

THE METIS IN MARGARET LAURENCE'S MANAWAKA WORKS

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In Margaret Laurence's tiny Ontario cottage on the Otonabee River two huge posters of Louis Riel and Dumont at once catch the eye of the visitor and remind him of the métis rebellion (1) in Manitoba and Southern Saskatchewan, which tragically ended with the hanging of Riel in Regina in 1885. This is no mere coincidence ; Laurence's sentiments have always been on the side of the anti-establishment ; in Africa, where she lived several years, she remained very critical of the British imperial attitude ; back home in Manitoba the grand-daughter of an Irish Scots Presbyterian pioneer had lived close to the half Cree, half French métis and had soon come to resent the "colonial" outlook of her own people.

Thus it is not surprising that the French Indians should appear as one significant feature of her works set in Manawaka, the fictional embodiment of her own birthplace, Neepawa. The Tonnerre family provide the link between the different books, just as do the recurrent "white" characters. Through this one family Laurence exposes the socio-economic plight of the half-breeds but fails - or refuses - to make a real issue of it. In fact, the métis functions in her fiction mostly on a symbolic level, as means for the writer, who has never really been reconciled to her heavy Irish Scottish Presbyterian heritage, to face her own inner conflict and to end an old feud.

Old Jules Tonnerre had fought with Riel and Dumont in the 80's and had retired after their defeat at Batoche into the Wachakwa Valley. There he had intended to build a temporary shack, but that same old shack was later also to shelter his son Lazarus and his son's children, Jules ("Skinner"), Piquette, Valentine, Paul and Jacques. A few references to the Tonnerre family are made in *The Stone Angel* ; the moving short story "The Loons" is centered around Piquette ; Valentine appears in a brief but significant episode in *The Fire-Dwellers* ; but it is in *The Diviners*, Laurence's last novel, in which Skinner plays a decisive role in the heroine's life, that the métis theme is treated most extensively.

The writer insists on the miserable living conditions of the French half-breeds and their tragic experience of "belonging nowhere" (*The Fire-Dwellers*, p. 236) (2). The Tonnerres "lived all in a swarm in a shack somewhere" (*The Stone Angel*, p.112), "in ramshackledom" (*The Fire-Dwellers*, p.236) ; with the years "their settlement had been added to, until the clearing at the foot of the town hill

was a chaos of lean-tos, wooden packing cases . . . " (*A Bird in the House*, p.114) ; "the main shack has been put together with old planks, tarpaper, the lids of wooden crates, some shingles and flattened pieces of tin . . ." (*The Diviners*, pp.136-37). This wretched shack is successively to haunt Laurence's heroines : Hagar, Stacey, Vanessa, Morag. It is the symbol of the métis predicament. Piquette has tuberculosis in one leg ; the French Indians generally hold temporary jobs (they help with the threshing; the women are hired as domestic servants), they are low-paid workers and no better off than more recent immigrants, the Polacks and Galicians from the mountains (*cf. The Stone Angel*, pp. 43-44, 100). Skinner joins the army in the implicit hope of getting social promotion (as did, south of the border, the Blacks and Mexican-Americans during W.W.II). To the writer the half-breeds are "The Dispossessed" (*The Diviners*, p. 378), like the natives portrayed on McRaith's painting, culturally and economically dispossessed. Lazarus feels "a stranger in the place where he lived his whole life" (*ibid*, p.338).

