CHAPTER I

MARGARET LAURENCE :
THE WOMAN BEHIND THE WRITING

A. A Biographical Sketch
B. Influences behind her fiction
CHAPTER 1

MARGARET LAURENCE: THE WOMAN BEHIND THE WRITING

It is but appropriate that a study of Margaret Laurence's Canadian fiction should begin with a discussion of Laurence's life and work, both of which are inseparable from her Manawakan or Canadian fiction. I have divided this chapter into two parts. The first section will provide a biographical sketch of Laurence, while the second will delve into the many influences on her fiction. This chapter will provide us with the necessary background material that is required to comprehend Laurence's larger themes.

A: A BIOGRAPHICAL SKETCH

Margaret Laurence was born Jean Margaret Wemyss in Neepawa Manitoba. Her father was of Scottish ancestry; her mother, nee Simpson, was Irish. Both branches of the family were Protestant which meant that the religious and cultural traditions of Puritanism were prominent features of the author's upbringing.

Born on 18th July 1926, Jean Margaret Wemyss was brought up in a small town in Neepawa, Manitoba. Her father, Robert, belonged to the Scots family of Wemyss and they had their own motto "Je Pense." After her mother died in 1930, and her father in 1935, she was raised by her maternal grandfather, John Simpson and by her aunt, Margarét Simpson Wemyss, who had married her widowed father. Both were strong influences on the young girl.

As a child, Margaret was a great fantasizer. 'Pretend this. Pretend that'. It was all 'Pretend'. Mind you this is the way her writing is from an early age, Laurence would say "I'm going to be a writer", and she would write in scribblers she always carried, 'Oh, she always carried those scribblers. She was always jotting down something.' Her stepmother encouraged her to read and she did and saw things which broadened her out, living at the old funeral parlour and through her reading. From the time she could read, she was interested in doing some writing. This was her hobby. Margaret liked to write stories.

Laurence lived in Neepawa through the depression and World War II until 1944, when she attended United College in Winnipeg. This arts and theology College was affiliated to the University of Manitoba. Clara Thomas discusses its founding institutions, Methodist and Presbyterian and its tradition of liberal thought, a tradition "particularly sympathetic to her positive affirming temperament." There she studied English, published her first poems and stories "Callipoe" and "Tas des Waldes" in the college journal 'Vox', and later worked as a reporter for the Winnipeg Citizen. In these formative years, she responded to the powerfully positive, liberal idealism of the college and to the optimism of the Winnipeg Old Left with its confidence in reform, brotherhood and social justice. Laurence later questioned her easy liberal attitudes, which were sorely tried in Africa, but she retained her indignation with forms of injustice, exploitation and depression. Though she grew sceptical of social solutions, she retained the compassionate, moral outlook that pervades her novels.

In Winnipeg, Laurence met her husband, Jack Laurence, a civil engineer. They married in 1948 and proceeded first to England and then in 1950 to the British Protectorate of Somaliland in East Africa.
She wrote book reviews, a daily radio column and covered labour news. Jack Laurence was engaged to create a chain of artificial lakes on earth dams in the deserts of the British Protoctorate of Somaliland. The British Colonial Service felt that Somaliland was no place for a woman but Jack described his wife as a handy Canadian girl, "a kind of female Daniel Boone", and Laurence was permitted to go. For the next two years she lived in isolated desert camps, sometimes in a tent on land rover, and came to know and admire the nomadic tribesmen whose lives depended on courage, endurance and religious faith. Out of this soujourn came her first published work, a translation of Somali poetry and folk tales.

Here she immersed herself in Somali culture. At this time her main project was to study the oral tradition of Somali and to prepare a book of translations, *A Tree for Poverty* (1954). This was her first published volume. Between 1952 and 1957, the Laurence’s lived in the Gold Coast, later Ghana, where they had two children, Jocelyn (Born 1952) and David (Born 1955). Her career as a writer of fiction began at this time as she wrote stories about the life that she observed around her, she published her first African story “The Drummer of All the World", in *Queens Quarterly* in 1956 and wrote several others later, included in *The Tomorrow - Tamer* (1963). She also began her first and only African Novel, *This Side Jordan* (1960). Her critical study of Nigerian novelists and dramatists *Long Drums & Cannons : Nigerian Dramatists and novelists 1952 - 66* (1968) while valuable in itself, is also interesting because it offers insight into her own books and displays her views of the art of fiction. Out of Africa, came Laurence’s maturity and a deep understanding of her own roots: “I learned so much from that experience”. 10

