

Three Canadian Women:

Fiction or Autobiography

by Carol Shields

It is a mysterious fact that literary critics are fond of citing cases in which writers of fiction have incorporated autobiographical material into their books. There is sometimes a gleeful pouncing on this fact, as though they, the critics, have caught the writer out, have found her guilty of major trespassing. Sometimes the tone is openly accusing; more often it is simply revealing commentary, a self-serving tribute perhaps to the critic's own cleverness in ferreting out these literary infringements.

In much the same way, a writer of auto-



biography is chastened when she bridges a synapse of memory with a fictional connective. Or she may incriminate herself by "touching up" her portrait. Her point of view--if it deviates too wildly from recognized fact--may leave her open to charges of bias or even untruth; one thinks immediately of Hemingway's A Movable Feast in which the author's vision has become grotesquely distorted. What is sometimes forgotten is that the only truth an autobiographer is obliged to observe is her own truth, however idiosyncratic that truth may be.

This sort of critical sleuthing--which often carries with it more than a hint of outrage--stems perhaps from an oversimplified view of literature, from a compulsion on the part of critics and academics to categorize forms of writing and a desire to impose on literature definable and teachable genres. The effect of this insistent cataloguing, of course, leaves the critics with the additional and inevitable task of naming exceptions and allowing for minor variances. For it is not the writer who coaxes her work into the confines of genre, nor is it the writer who willingly suspends her disbelief; the writer, despite her declared intentions, knows that the self can never be washed out of her storytelling, just as her creative impulse can never be separated from her personal experience. Furthermore, if one subscribes to the theory that it is not the writer's self which is re-

vealed in her writing but a sort of second self, the onus upon her to distinguish between the separate spheres of fiction and autobiography will all but disappear; at the very least the boundaries will soften to a less arbitrary interpretation.

The imaginative element has long been recognized in diaries, for whether or not a diary is intended for publication, a writer reveals what she wishes to reveal. Some writers, of course, use diaries or memoirs as exploratory machinery, as attempts to understand themselves or their period, but these explorations are almost always undertaken with deliberate shaping and selectivity, the writer controlling the direction of the quest and the nature of the conclusions.

Today many of the boundaries in literature appear to be collapsing. Is Margaret Laurence's A Bird in the House a novel or a collection of short stories? Is Atwood's The Journals of Susanna Moodie a long narrative poem or a series of lyrics? One is forced to ask whether traditional definitions are not overly subscribed to or insisted upon. Various approaches to autobiography too have become blurred. When does a diary become a memoir? When does a tale based on an actual event become reportage or essay or story? The refining of these distinctions, in the end, be exhausting and futile. Most futile and laborious of all may be the picking apart of the

elements of fiction and reality, laborious because an infinite number of statements must be questioned and futile because no one but the author will ever be able to settle the question and even she may find herself helpless in the making of final distinctions.

An example of this hybrid approach to reality is Susanna Moodie's Roughing it in the Bush, a book which is frequently looked upon as a novel and just as frequently as a document of personal history. One can make a rough case for either position (though not without being further confused by her wanderings into other forms) but it is fairly safe to say that she herself did not consider this book a novel. She did, of course, write a number of conventional nineteenth-century novels but even in these she is flexible about the question of genre, cheerfully making, when she wishes, a personal aside to the reader or placing a confirming footnote when she feels a situation might place a strain on her reader's credulity. Her novel, Mark Hurdlestone, is unarguably a work of fiction but another novel, Flora Lindsay, presents a more complicated problem of classification. Though everything known about life suggests that this work is autobiographical fiction, Moodie chooses to call Flora Lindsay a novel because the autobiographical elements have been assimilated and shaped into a form normally recognized as a novel.

Roughing it in the Bush has fewer imaginative elements than Mrs. Moodie's novels and it observes, at least at times, the chronology of memoirs. The autobiographical material, though, has been unevenly absorbed and Moodie's didactic urge ensures that her readers will be given more than a mere accounting of her adventures. The focus moves at times from self to society and the desire to amuse and divert--her stated wish--represents a giant step toward the craft of fiction since it requires not only selectivity but deliberate shaping.

More important to those who see Roughing it in the Bush as a novel is Moodie's handling of persona. The "I" of this book is not the voice of one who is recounting a series of adventures; it is the fully developed character-narrator, a persona which is expanded and enhanced so that it becomes in the end, a heroic presence in an ongoing drama. It should be remembered, though, that the creation of this persona may be partly unconscious; Moodie, at the time of writing Roughing it in the Bush, had already had considerable experience with fiction, and the re-arrangement of events to give tension and structure may have been second nature to her. In the same way, the projection of persona may have flowed from her pen with ease and honesty rather than with contrived egotism. Nevertheless, her pioneer memories, with their dramatic

structure and use of persona, more closely approach fiction than does the solid accountability of other pioneer women such as Catherine Parr Trail and Anna Jameson.

Jane Ellice, whose diary has recently been published by Oberon Press, also brings elements of fiction to her autobiographical task. The Ellice diary covers a period of about nine months in 1838 during which Jane, a woman still in her twenties, accompanied Lord Durham's expedition to Canada. Ellice was a less conscious shaper of her experience than was Moodie. Her writing, in fact, has much of the brisk jotting shorthand normally found in diaries:

Got up at $\frac{1}{2}$ past 5; dressed ourselves & went to see what we could see. Lovely morning. Beautiful wild flowers. Left Tina to draw while I made sketch from the Mill window.

(August 8, 1838)

Diaries impose their own chronological structure but in the Ellice diary a larger form emerges which manages to override this severe linear limitation. The diary, which begins with superficial jottings, mostly notations on matters of dress and manners, gradually grows more personal, more reflective and more dense. The half sentences favoured in the first three months of entries thicken and develop into a more confident, graceful and conscious style. Thus on September 13th she

writes:

Up after five after having a most disturbed night, first from the violence of the wind which smashed our windows and threatened to bring down the house about our ears.

