allegiance to other lands that is so prominent in Canadian experience. Maynard's retrospective verdict on the readers is more charitable than one might expect. Acknowledging that "the voice of the reader was the voice of the Union Jack," that the readers projected "a peculiarly English class consciousness," she nevertheless gives much credit to the "moral vision"²⁷ of the selections.

Both Maynard and Torgov end their books in tragi-comedy. The protagonists apparently achieve success in cosmopolitan, assimilated settings; at the same time, their fathers, who bitterly

opposed their children's efforts to enter the Gentile world, fade away into ineffectuality and death. Maynard's father, a gentle and loveable figure, declines into senility; Togov's father, a monster who persecuted his wives unmercifully, is conquered by cancer. Though, of course, no rational connection exists between the fates of the children and of their parents, the decay of the human embodiment of racial loyalty almost seems necessary for the assimilationist impulse to thrive.

Unlike Maynard and Torgov, Mordecai Richler did experience the full flavour of Jewish immigrant culture in his youth. Richler's alternately affectionate and exasperated recollections of that world are scattered throughout his fiction, and are also given a characteristic expression in his contribution to the *Childhood* genre, *The Street*.

Those who live on Richler's street know nothing but the street: "Our world, its prizes and punishments, was entirely Jewish."²⁸ French-Canadians are despised, WASPS "truly hated and feared" (*Street*, p. 57). In one significant respect, however, Richler's Jews are in agreement with the Anglo-Saxon protagonists of the *Childhoods* already examined. Like their blander compatriots, the inhabitants of St. Urbain St. undervalue themselves, and look abroad, rather than within the country for a standard value. "You're zeroes. We all are," the protagonist's father tells the regulars at Tansky's. "Canada, from the beginning, was second-best," the narrator tells his readers (*Street*, pp. 110, 16). As in *St. Urbain's Horseman*, the two countries which seem to offer a vision of the very best are Britain and the United States.

For the protagonist of *The Street* and his companions, the embryonic state of Israel also beckons more temptingly than anything within Canada. Richler's character learns what many other central figures of *Childhoods* have to learn: to distrust ideologies, and narrow-mindedness in all its forms. Zionism is merely the most attractive shape of a blind allegiance to Jewishness which, in diverse ways, pervades St. Urbain St. thinking. "You should remember only to write good things about the Jews" (*Street*, p. 99), a spokesman for orthodoxy tells Mervyn Kaplansky, the untalented, self-styled "wordsmith" who temporarily wins the narrator's admiration. Mervyn does not need this

advice, for his novel has already been devised to show "the struggles of our people in a hostile society" (*Street*, p. 93). It is only after he becomes disillusioned with both Mervyn and Zionism that the protagonist can turn, in the final paragraph of the book, to writing as his own vocation.

Richler has, of course, continued to write about Jews, though unlike Mervyn he has not always had good things to say about them. In the opening pages of *The Street*, he projects himself as a successful model of emancipation and cosmopolitanism. Like Maynard and Torgov, he has triumphed over parochialism, and he seems able to comment on St. Urbain St. with the detachment J. K. Galbraith brought to his contemplation of Dutton. For a moment, however, Richler directs the reader's attention to the powerful psychological claims of the racial past. Recalling his first return from exile, Richler shows the conqueror of new worlds capitulating to the champion of a traditional attitude:

A Yiddish newspaper fluttering on her massive lap, black bootlaces unravelled, my grandmother was ensconced in a kitchen chair on the balcony, seemingly rooted there, attended by sons and daughters, fortified by grandchildren. "How is it for the Jews in Europe?" she asked me.

A direct question from an old lady with a wart turned like a screw in her cheek and in an instant I was shorn of all my desperately acquired sophistication; my *New Statesman* outlook, my shaky knowledge of wines and European capitals; the life I had made for myself beyond the ghetto. (*Street*, p. 16)

I wish, by way of conclusion, to return briefly to Professor Coe's Australian *Childhoods*. Compared to the Canadian characters we have been considering, the Australian protagonist appears, on the whole, more inclined to cultivate an independent individuality, more outspoken and even acerbic in tone, more conscious of growing up within a *national* culture (which is not to say, of course, that he admires that culture).

