

Folklore in the Canadian Novel

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Article abstract

La fiction, dans la littérature canadienne, a puisé de façons diverses aux sources du folklore. Basée sur trois oeuvres aussi représentatives que celles de Frank Day, Philip Child et Robertson Davies, cette étude veut démontrer que l'usage qui a été fait du folklore lui-même dénote au cours des ans des changements d'attitudes significatifs.

Articles

*Folklore in the Canadian Novel*¹

TERRY GOLDIE

This study concentrates on three examples of the use of folklore in Canadian fiction which seem to suggest a significant change in authors' attitudes toward folklore between earlier and later periods. These distinctions are not meant to be seen as absolute. There are examples of the second attitude in earlier works and of the first in later. However, an examination of a larger body of material will, I think, reflect similar trends in most works concerned with folklore.

This explores the limitation of material but it does not explain the meaning of the title. "Folklore," as we all know, means very different things to different people.² In this context, folklore is defined as the "lore of the common people," the songs, tales, legends and beliefs which are maintained in spite of "scientific" or "elite" knowledge.

One might be quite taken aback by this definition. Are the "folk" only the "common people?" — whoever they may be. Has anyone in Canada since the arrival of the whites been untouched by the elite knowledge of Europe? Although the above definition is not scientifically precise, it is the popular view of what folklore is thought to be, and the view held by the authors under consideration here.

These writers seldom, if ever, use the word, "folklore," but they are very concerned with what are usually considered folkloric items —

¹There are very few examinations of methodology in the study of folklore in literature. A starting point for anyone interested in the subject should be "Folklore in Literature: A Symposium," *Journal of American Folklore*, 70 (1957), 1-65. Of particular interest is the paper which Richard M. Dorson gave to the symposium, "The Identification of Folklore in American Literature." A different and perhaps more expansive view can be found in Alan Dundes, "The Study of Folklore in Literature and Culture: Identification and Interpretation," *Journal of American Folklore*, 78 (1965), 136-42). Another informative study is Daniel Hoffman, *Form and Fable in American Fiction*. New York: Norton, 1973. The majority of the book is a study of Hawthorne, Melville, and Twain but the opening section provides a number of good general remarks and Hoffman's method of approaching the three writers might be applied to others.

²A good discussion of the problem is found in "What is Folklore?," the first section of Alan Dundes, ed. *The Study of Folklore*. Englewood Cliffs, N.J.: Prentice-Hall, 1965.

folksongs, folktales, superstitions, and typical objects of material culture, such as paintings, religious artifacts and vernacular clothing, furniture, and architecture. In general, their emphasis is on what we would probably call "popular beliefs," as manifested through religious or semi-religious activities and as represented in various legends. In cases where a variety of items, such as folksongs and artifacts, are also presented, the attitudes toward popular beliefs and superstitions seem to demonstrate most clearly the attitudes toward folklore in general.

Before examining the principal works of this study, we should look at what came before. A quick glance at nineteenth-century material shows a concentration on French and Indian sources among the English-Canadian authors who have an interest in folksongs, folktales, and legends. Perhaps this is a reflection of the experience of a folklorist in Newfoundland who asked his mother to be an informant. Her reply was "We don't have folklore; we're English."

Beyond the question of which ethnic group is depicted, there is an obvious division here. Some writers used legends as peripheral local colour or as gothic elements, usually in historical romances. This also accurately describes the main thrust of the treatment of Indian beliefs in Robert Tagers' *Ponteach* (1766) and Charles Mair's *Tecumseh* (1886), which are drama rather than fiction. Two novels, William Kirby's *The Golden Dog* (1877) and Gilbert Parker's *The Seats of the Mighty* (1897) show French-Canadian legends as a means by which the cunning might fool the gullible Quebec habitant. All four of these works present sorcerers or witches — some based on existing legends and others invented by the author — who use bogus black magic to cover up their criminal activities.

There are other instances where the author attempts to give an impression of ethnographic description of folklore performance. William Henry Drummond's "Phil-o-rum Juneau," published in 1897, and Duncan Campbell Scott's "A Legend of Welly Legrave," in 1923, use the context of a raconteur who is relating a traditional ballad or tale. Drummond's poem follows the well known tale of "La Chasse Gallerie," or the "witch-canoe," but whether Scott's story comes from traditional sources or is completely his own creation, I am not sure. The important question for this paper, however, is the author's attitudes. A brief study reveals a certain degree of condescension toward the legends. In "Welly Legrave" Scott describes the various story-tellers:

But another will lead you aside when he hears those vain stories, and with awe in his mouth will tell you that Welly Legrave was a child of the spirit which lives in the pine woods, and that he was found after a great storm on the shore of Lake Temiscamingue by a party of trappers wrapped in a red shirt which vanished when the human hand touched him, and that

a voice like thunder roared in the forest. He will offer to show you the very point of land, and here you will find a rude cross with the initials W.L., for no one would dare to cut the letters of his name.

