

Evelyn Eaton: 1902-1983

Clara Thomas

ABSTRACT

Clara Thomas examines the career of popular fiction writer Evelyn Eaton and the ways in which she shaped early Acadian material to meet the demands and preconceptions of 1940's Hollywood.

RÉSUMÉ

Clara Thomas examine la carrière de l'écrivaine de romans populaires Evelyn Eaton et la manière dont celle-ci a su utiliser les événements historiques de l'Acadie à ses débuts, pour les adapter à la demande et aux idées préconçues de l'Hollywood des années quarante.

Instead of the fair-haired, blue-eyed Anglo-Saxon son my mother craved and expected, I was a startling throwback to that Micmac or Malecite whose genes were in my father ... a black-haired, black-eyed, sallow-skinned daughter, with very little bridge to my nose."

That sentence, early in her autobiography, The Trees and Fields Went the Other Way,¹ describes the dominant factor in Evelyn Eaton's entire adventuring life. "It was forty years before I discovered that we had those Algonquin genes ... It was sixty years before I sat with my brothers and sisters in the Sweat Lodge and heard the ancient chants and prayed the ancient prayers, and knew that I had come, however tardily, home ... or, if not home, at least to a familiar inn" (TF 9, 11).

She ended her autobiography on the November day in 1966 when the Mugar Memorial Library of Boston University was dedicated, with her extensive collection of manuscripts and papers as part of its initial archival holding. At that time she had published 13 novels, 3 works of non-fiction, 3 volumes of poetry, and 2 children's books. She was 72 years old, and still had ahead of her a number of the most fulfilling years of her life, when she lived in close contact with the

Indians of Owens Valley, California, the Paiutes, Shoshones and Washoes. "I am not trying to 'ensnare' the Indian way of life," she wrote, "I am ensnared by it" (TF 307).

This paper was written as a challenge to some scholar who will follow the strands of Evelyn Eaton's life and work as, I believe, they deserve. She is a Maritime woman writer, the daughter of Maritime parents. She wrote three of her best known historical novels in a cabin called Fundy Tide overlooking Victoria Beach between 1940 and 1945. All those novels dealt with early Acadian material. During World War II, under the pressures of the American publishing world and grateful for the success she was having there she became an American citizen, but we are being inexcusably parochial if we ignore her life and her work for that reason. My memory of Evelyn Eaton goes back to 1940 and the publication of her most successful novel, Quietly my Captain Waits. Well-tutored throughout the thirties by Hollywood's stream of historical spectacles, climaxing with the stunning success of Gone With the Wind, the reading public and the movie-going public, virtually the same then, for everyone went to the movies, were attuned to the historical romance as they perhaps have never been since.

Moreover, the war years further fostered a taste for the combination of romantic escapism and patriotic heroics and derring-do that such works presented. In Canada, Franklin Davey McDowell's The Champlain Road, E.J. Pratt's Brebeuf and His Brethren, and Alan Sullivan's Three Came to Ville Marie won Governor General's Awards in 1940 and 1941. Every publisher and every movie mogul was looking for a follow-up to the beautiful, brave and bitchy Scarlett O'Hara, and when Evelyn Eaton sketched out a plot featuring Louise de Freneuse, her literary agent sold it that same day to Harper Brothers for an advance of \$1000, a big sum in those days. It was a windfall to Eaton who had just come back to America from England, jobless and flat broke.

I did remember a rainy afternoon I had spent in the fort at Annapolis Royal in Nova Scotia Uncle Tim was a curator of the museum there. He showed me a series of letters about a French-woman named Louise de Freneuse. Each letter praised her or damned her in words that still came crackling off the pages. One said, "This story against Madame de Freneuse is pushed as far as hell can desire."

