

Jan. 29, 1949,
Trueman House,
Mount Allison U.,
Sackville, N. B.

Dear Mr. Raddall,

I am writing you on the off-chance that you may become interested in my work and give me a little advice. As you may have guessed from the heading, I am a student at Mount A, to be exact, a senior honor student in English. For my thesis, I have chosen the Canadian novel as subject. It is a field which has not been trampled all over by rampaging critics. What criticism there has been is, I feel, very inadequate. Of course, this means that I am very much on my own, and since I have practically no one to lean on, I shall have to spend more time on the thesis than is altogether safe in such a compressed semester as we have here. Nevertheless, I think my work will give me a great deal of pleasure and satisfaction.

I am not trying to all Canadian writers (to my amazement, I found that there are more than 150 Canadian novelists), but only those who I feel have made a notable contribution

to Canadian art. These, in my opinion, are Louis Hémon, Frederic Phillip Grove, Marley Callaghan, Hugh MacLennan, ^{Gabrielle} ~~Garielle~~ Roy, Guethalyn Graham, possibly Mayo de la Roche, and certainly yourself. I shall also include a chapter on the early development of the novel, mentioning Halibuton, Kirby, and Parker, and one on recent writers such as Mitchell and Selwyn Dewdney.

I want to make it clear that I am a keen admirer of your work. I think there can be no doubt that you are the finest historical novelist in Canada. No one is more painstaking in his facts, no one can recapture the very taste of another time better than yourself. What is more, your stories are eminently readable. One fact I have noticed. The scenes in which you deal with Indians, especially the opening chapter of His Majesty's Yankees, are especially vivid and lifelike. I suspect that you are a man who relishes the out-of-deers.

But the fate of any novel is determined by something more than historical accuracy, I hesitate to use the phrase "insight into life," since the term has become clichéd, but I

think that is as close as I can get to what I want to say. Such an insight leads the author into seeing character on more than one plane, and giving to the story something more than a mere casualness, but rather a sense of necessity. One feels that the story could not have been told otherwise.

I don't know if you will get exactly what I'm trying to drive at. Perhaps I'm not too clear in my own mind. At any rate, I'm trying to work it out. Of course, one doesn't have to be able to define this quality to recognize it in a novel. It is something I saw in Roger Sudden, but not in His Majesty's Yankees or Pride's Fanny, as good as they are. In spite of touches of melodrama throughout, (It seems to me that the story could have been told more simply to more effect. It would not suffer for dropping a lot of the tricks that are the stock-in-trade of too many writers. For example, did Miss Johnstone have to have a spoiled, selfish brother?) I think Roger Sudden is on the verge of being a great novel. "On the verge," I say because there is something about Sudden's mental struggle that is not quite 'necessary'. He begins as a bold, handsome young Englishman, owing allegiance to no one but himself, daring in action, sensuous, but

not unkind to his friends, nor essentially bad. An ideal Aristotelean tragic hero. Aided by the lady of the many teats, he becomes a very wealthy, successful man. He transfers his money to Louisburg because he feels the French are going to win. Some instinct warns him, but circumstances hurry him off. Then, all at once, he becomes a sort of hero. He throws away everything, including the gorgeous Mary Johnstone for old Blighty. It seems to me that such a conclusion does not quite fit with the story. It has a slightly false touch. I may be very wrong in this, but I should like to know what you yourself think. Do you honestly think the story and the character of Sudden hang together here?

I hope you will not think I am being presumptuous. Roger Sudden is magnificently conceived and executed and I would rank it among Canada's top five novels. If you are at all interested in my work, I would appreciate your own comments on Roger Sudden.

Yours truly,
James Taylor
Inverman House
Sackville, N. B.