The fuller text, the proliferation of details and the greater faith in her own reactions may have reflected her own growing pleasure in diary keeping or it may have sprung from her growing realization, as the time in Canada drew to a close, that the diary would be shared with those back in England--the notebook had, in fact, been given to her by her father-in-law who rather imperiously demanded that she bring home a full account. Then, too, the events witnessed by Jane Ellice had a fortuitous gathering of impetus, so that the climax of the story, a terrifying week in which Jane and her sister were kept prisoners by French-Canadian rebels, occurs as if planned in a structured novel.

The first day of this siege, as recorded in the diary, illustrates an important fact about Jane as a recorder of events. The account occupies a mere two dozen lines and is in the briefest note form. But immediately following is a far more detailed account--a second draft--in which the siege is minutely described and given full and colourful treatment. The sentences swell to full size and Jane records her own terrified reaction to events, demonstrating her descriptive

powers and suggesting a familiarity with the structure of fiction. She switches from the genteel and vague first person plural to a single, powerful narrative voice. Without rearranging facts or inserting imaginary dialogue, she manages to give her account both density and drama.

The extent to which she projects a persona can, of course, only be guessed at. Her image of herself is that of a lively, accomplished and relentlessly upper-class woman. "Making bread," she says, is "tiresome work I should think." (October 10, 1838) The enormity of that unconsciously dropped phrase--"I should think"--with its suggestions of distances and distinctions serves as an index to all Ellice's undeclared social conceits.

The transcription of experience into imaginative expression is less pronounced in Jane Ellice's diary than it is in Roughing it in the Bush; this may have to do with the form of recording or it may rise from differences of temperament. Jane Ellice is more direct and less meditative than Moodie, showing less of a tendency to romanticize or to seek out evidence of the divine hand in nature. She is, in addition, impatient with genteel euphemism:

If you hear a Vessel hailed to ask what she contains, and the answer is returned: "Timber and fruit" if you have been in America you know it means broomsticks and

potatoes. . . .

(November 26, 1838)

Her preference for the broomsticks-and-potatoes variety of reportage suggest that she is a reliable witness and that her journal is weighted more in favour of fact than of fiction.

The same may be said for the British Columbia pioneer Susan Moir Allison whose memoir, A Pioneer Gentlewoman in British Columbia, has recently been published. It is of some interest perhaps that Susan Allison began her Canadian life at the age of fourteen, whereas Jane Ellice visited Canada in her twenties and Moodie in her early thirties. Susan's recollections, though they are the least literary of the three, have a startling vividness of detail, testifying to the completeness of vision which is usually associated with the smaller, more manageable universe of childhood. Her shrugging acceptance of her life in the wilderness--for not surprisingly she suffered a lesser degree of cultural shock--gives her work a delightful unself-consciousness. The openness of the writing may owe something to the manner in which her book was written, for these recollections were not set down until 1925 when Allison was over eighty years old. They were written quickly and without notes, although she was able to refer to some short stories she had written many years earlier. The great age of pioneering was over and Allison, living by then in the city of Vancouver, may have come to see her role with the kind of

balanced perspective denied Susanna Moodie and Jane Ellice.

Like Susanna Moodie she had literary inclinations but unlike Moodie she was a recorder rather than a shaper of events. (She is a little unsteady on dates and shows an understandable unevenness of memory, remembering, for instance, exactly how many tucks she took in a petticoat she once made and on the next page finding herself uncertain about the exact date of her wedding day.) Unlike Moodie who often writes in an elevated literary manner, Allison's narrative has the warmth and flow of human speech. It would never occur to her, one feels, to transform broomsticks and potatoes into timber and fruit.

Like Jane Ellice she is fortunate in the structure of her memoir: those events which are the most dramatic--the flooding of her farm, for instance--fall into the very section of the narrative which a writer of fiction might have chosen. But a real consciousness of structure is lacking; irrelevant details crowd in; there is a sense of rambling disorder and one senses that Allison, unlike Moodie and Ellice, had relatively little concern with the impact she might make on her audience. There appears to be no attempt to create a persona; Allison sees herself as a part of a larger history. She has little of the reflective quality of Moodie and none of the wit of Jane Ellice but

despite this lack her account has a reliability of tone which the other accounts lack, making it perhaps the farthest removed from the fictional form.

Susanna Moodie, Jane Ellice and Susan Moir Allison--three nineteenth-century women who were moved by a compulsion to set down their Canadian experiences--approached their tasks in widely differing ways. What sets them apart more than anything else is the degree of deliberation and imagination each brought to her separate story. In discussing the spillover between autobiography and fiction there is no desire to castigate writers who mingle the two forms or who weave back and forth between them. What does suggest itself, in these three stories at least, is the fact that the two genres are inextricably locked together. It may be that there is no such thing as pure autobiography or pure fiction, but only varying degrees of assimilated and transformed experience. It may be that real events are never freed of personal interpretation or imaginary extension, just as imagination finds its definitions and reference points in individual reality.

BIBLIOGRAPHY

- Godsell, Patricia, ed. The Diary of Jane Ellice. Ottawa: Oberon, 1975.
- MacPherson, Jay. "Canadian Autobiography," Literary History of Canada. Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1965.
- Moodie, Susanna. Roughing it in the Bush, ed. Carl Klinck. Toronto: McClelland and Stewart, 1962.
- _____. Roughing it in the Bush. London: Bentley, 1852.
- Ormsby, Margaret A., ed. A Pioneer Gentlewoman in British Columbia. The Recollections of Susan Allison. Vancouver: University of British Columbia Press, 1976.