The exploits of the hero are sometimes visionary and sometimes human, and their colour depends upon the character of the minds which have preserved them and handed them on from one generation to another.³

This approach is more evident in Drummond, who employs his usual French-Canadian dialect to depict Juneau's differing attitudes toward folk beliefs and scientific ones:

He don't believe not'ing at all, at all 'bout
lates' new fashion t'ing
Le char 'lectrique an' de telephome, was talk
w'en de bell she ring
Dat's leetle too moche for de ole bonhomme,
mak' him shake it de head an' say
"Wat's use mak' de foolish lak dat, sapré!
I'm not born only yesterday."

But if you want story dat's true, true, true,
I tole you good wan moi-meme
An de t'ing you was spik, dat I don't believe,
for sure she was beat all dem.⁴

Drummond and Scott seem to find these tales of ghostly voyageurs and loggers with superhuman strength quaintly appealing but they give no credence to them.

The first of our central texts is Frank Parker Day's *Rockbound*. This novel was published in 1928, towards the end of a long series of Canadian regional romances written between the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. A number of these would be similarly suited to the present study, such as Theodore Goodridge Robert's romance of Newfoundland, *The Harbour Master*, published in 1911. Day has been chosen primarily because his book presents an example of the author who builds a novel on his personal fieldwork, on Ironbound island, near Nova Scotia.

Day's story depicts an old man, the "king" of an island, and an exiled orphan "prince," who returns to claim his heritage. Lord Raglan, in "The Hero of Tradition," lists twenty-two parts in the heroic pattern. In *Rockbound*, the hero's early life is not described and the novel ends well before his death, but all of the possibly applicable section of Raglan, parts 7 to 13, clearly fit:

³Duncan Campbell Scott, "A Legend of Welly Legrave." *The Witching of Elspie*. New York: George H. Doran, 1923, p. 179.

⁴William Henry Drummond, "Phil-o-rum Juneau." *The Habitant*. London: G.P. Putnam, 1897, p. 61.

- 7 He is spirited away, and
 8 reared by foster parents in a far country.
 9 We are told nothing of his childhood but
 10 on reaching manhood he returns or goes to his future kingdom.
 11 After a victory over the king and/or a giant, dragon, or wild beast,
 12 he marries a princess, often the daughter of his predecessor, and
 13 becomes king.⁵

Whether or not Day has knowingly imitated a folkloric form, this structure seems perfectly suited to the regional romance. On one level, the work is an ethnographic study of the people of the island. Day recounts the social structure, the various activities associated with fishing, the position of the lighthouse and its keeper as protectors of the island, and the role of the singer and his songs in the community. An interesting addition to the latter is explored in one short description of an aspect of material culture, a fiddle:

The bottom of maple was made of a piece of hand-hewn beam that Great-grandfather Strum had put into his barn somewhere about 1760, soon after the old folks had come across the seas from Oldenburg; the top was of old, well-seasoned, wide-grained spruce, the tailpiece and string-board a cunningly inlaid strip of swordfish spike, while the scroll was carved in the shape of a leaping pollock.⁶

It seems doubtful that this stridently symbolic image is based on fact but Walter Peddle, education officer of the Newfoundland Museum, has noted the use of subtle fish motifs in Newfoundland furniture.⁷ Perhaps Day had seen something of this sort and used his poetic license to intensify the picture.

As in the earlier romances, the main folkloric interest is on popular beliefs as revealed in legends and superstitions. A very striking one, for which I have been unable to find references elsewhere, is of a ghost called "the footless nigger." Day's handling of another, more central to the development of the plot, comes when one character gets drunk and makes a pact with the devil to kill the "king" of the island. The presentation of his encounter, however, seems to suggest that the devil is less a supernatural visitor than a folk equivalent of the delirium tremens:

Every night he drank heavily and invited the devil to visit him, but the devil never returned. However, he had lots of company; one night swarms of little gray men about four inches high came from under the old walnut

⁵Lord Raglan, "The Hero of Tradition," *Folklore*, 45 (1934), 212. The article is reprinted in Dundes, *The Study of Folklore*.

⁶Frank Parker Day, *Rockbound*. Toronto: University of Toronto, 1973, rpt. 1928 ed. p. 83.

⁷This decoration is noted in Peddle's book, *Traditional Furniture of Outport Newfoundland*, to be published by the Canadian Centre for Folk Culture Studies, National Museum of Man, Ottawa.

desk, where he, and his father before him, had made up the meteorological reports for the government. These little men had bulgy popping eyes, and wide mouths like sculpins, their lower lips drooping on their chests. They danced and bowed and twirled their legs; then, forming platoons and companies, marched and countermarched, a little captain in yellow at their head twirling a gold stick longer than himself.⁸

This bears a certain similarity to the cunning sorcerer in the earlier works on the Indians and Québécois, although here the naïve folk-figure is deceiving himself.