February 1st, 1949

Dear Mr. Taylor,

Thanks for a frank and very interesting appraisal of my work. As you surmise, I have spent a good deal of my life outdoors; and the scene you mention in the opening chapter of "His Majesty's Yankees" is in fact one in which I have "called" moose myself in time past. "H.M.Y." however is really an historical tract, written with a purpose. As a schoolboy I was taught that the American Revolution was a sheer rebellion against the British king; and that Nova Scotia alone, by a sort of divine impulse, stood loyal to His Majesty. In later life, when I made a hobby of peering into the past, I was astonished to find that the Nova Scotians had in fact sympathized strongly with the rebels, and for very good reasons; and that their final decision was brought about by circumstances having nothing at all to do with abstract loyalty. I was appalled to realize that generations of Nova Scotian historians and teachers had ignored these facts, as if the whole episode were something disgraceful, thumping down heavily on the fact that Nova Scotia remained British. So I wound up my sling and hurled my little stone. It seemed appropriate to oppose "history" that was false with a "novel" that was largely fact -- even to many of the minor characters. But while the book had a good reception in Canada as well as in the U.S. and Britain, I was surprised by the number of people who took it for an interesting but rather wild flight of fancy.

"Pride's Fancy" on the other hand was deliberate fiction, drawn upon adequate fact ("Pride" was a real person, faithfully described, and his descendants still nourish the family fortune) but chiefly indulging a long-felt urge to write a sea tale in the frame of a romantic age.

"Roger Sudden", in material and treatment, lies somewhere between these two. Halifax and its rivalry with Louisburg made a romance in itself, and I sought to blend with it a romantic tale about an English gentleman-adventurer fleeing from his Jacobite associations. The character of Roger Sudden was drawn partly from that of the very real Michael Francklin, who came to Halifax with a few pounds in his pocket and turned them into a fortune by way of a rum shop, then the Indian trade, then commissary contracts and shipping. He was captured by Indians early in his career and spent many months in captivity in the forest, an experience which gave him a knowledge of the Micmac tongue and later a profound influence with the tribes.

The two characters diverged sharply, however, at the point where Roger makes his connection with Louisburg. (Francklin stuck to King George and legitimate money-making as a beneficiary of the Crown, and eventually became Lieutenant-Governor of Nova Scotia.) From that point Roger is purely mine; but even there he is no mere creature of fancy, for there were many adventurers of his kind abroad. Indeed he represents a kind of Englishman that still exists. I have met him more than once -- bold, goodlooking, determined, unscrupulous in the getting of what he wants (usually money or women -- which are not always the same thing) but scrupulous to the point of Quixotry in certain matters that touch his pride.

You find Roger incredible because in the end he throws everything aside for a whim. Yet Englishmen of his stamp have done it again and again, in every part of the world. Whatever you may think of Francis Doyle's "Private of the Buffs", there really was such a private, and he really did prefer to die. Roger's end was the only possible end for a man of his background and character in the given circumstances. This I knew from the beginning, and so the tale is a deliberate tragedy with every chapter a step towards that climax.

My American publishers also found the end incredible, but for typical publishers' reasons. "You have here", they told me, "a magnificent novel;

but you ruin it by shooting the hero on the last page. This is not logical. After all, the British forces were about to enter the fortress. Why shouldn't they rescue Roger in the nick of time?" I replied, "That is good logic in the Hollywood tradition. But let's be completely logical in that tradition. Why British troops? Why not the United States Marines?" They thought me stubborn and rude, and they were right. But they published the novel, illogical finish and all, and had no reason to complain about the sales.

Again, certain of my friends objected to Roger's rejection of the nude Wapke, in the scene by the fire. It was not natural, they said, in view of his past. Yet here again is the Quixotic adventurer being very natural indeed, and in full view of his past. He rejected Wapke in the forest for the same reason that he rejected Sally in the attic -- his strong self-pride, which laid a bar, even in lechery. Wapke was a savage and Sally a common whore. For a man like Roger they were impossible. The women of his past, though willing to be seduced, were neither whores nor savages. In the lexicon of the 18th century gallant that was a very important difference.