They are made to feel doubly outcast by an ethnocentric society that both believes in the superiority of the white race and considers the half-breed as biologically and intellectually inferior : "Half a man was what the town would say" (*ibid.*, p. 462) . Added to this is the fact that the métis is a catholic. So the general feeling toward the latter is one of distrust. Small town racism - "the town's invisible stabbing" (*The Fire-Dwellers*, p.236) - makes it worse. Reminiscing about the Tonnerre boys, with whom her brothers liked to chum around, Hagar admits : "I wouldn't have trusted any of them as far as I could spit" (*The Stone Angel*, p.112) ; her father once forbade his son to go hunting with Jules because he wouldn't have him "gallivanting around the country with a métis" (*ibid.*, p.16) ; dating half-breed girls puts Bram, Hagar's husband, beyond the pale. When Dr. MacLeod, the father of Vanessa, the young heroine of "The Loons", insists on taking the sickly Piquette with them to Diamond Lake, grandmother MacLeod refuses to go along ; she is prejudiced against the Tonnerre girl not so much because she has tuberculosis as because she is one of those half-breeds who don't belong anywhere, neither Cree nor Scots Irish and Ukrainians, "neither flesh, fowl, nor good salt herring" (*A Bird in the House*, p.115). In *The Diviners*, the French Indians are discriminated against beyond the grave as they are denied admittance into the local graveyard ; when Lazarus died people were afraid of "his half-breed bones spoiling their cemetery" (p. 268). The colonialist attitude of Brooke, Morag's husband, who grew up in India and was brought up to look down on the "native", adds his own particular note to the racist chorus of the old Scots Irish Presbyterian pioneering families of the book.

Another false attitude to the métis emerges from the Manawaka books ; some tend to romanticize him as did, and still do, the Americans in the case of the

Indian and the Mexican-American. This romantic view of the indigenous people is illustrated by the short story "The loons" : young Vanessa sees Piquette in romantic terms, "as an Indian" (*A Bird in the House*, p.120), as a child of the earth, who should as such have an intimate knowledge of nature's mysteries - in this particular case - of the loons. And she is quite surprised that the métis girl should fail to respond in the expected way :

' I bet you know a lot about the woods and all that, eh ? ' I began respectfully.

Piquette looked at me from her large dark unsmiling eyes.

'I don't know what in hell you're talkin' about', she replied. 'You nuts or somethin' ? If you mean where my old man, and me, all them live, you better shut up, by Jessus, you hear ? ' (*ibid.*, p.120).

Neither attitude, ethnocentric or romantic, is right. In neither case does the white see the Other as he really is. Whether he needs to justify his feeling of superiority or to fill in a lack in his own self he presents a disparaging or an exaggerated image of the métis.

Forced into a "long silence" (*A Bird in the House*, p.114) after the hanging of Riel, made to live on the fringes of a society whose approach is anything but objective, the métis resents his alienation but fails to overcome it. Skinner hates cities as synonymous to him with a white well-to-do world he is not able to enter (*The Diviners*, p.340). Though a talented singer and despite his defiant attitude, he is a loser ; his career will symbolically come to an early end. When he was only 37 his face already bore an ominous resemblance to the ravaged face of Lazarus as if he were fatally conditioned by a race in the process of rapid deterioration (*ibid.*, p.337). Piquette's attempt at making it into white society is also doomed to failure ; in order to get out of Manawaka and a restrictive environment she marries an all English boy - tall and fair - but he abandons her and their two children ; the three of them are soon to perish when the shack they have come back to mysteriously catches fire. Skinner's death from throat cancer, Piquette's awful end by fire are both symbolic of the tragic fate of the métis.

With heart-felt sympathy Laurence records the painful misery of the French Indians, whose decay contrasts with the wealth of the rest of the nation" : . . . her presence is a reproach to me, for all I've got now and have been given . . .", thinks the heroine of *The Fire-Dwellers* (p.237) when first confronted with Valentine Tonnerre on the street ; but later she confesses : "Too little can be said, because there is too much to say. And I'm relieved to be going because I can't cope here" (*ibid.*, p.240) ;

neither can Laurence ; she is very conscious of the harm done to the half-breeds but never presses the point, never suggests a possible remedy. No polemist she. She is no more willing to go to war for them than she is to fight for women's rights. In her works the métis operates mainly on another level, a symbolic one.

The métis reacts to his alienation in a negative way. An eye for an eye. To scorn and distrust he responds by hatred and defiance. By pitting the French Indians against the Scots Irish establishment Laurence seems to revenge herself for the past, for her unwilling adherence to the Presbyterian conventions of the milieu in which she grew up, to dismiss the formidable ghost of grandfather Simpson.

