

editorial

AN ABSENCE OF UTOPIAS

LITERATURES are defined as much by their lacks as by their abundances, and it is obviously significant that in the whole of Canadian writing there has appeared only one utopian novel of any real interest; it is significant in terms of our society as much as of our literature.

The book in question is *A Strange Manuscript Found in a Copper Cylinder*. It was written in the 1870's and published in 1888, eight years after the death of its author, James de Mille, a professor of English at Dalhousie, who combined teaching with the compulsive production of popular novels; by the time of his death at the age of 46 he had already thirty volumes to his credit, but only *A Strange Manuscript* has any lasting interest. It has been revived as one of the reprints in the New Canadian Library (McClelland & Stewart, \$2.75), with an introduction by R. E. Watters. One cannot go quite as far as Dr. Watters in his arguments for the great originality of *A Strange Manuscript*. As even he admits, the conception of the work, with its presentation of an imaginary society — that of the Kosekins at the South Pole — whose values are the opposite of those we sustain, owes an obvious debt to Samuel Butler and *Erewhon*; there are also perceptible echoes of Lord Lytton's underground Utopia, *The Coming Race*, which, like *Erewhon*, was published at the beginning of the 1870s, a few years before de Mille began work on his novel. Yet one can grant Dr. Watters — and de Mille posthumously — that his combination of elements from old books of antarctic exploration, from palaeontological treatises, and from a range of earlier utopian romances does result in a book which holds together, cemented by a moral vision that is perhaps not peculiar to the author so much as characteristic of Canada.

Yet in terms of our culture as a whole the interesting fact about this solitary successful Canadian utopian novel is that it is really not utopian at all. It is not

even — at least in the manner of *Brave New World* or *1984* — anti-utopian, since it is not concerned with either the defence or the refutation of the idea that men can live in a planned, “ideal” society. De Mille’s purpose, like that of Swift and Butler, is not to polemicize for or against a society that does not exist, but to present a satirical view of our own world by the simple and oft-used process of inversion. Where we love wealth, the Kosekin love poverty; where we regard happiness as the greatest goal, they strive after misery; where we love light, they yearn towards darkness; where we long for life, they desire death. In the process De Mille — like so many satirists — manages to have the best of both worlds, for the selflessness of the Kosekin reflects on the selfishness of our own world, and at the same time we realize that even virtue and self-sacrifice carried to an extreme can be repulsive, so that we see the man of aggressive virtue pilloried at the same time as the man of good-natured vice. If there is any moral to *A Strange Manuscript Found in a Copper Cylinder*, it is surely that of the middle way — moderation in all things.

But the fact that our one good utopian romance turns out to be no utopia at all, but a tract for the times, merely emphasizes the fact that the genuine utopia — positive or negative — is not a Canadian or, indeed, a North American genre, for the examples emanating from south of the border are so rare — Bellamy’s *Looking Backward* is the only one that comes immediately to mind — as to emphasize the slight interest in the New World (at least until the advent of science fiction) in this kind of fantasy.

The lack is not due to the absence of utopian inclinations in either the United States or Canada. The great number of practical experiments in utopian living from the early 19th to the early 20th century is a proof to the contrary. But here again there is an interesting point to be observed. The celebrated North American communities — and the list of them runs into hundreds — were either groups of religious zealots following millenarian doctrines which had their early origins in the Catharist teachings of medieval Europe, or secular groups inspired by socialist visions which originated — also in Europe — in the wake of the French Revolution. Brook Farm sprang from the bizarre dreams of the French phalansterian, Charles Fourier, and many communities were inspired by a novel — *Voyage en Icarie* — by the French socialist Etienne Cabet. Neither Fourier nor Cabet set foot in the New World, but Robert Owen did, and a considerable communitarian movement sprang from his efforts. Possibly the most important secular utopia in Canada was that of the Finns who established a settlement at Sointula — the Place of Harmony — on Malcolm Island off the Pacific Coast; they too were responding to ideas formulated already in Europe.

In other words, in Europe men dreamed of utopias, but in North America they set about creating them as concrete entities, and often succeeded in sustaining them for generations, which did not happen in the urban pressures of Europe. It is the same relationship between imaginary and practical creation as one encounters everywhere in pioneer societies. Pioneers did not produce original works of art, because they were creating original human environments; they did not imagine utopias because they were shaping them. The peculiar conditions of the frontier allowed a great variety of experimentation, though the later advance of settlement brought in restrictive influences; one can see this in the fate of utopian sects like the Doukhobors, who were allowed to experiment in communal organization when they settled in the empty prairies, but were quite ruthlessly dispossessed as soon as land-abundance changed into land-scarcity. Even then, there were still places farther on to which one could emigrate, and the westward shift of utopias continued — Sointula was founded in the Edwardian decade — until, by World War I, the positive utopian ideal had run out of steam. By the time Canadians had become urbanized enough to lose the spaciousness and freedom of frontier life, which in itself constituted a kind of unacknowledged utopia, the literary utopia had lost its meaning in the recognition that rigid planning produces only the utopia of a nightmare. But Canada was never near enough to the totalitarian world of the 30s and 40s to make even that a meaningful vision, and so we have gone entirely without a utopian literature. Perhaps in that we are fortunate as, in other respects, are those lucky lands that have no history.