She crossed the Bay of Fundy alone in an open canoe with a small Micmac boy, ... she loved the Captain of the fastest sailing vessel in the world, although she was married to two other men, ... she sustained the fighting courage of a starved and defeated garrison. (*TF* 146)

Eaton took a train for Nova Scotia, rented a cabin on the shore of Fundy near Victoria Beach, and settled in to write. She found she had a story that was even

more exciting than she remembered, the years she had spent in France were invaluable in helping with background, and there were neighbouring Micmacs and Malecites with whom she felt completely at home, who gave her help with the Indian parts of the story: "I wrote a chapter a day, on an old battered portable with keys that stuck and a ribbon that had to be rewound by hand because it would go only one way. The chapters were short, never more than four pages" (*TF* 146). At the end of the summer she took her daughter Terry back to Edgehill school in Windsor where she had enrolled her as a boarder immediately on their arrival from England, and went back to New York with her manuscript. The book was published as a "Harper Find" in a furor of publicity, and Warner Brothers bought the rights for \$40,000 as a vehicle to star Bette Davis. No movie was ever made in spite of some years of to-ing and fro-ing and the bandying about of such names as Joan Crawford and Errol Flynn, but the book itself was a best-seller in the dismal war year of 1940, and riding on a wave of optimism and gratitude, Evelyn Eaton became an American citizen. She returned to Nova Scotia for the summer, however, settling again in her cabin, Fundy Tide, to begin another novel. Until 1945 she considered Nova Scotia her home, utilizing the Acadian past for both Restless Are The Sails and The Sea is So Wide, both successful for she now had a faithful following, though neither of them fulfilled the best-selling promise that Quietly had established.

The story of Louise de Freneuse as now authenticated in the DCB forms the basic fabric of Quietly My Captain Waits.² Louise Guyon, born in 1668 on the Isle d'Orleans, was married, widowed and married again by the time she was 18. Her husband, Mathieu Damours de Freneuse, and his three brothers had as their seigneuries two leagues of land on the St. John river near the present Nashwaak, New Brunswick. After a more than a decade of tending their affairs, Mathieu went to Quebec to take up his fa-

ther's position on the Council Suzerain. He died while settling his Acadian estate and arranging to live in Quebec and his widow, thirty-four, with five children, moved to Port Royal in 1702 to live with her sister and brother-in-law. There the King's Lieutenant, Pierre Denys de Bonaventure, took her into his home, she bore a child, and a vicious scandal erupted, involving church and state to such a degree that the governor sent her to France where she is said to have spent her time lobbying for de Bonaventure's appointment as Governor. He was refused the post in 1706, the scandal seeming to have been the reason, and Mme. de Freneuse returned to Acadia -- but so did de Bonaventure's wife. Once again, the troublesome Louise was removed from the scene, this time exiled to Quebec. After the capture of Port Royal by the British, de Bonaventure went to France where he died in 1711. Louise successfully petitioned the British Governor to return to Port Royal, where she still had lands, and after 1711 she drops from sight.

It takes no stretch of the imagination to erect a romantic novel of adventure, deathless love and international intrigue on this base, and Evelyn Eaton was equal to the task. The records themselves were replete with dramatic material, from the precarious situation of Acadia itself, threatened by the rapacious English and, from time to time, by the hostile Iroquois, to the stubborn love of Louise de Freneuse and Denys de Bonaventure. The crafting of the book, with best-sellerdom and the movies in mind, is its most interesting feature, I believe, for present day scholars. Those four-page chapters sound strange, especially when one thinks of the lengthy, not to say windy, expansiveness of Scott for instance, or even of her contemporary, Raddall. But when we consider the filming of a book, and then look at Quietly My Captain Waits, their reason and purpose become obvious. Each chapter is a scene: so, for instance, we begin in France, with short and vivid chapters that establish the heroic, and handsome, authority of Pierre Denys

de Bonaventure, captain of the *Soleil d'Afrique*, the protector of a young lad, Raoul de Perrichet, his secretary, to whom he confides the story of the girl he met, loved and chivalrously gave up long ago in Quebec. The girl, of course, is now Louise de Freneuse, married, a mother, but still committed in her heart to de Bonaventure, her first and only real love. By chapter eight, page 30, they have met again at a gorgeous ball in Quebec city, a splendid occasion that is interrupted by the Governor, Count Frontenac's announcement that the Iroquois have attacked the settlement of Trois Rivieres, massacred twenty-nine and taken six captives. By chapter twelve, page 49, Madame de Freneuse and her sister are sailing with de Bonaventure toward Port Royal where de Bonaventure is determined to lead a confederation of Micmacs and Malecites against the Iroquois. Raoul, himself infatuated with Louise, has become the onlooker and narrator of the stormy and agonized course of their reawakened passion. By chapter seventeen, page 70, de Bonaventure's crew have met, boarded and defeated an English ship and Louise and her lover have consummated their love in the 1940s style that made for wonderful, full-screen closeups: "He gathered her close and held her against his heart. 'Light the light,' she said in a whisper. 'No.' 'Light the light!' He tightened his hold for a moment, sighed, released her, and obeyed. When the flickering light grew steady, casting an orange beam on the little room, she turned him again to face her; and as he looked at her, not daring to speak, she smiled and offered him her lips."

