

HOW A LAND GROWS OLD

NO-ONE WHO TRAVELLED over Canada in recent years by ways other than the impersonal Highway could fail to observe with uneasy sadness how quickly the land grows old where man touches it. Of course, the country is so large that it remains possible for casual visitors to escape into pristine landscapes, wildernesses relatively unmarred; after all, the image of a *new land* is still fostered assiduously by publicists and politicians. But the poets think differently, and they speak for sensitive Canadians. When Al Purdy writes of the Ontario he knows as a land which history has worn down with glacial persistence, when a young poet like Dale Zieroth writes elegies on a dying prairie way of life, we ignore them at our peril. For they tell us how a century of unthinking exploitation has destroyed not only the original quality of the land, but also the human culture that was grafted on to it. For those inclined to trace this pattern of environmental disaster three recent books are worth reading.

Painters in a New Land, by Michael Bell (McClelland & Stewart, \$22.50) is one of those lavishly produced volumes of social history-cum-art which McClelland & Stewart do so well. Michael Bell, formerly a curator at the Public Archives of Canada, has gathered a fascinating anthology of drawings and water-colours by pre-Victorian and early Victorian artists in Canada; almost all of them have been preserved unexhibited and previously unpublished in the Archives, and this has helped to guarantee their freshness of impact.

One thing *Painters in a New Land* reveals convincingly is that Canada in the early nineteenth century fostered a flourishing extension of the great English school of water-colour painting. There is an extraordinary gem-like vividness of tone about many of these sketches, which vary in character from the engagingly

primitive to the highly accomplished, the latter usually the work of military topographers or of the few professional artists who in those distant days found their way into the wilderness west of Lachine. In their vigour and clarity the best of these works recapture in a way the camera has never done, and prose only rarely, the wild and evanescent beauty of parts of Canada that have now been long submerged by settlement, and the appeal of new places where the buildings may have been rough and makeshift but the alienating impersonality of modern cities had not yet taken root. Michael Bell has kept his own commentary to what is barely necessary for sustaining the historical flow, but he has very felicitously mingled the paintings and drawings he selects with well-chosen passages from the diaries and journals of the time. Thus, *Painters in a New Land* really does give a vivid sense of what its title describes — a land barely changed by man the hunter and as yet hardly spoilt by man the exploiter.

No-one who knows Canada well is likely to enjoy this fine book without experiencing a pang of grief — and of remorse on behalf of his people — at the thought of how much of this sparkling heritage we have ruined. Something of the change that human settlement wrought in the prairies, totally changing their original ecology, is charted in J. G. Nelson's *The Last Refuge* (Harvest House, \$7.50). This is a geographer's account of what has happened to the Cypress Hills and the surrounding plains since the introduction of the horse — even before white men appeared in numbers — began the process that on the prairies has changed the relationship between man, his environment, and the animal and vegetable species that share it with him: changed it so radically that it seems unlikely that — even if one's occasional fantasies of man's vanishing as a species could ever come true — anything resembling the original pattern of existence would form itself again in the vast southern regions of Rupert's Land. The moral of Professor Nelson's carefully written and researched historical narrative is summed up in his last paragraph with a simplicity that is its own eloquence.

In concluding this study, I would like to lay stress on the rapid pace of change since the appearance of the white man, and its implications for the future. It took about 200 years between 1670 and 1880 for man to emerge as an ecological dominant and for the European economic system to effect major changes in an ecosystem that apparently had been in a relatively steady state for thousands of years. In the following eighty or ninety years this economic system has grown to the point where remote areas such as the Cypress Hills are being subjected to the cumulative effects of urban, agricultural, transport and recreational developments as well as to proposals for mining in one sort or another. In about ninety years we have moved from abortive efforts to save the bison to the point where the very

air of the Cypress Hills might be polluted by gas and oil production. What will the Hills be like in fifty years if we do not seriously look at present economic activities and living patterns, and plan for life as well as growth, goods and earnings?

The real tragedy of the prairies goes beyond mere humanization, for what is happening now is the destruction of the plains not merely as an environment, but also as a setting for human communities. During the past two decades exploitation has taken on even more naked and rapid forms, exemplified in official encouragement of the ousting of the farmers by large corporations, with the consequent decay of the towns and villages of the prairie provinces.

This process — the death of a regional culture that has emerged, flourished and decayed in no more than a long human life — is splendidly described and chronicled by Heather Robertson in *Grassroots* (James Lewis & Samuel, \$10.00). Heather Robertson takes five communities, varied in character and history, and shows how the process of regional decay is working through all of them, so that they can be described only as moribund, no matter what efforts at rejuvenation their inhabitants may initiate. Their death, and the death of scores of communities like them, will mean that within another generation prairie life as our novelists have described it will have come to an end. The combines will still move over the vast fields, but they will move — so far as human community is concerned — through a near vacuum.

Heather Robertson has been accused by some reviewers of exaggeration, and here and there she does indeed perform that heightening of fact which all writers know is sometimes necessary to arrive at an underlying truth. But those who have travelled the plains during the last six or seven years will recognize the essential rightness of her presentation. These are in stark actuality the prairie towns and villages of the 1970s, a generation farther into decay than Sinclair Ross's *Horizon*. No-one now would think of calling any of them even ironically *Horizon*; they are our own destinations on a *Journey to the End of the Night*. Perhaps Heather Robertson is no Canadian Céline, but she has charted the territory in which such a novelist might operate, and has set the mood of the next wave of prairie novels, provided there are enough people left in the prairies during the later 1970s to make novels worth the effort. In the meantime Heather Robertson has shown herself in *Grass Roots* to be something more than a good journalist. She writes the kind of documentary reportage that is likely to be read a long time ahead. Orwell would not have resented a comparison between *Grass Roots* and *The Road to Wigan Pier*.

THE AREA of silence between those who write in French and those who write in English north of the 49th parallel and west of the Atlantic has long been a cause for regret. From the beginning in *Canadian Literature* we have tried to throw out precarious bridges of lianas and telegraph wire across the gap; our efforts have been largely frustrated by the manifest failure of the assumption that participants in either the francophone or the anglophone culture in Canada are willing to exercise bilingualism sufficiently to read much of each others' literatures in their original languages.

Reluctantly, we have had to accept the need for the copious translation of Canadian books from French into English and vice versa. A beginning has been made from French into English, and it is now possible for readers in Thunder Bay and Seven Persons to read in their own language a score or so of the most interesting novels written recently in Quebec; with due respect, I doubt if even ten recent interesting English Canadian novels are available in French translation to the inhabitants of Sorel or Rivière du Loup.

We welcome therefore the Canada Council's recent initiative in this field. Not only is the Council offering two annual prizes for the best translations of Canadian books into one or other of the major languages. More important, in the long run, it is allocating no less than \$225,000 to subsidize the publication of translations during the current financial year, and translations from the Canadian languages other than French and English are not ruled out. This modest fund, well spent, can do more to promote understanding between the various cultures than any number of expensive Royal Commissions.

G.W.