Remittance Men, Romantics, and Regular Guys: The Image of British Immigrants in Popular Western Canadian Fiction

by Frances W. Kaye

Paul Voisey's study *Vulcan*, definitive in so many areas, is no less so when it comes to understanding the reputation of British settlers among western Canadians and other North Americans. On one hand, the Canadians "considered Englishmen the most inexperieneed, incompetent farmers of all, and they revelled in tales that illustrated the faet." On the other hand, they welcomed them as kinsmen. Many of the English were, in fact, inexperienced farmers, and although their ranks contained many lower middle elass immigrants as well as the ubiquitous "remittance men," English accents and reserve often gained the unpretentious immigrant as well the reputation of being snooty and undemocratic. As Voisey says:

> Ridicule served to remind British immigrants that while they might represent the ideal racial type, English-speaking North Americans stood as their equals in that respect and could teach them a thing or two besides. But any hostility directed towards Englishmen cannot be taken too seriously. North Americans never punished them socially. They welcomed them into all local organizations and awarded them positions of leadership disproportionate to their relatively small numbers. Thus, they could be made the butt of pranks and tall tales because North Americans knew they could withstand it without suffering social damage.

In *A Flannel Shirt & Liberty*, her study of British women who emigrated to the Canadian West, Susan Jackel discusses the phenomenon of "NO English Need Apply" in much the same terms as does Voisey, making a distinction between the helpless and hapless English immigrants and those who worked hard and soon fitted into their adopted communities. Other prominent historians of the prairies, including R. Douglas Francis, Howard Palmer, and the magisterial W.L. Morton, have also talked about the paradoxical assimilation of the British on the prairies.[1]

In this paper I have discussed the images of the British in the popular literature (fiction and journalism) of the Canadian West in the first third of this century. Popular literature, in its unabashed use of stereotypes, allows the reader to see types rather than complex, individualized characters. And works written before 1929 reflect the boomer spirit of the West before the Depression and Dust Bowl (though western Canada suffered an early depression in the twenties), in the early years of settlement, when popular works, explaining the West both to its new inhabitants and to interested parties in the east or across the Atlantic, enjoyed a flourishing market. I have made occasional references to later, more serious works, however, when they shed particular light on

a subject. I have looked at the works of the two most popular western Canadian novelists of the first decades of this century, Nellie McClung and Ralph Connor, and at the popular journalists identified by Susan Jackel. I have also included two lesser known novels that are particularly articulate about perceptions of British settlers, Francis Marion Beynon's *Aleta Dey* and May Florence Weller's *Redgold*. The former has recently been reprinted and enjoys a fair amount of critical interest; the latter was "Canadian Novel of the Year" when it was originally published. I have omitted a number of books and authors whose portrayals of British settlers were not as vivid and detailed. My choice of texts, then, is idiosyncratic but not arbitrary.

For the most part, my research has turned up English men and women. The occasional Scot is rarely distinguished from the English except for the frequent use of the stagey "Hoot, Mon" accent. "Shanty" Irish, also dialect characters, appear as comic relief. Unlike the English and the Scots and the Protestant Irish, the Catholic dialect Irish are usually lower class town or city dwellers rather than farmers. My research, while not exhaustive, did not discover any settlers definitely identified as Welsh. (Susan Jackel identified the same pattern in her study.)

The remittance man is by far the most frequent stock character. Although there was often discrimination against the English for their condescension and class consciousness, as well as the carelessness and ineptness of the stereotypical ne'er-do'well remittance man, this attitude is rarely reflected in the literature. Francis Marion Beynon's *Aleta Dey* provides a rare treatment of this true dislike.

> John was a remittance man. In the beginning England sent her younger sons of great families to Canada, and her criminals to Australia, and judging by some of the results our cousin had an unfair advantage over us.

How we, born Canadians, detested those English remittance men! The narrator, Aleta, explains that John is rude and scornful of her father, proclaiming that colonials know only how "to plough a straight furrow." This discourtesy and undemocratic judging leads the family and its neighbors to refuse to hire English workers when men of any other nationality can be found. Aleta concludes her discussion:

> I am sorry for those English remittance men now, at a distance of years from contact with them. Our crude way of living must have been as distasteful to them as their avowed contempt for everything we did, thought and had was to us.[2]

Beynon makes it clear that Aleta's prejudice is not against Englishmen as Englishmen but only as people who disparage Canadians as colonials in comparison to a "remembered" England that never was. Aleta eventually falls for the Scot McNair, a love affair that allows Beynon to deal with a more complex image of the Briton in western Canada.