You object to my giving Mary Johnstone a spoiled selfish brother, and consider it an artificial and hackneyed device. Here is a sample of the way in which history intrudes upon mere romance. The Chevalier de Johnstone was an actual person, and his character and adventures (and some of his conversation) I took straight from his own memoirs. For the purposes of my story it was necessary to provide him with a sister, hence "Mary Johnstone". And for the purposes of my story she had to be the sort of woman I have made her, a strong impassioned follower of the Stuart cause. Is a writer to reject such a relationship merely because it is a common thing in life? Isn't life what he is trying to portray?

That, at least, is what I have tried to portray in all my tales. Times change, and with them costumes, manners, ways of speech, all of which must be studied to the point where one's mind can move freely in a bygone age. But men and women do not change. The tart on the street corner this evening was essentially Shakespear's Tearsheet in another guise, and the daring and successful young business promoter whose picture was in the morning paper is essentially Roger Sudden with another name and in a different habitat -- women, money and all. In a given situation each will react in the same way.

And so the rest of an author's study is the study of contemporary life. This is not to be picked up in half an hour. It is a matter of constant and keen observation over the years, seeing life as a play in which the characters only yesterday were wearing different clothes. If this theory is wrong, then all my tales are false, for I write in the immediate, as well as the remote past. But that is my creed as a writer and I stand by it.

Sincerely,

February 6, 1949,
Trueman House,
Sackville, N. B.

Dear Mr. Raddall,

Thank you for your very enlightening letter. Since I wrote you I have again been examining Roger Sudden, because for some reason it seems to focus for me the whole problem of the nature and purpose of all art. Since my business is assessing works of art, I feel I must first work out a standard. It's not easy.

As you remarked in your letter, the artist is trying to portray life. That this can best be done by transcribing life in all its confusion, I would be prepared to debate. D. H. Lawrence does this, but I do not think he is a great artist, at least in his novels, fascinating as they may be. The artist must also be concerned with form, and this is where Lawrence falls short.

Thus the artist must not be satisfied with life in the raw, as it were, but he must want to recreate it. In other words, he is looking for patterns.

Perhaps I can make what I am trying to say clearer by using an analogy. The layman sees matter as something formless, or at least having no permanent form. The chemist, with greater insight, observes its true, unchanging structure. In order to make this structure clear to the novice, he translates it in terms which the beginner can understand. Water is H-O-H and so on. The artist, also possessing more insight than the common man, shows the pattern of life in a medium (whether it be the novel, poetry, music or art) which is easier to comprehend.

If he is to describe life in its essential simplicity, his own work must possess that same singleness of purpose. Aristotle's remarks about the necessity of unity of action in the drama are valid for all forms of art. The single action is, to use

a musical term, the theme. The artist is free to use any material which will develop his theme. Any excess matter, although it may be interesting and informative, we will regard as dress. This seems to me to be a first principle of art. Nevertheless, one of Canada's most important contemporary novelists prefers ~~to~~ ignore it. In his latest novel, The Precipice, for example, the central action deals with Lucy's marriage to Stephen, with an underlying motif of Canada's relationship with the United States. Yet he loses grip so completely as to describe Lucy's sister Nina refusing to go to bed with a young man in Halifax, a digression which not only contributes nothing to the central theme, but also is not particularly interesting. Morley Callaghan, on the contrary, has written a book, ~~that~~ Such is my Beloved, that is superbly unified from an artistic point of view. But the story is so bare that the characters seem to move in a vacuum. The book lacks

the richness that a work like Vanity Fair has.

A book is not ~~overloading~~ ^{overloaded} as long as all the details add to and not detract from the central theme.

Roger Sudden illustrates another principle of artistic composition. The central theme is underlined by the subordinate movement of the struggle between Britain and France, creating a sort of counterpoint. Both threads have significance and meaning, and they do not conflict. Roger's death and the death of French power in North America come about from the same reason. When Roger leaves Halifax for the last time, he chooses to put his faith in walls, although not necessarily the walls of Louisburg. He has ceased to grow. As you show admirably, he is moving against the inevitable growth of North America. This counterpoint is what gives Roger Sudden its haunting quality, something which neither of your other novels,

His Majesty's Yankees or Pride's Fancy have.

