

Some Pioneer Women Writers of French Canada

Catherine Rubinger

Lectrices et lecteurs chercheront en vain
une thèse féministe dans les écrits des femmes pionnières Canadiennes françaises.
Ils entendront, par contre, une voix de femme claire
et ferme qui nous parvient à travers trois cents ans d'histoire.

Readers seeking a feminist thesis in the pioneer writings of French Canadian women will be disappointed. They will find, however, a clear and firmly accented woman's voice, echoing over 300 years. The personal letters of the founders of the Ursuline order, the family letters of Mme Bégon a century later and the works of French Canada's first woman novelist, Laure Conan, show certain constants despite their different genres and their different historical periods. Together they are a unique record of women's reaction to their times, to their surroundings, to their contemporaries and to each other.

The themes and subject matter of the pioneer women writers often echo and parallel those of their male contemporaries, but always with a personal touch, permitting modern readers to know how at least one woman felt and thought and lived at a specific date. The characters of these women vary enormously but they have a deep spiritual commitment and a certain respect for suffering in common. This is the source of the moral strength which is one of their outstanding characteristics. These

women are fully in touch with life in all its aspects including the need to write, both as a documentary duty and as a relief from loneliness — even as a form of human contact. The writers are touched with a deep social and patriotic concern and express admiration for the leaders of their society, both male and female; leaders with whom they feel entirely equal. A certain 'earnestness' is the prevailing mood as these women write, but there are also flashes of wit and an appreciation of the joys of leisure and they show sympathetic amusement at human foibles. The similarities of the experiences are perhaps all the more remarkable in that their writings date from such widely spaced periods and were born or such widely different reasons for writing — collectively they amount to a tableau of women's vision through time.

The contribution of these women to the development of French Canadian society has been a controversial matter at times, but of their contribution to the literature of French Canada there is no doubt. Few countries have such a body of literature, containing such early material and so

continuous a participation by gifted women. The novel, in particular, is dominated by women writers and the origins of that novel are in the letters of the 17th and 18th centuries.

When Mother Marie de l'Incarnation arrived in New France shortly after its founding and in 1637 set pen to paper to write her first business and personal letters, she unintentionally laid the foundations for the French Canadian novel. Her spiritual, social and practical observations show that, to France, the Canada of the early 17th century was the scene of the highest and most splendid adventure of the age: the founding of a pure and innocent society in a vast wilderness rich with human souls to save. The first inhabitants were therefore men and women of towering idealism and very considerable stamina.

The subject matter of Canada's first woman writer is interesting because it contains, in its way, the main themes which continue to dominate the French Canadian novel. Survival, for example, is a prime concern, not in the modern context of remaining oneself in the face of

boredom, insanity, technology or alienation, but in a totally idealistic sense, involving all society and all aspects of life. It is similar perhaps to that sought by some leaders of the Women's Movement of the 20th century. On a personal level, it is a matter of physical survival in the face of war and privation and, when necessary, triumph of the spirit over death. It is a question of the survival of a nation at the collective level and of the triumph of the word of God at the mystical level. The prevailing atmosphere is one of exaltation, ardour and a certain stern joy. The climate of thought and the psychological emphasis of the 17th century are different from those of today, yet the importance of the theme anticipates the modern novel in its general outlines.

Scenes familiar to the modern reader, familiar melodramas, occur often. Familiar details occur also: flies, difficulties of learning new languages, loneliness forests, wilderness and its moods, the challenge of being stretched to the limit of endurance, long winters, the cold, the joy of spring and that love of the land which developed in the early European founders and which is a lyrical *leitmotif* throughout

Canadian literature. Here we also find for the first time the urge to write, however unpropitious the circumstances, which many an author in both English and French Canada has since described as an elemental need.

Characters also emerge. Marie de l'Incarnation alludes to the adventurer, alone but happy, battling with danger and with solitude and at times overcome by the rigours of nature. This character will haunt the imagination of artists from Louis Hémon to Gabrielle Roy.

No one reading the novel of the land, or even the contemporary French-Canadian novel, can fail to notice the importance of the mother as a strong, courageous personification of all female virtues and the keystone of stable society. Here it has its origins in documented observation of the daily actions and thoughts of larger-than-life heroic women. These are the super-heroic characters who disappeared from the novel at the beginning of the 20th century to be replaced by unhappy, lost, helpless anti-heroes. Here in the world of French Canada's first woman writer we find the real thing: authentic, heroic, men and women. French Canadian literary characterization, which sometimes seems rather stereotyped or improbable does indeed have its roots in historical fact.

