

Speaker for the Tribes

by George Woodcock

From the beginning, I am sure, Margaret Laurence saw her African experience as a kind of yin-yang unity. Somaliland might be arid and the Gold Coast lush; on the Gold Coast animism and Christianity might melt and merge into each other, while the Somalis were zealously Moslem (with a few lapses into necromancy) and impervious to conversion. But in both places she was "a stranger in a strange land, and was sometimes given hostile words and was also given, once, food and shelter in a time of actual need, by tribesmen who had little enough for themselves." There is no attempt in *The Prophet's Camel Bell* to relate her African experiences to her Canadian past in any meaningful way, except in the sense of showing how she modifies the liberal views on "imperialists" which she had brought with her from North America. On the other hand, there are sharp echoes uniting the Somali experiences with her West African fiction and particularly her short stories.

In Somaliland Laurence had occupied herself with a salutary literary apprenticeship; instead of writing the customary autobiographical first novel, she collected Somali folk tales and poems and, rather than actually translating them since she still knew relatively little Somali, she rendered them into English with the help of friends who knew both languages. But as she occupied herself in this way she was also keeping her journal and noting the experiences that would eventually form the substance of *The Prophet's Camel Bell* itself, that best of Canadian travel books.

She was also storing up incidents in her mind, some of them shocking and some of them apparently inconsequential, which she would later develop, so that several of the most striking stories in *The Tomorrow Tamer*, though they are actually set in the lush ambience of what later became Ghana, actually had their origins in episodes which occurred while Margaret and Jack Laurence were wandering in the terrible drylands of the Somali Haud.

For example, one of the men who drove

the earthmoving machine with which Jack Laurence was digging pools to conserve the rare savage rainfalls of the desert, brought in a gramophone with which he would play Italian songs.

Arabetto told us with amusement the reaction of one of the labourers to the gramophone. "He never see such thing before. He say — is it some devil, or is it some small man inside." The "some small man inside" eventually becomes Godman, the dwarf imprisoned by a charlatan in a box to make oracular statements, who is the central figure of the best of all Margaret Laurence's stories, "Godman's Master."

And there is the bleak little incident in *The Prophet's Camel Bell* in which Laurence realizes that the young girl Asha in a family that has set up its tent close to one of the construction sites is in fact a child prostitute. At the time Laurence does not really know what to do, even how to address this melancholy little girl with her vacant eyes, but the incident will not rest in her mind, and eventually it emerges, and Asha, her name barely changed to "Ayesha," becomes the former child prostitute in "The Rain Child."

An echo with broadening resonances occurs in "The Perfumed Sea," in which Mr. Archipelago, the Armenian-Italian hairdresser trying to keep his feet in a changing African society, remembers "the white marble angels—so compassionate they looked, and so costly" in the Staglieno cemetery in Genoa.

It is an image that looks backward and forward, for in *The Prophet's Camel Bell* one of the last sights of Europe is the Staglieno cemetery "where marble angels loomed like spirits of vengeance among the green-black cypress trees" (note how vengeance changes to compassion in Mr. Archipelago's nostalgic memory).

But then the marble angel takes a leap forward to unite Margaret Laurence's African experience with her Canadian vision, for it becomes, of course, the dominant and title-giving image for the first of her Canadian novels, *The Stone Angel*. Margaret Laurence always in-

sisted that the marble statue in the novel was not derived from any actual monument in the cemetery of her home town of Neepawa. And she was right, for the angel was associated with her first voyage from the familiar world into strange lands, and its use in the first of her Manawaka novels signalled an important and fruitful change in her outlook.

In the last pages of *The Prophet's Camel Bell* Laurence talks of her feelings on leaving Somaliland:

It seemed to me that my feeling of regret arose from unwisely loving a land where I must always remain a stranger. But it was also possible that my real reason for loving it was simply because I was an outsider here. One can never be a stranger in one's own land — it is precisely this fact that makes it so difficult to live there.

Yet in fact, not long after she wrote these words in the last pages of her last book on Africa, Margaret Laurence had in fact performed imaginatively the feat of being "a stranger in one's own land." For the long withdrawal into foreign places from the prairie society of her childhood and youth enabled her to see it anew with, as she remarked in *Heart of a Stranger*, "the vividness of recall that only our first home can have for us," but also with the detachment that is necessary to transform what has been passionately experienced into a work of art. It is highly significant that, though Margaret went home to Canada, she did not go home to the prairies. She lived first in Vancouver, where she gained the perspective distance that enabled her to resolve the problems she had encountered while trying to write on Africa in Ghana. And just as she successfully completed on the Canadian west coast her first novel, *This Side Jordan*, and the splendid stories of *The Tomorrow Tamer*, so she needed to go to England to write the final, successful version of her first Canadian novel, *The Stone Angel*, which she began in Vancouver. All the other Manawaka novels except one were written in England, and so in a mental and emotional sense as well as a physical one,

she stood outside her "own land" when she wrote about it, and only succeeded in doing so by making herself a stranger.