Nelly McClung's portrait of Arthur Wemyss in *Sowing Seeds in Danny* shows the combination of admiration and contempt that the Canadian felt for the English. As Pearl, the heroine of the novel, tells Arthur:

> Ma says when ye git a nice Englishman there's nothing nicer, and pa knowed one once that was so polite he used to say 'Haw Buck' to the ox and then he'd

> say, 'Oh, I beg yer pardon, I mean gee.' It wasn't you, was it?

Arthur admits he has done many foolish things but maintains that he is not guilty of this particular one. Arthur himself is a middle class, "fifth son of the Reverend Alfred Austin Wemyss, Rector of St. Agnes, Tilbury Road, County of Kent, England," but McClung groups him with younger sons of "earls and dukes." Arthur may not be excessively polite to oxen, but his unfamiliarity with horses leads him to tip the buggy to allow the horses to drink because he does not know how to unfasten the check rein--or even what a check rein is.[3] Arthur's polite ineptness is further demonstrated by his getting appendicitis. Too polite to complain, he is saved by Pearlie, who rallies his spirits and brings him a doctor. Arthur will presumably stay in Canada and be joined by his English sweetheart. In time the two will develop the common sense of the native-born Canadians, but McClung clearly thinks they have a good deal to learn.

Arthur, who has a splendid singing voice, seems to be modelled to some extent on the young Englishman McClung calls Alf Grainger in her autobiography, a man who comes West as a farm hand and stays on as piano teacher and church pianist, roles that might have been thought a little effete for a Canadian man. McClung remembered that Alf "gave us a love and understanding of music, and added greatly to the happiness of our lives." Despite the stereotypical Englishman's impracticality, he was an important culture bearer. McClung recollects not only Alf's piano but the music hall accordion repertoire of another English hired man, Edwin Guest. More important are the books and sermons that the Englishmen bring and lend freely among their neighbors. While western Canadians might laugh at the remittance man's attempt to transplant tennis or fox hunting, the culture he brought was extremely important, especially to bookish children like Nellie, with no ready source of reading matter. Edward McCourt's remittance man Charlie Steele, in *Music at the Close*, likewise enriches the young Neil Fraser's life with his books and his romantic aloofness from the prosaic farming community. Charlie Steele also operates in an alcoholic haze, another common attribute of the remittance man, though not one that the strong WCTU-er McClung would depict as laconically as did McCourt. The remittance man could also partake of homegrown Canadian grandeur when he donned the scarlet coat of a Mountie, and, as Dick Harrison has pointed out, many of the early Mounties in popular fiction were remittance men or other immigrants from Britain.[4] Corporal Cameron, the hero of Ralph Connor's Mountie novel of that title, is a Scot, though not a remittance man.

The writers of fiction do not always distinguish clearly between the remittance man, whose emigration is usually at least partly at the behest of his family, and British settler who has come to the Last Best West on his or her own. The self-supporting immigrant, however, is less likely to be portrayed as a fool and fits more easily into the community though there are often difficult moments at first, when the Canadians mistake English reserve for snobbishness and the English find Canadian curiosity intolerable intrusiveness. While the remittance man is always a man, the voluntary immigrant is quite likely to be female. As Susan Jaekel has pointed out, England at the end of the nineteenth century had many more women than men in its population, and the class system that so irritated Canadians forbade middle class women from entering any occupation but marriage.[5] Thus emigration became an alternative to a genteel poverty that was little more than slow starvation. Women

also emigrated with husbands or brothers for adventure or to build family fortunes. And working class women immigrated to a region of relatively high wages and good matrimonial prospects.

Englishwomen did not carry the stigma of the remittance man, but they did have their own handicaps. Georgina Binnie-Clark quotes an American immigrant to the prairies who tells her, "I've heard tell the English come out to get a livin' in the West, and all they can mostly do is dab the organ and speak foreign tongues--which don't set bread for themselves nor their employers." Binnie-Clark admits that English women are not usually quite up to the Canadian mark of housewifery, but she advises them not to shun domestic work and not to act as if they are martyred in doing it if they come to Canada. Binnie-Clark was well enough to do to buy herself farmland--single women in the Canadian West, unlike those in the American West, could not homestead. Although she reassures her readers that the Canadian housewife is "no mocker of the mistakes of English women," the reality of prairie farming was harsher for poorer genteel Englishwomen who had to take up domestic service.[6]

In her novel *Redgold*, May Florence Weller, like Binnie-Clark herself a gentlewoman from England, though probably a "poor relation," describes her heroine's struggles as she and her husband learn the skills of the West working for a farm family. Like McClung's Arthur Wemyss, Redgold is laughably ignorant of everyday objects. "After the butter was taken from the churn, Redgold, noticing a crinkly board, asked if it were used in the butter process. After a fit of laughter, Mrs. Hunter informed her that it was the washboard."[7] While most of McClung's Canadians are far superior to her English characters, Weller however portrays her Redgold as truly abused when her employers riffle through her clothes, trying on and making fun of what seems to them a sizable and incongruous wardrobe. Not surprisingly the English writers portray the Englishwomen more favorably than do the Canadian writers, but the respect for Englishwomen in the society may be fairly gauged by the political success of such British-born women as Irene Parlby and Violet McNaughton.