Later, in a very different vein, Mlle de Verchères, in her letter to the Countess Maurepas, provides a short but tantalizing glimpse of family life in the mid-17th century, and of the possible dramas at that time. The emphasis on courage remains, but it is now inspired by national or family pride. Mlle de Verchères, who sees herself as a heroine, is conscious of what she owes to her country, to her name and to herself. Her style is bombastic, naïve, highly personal and engagingly

dramatic. She has two adventures. During the first episode she is only 14 and is outside the gates as the Indians approach. She gains the doorway and leaps onto the breach — ordering the soldiers to arms and telling her brothers:

Let us fight to the death, let us fight for our father-land and our religion. Remember the lessons that my father has given us, that gentlemen are born to shed their blood for the service of God and king.¹

She and her small contingent hold the fort for eight days. After the commander of the garrison has returned and taken over from Madeleine, (or gallantly refused to do so,) she tells him that the soldiers covered her while she sallied forth among the enemy to collect her clothes off the washing line!

The second event in the same vein occurs later when she is married. Her house is invaded by Indians who attack and overcome her husband. On this occasion she seizes the tomahawk of one of the Indians and wallops him with it. But she takes time to record that, in the struggle, her hair becomes tousled and her dress disordered. Even allowing for a little exaggeration (and a middle-aged idealization of these past events) what Mlle de Verchères is recounting is, presumably, true. In the early days of New France, life was indeed a high adventure — and the pioneer women write of themselves and of their activities in 'larger than life terms.'

From these epic dramas, with their gallery of heroic ancestors, French Canadian folklore and literature took a long time to evolve. It is possible to view the modern novel with its women characters struggling to live (and love) and be free in a

claustrophobic world of alienation and amorality, as a reaction against the weight of a history grown too heavy to bear.

When the reaction to the past set in, French Canadian writers felt the need to attack the kingpin of their glorified history — the mother. Yet she was the woman who had kept alive the story of the heroism of the founders of New France. The French Canadian novel of the 1950s and 1960s therefore set out to debunk what had become a myth, an idealized legend, and it is interesting to note that the most ferocious attacks on the myth of the mother/heroine come from women writers.

The modern themes of alienation, suffering, and despair however are not an invention of the 1960s. They appear in the work of another letter-writer of the Ancien Régime, in the mid-18th century. These are the personal letters written during the final years before the fall of Québec, by Mme Bégon.

Her first letters to her son-in-law offer glimpses of society life in Montréal, Trois-Rivières and Québec during the years before the Conquest. People who played a role in Canada's history visited her home, played with her grandchild, made her laugh by falling into snowdrifts where they lost their dignity and their wigs. Dancing, love-making, assemblies, witty political gossip occupied the days while the bishops thundered against the general dissipation. Momentarily, the hostile Indians, the fierce cold, the incessant danger of fire, and even the menace of the wintry elements seem tamed, civilized by courtly manners. On December 9, 1748 she writes:

Would you believe it, dear son, that pious lady Mme Verchères held a dance which lasted all night? Our priests will have some

pretty preaching to do: on Our Lady's Day, during Advent, to hold a ball! And the best of it is that there will be another tomorrow night at Mme Lavaltrie's and the day after tomorrow one at the house of Mme Bragelogue.²

Yet as the last years of Mme Bégon's life unfold, the tone changes and desperation replaces the spirited accounts of adventure and high society. Exiled in New France, which she finds damp and lonely, she is deprived of the world she knows. Cold assumes a psychological importance; love is remote; exile is permanent, and on May 4, 1751, she is struggling with poverty and resorting to Christian resignation. Her words could be spoken by the modern fictional mothers — Gabrielle Roy's Rose-Anna Lacasse, or Marie-Claire Blais' Grandmère Antoinette:

Life is so extraordinarily expensive, and despite our simple fare which is of the most meagre, we spend more than we have in revenues: but one has to live and I confess that I suffer to see myself in such straits, but it is the Lord's will . . . We have the most cruel winter that one can imagine.³

As her world contracts and her life darkens, Mme Bégon assumes the stature of a classical figure of tragedy and becomes an archetype of the Canadian fictional heroine of the 20th century.

Between Mme Bégon's final pages where she describes the difficulties of New France during the last years of the Ancien Régime and the birth of fiction in French Canada at the end of the 19th century, there is a long gap. However, the work of Laure Conan provides a transitional

study, for her novels both anticipate the contemporary women novelists' work and contain echoes of her literary predecessors.

The spiritual adventures of Marie de l'Incarnation evolve into the rather more military exploits of Mlle de Verchères and the religious ideals of the founders evolve into an ideal of national and family pride. From Mme Bégon's first letters we see a brilliant society which she enjoys and then the despair and tragic loneliness of old age. In Laure Conan's work we find all these elements. The heroine of *La Sève Immortelle* is patriotic, proud and brave, animated by a fervent spiritual and national faith. Guillemette rejects her rich English suitor despite her father's persuasion to marry a man who could relieve their poverty, quotes from the work of Marie de l'Incarnation and then writes about her most impressive relative — an aunt who became a nun.