In 1957, the Laurences moved to Vancouver. During Vancouver years, Laurence taught Sunday school, first for the United Church and then for the Unitarians. She attended Unitarian services in Vancouver for some time and wrote a christmas nativity story for this church. Her interest in the Unitarians did not last, since “ancestors” meant nothing to them and a great deal to Laurence. She offers a wrong definition of a Unitarian as one who believes in “one God atmost”. After many years of absence from church services, Laurence began in the late 1970s to attend the United Church, “the Church of my ancestors”. 11
In Vancouver, she completed *This Side Jordan*, and then began *The Stone Angel*. In her second novel, she returned to her native ground. In her own life, however, she had not yet come home. She seems to have needed a more distant view of herself, her country and her art and so in 1962, after separating from her husband she took her manuscript and her children to England. Here she created the world of Manawaka completing *The Stone Angel* (1964) and writing *A Jest of God* (1966), *The Fire Dwellers* (1969) and *A Bird in the House* (1970). She also wrote her first children's book *Jason's Quest* (1970). It was in England that she established herself as a major Canadian novelist and as a woman of letters, reading widely in Canadian literature writing reviews, essays and articles and meeting other Canadian writers.

*This Side Jordan* won the Beta Sigma Philosophy Award, and *A Jest of God* won the Governor General’s Award.

Gradually, she was lured back in Canada. Through the 1970s, she was awarded honorary degrees from eleven Canadian Universities; in 1971 she became a companion of the order of Canada; She served as writer-in-residence at Trent University and at the Universities of Toronto and Western Ontario. she returned first in summer to a cottage on the Otonabee River in Ontario, where she wrote much of the *The Diviners* (1974) which won the Governor General’s Award. “The Shack”, as she called her small cedar cabin was destined to play an important part in her life for the next decade and provided the setting for *The Diviners*. Margaret called this cabin the most loved place of her later years: “every time I lift my eyes from the page and glance outside, it is to see some marvel or other.”12 During these years Laurence took to letter writing like never before. She was as “inverterate letter writer”, self styled and “an addicted receiver of letters”.13 Mail provided vital links to beloved friends, a lifetime which was necessary to her well-being. Margaret answered twenty-five hundred letters a year.14 Letters meant communication, always a major theme in Laurence’s writing. She wrote three more children’s books: *The Olden Days Coat* (1979), *Six Dam Cows* (1979), and *The Christmas Birthday Story* (1980). In 1981 she was appointed chancellor of Trent University. Laurence died on 5th January 1987.
Lt [Literature] must be planted firmly in some soil. Even works if non-realism make use of spiritual landscapes which have been at least partially inherited by the writer. Despite some current fashions to the contrary, the main concern of the writer remains that of somehow creating the individual on the printed page, of catching the tones and accents of human speech, of setting down the conflicts of people who are as real to him as himself. If he does this well, and as truthfully as he can, his writing may sometimes reach out beyond any national boundary.

Margaret wrote no more adult fiction after *The Diviners*. The reason why is given near the end of the novel itself. Like the protagonist, Morag, she had received the gift and feels that the gift is leaving, is being transferred to others. "The gift or portion of grace, or whatever it was, was finally withdrawn, to be given to someone else". "Morag returned to the house to write the remaining private and fictional words and to set down her title". By this she meant that someone else would write the next book, the next novel. She was leaving things all set up and waiting for the next writer. The novel includes a heart-rending description of what writing meant to Morag, and to Margaret: the wrenching up of guts and heart, to be carefully set down on paper in order to live.

Laurence's fiction is neither autobiographical nor confessional, though it does incorporate many features from her own life, her youth, family, heritage, an upbringing in Manitoba; her travels through Canada, Europe and Africa, her struggles as a Canadian woman writer.

Local villagers and British culture do not appear to have played much part in Laurence’s life. Seven years in Africa led to five books, but contemporary British life is reflected only in *Jason's Quest*, the novel for children which Laurence wrote near the end of her decade in England.

Laurence always worked retrospectively, drawing from the deep wells of remembered experience. The African years took literary shape in Canada during the five years that followed; the Manawakan portraits of Laurence's grandparents and parents and of herself were created in England in the sixties; and material from her years in Vancouver goes into Stacey’s
experience, half a decade later. Only with *The Diviners* does Laurence confront Canadian life that is contemporary with the time of writing.