Looking back over Margaret's career now that she is dead, and remembering statements she made that one wished to ignore, it seems probable that even before she began to write *The Diviners* she understood that this would be her last significant work, the endpiece of a statement as self-contained and as comprehensive as *A la recherche du temps perdu*, and that she felt deeply the need to be within a Canadian cultural ambience yet still away from the actual places of her past Canadian experience (Manitoba and the West Coast) when she wrote what we now cannot fail to see as a testamentary work, *The Diviners*. In hindsight there is even a special significance in her choice of Lakefield, a place so important in the annals of Canadian writing for its association with Catherine Parr Traill and the rest of the Strickland clan, as the place where she would end her writing and her life.

In that choice was embodied a sense of the coherent tradition of writing in Canada of which Margaret was strongly aware and which she gave her own particular expression when she would talk, as she so often did, of Canadian writers as a tribe. She sensed a community that was more than merely occupational, and she created her own special place within it. In every tribal society I have encountered — in North America, in India, in the South Pacific — the orator, the spokesman who articulates the group's sense of itself, assumes a special and symbolic role, and I think this was the role that as the tribe of Canadian writers we all — consciously or half-consciously — accorded to Margaret, and at the end it did not matter that she had little more to say; the myth was already there in her work, complete and self-consistent.

This sense of the tribalism of the artist — or at least of the writer — was closely linked with Laurence's awareness of the alternative values represented by tribal society from which she felt we could and should learn if we were to reinvigorate our own society and even to survive. One of the essays in *Heart of a Stranger*, "Man of our People," was written in response to my own biography of the great Métis leader, Gabriel Dumont, and in it, apart from what she had to say about Dumont and the Métis cause, which had long concerned her, she concluded:

Those other societies which existed before imperialism, industrialism, mass exploitation, and commercial greed were certainly far from ideal, nor

can we return to them, but they knew about living in relationship to the land, and they may ultimately be the societies from whose values we must try to learn.

Margaret Laurence's interest in tribal peoples and in their often doomed resistance to imperialist intruders began in Somaliland, where she became aware of the tribal divisions of the desert people and of the way these tended to shape their personal as well as their communal lives. There — and later in West Africa — she was a witness to the dislocation of tribal patterns on all levels that was brought about not only by the rule of colonial masters but also by the temptations offered by alien beliefs and lifestyles, and she had listened sympathetically to the tales that circulated among the Somali tribesmen of that early leader of resistance to imperial intrusions, Mahammad 'Abdille Hasan, known to most of the British as The Mad Mullah, who for twenty years resisted the British colonial rulers and was finally defeated only when the RAF was brought in to bomb his mud-walled strongholds and put to flight his camel-borne warriors.

Actually, the only reference to Mahammad 'Abdille Hasan in *The Prophet's Camel Bell* was a brief and passing one; Laurence was intent on portraying the Somali people as she had seen and encountered them, not as she had been told about them. But the translations of Somali oral poetry she did in connection with *A Tree for Poverty* during her years in Somaliland made her aware of the rebel leader's repute and even of his cast of mind, for he was a bard of his people who turned poetry into a weapon as powerful as a rifle in rallying his followers. However, it was not until 1964, after she had finished all her African books and had even completed *The Stone Angel*, that she finally wrote "The Poem and the Spear," her essay on Mahammad 'Abdille Hasan. As she says, "I wrote this essay for my own interest" and, after completing it, "I put the article away and gave it no more thought for many years." It was not published until she included it in *Heart of a Stranger* in 1976, twelve years later.

Why did she produce it at this time, when she had finished writing about Africa and was already well advanced into her Manawaka cycle? In the remainder of her prefatory note to the essay she gives a partial answer:

It seems to me now a rather curious piece of work, because I was making some attempt not only to tell the Sayyid's story but also to understand the plight of a tribal people faced with

imperialist opponents who do not possess superior values, but who have greater material resources and more efficient weapons of killing. A long time later, the same theme came into my novel, The Diviners, in the portions which deal with the Highland clans and with the prairie Métis.

But in fact Margaret Laurence did not wait until she was writing *The Diviners* to make the link between the Sayyid and his Somali rebels on the one hand, and the Scottish clans of 1745 and the Métis rebels of 1885 on the other. It already appears, in "The Poem and the Spear," when she suggests that both the Somalis and the Métis had similar beliefs in the magical powers of their leaders to render bullets harmless, and then goes on to point to the striking parallel between the British propaganda which represented Mahammad 'Abdille Hasan as a madman and the arguments about Riel's sanity that have continued without conclusion since he was condemned and executed more than a century ago.