It would appear that the majority of the earlier presentations of folklore in Canadian literature, whether songs, tales or superstitions, take the position that the items are entertaining but are clearly manifestations of a culture which lacks the scientific knowledge required for a more “accurate” perception of existence — only the ignorant believe in and practise folklore.

A significant difference is found in Philip Child’s *Village of Souls*,⁹ published only a few years later, in 1933. A young man, Jornay, and his wife, Lys, flee their scandalous pasts in seventeenth-century France and travel to the Canadian wilderness. While there they meet a mysterious young Indian girl, at first called Yaraniahwi, “floating in the sky,” but eventually known as Ann. From a tribe still untouched by European exploration, she is following her puberty dream vision, to seek white men with ships. She is guided in her quest by a talisman which she does not understand but which is clearly a Christian cross. She calls it her “master of life.”

The core of the plot is a process by which Lys comes to live in an Indian village and Ann in a French convent. Ann sees that the nuns are narrow-minded and restrictive, “folk without spirit,” but Lys meets an Indian sorcerer who is not a con-artist but, in his own way, a seeker for the “unknown god.” He sees his personal role in connection to not only Indian beliefs, but also the supernatural figures of Quebec folktales and the Roman Catholic priests.

Throughout the novel we get hints about this process of religion through Father Bernard, who might be called a “priest folklorist.” He has analyzed Indian legends and superstitions and he comes to see them as emanating from the Indians’ belief in the power of dream visions like Ann’s, which he calls “memories too deep for reality.”

The title of the book refers to the Indian doctrine that the dreams are connected to another world in the west, where the dead live, known as

⁸Day, *Rockbound*, p. 257.

⁹Philip Child, *Village of Souls*. Toronto: Thornton Butterworth, 1933.

“the Land of Souls.” By the end of the novel, the four main characters reach a missionary village overrun by disease. This for them is the Land of Souls. At this point, each of them makes a connection to an individual vision. Even Jornay recalls a folksong from the streets of Paris. He is attempting to come to terms with the “folk basis” of his own experience and understanding.

There is much more to this fine novel which could be pursued. The major point, however, should be clear from this short discussion. One should reflect on the difference from the image presented in Drummond’s poem, where superstition is an entertaining delusion. Child presents a reconciliation of civilized knowledge, as found in Father Bernard’s Christianity, and folk knowledge, as represented in Jornay’s folksong, Ann’s dream vision, and the beliefs of Lys’s sorcerer. At the end of the novel, Father Bernard seems to suggest that, while Christianity is the true path, there are a great variety of belief systems which lead in a similar direction.

Today, there are a variety of novels which not only reject a condescending attitude to folk forms of belief and communication, but in fact raise them up as superior to the elite versions. In Ernest Buckler’s *The Mountain and the Valley*, a gifted and introspective young man is unable to articulate the meaning of his rural community through his writing. His grandmother, a completely non-analytical and unsophisticated person, is able to find a superior communication through her hooked mats. *Surfacing*, by Margaret Atwood, shows a young woman searching for a meaning to life through Quebec folktales and Indian rock paintings. In Margaret Laurence’s *The Diviners*, a writer comes to terms with the past through various characters who present her with folksongs, folktales, personal experience narratives, and folk beliefs, in the form of a kindly and helpful water diviner.

The contemporary Canadian novel which provides perhaps the most complex and interesting use of one type of folklore, saints’ legends, and, as part of the legends, the magus tale, is *Fifth Business*, by Robertson Davies. The central character, Dunstable Ramsay, a schoolmaster turned hagiographer, or chronicler of saints, becomes convinced that a simple, perhaps insane woman from his village, Mary Dempster, is a saint. He believes she has performed the requisite three miracles: first, she selflessly had sexual relations with a tramp and thereby converted him to Christianity; second, when Dunstable’s brother seemed to die, her visit brought him back to life; third, Dunstable is wounded in the First World War and is near death but sees a statue of the Virgin Mary, apparently with the face of Mary Dempster. He sinks into a lengthy coma but his life is saved.

When Dunstable reawakens, another dimension of the saintly aura

of the novel is added. A war nurse convinces him to change his name to Dunstan. As the story is the autobiography of a biographer of saints, this re-baptism immediately suggests the legend of St. Dunstan. In fact, the lives of the traditional saint and of Davies's protagonist are very similar.