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This novel has, it is true, all those cliched romantic conventions which we scorn, or at best, tolerate. But its craft is quite breath-taking all the same. Love scenes, battle scenes at sea, forest scenes, good-and-bad-savage scenes, French court scenes, everything that movie technicians most loved to deal with and that audiences most loved to see, move forward with breathless speed and suspense -- and at

the last, chapter 87, page 360, Eaton wrote a scene of renunciation between Mme de Freneuse and the ever-faithful, ever-present Raoul that would leave not a dry eye in the house: "I must stay here. There is work for me to do. The English must be driven out of Acadia. We must push them into the sea. Then he will not have died in vain I am not alone. I have his son. You must remember that when you think of me. Farewell, Raoul" (*QCW* 360). Can't you see it now, the brave Louise, bareheaded, her cloak blowing in the wind, waving farewell, her little boy clinging to her skirts, the faithful Micmac youth standing by? It is impossible not to make a little fun of it, but at the same time, let me try to convince you that Evelyn Eaton researched well, and she wrote well. The authenticity of her historical background and its details, including details of the fragile society of New France, is entirely convincing, miles ahead of the supermarket best-sellers of today, and certainly worthy of some academic exploration of the interaction between film and fiction in the popular culture field.

Her father, Daniel Eaton, had been born to a large family on a poor farm near Truro. The land was the remnant of a grant made to the ancestor who, she says, had been "tarred, feathered and flung out of Connecticut in 1779" (*TF* 35). A graduate of R.M.C. in Kingston, Daniel Eaton was an officer in the Royal Canadian Horse Artillery, had served in the Boer War, was to be killed at Verdun in World War I, and for most of Evelyn's childhood was an instructor in Kingston at the R.M.C. Her mother, Myra, was the daughter of one of the founding families of Fredericton, New Brunswick, the Fitz Randolphs, exceedingly proud of their Loyalist ancestry, devotedly Anglophile, and in Evelyn's girlhood, the prosperous heirs of the lumber and wholesale business which had established the family fortune. In all this illustrious family connection, at least as she looked back on her childhood from her sixties, from infancy on she had one overriding problem, her agonizing feeling of inferiority and rejection

because of the favouritism shown to her sister Helen, four years older than she. That favouritism she came to connect primarily with her "Indian" appearance, so unlike Helen's blonde beauty.

The Fitz Randolph pattern of living, with trips "Home" to England every other year, English education and European finishing schools and family travels, is not strange to anyone familiar with the peregrinations of the family of Henry James, or, closer to home, to the patrician Halifax background of Charles Ritchie. What was crucial in the life of Evelyn Eaton, however, was the eruption of World War I, the death of her father, the subsequent virtually permanent residence of her mother in England, and the brilliant marriage of sister Helen to Lord Dashwood of West Wycombe Park in Buckinghamshire. She has little that is good to say about her English years, though she might well be duly grateful for the education she received at Heathfield School, "an ultra-snobbish nonsense place known as 'the girls' Eton'" (*TF* 61), for she quite obviously had splendid training in literature and writing at least. She barely and bad-humouredly tolerated the various social rituals, including presentation at court, to which she was subjected, and gives not even grudging thanks to her mother for her months in Paris with an indulgent French family, designed to "finish" her education, but in reality her first and heady taste of joyful exploration: "It colored my life and brought me back to France at crucial times, for love, childbirth, marriage, divorce" (*TF* 91). And try as she will throughout her autobiography to present herself as the humble, misunderstood girl of the people longing only for love and understanding, a good part of the elitism she associated with her mother's snob values was always part of her own makeup, travelling in uneasy tandem with her powerful impulse to rebel against anything and everything she saw as hampering her freedom and individuality.