I suggest that these preoccupations take on more significance when one relates "The Poem and the Spear" directly to the Manawaka novels and not to *The Diviners* alone. For in all the Manawaka books except *A Jest of God* the Métis play a role that develops from novel to novel.

For the people of Manawaka the Métis are seen not merely in historical recollection as rebels against the white man's domination of the West, but also as present challengers to accepted values — people who are no longer a physical threat but who are uneasily perceived as a moral one because they seem to reject the settled respectability and the prudential protestant values of Anglo-Scottish prairie society.

It is this distrust and fear that Laurence projects in *The Stone Angel* in which, through Hagar Shipley's eyes, the Métis appear as the rather Mephistophelian tempters who, as she sees it, corrupt her brother and lead her favourite son towards his destruction. It is a negative view of the Métis that, faithful to the character she creates, Laurence projects throughout the book. But clearly a more objective view of the Métis appears in the two paragraphs of "The Poem and the Spear" in which they figure, and I suggest — in view of the fact that this essay was written immediately after the completion of *The Stone Angel* — that it may well have arisen from a desire to balance, at least in her own eyes, Hagar's hostility to the Métis. She wrote the essay, as she said, "for my own interest," which might also mean to balance in

her own mind the account of her attitude to tribal rebels; she could then put it aside and not publish it until after, in *The Diviners*, she had rendered into fiction her own real feeling about the Métis and their rebellion.

In the successive Manawaka novels one can trace the evolution — not perhaps of Laurence's own views on the Métis which I am sure were the same throughout—but of her fictional presentation of this people, so despised and despairing in the generations after the failure of the 1885 rebellion.

In *The Fire-Dwellers* there is already a shift of viewpoint. The Métis involved are still members of the Tonnerre family whose young men appeared in Hagar's eyes as the corruptors of her menfolk. But their role is changed, even though they still appear as moral casualties of their historic situation. When Stacey, the embittered housewife protagonist of *The Fire-Dwellers*, is overwhelmed by the anxieties and fears of her middle-class life, she encounters Val Tonnerre, now become a prostitute on Vancouver's skid road and resigned to an early death. When Stacey talks of her own problems, Val tells her that her sister Piquette has burnt to death, drunk in her blazing cabin, with her children. Val does not appear as an aggressor, but she is a challenger of values, and the tragedy of Piquette makes us look at Stacey's misfortunes — as they appear to her — with an ironic eye. For urban man and woman have created their own alienation, and it is different from the

alienation of those whose way of life has been destroyed by historic change and whose natural community has been made irrelevant by an acquisitive society.

Piquette's death echoes through both *A Bird in the House* and *The Diviners*. In the first book Vanessa McLeod's doctor father helps Piquette, who suffers from a tuberculosis of the bone, and this brings the two girls into uneasy contact. Vanessa later encounters Piquette when her eyes are bright with "a terrifying hope," at the prospect of marrying an Englishman. And then she hears that the marriage has failed and Piquette has died so frightfully.

I did not say anything. As so often with Piquette, there did not seem to be anything to say. There was a kind of silence around the image in my mind of the fire and the snow, and I wished I could put from my memory the look I had once seen in Piquette's eyes.

We have come a long way from Hagar's undoubting prejudices. Vanessa belongs to another world from Piquette's world of failure and despair, and she cannot really put herself in the dead girl's place. And yet she recognizes the reality of the tragedy, and she sees the Métis as victims rather than challengers. She had pity — feeling for — but she does not yet have compassion — feeling with.

That comes only in *The Diviners* with Morag Gunn, who also is in her own way an outcast, an orphan child brought up in the wrong part of Manawaka by the village scavenger and in her own way despised and rejected. Stacey and Vanessa

and Piquette are all her schoolmates, but her poverty allows her a closer mental proximity to the Métis than is possible for the more prosperous girls of Scottish descent. Circumstances intensify that proximity, for as a young reporter she "covers" Piquette's death, and she eventually becomes the lover of Piquette's brother Jules, who makes his way marginally into the white world as a folk singer. There is an extraordinary scene where sexual need mingles with hate as Jules forces Morag to tell him what she saw of Piquette's death scene and curses her for it, and then they "make love or whatever it is, throughout the dark and terrifying night."

What Laurence is telling us in *The Diviners* is that there is no easy understanding between people bred in our materialistic, mechanical culture and people like the Métis who have been its victims, and yet there must be understanding, for both sides' sake. The child Pique whom Morag bears from coupling with Jules becomes the symbol of that difficult reconciliation, and represents the conclusion to the process begun in Somaliland when Laurence first began to understand tribal value systems that were different from ours but just as valid, value systems for which men like Mahammad 'Abdille Hasan and Louis and Gabriel Dumont, all of whom she came to admire greatly, were willing to lead their people into rebellion and risk their own lives.

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