

NOTES DE LECTURES

Paulette Collet : Marie Le Franc, deux patries, deux exils. Sherbrooke, Ed. Naaman, 1976. 20 x 14 cm. 198 p. Bibliog., 2 index, ill.

Marie Le Franc, malgré l'amour fervent qu'elle portait au Canada, ne voulut jamais changer de nationalité. C'est pourtant à la fidélité de sa patrie d'adoption qu'elle doit la mince notoriété qui entoure encore son nom de grand écrivain modeste et méconnu. Elle occupe une place, trop réduite d'ailleurs par rapport à celle des autres "Français-Canadiens" dans les histoires de la littérature canadienne-française. Tandis qu'en France on ne saurait découvrir en librairie un seul de ses livres, la maison Fides en a réédité quelques-uns. Plusieurs thèses de maîtrise lui ont été consacrées au Québec, en Ontario, même en Colombie britannique. Si l'on excepte un récent article de Madame Ducrocq-Poirier (1), la France la néglige. C'est de l'Université de Toronto que nous vient enfin un ouvrage de fond, extrêmement soigné, qui unit l'agrément de lecture à la rigueur de la recherche, et à une intelligence critique dont la préface due à M. Robert Choquette, vieil ami de Marie Le Franc, fait un éloge mérité.

Madame Collet a pu dépouiller les papiers laissés par l'auteur à sa mort (1965), et y a découvert des inédits instructifs. Elle a obtenu communication de lettres envoyées à des correspondants tels que Rina Lasnier — qui dut sursauter plus d'une fois devant les singulières opinions littéraires de sa consoeur bretonne. Elle a interrogé longuement les amies de Marie Le Franc à Sarzeau. Elle a mené des deux côtés de l'Atlantique une vaste enquête bibliographique, compliquée par la dispersion de contes, souvenirs, articles dans une foule de publications, qui offre une base sûre à tout chercheur à venir (2).

La biographie de Marie Le Franc s'enrichit de précisions curieuses, par exemple sur la passion romanesque et hardie vouée au commandant Marchand, héros de Fachoda, juste avant l'épisode Bessette. Bessette ne fit sans doute que cristalliser sur lui le désir d'évasion et d'aventure, sans être vraiment aimé. En revanche, le type de "l'Homme du Nord", qui réapparaît dans plusieurs ouvrages, permet d'induire que Marie Le Franc s'éprit à Montréal d'un Canadien anglais, qui la déçut aussi, sinon de plusieurs. Pour retracer la carrière littéraire, marquée spécialement par le Prix Fémina récompensant en 1927 *Grand-Louis l'innocent*, les voyages, les conférences, et en particulier celle qui souleva en 1935 une polémique parce qu'elle dénonçait la misère de la Gaspésie, la réinstallation définitive en France, l'existence gênée et charitable durant la guerre, les dernières années à Saint-Germain-en-Laye, Madame Collet s'appuie sur des documents qui authentifient et vivifient l'évocation.

Trois grands chapitres analysent l'oeuvre à partir de ses thèmes majeurs: la forêt laurentienne d'abord, véritable héroïne d' *Héliel, fils des bois*, de *La Randonnée passionnée*, de *La Rivière Solitaire*, principal amour de Marie Le Franc, qui ne la découvrit pourtant qu'assez tard, et grâce à *Maria Chapdelaine*; la lande et la mer ensuite, celles de *l'Enfance marine* et de *Grand-Louis*, celles aussi du *Poste sur la dune*, celles encore de Gaspésie; la ville de Montréal enfin, seule ville qui trouva grâce auprès de la "mangeuse d'espace" saisie par la nature primitive, de sorte qu'elle introduisit la métropole dans la littérature une quinzaine d'années avant *Bonheur d'occasion*.

Madame Collet décèle la sensualité qui caractérise un sentiment si exceptionnel de la nature, et d'où jaillit l'originalité de la notation, de l'image, de la phrase. Elle pousse loin l'interrogation sur la psychologie profonde, à coup sûr insolite chez l'auteur des pages stupéfiantes de méditation et d'introspection visionnaires que l'on trouve dans *Inventaire*, livre qui mériterait à lui seul une étude. Elle juge avec une sympathie sans complaisance l'art spontané, mais parfois défaillant, de l'écrivain. Si elle s'occupe peu d'histoire littéraire, c'est que Marie Le Franc fut peu perméable aux influences: "solitaire" et "cachée", selon les noms des deux rivières qu'elle a chantées. Mais la voici, espérons-le, tirée de la pénombre par un excellent livre qui comble une lacune en réparant une injustice.

Jean Marmier.

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- (1) "Arsène Bessette et Marie Le Franc", **Relations France-Canada au XIXe siècle**. *Cahiers du Centre culturel canadien*, 1974, N° 3.
- (2) *La Bibliographie de Talvart et Place (t.XII) ne dépasse pas 1952, et n'est pas exhaustive à cette date. Cependant elle aurait pu fournir des compléments utiles: article d'André Thérive sur Grand-Louis l'innocent ("L'Opinion", 10 déc. 1927), parallèle des "Trois Maries" — Marie Noël, Marie Le Franc, Marie Mauron — par Sully-André Peyre dans la revue Marsyas en avril 1949, etc...*

PIPET, Albert : Mourir à Caen. Paris, Presses de la Cité, 1974.