Defiance best characterizes Laurence's métis. When Vanessa first sees Piquette as she really is she is struck by "her defiant face" (*A Bird in the House*, p.124). Stacey is startled by Valentine's flashy outfit and blunt address :

' It is Stacey, ain't it ? Stacey Cameron ?
I dunno your married name ' (*The Fire-Dwellers*, p. 236).

Skinner is both aggressive and elusive ; he makes no secret of his contempt for the various audiences he performs to as a singer (Margaret Laurence loved that character) (3). Time and time again he pops up in Morag's life, demanding and cynical, and then goes.

In *The Diviners* Morag Gunn/Margaret Laurence enjoys telling and re-telling the saga of the métis along with that of her own people from Scotland : the Tonnerre family versus the Gunn clan, Lazarus Tonnerre versus Piper Gunn. The story of the present Tonnerre is replaced within the larger context of history :

Another thing is that Rider was also called Prince of the Braves. He wasn't all Indian, though. He was Métis, only back there, then our people called themselves *Bois-Brûlés*. Burnt wood. I dunno why. Maybe the fires they made to smoke the buffalo meat. Maybe their own skins, the way they looked (*ibid.*, p.145).

In his songs, fiercely assertive and resigned (like the Black man's blue) Skinner extols the feats of his métis ancestors :

Lazarus, rise up out of the Walley ;
Tell them what it really means to try.
Go tell them in the Town, though they always put you down,

Lazarus, oh man, you didn't die.
Lazarus, oh man, you didn't die (*ibid.* p.463).

Laurence goes as far as to invert the roles, as it were by presenting the métis as superior to his white protagonist, by somehow making the former into the mentor the instructor of the latter. The MacLeod girl's encounters with the suffering alienated Piquette has enlarged her awareness. When, years later, Vanessa comes back to Diamond Lake on a visit, the loons have vanished - so has Piquette - she finally realizes that the métis girl did understand the meaning of their "half-mocking, half-plaintive" call (*A Bird in the House*, p. 127). In the silence surrounding the lake she gets the ultimate message of the dead Piquette, who had perhaps known how to pain through mockery. The MacAindra family of *The Fire-Dwellers* is under the sway of Thor Thorlakson, a quack who sells rejuvenating pills. From the first his name had sounded to Stacey "made up" (*ibid.*, p.53) and his face vaguely familiar, but so far she has never been able to place him. Then comes thundering in Valentine Tonnerre (= Thunder in English), who loudly debunks the fake god of thunder, worshipped by those who can afford to buy his lies (he turns out to be nobody else but ugly little Vernon Winkler, who, as a boy, used to be the school-children's scapegoat and whose physique was drastically changed by surgery and built-up shoes). Morag has her first sexual experiences with Skinner and she keeps missing him, Pique is the fruit of their passionate embraces; and thus the author has her final revenge.

"I was big-boned like grandfather Connor and had straight black hair like a Blackfoot or Cree" (*A Bird in the House*, p.90), says the young heroine of "A Bird in the House", as if Vanessa viciously enjoyed identifying with a métis (wishful thinking on Laurence's part too?). At the end of *The Diviners*, when Pique, born from a Scots Irish mother and a French Indian father, now a social worker, leaves for the Wachakwa Valley to help her own people the two aspects of our theme merge: the métis, both a disturbing element of the Canadian scene and a means for Morag Gunn/Margaret Laurence to come to terms with her own inner conflict.

NOTES

1. *Indian and métis people represent 3 % of the population.*
2. *We refer the reader to the following editions: The Stone Angel (1964), Toronto: McClelland & Stewart-Bantam; The Fire-Dwellers (1969), McClelland & Stewart-Bantam; A Bird in the House, (1970), McClelland & Stewart, New Canadian Library; The Diviners (1974), McClelland & Stewart-Bantam.*
3. *Interview with Margaret Laurence at her cottage, near Peterborough, Ontario, on July 31, 1978.*