If Englishwomen are, for the most part, portrayed favorably, their non-remittance men are portrayed similarly. Redgold's husband, Fred, becomes a leader in the community and with his added sheen as a war hero is elected a member of the Legislative Assembly. The campaign as portrayed by Weller, who herself had considerable experience as a ward heeler in Calgary, is an interesting one in that neither Fred's English birth nor Redgold's success in bringing out the woman's vote receives any attention. One would not guess from the novel that woman suffrage was recent and hard won, while Fred's political success corroborates Voisey's point that the English were gladly accorded leadership positions in prairie communities. In fact novelists not infrequently introduce community leaders who turn out, after many pages, to be British born. Despite remittance man jokes, British immigrants were for the most part admired as community builders, culture bearers, and links with the cultural and patriotic values of a Britain that remained a cultural heartland for English-speaking Canadians.

Lower class British immigrants appear somewhat less frequently in fiction than do upper and middle class ones, and despite Canada's supposed lack of a class structure, these lower class Britons neither aspire to nor are accepted in leadership roles. While Redgold accepted her role as hired girl as an apprenticeship necessary for success in the new land, Polly Bragg, the English girl in *Sowing Seeds in Danny* who has come to

Canada for the better wages that can keep her mother out of the poorhouse, dies of "homesickness as well as typhoid," her pathetic death bed brightened only by the poppies Polly had planted from English seed and that the plucky Canadian Pearlie has had the thoughtfulness to send her in the hospital.[8] Pearlie's parents are northern, Protestant Irish, hard working, lower class dialect characters. It is left for Pearlie to succeed and move up in the world, as she does in the later novel *Purple Springs*, in which she both enjoys a triumphant political career and marries the doctor. Mrs. McGuire, her family's neighbor, is southern Irish, bad tempered, and uses a strong and stagey dialect. By the end of the book she is won over to Protestantism and good temper by the good works of another Canadian-born woman, but she remains a comic character.

In Ralph Connor's *The Foreigner*, the dialect-speaking Mrs. Fitzpatrick plays an important and curious role. As the only English speaker in the burgeoning eastern European ghetto of Winnipeg, she acts as a "civilizer" and, even though she is a Celt, as a mouthpiece for Connor's decidedly Anglo-Saxon values. She is low enough in class that her occupying "the only house that had been able to resist the Galician invasion" is plausible, but she remains to represent British values among the "'haythen.'"[9] She is, however, quite beneath the rank of the Canadian-born, Anglo-Saxon Lady Bountiful of the ghetto. Both Connor and McClung were convinced meliorists who believed Canadian democracy, Anglo-Saxon law, and Protestant Christianity could raise even the foreign-born child--Finn or Russian--to a leadership role as an Anglieized member of the Canadian community. Arthur Stringer, far less tight laced and Progressive, shows us the imported lady's maid Struthers leaving her employer not to embrace Canadian democracy but to assume the semi-equality of a hired girl with flirting rights to the hired man.

Not all British emigrants came to western Canada to work, however. Some came simply for the freedom and the beauty, and not only as tourists, but to settle. Perhaps the most remarkable of the romantics was George Stansfeld Belaney, or Grey Owl. Born and educated in England, he was the son of an English father and an American mother whom he claimed was "an Apache Indian of New Mexico," a claim that scholars have been unable to substantiate. At any rate, Grey Owl came to Canada, living in Ontario, Quebec, and finally Saskatchewan.

> A harsher, sterner land, this, than the smiling Southland; where manhood and experience are put to the supreme test, where the age-old law of the survival of the fittest holds sway, and where strength without cunning is of no avail. . . .
>
> Here, even in these modern days, lies a land of Romance, gripping the imagination with its immensity, its boundless possibilities and its magic of untried adventure. Thus it has lain since the world was young, enveloped in a mystery beyond understanding, and immersed in silence, absolute, unbroken, and all-embracing; a silence intensified rather than relieved by the muted whisperings of occasional light forest airs in the tree-tops far overhead.