Three further considerations may serve to confirm by contrast the portrait of the colonial Canadian I have been attempting to draw. Evaluative critical judgements on such a broad scale are difficult to make; nevertheless, I would say that Canadian fictional *Childhoods* are the equal of their Australian counterparts, but that in pure autobiography, with honourable exceptions

such as Dickson and Salverson, our efforts have been inferior to the Australian works. One may wonder whether the reluctance to write forcefully about oneself may be related either to the well-known Canadian disease of perceived inferiority or to the unmodified inheritance of British reticence.

A comparison of family patterns yields interesting results. Coe finds a pervasive "failed father" motif, and a less frequent but significant pattern in which the protagonist lives vicariously through the experiences of an elder brother ("Portrait," pp. 159-62). In Canadian *Childhoods*, a sibling who really matters to the protagonist is quite rare. On the other hand, fathers or father substitutes, far from being dead, absent, or unreliable, are very frequently central to the narrative. They exert, for good or ill, a powerful influence on the protagonists of works by Blondal, Buckler, Carr, Dickson, Maynard, Minifie, Salverson, and Torgov. If the father is not dominant, we find a strong-willed mother, aunt, or grandparent, as in Laurence, Leacock, Montgomery, Munro, Richler, and Ritchie. Often, there is an explicit connection between the parent and a mother country; in any case, the extreme importance attached to the parent as opposed to siblings produces in the Canadian protagonist an orientation towards filial obedience which has implications in terms of national as well as family loyalties.

Related also to family and colonial feeling is the image of the big house, a motif which appears more often in Canadian than in Australian *Childhoods*. This symbol can be found in Blondal, Carr, Dickson, Laurence, Montgomery, and Ritchie. In nearly every instance, the attempt to build a Canadian equivalent of the English country house represents an effort to perpetuate British tradition, or at least to found a Canadian dynasty on aristocratic principles.

Salverson speaks of herself as "a true Icelander" because she is "more likely to be keenly engrossed with problems of time than of space" (*Confessions*, p. 115). The evidence I have gathered suggests to me that in making such a self-definition, Salverson reveals herself to be as much a true Canadian as an Icelander. The role of ancestry in Canadian *Childhoods* certainly seems

fundamental. For Lovat Dickson, writing an autobiography without reference to the family tree is unthinkable:

I am not going to write about my vigorous ancestors but about myself in the pages that follow. But I could not explain my own character without calling them briefly to appear. What they did, what they endured, their achievements, their failures, their tempers and ardours, the workings of their minds and the inclinations of their hearts moulded me into what I am.

(*Ante-Room*, p. 15)

Salverson tells us, "The old-fashioned Icelander . . . does not cherish his ancestors idly. . . . One walked warily before this ghostly assembly, and shuddered to be found wanting in commendable behaviour" (*Confessions*, pp. 49-50). The Canadian autobiographer also walks warily, but the ghosts he fears to offend are the ghosts of another country.

NOTES

- ¹ *Southerly*, 41, No. 2 (1981), 126-62; cited parenthetically as "Portrait."
- ² Professor Coe has examined French-Canadian autobiographies of childhood in "Childhood in the Shadows: The Myth of the Unhappy Child in Jewish, Irish and French-Canadian Autobiography," *Comparison*, No. 13 (1982), pp. 3-67. His study of the genre is to be published shortly by Yale University Press.
- ³ A vigorous controversy has arisen in very recent criticism as to whether any valid distinction between fiction and autobiography can be made. I have discussed this question in an article on Glassco's *Memoirs of Montparnasse* (*Canadian Poetry*, No. 13 [Fall/Winter 1983], pp. 59-84; see pp. 71-73). In the present context, I do not feel an effort to separate fiction from autobiography is required. I am not claiming that works presenting themselves as fiction are in reality disguised autobiographies; I simply wish to juxtapose national visions of childhood experience.
- ⁴ Decisions as to whether a specific title should be included or excluded as a result of these guidelines often proved hard to make, and the list given here is necessarily subjective. The conclusions I have drawn are based on a study of the following works (though only about two-thirds of the titles are discussed directly): Patricia Blondal, *A Candle to Light the Sun*; Ernest Buckler, *The Mountain and the Valley*; Emily Carr, *The Book of Small*; Ralph Connor, *Postscript to Adventure*; Lovat Dickson, *The Ante-Room*; J. K. Galbraith, *The Scotch*; Margaret Laurence, *A Bird in the House*; Stephen Leacock, *The Boy I Left Behind Me*; Nellie McClung, *Clearing in the West*; Oonah McFee, *Sandbars*; Fredelle Maynard, *Raisins and Almonds*; James M. Minifie, *Homesteader*; L. M. Montgomery, *Emily of New Moon*, *Emily Climbs*, and *Emily's Quest*; Alice Munro, *Lives of Girls and Women*; Mordecai Richler, *The Street*; Charles Ritchie, *An Appetite for Life*; Wallace Stegner, *Wolf Willow*; Morley Torgov, *A Good Place to Come From*.
- ⁵ Charles Ritchie, *An Appetite For Life* (Toronto: Macmillan, 1977), p. 34.