The bibliography of official military histories, regimental records, personal memoirs, guide books and souvenir albums on the subject of D-Day and the Battle of Normandy in 1944 is so varied and extensive that anything published to-day is almost bound to be redundant. Nonetheless, one more book, added to the long list in 1974 under the title *Mourir à Caen*, has gained both critical and commercial success. During the thirtieth anniversary celebrations of the Liberation of France this work by a Norman writer, Albert Pipet, became something of a "best seller" in France and Canada and, in 1975, earned for its author the *Prix d'honneur* awarded annually by *La Société des Ecrivains Normands* as well as invitations to lecture in Canada in 1976.

Mr Pipet's achievement may be credited to his purpose and method but, above all, to his personal merit in writing a unique book. About ten years ago, as a consequence of his research for an earlier work (1), the author became aware that only the third volume of *The Official History of the Canadian Army in the Second World War* (2) had concentrated exclusively on the Canadian contribution to the Allied victory in Normandy and he decided to pay his own homage to those who had fought and fallen on his native soil. Without the advice of professional historians and without research grants or publishers' advance subsidies but encouraged by several Canadian ex-servicemen and motivated by his desire to record Canadian exploits and sacrifices in Normandy, Mr Pipet undertook to re-trace the military operations from the landing beaches of Juno to the Falaise Gap, i.e., from June 6 to August 21, 1944.

His undertaking soon became a vast operation in itself, as Mr Pipet quickly realized the complexity of the obstacles presented by time and distance. Besides studying general works on the Battle of Normandy, he set about to contact as many Canadian veterans of the campaign as possible. In this initial stage he was aided by the Department of Veterans' Affairs in Ottawa and the Canadian Legion; the latter advertised his intentions in its monthly magazine. Within a year, he had almost a thousand letters from Canadians in reply to his inquiry and, for the next six years, he devoted his evenings, week-ends and annual holidays to his long-distance research project, sorting accounts, diaries, photographs and regimental reports as they arrived; in addition, he meticulously covered by foot all the forgotten or neglected battle-sites and interviewed hundreds of civilian survivors who had witnessed the fighting in 1944. For less devoted historians the task would have been too ambitious.

The published result, *Mourir à Caen*, is a factual, day-by-day account in which the author has attempted to take his reader into the turmoil of battle. His crisp narrative prose is interspersed with dramatic personal anecdotes, often in the form of well-chosen quotations from his military and civilian witnesses. His maps are thorough and clearly drawn. His choice of photographs provides a good illustration of the tragic and comic aspects of the daily events on and off the battlefield. His concluding pages include a valuable bibliography of about forty regimental histories which were sent to Mr Pipet in the course of his investigation; in these last pages, too, his civilian and military witnesses are identified. *Mourir à Caen* is indeed a solid monument to the memory of Canadian servicemen who lived or died between the Calvados shore and the town of Falaise in the summer of 1944.

Mr Pipet's monument is very close to being perfect but, for this reader, it is marred by a number of relatively small imperfections many of which are attributable to the publisher who, in his haste to put the book on the market before the thirtieth anniversary celebrations, and in his concern about printing costs, eliminated one third of the original manuscript, half of the selected photographs and several maps. These money-saving measures have had unfortunate effects on the finished product: at times it is obvious that the balance between the author's narrative and the civilian accounts or military reports has been upset; some aspects of the campaign are not illustrated photographically; moreover, despite the book's title, a map of the city of Caen is missing.

Other defects might be attributed to the author's method. For his numerous quotations and anecdotes, it would be preferable to identify and explain his sources within the text, rather than in an Appendix. For those readers who are not necessarily aware of the existence of many excellent and relevant works, he fails to provide any direction (3). Supplementary information, which can be found in these books, is particularly needed at the beginning of *Mourir à Caen*, which opens with the actual assault on the beaches; in the middle, where the courageous citizens of Caen are hardly represented; and at the end, where the famous Falaise Pocket is not quite closed.

Other defects may be in the eye of this reader only. If *Mourir à Caen* is a record of Canadian military operations in Calvados, all units of Canada's armed forces which participated could easily be listed in the space of three or four extra pages (4). If *Mourir à Caen* is a tribute to those who "died that we might live" their names could be listed in an appendix to the book (5). Finally, if *Mourir à Caen* is to reach the full readership it deserves, it is a pity that it has not yet been made available in English.

R. L. Bennett

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- (1) *Pipet, Albert: La Trouée de Normandie. Paris; Presses de la Cité, 1966. A detailed, step-by-step account of the American break-out in the Saint Lô area in late July 1944.*
- (2) *Stacey, C.P. : The Victory Campaign: The Operations in North-West Europe 1944-1945. Ottawa; The Queen's Printer, 1960.*
- (3) *Among the many titles the following are pertinent examples.*
Belfield, E. and Essame, H.: The Battle for Normandy. London; Batsford, 1965.
Blond, Georges: Le Débarquement 6 juin 1944. Paris; Fayard, 1951.
Florentin, Eddy: Stalingrad en Normandie. Paris; Presses de la Cité, 1964.
Gosset, A. et Lecomte, P.: Caen pendant la Bataille. Caen; Ozanne, 1946.
Grandais, Albert: La Bataille du Calvados. Paris; Presses de la Cité, 1973.
McKee, Alexander: Caen, Anvil of Victory. London; Souvenir Press, 1964.
- (4) *Although available in Stacey, op. cit., pp.657-662, this information could be more precisely presented as was done in a Canadian government booklet that appeared shortly after Mr Pipet's book. 30th Anniversary of the D-Day Landings in Normandy. Ottawa; RBT Printing Ltd., 1974.*
- (5) *Admittedly, the names, ranks and registration numbers of the more than five thousand Canadians buried in Bény-sur-Mer and Bretteville-sur-Laize are listed in the cemetery registers but all readers of Mourir à Caen cannot visit these cemeteries. An appendix, recording these names in small type, would require no more than ten additional pages.*