Laurence’s African writing and her Canadian based fiction are closely related. Together they represent a seamless fabric a steady growth and maturation of a way of seeing which was first formed in Neepawa, Manitoba.

In the Manawaka cycle, the beauty and writing of Laurence’s language and the use of setting as human analogue, serve to develop character. Laurence’s special talent in the creation of vital individual characters within a vividly realized social group. Laurence can be called “a Canadian equivalent to Tolstoy”, not in terms of “literary gigantism”, but rather “in such terms as a writer’s relevance to his time and place, the versatility of his perception, the breadth of his understanding, the imaginative power with which he personifies and gives symbolic from to the collective life he interprets and in which he takes part”.

**B. INFLUENCES ON LAURENCE’S CANADIAN FICTION**

Margaret Laurence has created her Manawaka world out of a gigantic complexity, reaching back from her own place and time through four generations of men and women in a Canadian western town. All the strands of her ancestral past have interwoven with her own life and the power of her own gift impelling her to write her people down to the pages of her fiction. The people, the circumstances and the places of her past are important to an understanding of both the “why” and the “what” of Margaret Laurence’s writing. She does not always write from within a circumference that contains the imaginative experiences and perceptions congruent with one of her place, her time and her life.

Laurence’s Canadian fiction reveals that besides other factors travel played a major role in Laurence’s life. It helped shape her vision and literacy provided her with a central metaphor. The psychic journey towards inner freedom and spiritual maturity. Because journeying and strangerhood have played an intimate part in Laurence’s life, it has been given to her to see their meaning in human experience and to penetrate “the pain and interconnectedness of
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northern lights,\textsuperscript{21} became the Wachakwa River, while Ridding Mountain on clear Lake where
the Laurences has a summer cottage, some hundred miles north of Neepawa, models for
Galloping Mountain on Diamond Lake. Neepawa was already well settled by the time of its
incorporation in 1883. With the railway, it became a major grain outlet and the centre of a rich
agricultural district from Riding Mountain in the North to the Assiniboine land in the south. It
was also rich in dairy products, wood and salt. Neepawa was originally settled in 1870’s by
the Scottish pioneers trekking westward from Ontario in search of land. These founding
families formed a tightly woven, predominantly Scottish group that Laurence describes with
biting accuracy in \textit{The stone Angel, A Jest of God, and The Diviners.}

Sixty years earlier, a shipload of destitute corfters from the north of Scotland had been brought
by Alexander Selkirk to found the Red River Colony, in the area of the red and Assiniboine
rivers where Winnipeg now stands. The Scots thus formed one of the strongest elements in
Manitoba settlement. The Scottish side of Laurence’s ancestry has loomed larger in her
imagination than the Irish, doubtless because of the Scottish culture of Neepawa. Laurence
thinks of herself as Scots – Canadian and identifies sympathetically with the Highlanders. As a
child she was extremely aware of her Scottish background. Scotland inhabited Laurence’s
imagination as a bold, dramatic country of high atrocities of the clearances after the battle of
Culloden. During a visit of Scotland in the 1960s, she realized that her true ancestors and
cultural heritage were Canadian.

Laurence’s discussion of what Scotland meant to her reveals the twofold temper of her
imagination, its social realism and its romanticism. It also reveals her capacity for sympathetic
identification with people whose experience has been strikingly different from her own. The
clearances devastated the highlanders because they were betrayed by their chieftains, the
symbolic king/father figure with almost mystical powers in a tribal culture.

To be betrayed by one of these must have been like knowing... that one’s own
father intended... to murder you. The outcast highlanders must have arrived
psychically in ways they could not possibly have comprehended.... Their
hearts had been broken... I had known of course... of the external difficulties
of the early Scottish settlers, the people of Glengarry Red River. What I had never seen before, was a glimpse of their inner terrors, a sense of bereavement they must have carried with them. What appeared to be their greatest trouble in a new land - the grappling with an unyielding environment - was in fact probably their salvation. I believe they survived not in spite of the physical hardship but because of them for all their attention and thought had to be focused outward. They could not brood. If they had been able to do so, it might have killed them.  