- 6 Patrick Maloney, quoted in John Pengwerne Matthews, *Tradition in Exile: A Comparative Study of Social Influences on the Development of Australian and Canadian Poetry in the Nineteenth Century* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1962), pp. 4-5.
- 7 Randolph Stow, *The Merry-Go-Round in the Sea* (London: Macdonald, 1965), p. 118.
- 8 Georges Gusdorf, "Conditions and Limits of Autobiography," in *Autobiography: Essays Theoretical and Critical*, ed. James Olney (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1980), p. 33.
- 9 David Malouf, *Johnno* (1975; rpt. Ringwood, Australia: Penguin, 1976), p. 98.
- 10 Barbara Hanrahan, *The Scent of Eucalyptus* (1973; rpt. London: Fontana, 1980), p. 7.
- 11 Miles Franklin, *My Brilliant Career* (1901; rpt. New York: Washington Square Press, 1981), p. xviii.
- 12 L. M. Montgomery, *Emily Climbs* (1924; rpt. Toronto: McClelland & Stewart, 1974), p. 210.
- 13 Anna Jameson, *Winter Studies and Summer Rambles in Canada* (1838; rpt. Toronto: McClelland & Stewart, 1965), p. 49.
- 14 Donald Horne, *The Education of Young Donald* (1967; rpt. Ringwood, Australia: Penguin, 1975), pp. 37, 71.
- 15 Lovat Dickson, *The Ante-Room* (London: Macmillan, 1959), pp. 4-5, 69-70.
- 16 James M. Minifie, *Homesteader* (Toronto: Macmillan, 1973), p. 64.
- 17 Wallace Stegner, *Wolf Willow: A History, A Story and a Memory of the Last Prairie Frontier* (1955; rpt. Toronto: Macmillan, 1977), p. 23.
- 18 J. K. Galbraith, *The Scotch* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1964), p. 9.
- 19 Stephen Leacock, *The Boy I Left Behind Me* (1947), in *The Penguin Stephen Leacock*, ed. Robertson Davies (Markham: Penguin, 1981), p. 375.
- 20 "Greater Canada: an appeal" (1906), in *The Social Criticism of Stephen Leacock*, ed. Alan Bowker (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1973), pp. 4, 10.
- 21 Margaret Laurence, *A Bird in the House* (Toronto: McClelland & Stewart, 1970), p. 49.
- 22 L. M. Montgomery, *Emily's Quest* (1927; rpt. Toronto: McClelland & Stewart, 1972), p. 177.
- 23 Patricia Blondal, *A Candle to Light the Sun* (Toronto: McClelland & Stewart, 1960), p. 314. Blondal's protagonist is male, but the novel apparently reflects the atmosphere of her own hometown, Souris, Manitoba.
- 24 An even grimmer picture of the immigrant's plight is given in Joy Kogawa's powerful *Obasan*. Since the novel's protagonist is never defined as a writer, I have not discussed it.
- 25 Laura Goodman Salverson, *Confessions of an Immigrant's Daughter* (1939; rpt. Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1981), pp. 49, 39.
- 26 Morley Torgov, *A Good Place to Come From* (Toronto: Lester and Orpen, 1974), p. 7.
- 27 Fredelle Brusser Maynard, *Raisins and Almonds* (Toronto: Doubleday, 1972), pp. 103, 106, 114.
- 28 Mordecai Richler, *The Street* (Toronto: McClelland & Stewart, 1969), p. 28.