Such romantic scenes are for the Indians and the "English-speaking and French-Canadian nationalities," however, and not for those whom Grey Owl scornfully calls the "Hunky" or "Bolshie."[10]

Grey Owl's portrait of himself, though he was certainly eccentric in his preference of beavers for housemates, is in some ways the epitome of the image of the English emigrant to Canada. Grey Owl is a romantic, in tune with nature. Even Nellie McClung's Polly, in her love for her English poppies, in distinction to their employer's materialistic emphasis on cash crops, echoes this sensitivity. Grey Owl is educated, a leader of men as a soldier and as a forest ranger. He romanticizes Indians in his writings, as did fellow English writer May Florence Weller, whose picturesque evocations of the traditionally dying race were quite out of tune with her personal dislike of actual Indians. Grey Owl is also a culture bearer, if in a different way from the bringers of books and music. He brings a romantic landscape aesthetic quite foreign to the pervasive Protestantism of most popular Canadian writers. Like Ernest Thompson-Seton, he included his own sketches in his books, thus showing himself to be an artist as well as a naturalist and writer.

More common than Grey Owl, however, is the British romantic who has come to Canada and drowned both his sorrows and his talents in drink. This noble but ultimately failed figure may simply be a reflection of the battle between the hard drinking and the teetotalling elements of North American society, but it seems more likely that he represents the combination of Canada's great respect for the Briton and the Canadian's need to remind this cross-Atlantic cousin that he (always a he) has a tragic flaw that will prevent him from achieving full success in Canada. Not surprisingly, this figure is usually the creation of a Canadian-born writer. In McClung's *Sowing Seeds in Danny*, the alcoholic genius is Scots, though educated at McGill, in Montreal.[11] He is the "old doctor," who is needed and respected, but feared because of his alcoholic irresponsibility. A minor character, he is "cured" by the end of the book.

Two more variations on this theme are Ralph Connor's Jack French and Francis Marion Beynon's McNair. (Even the woman who loves him gives him no first name.) Jack French, "of good old English stock," and his brother leave "the rim downs of Devon" and wind up in Winnipeg, where both fall in love with the same Canadian woman. When she chooses the brother, Jack finds a "fair and lonely wilderness" and settles down to build a ranch and to drown his sorrows. He does both, quite thoroughly, until his sister-in-law, now the widowed Lady Bountiful of the eastern European ghetto, sends to his care the passionate young son of Russian revolutionaries.[12] On the remote ranch the boy will be safe from his father's enemies and Jack will make a Canadian–that is, an Anglicized Protestant--out of him. Connor is unabashedly assimilationist. While he does not value other cultures, he believes, unlike Grey Owl, that the people are, at least potentially, as good as the best Anglo-Saxons. Jack's fine qualities win the boy's love, but his failing forces the boy to take responsibility for the ranch and actually helps the boy to become a man. Thus it is not surprising that the young Russian discovers coal, wins the hand of the daughter of a wealthy Scottish investor, and settles down to, presumably, live happily ever after as a leader in the Anglo-Canadian community.

The Scot McNair in *Aleta Day* is a conservative newspaperman who falls in love with the suffragist, pacifist heroine of the novel, herself a journalist. She first discovers his problem when he becomes drunk at a dinner they are attending, a very public and painful disgrace. Aleta tells the reader:

> It is one of the tragedies of life--
> this trek to Canada of men who

> even in the gentle, humid, unexhilirating climate of the Old Country have developed an unslakable thirst. They come, poor fellows, in the hope of making a new start in the new world. To Canada of all places! To western Canada in particular! Imagine a man who could get up sufficient intensity of thirst to drink to excess in a climate where the end of every avenue is draped in haze; coming for surcease of appetite, to these dry, windy plains where the most distant object meets the brilliant sky with the sharpness of a silhouette; where the night wears no other veil than darkness; and where, even in the hottest July weather the dawn comes tripping over the dewy grass with a tang in her breath. Yet still they come.[13]

According to Beynon, the harsh climate of the prairies makes moderate drinking impossible to all but the most phlegmatic. Thus the prairie dweller drinks either too much or not at all.

