

# Margaret Laurence's *Long Drums and Cannons*

By G.D. Killam

*This Side Jordan* was published in the New Canadian Library edition in 1976. "It seems rather strange to see it in print after so many years," Margaret wrote. By this time she had distanced herself from her African stories and didn't think all that well of them. As she has said often, at different times and in different places, she felt that if she continued to write about Africa she would become more and more of an outsider, "a tourist," not perceiving Africa from the inside which is, in her view, a writer's primary responsibility to the society she depicts. There are many who would not agree with her estimate of her achievement in presenting Africa in her short fiction and her first novel. Indeed, many African writers and critics have paid her large tribute in saying that her imaginative renderings are among the best from among the thousands of pieces of fictional writing by expatriates devoted to Africa.

But whether Margaret was right or wrong about her achievement in the fiction, there is little doubt that she has left an important and enduring legacy in *Long Drums and Cannons*. The book is as valid today as when it was published in 1968. Its only limitation is the fact that some of the writers she discusses have gone on to produce more — but with the exception of Wole Soyinka not much more — writing. Clark, Ekwensi, Okara, Nwankwo have added little to the list of works discussed in *Long Drums and Cannons*. Soyinka has written enough, brilliantly, to win him the Nobel Prize. My friend, Clara Thomas, was with Margaret on the day last October when she got the news of Soyinka's award and has told me that all thoughts of her own illness were forgotten and she re-

joiced for him.

Achebe has been continually busy as a writer with poems and literary critical pieces and the document, *The Trouble with Nigeria*, adding to his list over the years. With the publication of *Anthills of the Savannah* in 1987 he will break a twenty-year silence as novelist. How sad that Margaret is not here for that launching: Achebe has said that discussions he had with her in Canada in 1984 helped him with this "problematic novel." Everyone who saw them together then was aware of the strong sisterly-brotherly empathy between them.

There has been a great critical outpouring about modern African writing in English in the last decade or so (as there also was in the late sixties). It has come in three successive waves: expatriate responses, followed by African responses (and often at the same time African rebuttal of expatriate judgments) and, finally, African responses to African responses — the debate, properly, becoming internalised. Yet Margaret's book remains one of the surest ways into an understanding of the writing she reviews, especially into Achebe, Soyinka and Clark, authors whose writing is progressively more studied in the world beyond, as well as in Africa. She was alert to the demands of "reader-response" criticism before it was popularly called by that name. That is to say that she understood, likely by virtue of her long experience of living in Africa, but equally because of her intuition and comprehensive sympathy, that rapprochement was necessary between writer and reader, that writers — those before us in *Long Drums and Cannons*, for example — in choosing an interna-

tional language were accepting the problems of presenting their unique cultures to a world audience; in doing so they were in danger of being misunderstood when what they wanted, obviously, through their choice of language, was to be understood. That being the case, they made concessions to their readers — but not so many as to discredit their work in the eyes of their own people. The reader beyond the national boundary had the obligation to seek out the clues and concessions the writer gives him/her, and to discern the meaning even in the strangeness of the culture he/she confronts through the writing.

Margaret Laurence's artistic and moral fastidiousness is nowhere more certain than in her essays in *Long Drums and Cannons*. Her discussion is with the writing as literature, with those elements in the writing which will cause it to be read when the occasion for its being written has passed away. But she was concerned as well with the broad social significance of the writing:

*Modern Nigerian literature interprets Africa, both past and present from the inside... Its... writers are engaged in reassessing the past, in rediscovering their inheritance, in interpreting themselves to their own people and to the rest of the world... Perhaps the most enduringly interesting aspect of this literature... as of literature anywhere, is the insight it gives not into immediate and local dilemmas but, through these, into the human dilemma as a whole... The best of these Nigerian plays and novels reveal something of ourselves to us, whoever and wherever we are.*

It is a pity that *Long Drums and Cannons* is not more readily available. There was an attempt in the early '70s to move it from its original publisher to another where, through a paperbound edition with world-wide distribution, its values and its usefulness to readers and students would have been more readily apparent. The original publishers proved intractable. Now, in a publisher's sense, the book is out of date. Would that Margaret were here to talk about Soyinka's writing since her first edition and to write about Achebe's new novel! But the wisdom and comprehensive humanity which informs all of Margaret's writing remains in this last — and perhaps by her own account, the best — of her "African" books.