Neepawa was indeed a strong influence on Laurence's writing. Laurence states that Neepawa and its Scots-Presbyterian pioneers, not Scotland, represent her real past. "My true roots were here". Neepawa provides "elements" of Manawaka but this town of the mind, her own private world, is "not so much any one prairie town as an amalgam of many prairie towns".

Place means land and people and Laurence writes of the ambiguity she felt towards both. To Cameron, she spoke of the stultifying aspects of local culture which, along with respect for individuality and independence, helped to nurture her love of freedom. Here she acknowledges the welcome security of that admittedly repressive atmosphere. The land was lonely, isolated, yet very beautiful. Its inhabitance evoked similarly complex emotions:

how difficult they were to live with, how authoritarian how unbending, how afraid to show love... and how willing to sow anger. And yet they had inherited a wilderness and made it fruitful. They were in the end great survivors and for that I love and value them.

The theme of survival with human dignity and warmth is termed as an almost inevitable theme for a writer who came from a Scots - Irish background of stern values and hard work and puritanism, and who grew up during the drought and depression of the thirties and then the war. The most readily identifiable western Canadian quality about Margaret Laurence is her early dedication to social reform and the continued, basic, social awareness that is part of the foundation of all her work. Growing up with a troubled knowledge that the depression had
cramped or defeated her parent’s generation and coming to maturity with the knowledge that everywhere in the western world their general choices were predetermined by the Second World War, she and her associates saw concerted social action as the hope and the only protection for mankind. Her statements of concern were to become a part of the fabric of all her fiction.

The generation of Canadian writers who preceeded her, influenced Laurence to a great extent. Exhibiting a strong sense of kinship, Laurence calls these writers “God busters” and “literary heroes”, who revealed their particular Canadian communities and whose writings influenced her own.

One important literary influence was the fiction of Sinclair Ross. Laurence first read his As for me and My House when she was eighteen. Laurence comments on the realism that is nevertheless “illuminated with compassion”.26 His treatment of the land, “violent and unpredictable”, sometimes suggests a harsh and vengeful God; his concern with the problems and difficulties of human communication is also hers.

There are close links between Laurence’s African writing and her Manawaka cycle or Canadian based fiction. In Africa, exposed to puzzlingly different peoples and cultures, Laurence’s understanding of herself and her own culture took a great leap forward. In Africa she was a stranger, subject to the alienation that she depicts as central to human experience everywhere. It was in Africa that her recurring themes of strangerhood, exile, bondage, freedom and human dignity and concern for women first took shape.

It was a circuitous path, however that took her from the real Neepawa to the literary Manawaka, the town which appears in her novels, and which she has built into an elaborate imaginative world. She had to be shocked and stimulated by the very different worlds of Somaliland, Ghana and England before she could write about her home. She found Africa totally alien and strongly familiar. Paradoxically, this exotic milieu allowed her to take a leading place within a Canadian literary tradition. Africa inspired her to write, first of all, by providing her with the rich and ever fierce details that are the first elements of fiction. Africa
also posed, in a particularly acute form the dilemma of understanding and portraying character. This was to become the goal for her novels. Finally, Africa offered Laurence her the major themes for her novels.

Her African stories, essays and articles explore the issues of tribalism, colonialism, racial intolerance, betrayal, independence, the clash of generations, self-sacrifice, and survival in a harsh land. All are subjects which recur in the Canadian novels. These themes were first expressed in non-fiction: "I began to write out of my own background only after I had lived some years away." 27 Above all, Africa deepened her appreciation of human differences and of shared individuals in a world of people whom she describes as being both different and similar to themselves. Africa was catalyst and crucible for much of Laurence's work. 28 Africa cauterized Laurence's youthful naivete & liberal optimism. Laurence shares in the world view she ascribes to these African writers (Wole Soyinka and Amadi) who see mankind as vulnerable, paradoxical, struggling, growing with “mystery at the centre of being” (*The Diviners*, p.184). Africa also developed Laurence's interest in and sympathy for the Canadian Indian. His degraded situation has been observed in her youth. It is treated peripherally in *The Stone Angel* and *The Fire-Dwellers* and becomes a significant theme in “The Loons” and *The Diviners*. Finally, the phenomenon of imperialism, along with exposure to different cultures in Africa, bred in Laurence that sensitivity to human difference, that compassion for alienation and misunderstandings of a social as well as a personal type, that mark all her writings. Africa confirmed Laurence's intuition that “it was not a matter of intelligence but of viewing the whole of life through different eyes' (*New Wind*, p.99). The exposure to the African tribal systems had given her an understanding of the Scottish clans. *The Prophets Camel Bell* (1963), is based on diaries from the early fifties, but is written out of a later maturity which judges and frequently scorns the initial reactions.