Both McNair and Jack French struggle against their demon, both are deeply embarrassed to know that those who love and admire them must deal with them--and their unpleasantness--while they are drinking, but neither is fully successful in kicking the habit, even for love. Jack French's drinking is all that keeps him from being a saint, and we can easily see that this flaw is all that keeps the Englishman from being hopelessly superior to the Canadians--and thus all that salves the Canadians' fear of truly turning out to be as inferior as the insufferable remittance men suggest. The portrayal of McNair is somewhat different. He believes in whatever Aleta most staunchly opposes. She's a suffragist, he's not; she's a prohibitionist, he's a drunk; she's a pacifist, he enlists in the war; she's a Canadian, he's a Scot. All of these contrasts allow Beynon to make her points in arguments between the two, arguments that McNair is fated to lose. Beynon is quite successful in getting the reader to believe in the arguments between the two lovers, which allow her to make her case more forcefully than if Aleta were preaching to a fellow liberal. Aleta is killed in a riot and McNair dies of a broken heart before he can be converted, but Beynon's use of him is plain. As a Scot, he represents all that is best of the old ways but also the limits and pitfalls of the old ways. Clearly his marriage to Aleta, who represents the best of the new ways, would foreshadow a glorious future, but Beynon was not optimistic after the end of the First World War, and she foreshadowed tragedy instead.

This quick look at the image of the British in western Canadian popular fiction produces no surprises. Male and female, British born and Canadian born, authors almost all like their British characters, even as they portray their ignorance of the country and their weaknesses. Canadian writers tend to be more critical than British ones, but all value the Anglo-Saxon culture and traditions and expect the educated British settlers to be leaders in the prairie communities. Certainly the British were treated with far more respect than eastern Europeans or even German and Scandinavian immigrants. The British, even Celts, were seen as standing with Canadians in the anglicization--and hence Canadianizing-- of these "foreigners." But while British writers portrayed their own as an unmitigated gift to Canada, Canadians were more likely to portray the British with a flaw, especially alcoholism, that rendered them inferior, after all, to the native-born Canadians. This image of the British reflects the Anglo-Saxon exclusivism of English-speaking North Americans at a

time when the United States was adopting increasingly strict immigration laws and the pseudo science of the day was establishing and maintaining theories of "racial" inferiority and superiority. The Canadians' need to find something akin to a tragic flaw in their British heroes also reflects Canadians' need to prove themselves every bit as good, if not better, than their parent culture. Sometimes, in order to distinguish themselves from the British, the Canadians proclaimed democratic and egalitarian ideas like those commonly represented in the United States. The prominence of women, both as authors and as characters, is one recognition of that egalitarianism, though neither in Canada nor in the United States did women's equality come easily or fully. As remittance men, romantics, and regular guys--or gals--the image of the British immigrant to the Canadian prairies reflects as much about the host culture as it does about the immigrants.

ENDNOTES

1. Paul Voisey, *Vulcan: The Making of a Prairie Community* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1988), 230-31; Susan Jackel, ed., *A Flannel Shirt and Liberty: British Emigrant Gentlewomen in the Canadian West, 1880-1914*, (Vancouver: University of British Columbia Press, 1982), xx-xxi; R. Douglas Francis and Howard Palmer, "Interpretations and Historiography," and W.L. Morton, "A Century of Plain and Parkland," in Francis and Palmer, eds. *The Prairie West: Historical Readings* (Edmonton: Pica Press, 1985), 1-3,27.

2. Francis Marion Beynon, *Aleta Dey* (London: C.W. Daniel, 1919), 17-18.

3. Nellie McClung, *Sowing Seeds in Danny* (Toronto: Thomas Allen, 1908), 131,143,147-148.

4. Nellie McClung, *Clearing in the West* (New York: Fleming H. Revell, 1936), 221,219; Dick Harrison, "Introduction," in Harrison, ed. *Best Mounted Police Stories* (Edmonton: University of Alberta Press, 1978), 3-4.

5. Jackel, *A Flannel Shirt*, xiii-xvii.

6. Georgina Binnie-Clark, *A Summer on the Canadian Prairie* (1910), in Jackel, *A Flannel Shirt* 157; Georgina Binnie-Clark, "Are Educated Women Wanted in Canada" (1910), in Jackel, *A Flannel Shirt*, 163.

7. May Florence Weller, *Redgold: A True Story of an Englishwoman's Development in the West* (Vancouver: Sun Publishing, 1929), 27. The author's name given on the title page of this book is "Charlotte Gordon," a woman who had paid for the publication but did not write the book. Since this is not a pseudonym, I have used here the name of the actual author.

8. McClung, *Sowing Seeds in Danny*, 176.

9. Ralph Connor [Rev. Charles Gordon], *The Foreigner: A Tale of Saskatchewan* (New York: Grosset and Dunlap. 1909), 21.

10. Grey Owl [George Stansfeld Belaney], *The Men of the Last Frontier* (London: Country Life Limited, 1931), vii,30,175,174-75.

11. McClung, *Sowing Seeds in Danny*, 285.

12. Connor, *Foreigner*, 190,191.

13. Beynon, *Aleta Day*, 132.