On the other side, Mary Dempster's son, Paul, has become a magician, known as Faustus Legrand and later as Magnus Eisengrim, both names which suggest a magus connection. Then Ramsay writes a fictionalized autobiography for Paul as Magnus. Is this an inverted saint's legend, a magus legend? One should recall the traditional linking of certain saints and wizards, such as Saint Julian and Julian the Apostate in *The Golden Legend*, and, perhaps better known, Saint Peter and Simon Magus. In Christian theology these are usually seen as opposites. However, as suggested by this hagiographical connection, Dunstan comes to see them as different aspects of a similar power.

Dunstan examines a variety of aspects of the veneration of saints. His personal saint, Mary Dempster, is his driving force but he is interested in many others. He goes searching for information about St. Uncumber, a woman who had grown a beard to protect her Christian vow of chastity. He explores modern scientific references to psychological causes of beard growth in women; he looks at the suggestion that St. Uncumber developed from the Holy Face of Lucca, when inferior copies of the original made Christ look like a bearded woman. He also looks at the pagan hermaphroditic Great Mother figure (which as well reflects both the Jungian concepts which underly Davies's writing and an important character elsewhere in the novel, Liesl, a very masculine woman of great power). Finally, and perhaps most obviously, he talks to a bearded lady in a circus.

As Ramsay goes on, he discovers the meaning of the religious pilgrimages to shrines, of religious paintings and statuary, and of the veneration of saints in general. He is convinced by an elderly Jesuit scholar, Padre Blazon, that the evaluation of a saint must be personal and subjective. If Mary Dempster is a saint only to him, then she should be accepted as such by him. When Liesl, the mysterious mentor of Magnus Eisengrim, wrestles and then seduces Ramsay, Padre Blazon has the following reaction:

"Really Ramezay, you astonish me. You are a much more remarkable fellow than one might suppose, if you will forgive me for saying so. The Devil certainly changed His sex to tempt St. Anthony the Great, but for a Canadian schoolmaster! Well, well, one must not be a snob in spiritual things. From your certainty I gather the Devil tempted you with success?"

"The Devil proved to be a very good fellow. He suggested that a little compromise would not hurt me. He even suggested that an acquaintance with Him might improve my character."

"I find no fault with that. The Devil knows corners of us all of which Christ Himself is ignorant. Indeed, I am sure Christ learned a great deal that was salutary about Himself when he met the Devil in the wilderness. Of course, that was a meeting of brothers; people forget too readily that Satan is Christ's elder brother and has certain advantages in argument that pertain to a senior. On the whole, we treat the Devil shamefully, and the worse we treat Him the more He laughs at us . . . You met the Devil as an equal, not cringing or frightened or begging for a trashy favour. That is the heroic life, Ramezay. You are fit to be the Devil's friend, without any fear of losing yourself to Him!"¹⁰

In the novel, the folk, through their legends and icons, seem to understand this process without intensive introspection and intellectual analysis. It is like the dreams of *The Village of Souls*, the hooked mat in *The Mountain and the Valley*, the paintings and folktales in *Surfacing*, and the folksongs and folktales of *The Diviners*. In other contemporary works, Marian Engel, W.O. Mitchell, James Reaney and Michael Ondaatje all consider similar situations.

The reason for this thrust cannot be asserted absolutely. Davies admittedly follows Jungian psychology while Child's Indian dream visions suggest a similar source.¹¹ To see all this as simply too much Jung, however, seems far too limiting. A more complete explanation might be the desire of the authors to extoll the virtue of a more primitive state than the present. Still, even this assertion of romantic primitivism is too simple an analysis for the likes of Davies, Margaret Atwood, and Margaret Laurence.

A detailed examination of the individual works suggests that each author has his or her own purpose in the turn to folklore, but we still may generalize if only to state that some of the major Canadian writers today are looking to this folk experience for answers which do not seem available in elite knowledge. Folklore in the Canadian novel begins as local colour and even pernicious superstition. It continues in contemporary fiction as the representation of that body of knowledge that always lies just beyond the comprehension of modern technological man.

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¹⁰Robertson Davies, *Fifth Business*. New York: Signet, 1970. pp. 222-23. The role of folklore in Davies is examined in more detail in my article, "The Folkloric Background of Robertson Davies' *Deptford Trilogy*," in Samuel L. Macey and Robert G. Lawrence, eds. *Studies in Robertson Davies' Deptford Trilogy*. Victoria: University of Victoria, 1980.

¹¹Carlos C. Drake's study, "Jungian Psychology and its Uses in Folklore," *Journal of American Folklore*, 82 (1969), 112-31, is primarily concerned with fieldwork, but his consideration of "psychological purpose" has interesting ideas which might be applied to the study of folklore in literature.

Résumé

La fiction, dans la littérature canadienne, a puisé de façons diverses aux sources du folklore. Basée sur trois oeuvres aussi représentatives que celles de Frank Day, Philip Child et Robertson Davies, cette étude veut démontrer que l'usage qui a été fait du folklore lui-même dénote au cours des ans des changements d'attitudes significatifs.