Laurence’s conclusion to the Nigerian study reiterates that neither Elichi Amadi nor Wole Soyinka are liberal humanists, that they never suggest that man improves with the passing of time “and will ultimately be able to direct wisely and knowingly every facet of his life”. Laurence shares in the worldview of these African writers who see mankind as vulnerable, paradoxical, struggling, growing, with “mystery at the centre of being”. 29 Africa bred in
Laurence that sensitivity to human difference, that compassion for alienation and misunderstandings of social as well as a personal type, that mar all her writing. "It was not a matter of intelligence but of viewing the whole of life through different eyes".  

Laurence read O. Mannoni’s *Prospero and Caliban. A study of the Psychology of Colonisation in Canada* in 1960. Literature clarified and confirmed her own experience in Africa. Like *The Prophets Camel Bell*, Mannoni’s study stems from self-searching and the validity of the Other: “I saw that the problem for human beings.... was to acquire not the ability but the will to understand each other”.  

In Laurence’s travel narrative she quotes Mannoni’s reference to the colonials’ lack of awareness of “the world of others, a world in which others have to be respected”.

Laurence places importance on the past. “Most Nigerian writers have in some way or other made an attempt to restore the value of the past, without idealising it and without being shackled by it.” “No one’s past is to be dismissed by an act of will”. Moreover, the bond between past and present is inevitable, for the past within ourselves shows the present “its own face”. Laurence’s African writing reveals her advances in self-acceptance and understanding, fostered by the United States. Every woman’s struggle of the psyche to know, be, and act as and for herself, is a paradigm of the situation Canadians feel themselves to be in. Survival is not the point; endurance is not the point; resistance is the point, so that we know ourselves to be ourselves defined by our difference. That is the Canadian existential situation. Margaret Laurence treats her own concerns and her works resonate with the concerns of all of us.

When Laurence returned to Canada in 1957, still engaged in writing *This Side Jordan*, she saw her own country in the light of her years spent abroad. In particular, she observed three dilemmas that now fell into alignment. The first, prompted by seeing Africans, faces an abrupt and bewildering transition from traditional to modern eras. It was the twin problem of freedom and survival, of gaining and maintaining “an independence which was both political and inner”. How can individuals live freely, at ease with themselves, their past and the lives of others? This question immediately raised a second, for the private life responds to a thousand social pressures, some obvious, some insidious. How can individuals assess their lives fairly when standards of judgment are imposed on them? Canada, like Africa, was a land that had
been a colony, a land which in some ways was still colonial. The people's standards of correctness and validity and excellence were still at that time largely derived from external and imposed values; the problem of colonialism seldom appears openly or politically in Laurence's Canadian fiction. Instead, it is implied in the habits, instincts, even turns of speech of her characters, in their numbing sense that their lives are not their own, and in their recurring need to escape from "correctness", often by retreating into the Canadian wilderness, far from social pressures and prejudices. The colonial mentality corresponded to a third problem that became apparent when Laurence began writing *The Stone Angel*. This was her "growing awareness of the dilemma and powerlessness of women, the tendency of women to accept male definitions of 'themselves', to be self-deprecating and uncertain, and to rage inwardly." This is a different kind of colonialism that makes the issues of freedom and survival particularly acute for women. Laurence observed this condition in its starkest form in Somaliland, where women's lives are strictly scrutinized and directed by men, yet are romanticized elaborately in literature. The status of women in tribal and religious traditions is infinitely inferior to that of men: "The double standard is extremely strong." She continued her observations in Canada, and while she has declared that she is "90% in agreement with women's lib", she is a thoroughly feminist writer in the sense that she explores sympathetically and critically the plight of women in 20th century Canada. Laurence's direct influences have been literature, myth and personal experience.

CHAPTER NOTES


11. Conversation with Patricia Morley, July 25, 1976, at Lakefield; and *Margaret Laurence. First Lady of Manawaka*, Director Robert Duncan, Producer William Weintraub; Distributor, National Film Board of Canada.


22. Ibid., p. 148.

23. Ibid., pp. 145-146.

24. Ibid., p. 15.

25. Ibid., p. 16.