Yes, and she loved her country. But in her eyes, New France was a work of heroism, and to see its destruction was agony. She died the day after the Battle of the Plains, at the very hour when the body of Monsieur de Montcalm was laid in the ground. She did not outlive New France . . . and I find that so beautiful.⁴

The pattern in this work is familiar. It is a mosaic of recurring elements: the idealistic founding of New France, the struggles, the women founders evoked by name and the nobler-than-life characters. But this scene is not documentary. History has become fiction and the basic myths on which a literature can be founded now exist.

French Canada has its lasting imagery — history and art begin their universal interaction, influencing the life style and artistic imagination of

successive generations provoking reactions leading to new vision. Elsewhere in literature this interaction is usually dominated by men, with women writers standing apart as exceptions in literary history. In Québec's novel, however, the continuity of women's voices is unbroken. Since Laure Conan echoed the documentary letters of the Ursulines and sketched her vision of the human condition, women writers have reacted to and interacted with, each other and with their society. Using the idiom of their times these novelists have shown the need to enlighten, to inspire, to build and to create which, in very different ways, characterized the missionary pioneers.

Indeed many of the contributions of Laure Conan linger on. Her search for a clear, elegant French which is yet unmistakably Canadian and her experimentations with style, plot and form continue to be hallmarks of novels written by French Canadian women. The 'terroir' novel is anticipated in her patriotic love of the land. Nostalgia for a lost age of coherent unity, peopled by super-heroines echoes throughout her books. Her evocation of powerful women — which is one of the constants of the novel of the land, already places 'Mother' and 'Young Girl' firmly at the centre of the work. The hold of the mother figure on the French Canadian sensibility can be measured by the ferocity with which modern novelists, such as Anne Hébert and Marie-Claire Blais attack this symbol as a repressive and reactionary force. The secondary characters of the 'terroir' novel are present in Conan's work, the priest, notary, father, lover. The plot is sketched in: girls must marry, for love if possible, but mainly for duty. And lurking in the strange world of Laure Conan's *Angeline de Montbrun* lies much of the

psychological drama to be explored in detail in the successful novels of the 1960s and 1970s, with their emphasis on neurosis, monstrosity, denial of life and inhumanity.

Perhaps the most remarkable aspect of Conan's work, however, is that it exists at all. Living a vivid life of the imagination, yet in tune with society and the land around her, she felt the need to express her experience, to communicate it, to make it coherent. After her, women's contribution to the Québec novel will never again be solitary: she heralds a period of rich and powerful talent.

This examination of women's experience in French Canada is far from complete. It is based on writings which are themselves only fragmentary samples of the voices of women pioneer writers. If Laure Conan's fiction comes to us complete and as she intended it, the letters of her predecessors are subject to the flukes of history. Mme Bégon's last letters survive where her earlier correspondence is lost. Several versions of Mlle de Verchères' letters are available but a number are missing. Marie de l'Incarnation wrote many thousands of letters but those in print are the choice of her son, who was her first editor and who destroyed many more. How true his judgment was when he made his selection, we do not know.

It is difficult to judge how representative these writings are of 300 years of women's experience. However, it is possible to trace in them the echoes of a stern but irrepressible celebration of life. It is possible to identify an aspiration towards freedom and expression of individuality that is born of the land. It is possible to observe the development of an art form owing little to outside influences. This is

an original literature.

It is often pointed out that the novel of French Canada has an unusual number of women authors, an unusual number of dominant female characters and that its most recurrent image (at least in books by male novelists) is that of the young girl who symbolizes, or who is, Québec. Yet the formative influence of women's sensibility and women's vision of the world goes deeper than this. The French Canadian novel is founded on a mythology of which women, real women of whom some were themselves writers, are among the principal characters. There are significant features in this mythology which women artists later formed and moulded and transformed into their own poetry and fiction. In this way the sensibility and imaginative references for future generations are revealed as an unbroken chain.

Women did not, and still do not, dominate the French Canadian novel to the exclusion of men: they work as equals and as leaders at times. But unlike the situation of most literatures of the Western world, they are never absent. It is their large and constant participation which gives to the body of French Canadian novels a particular flavour and a rich diversity. ☉

Footnotes:

1. Verchères, Madeleine de, *Lettre à la Comtesse de Maurepas*, in French and English, in the Supplement to the report of the Public Archives of Canada for 1899 (Ottawa:1901).
2. Bégon, Elisabeth, *Letters au cher fils: correspondance d'Elisabeth Bégon avec son gendre. 1748-1753*, préface de Nicole Deschamps (Montréal: Hertubise HMH, 1972), my translation, C.R.
3. *Ibid.*
4. Conan, Laure, *La Sève Immortelle*, my translation, C.R.