From her early insistence on taking secretarial training in London to her death at age 80 in a commune in

Independence, California, her life was a reflection of an unusually gifted person and an indefatigably adventuring spirit. She bore pregnancy and the birth of her daughter, Terry, alone in Paris, later marrying Terry's father, but only briefly: "I felt that marriage was in itself defeat. I believed that I believed in free love" (TF 117). She squeezed in her apprenticeship years as a writer at the same time as she worked at an array of poorly paying clerical jobs. Threatened with serious tubercular illness, she was able to afford some months of rest cure in a shepherd's cabin in the hills of Provence because of the modest success of a first novel, Desire, Spanish Version. The light-hearted sketches published in The New Yorker and collected in Every Month Was May and The North Star Is Nearer were minor but charming and certainly well-paying products of this time, but its major gift to the life of Evelyn Eaton was through the agency of a chance-met book, Peaux Rouges, that consolidated her awareness of the spiritual beliefs of North American Indians: "Knowledge comes when the time is right, when one is already aware of the subject It was as though someone, something, woke me from amnesia to the recall of truth grasped in childhood or in other lives" (TF 126).⁴

For some years she was a prosperous and well-known writer. Perhaps the high point of her mid-life career was being chosen as one of a small and select group of journalists who were toured around the theatres of war in the Pacific and Europe in the final weeks of conflict in 1945. The group, representing the top Newspaper and Radio networks in the States, and temporarily commissioned as American Army Officers, was an extremely high-level one. They were granted interviews with officialdom from Chiang Kai Shek to the Pope and toured through the most top-secret areas, including the recently liberated camps of Belsen and Dachau. Their reports informed reading and listening Americans for months thereafter. She suffered a serious drop in popularity and therefore in

income during the fifties, and began some years of unwilling teaching of English and Creative Writing, briefly at Columbia, then for several years at Sweet Briar College in Virginia.

Throughout these years, and indeed, intermittently throughout her life, she was seriously bent on a quest leading to the spiritual life she longed for. She found it, finally, in 1962, when she came to a small college in Deep Springs, California, and first encountered the Paiute and Arapaho medicine people. She had twenty more years to fulfill her longing for the true spiritual home that she finally found among them, and she made the most of them, becoming a medicine woman herself, writing three books, Snowy Earth Comes Gliding, I Send a Voice, and The Shaman and the Medicine Wheel, and presiding as the central figure in the commune in Independence, California, where she died in 1983. Her daughter, Terry, commemorated her later years and did honour to her deepest spiritual beliefs in Joy Before Night: The Last Years of Evelyn Eaton. She ends her tribute with a transcript of a talk given by her mother at the close of a large gathering sponsored by the Bear Tribe in northern California, shortly before she died:

I leave behind a picture of Evelyn Eaton, nearly eighty, dressed in white buckskin with an intricately beaded shawl around her shoulders, made especially for her by a direct descendant of Wovoka. Blue medallions hang from her ears, and on her feet, a pair of soft leather moccasins. She stands before a microphone, alone on a wide stage at the foot of a dell, while the audience is seated on a steep slope. She is leaning on her walking stick, sometimes called her talking stick, and though she seems frail there is, in the smile she throws to the crowd,

a visible, enduring strength.

She begins: "I believe we can take away from here many new and old ideas, and reinforcements, and reassurances, and confirmations of the different ways we're going toward the Great Spirit."⁵

Terry Eaton is approachable and cooperative, as Heather Kirk, a student of a few years back found out when she began tentatively to investigate Evelyn Eaton. The papers in the Mugar Memorial Library of Boston University are copious, vastly engrossing, and open to scholars. Perhaps my challenge, to look into Eaton's many faceted life and work, will take root in one of you. I hope so.

Editor's Note:

This essay is also published in *All My Sisters*, (Ottawa: Tecumseh Press, 1994), a collection of essays by Clara Thomas on the works of Canadian Women writers.

NOTES

1. Evelyn Eaton, *The Trees and Fields Went the Other Way*. New York: Harcourt, 1974.
2. René Baudry, "Guyon, Louise" (Thibault, Damours de Freneuse), *Dictionary of Canadian Biography*, Vol. III, 1741-1770, Appendix.
3. Evelyn Eaton, *Quietly My Captain Waits*. New York: The Literary Guild of America, Inc., 1940, p. 70.
4. Coincidentally, as I was writing this paper, the *Canadian Geographic Magazine*, July/August 1992, published "Sacred Circles," a detailed report on the Medicine Wheels of the Prairie tribes, an archeologist's account of their probable history and powerful traditions.
5. Terry Eagleton, *Joy before Night: The Last Years of Evelyn Eaton*. Wheaton, Illinois: The Theosophical Publishing House, 1988, p. 146.