

Stephens is inspired by a quest to identify and celebrate lesbian ancestors, from Joan of Arc to the "women of the left bank" in literary Paris at the beginning of the twentieth century (Renée Vivien, Natalie Barney, Colette) and to Virginia Woolf and Vita Sackville-West. This lesbian genealogy that she traces links her narrator's quest to a fascinating past as well as to a utopian future.

As a francophone writer living in English Canada, Stephens uses French with great precision and tenderness. Each word of her texts is consciously chosen, carefully placed. Her prose is incantatory and lyrical, yet highly disciplined. Marguerite Andersen, the critic and writer to whom *Colette, m'entends-tu?* is dedicated, has spoken of the "classicism" of Stephens's writing, a "measured" quality that is rare in the work of so young a writer. *Colette, m'entends-tu?* is composed of fifty-one prose poems, each of which fills one dense and beautifully crafted paragraph. Having read it, one feels that Nathalie Stephens will one day be acknowledged as a major francophone poet. Along with her other readers, I look forward to the publication of her next work, *Le dortoir de l'indiscrétion*, later this year.

THE LIFE OF MARGARET LAURENCE

James King, Toronto: Alfred A. Knopf Canada, 1997.

by *Donex Xiques*

This is a disappointing book. The unusual media coverage attending its publication in the summer of 1997 led the public to expect this new biography of Margaret Laurence to be both rigorous and comprehensive. Unfortunately, it is neither.

This work by James King, a professor at McMaster University, is his first foray into Canadian biography; he has written extensively on the eighteenth-century poet William Cowper and published biographies of other British writers.

James King's *The Life of Margaret Laurence* fortunately does not idealize Laurence, but neither does it seem to capture her. In preparing the book, King had access to new material which had not yet been archived: the journal which Laurence kept during the last six months of her life; drafts for a novel (1982–83); and some letters in private hands. In addition, he located a friend of Margaret's mother (who died when she was four) and offers new information about her. His book also contains a very fine selection of about fifty photographs, many never before published.

Margaret Laurence, with the exceptions noted above, did not leave diaries, early drafts of her fiction, commonplace books, or copies of correspondence before 1962, her thirty-sixth year.

There remains, nevertheless, an enormous amount of archival material. At York University, the chief repository of her papers, there are hundreds of letters (business and personal), as well as typescripts of her fiction, manuscript notes, and other related documents. In addition, McMaster University holds the archives of her Canadian publisher, McClelland and Stewart, and typescripts of many of Laurence's novels acquired by McMaster's university librarian, William Ready. It also now houses much of the new material which James King referred to.

A good deal of the information in *The Life of Margaret Laurence* is based on three books by Laurence: *The Prophet's Camel Bell*, a travel-memoir about Somalia; *A Bird in the House*, short stories which focus on the childhood and youth of Vanessa; and *Dance on the Earth*, Laurence's memoirs. When passages from those memoirs are put side-by-side with King's biography, the indebtedness, even to phrasing, is obvious. But memory is selective and Laurence's account of her life is incomplete. Due to illness, she was unable to finish her memoirs, relying for the first time on a tape recorder, and Joan Johnston's assistance with the manuscript. Published posthumously, *Dance on the Earth*

was completed under the editorship of Margaret's daughter, Jocelyn.

Although *A Bird in the House* is set in a prairie town, a one-to-one correspondence between Vanessa and Margaret is problematic and allows little room to approach the book as imaginative creation. It also overlooks discrepancies between the fiction and the life. It is difficult, moreover, to understand on what basis Mr. King selects dialogue and details from the fictionalized account of Vanessa to apply to young Laurence (then Peggy Wemyss).

Readers unfamiliar with Laurence's life will find much information, particularly about her years in the British Somaliland Protectorate and later in England. But the biography on the whole seems uneven. King's use, at times, of melodramatic phrasing is distracting: "And the Manawaka she later ripped from the flesh of Neepawa is a hothouse of stifled feeling"; or "In Neepawa resided a heart of darkness which the young girl knew intimately"; or (about literary disputes) "In 1969–70, she could, in large measure, take an almost voyeuristic pleasure in seeing other people expose themselves."

This biography would have been enhanced by a more comprehensive treatment of Margaret Laurence's literary work; more discussion such as that offered by Jon Kerzer's analysis of the stories in *A Bird in the House*, where among other points he notes that the arresting image, "horses of the night" is drawn from Marlowe's *Dr. Faustus*. It is also disappointing that King presents Margaret's off-handed comment to friend and fellow writer Adele Wiseman, this is "a story about a dwarf," as a description of "Godman's Master," one of Laurence's finest stories.

It is impossible, of course, to cover every facet of a subject's life, but errors or omissions in one area lead to questions about King's assessment of other areas. Here are some points I have noticed: Margaret's first home on Vivian Street was extremely modest, but it was not, as King states, on the "wrong" side of town. If there was

a "wrong" side of Neepawa, it was at the far northern end near the CPR line and the Salt Plant. Laurence did not write the "I.M. Nosey" [sic] column in the high school paper. Although she ended her violin lessons, Margaret continued to play in the orchestra throughout her high school years. While James King rightly foregrounds the significance of the death of Margaret's parents during her childhood years, he presents her in high school and college as an "outsider"—a term that would aptly describe William Faulkner at a similar period, but hardly applies to Margaret who was well-liked in high school and college and very involved with school and campus activities. In treating the college years, Mr. King accepts Margaret's statement that "she decided against joining a sorority," but overlooks one of the singular features of United College that, unlike the University of Manitoba, it had no sororities or fraternities (this was one reason why a large number of Jewish students enrolled there). Later, when

Laurence left Vancouver for England, her friend Mona does not recall Margaret asking for approval or discussing George Lamming.

These and subsequent points may seem minor, but they raise questions for this reviewer. There is, more significantly, the absence of the usual scholarly bibliography; a puzzling fact, since this has been a feature of King's previous biographies and is standard procedure.

Whatever Laurence's private life may have been in her later years, when she seemed unable to write more fiction, she continued to discharge her professional duties as the Chancellor of Trent University and to conscientiously participate in various peace and environmental organizations. The best discussion of these last 13 years of Laurence's life, the period following *The Diviners*, remains that by Patricia Morley (*Margaret Laurence: The Long Journey Home*, revised edition, 1990).

In reviewing this book, perhaps, after all, the issue is chiefly one of

interpretation and emphasis. In *The Life of Margaret Laurence*, James King's approach and style are closer to that of biographer Jeffrey Meyers than to Michael Holroyd or Richard Holmes. Margaret Laurence was a very private person and a complex woman. Her correspondence is remarkably free of professional gossip, and she remained consistently silent about personal matters regarding her husband Jack, and the children and their lives, making it a challenge for a biographer to analyze and interpret the life.

As Gabrielle Roy once remarked in a letter to William Arthur Deacon: "Our life cannot be told in facts, ... but in inner strivings and conflicts, very difficult to record." Although James King has presented a good deal of information, *The Life of Margaret Laurence* should, more appropriately, have been called "A Life" rather than "The Life," for with the passage of time, the availability of additional material and others' memoirs, a fuller portrait will emerge.

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