But the story of Roger Sudden himself is also of significance. Davey Strang and Cockerel Cain were men whose characters were co-ordinated; their struggles were with external powers. But Sudden was divided within his own mind. His soul was facing two ways, the way to riches, position, and a happy marriage or the way of loyalty to his own people, and to his own better nature. As you yourself said in your letter, the end of the story must be inherent in the very first chapter, or it is not a single action. You knew in your own mind that, in your own words, "Roger's end was the only possible end for a man of his background and character in the given circumstances." But I do not think this is made clear to the reader until very late in the story, when it finally becomes clear that there is a core of high moral strength in Roger's

character. That is why I objected to the ending.

The remarks I made about Jamie Johnstone were merely intended to illustrate what I thought was a rather frequent use of coincidence or accident, which may be common enough in common life, but should, I think, be avoided in novels. However, thinking it all over, I have come to the conclusion that I was mistaken in what I said about the Chevalier Johnstone.

I hope you will understand that my criticism is not intended as abuse. If I did not respect your work, I would not be bothered criticising it.

If you are interested it would please me to be able to send you a copy of my thesis when it is finished. Meanwhile, I find your letter so valuable that I wonder if you would object to me using parts of it in my thesis. I would not do so without your 'okay'.

Sincerely,
James Taylor

February 12th, 1949

Dear Mr. Taylor,

The British painter Walter Sickert once remarked, "My pictures are like the clippings of my nails; they grow out of me and I cut them off, and that is all I know about them." It has always seemed to me that what Sickert said of his paintings is true of all novels written by men or women who rely upon instinct rather than formula. By this I intend no invidious comparison between writers. First-rate novels have been written by authors blessed with a certain clarity of mind which enables them to plot a book from start to finish before actually sitting down to write it. Many authors work in this business-like fashion, and some achieve brilliant results; but in my observation there are a great number who merely turn out books as Henry Kaiser turned out ships. As vehicles designed for a utilitarian purpose they are all right. They get from port to port just like the others and they often earn more money for the owners. But the framework is too obvious and too similar when one examines them as ships.

I use a more-or-less instinctive course, not from any silly snobbery, but because I have to work within my own mental limitations and make the best of them. This means of course that I begin a novel with a general idea of where I want to go, and with what characters; but how to get there is a matter of blood and sweat, worked out step by step as the characters develop in the mind. Often this means a false course from time to time, with a resultant tearing-up of pages and frequently whole chapters. This is part of the blood and sweat. Somerset Maugham puts it very well when he says that every story has its own natural curve which must be followed from start to finish, and the difficulty is to find (and keep) that curve. The great virtue of this sort of writing is that it is like life itself. You, for example, have a fairly definite idea of what you will be doing in the next ten months or so, and where you will be next Christmas, and with what people. But the detail of what will happen to you and to your immediate circle of acquaintances in that time, the new people you will meet, and their impact on you and your thought and actions -- all these are hidden from you. You have to live those months and record them as you go.

By Christmas you can look back and perceive a certain pattern, an interlocking of people and events, that was not apparent to you at the time. But if, in talking about it afterwards, you were to declare that you did this or that in June because you knew that thus-and-so would take place at a casual moment in your vacation in August, or on a stroll to Frosty Hollow in November, you would be talking through your hat. I seem to hear a hollow hat-like echo whenever I hear an author describing in brilliant detail the exact course he followed in writing his book. Perhaps this attitude is due to my blood, which is half Cornish -- and no doubt you know what Rebecca West said about "the dark Skeptical Celts of Cornwall". Perhaps it is unconscious envy. Write your own verdict.

All this means that I cannot honestly say I knew Roger Sudden would do this or say that in each episode of his career. Looking back, it all seems clear, and perhaps these things are always clear in some mysterious recess of the mind; but at the time of writing I can only say I was like a sailor in a mist, seeing clearly only what lay immediately ahead, seeing vague outlines farther on, and sensing other objects and people hidden altogether. Don't misunderstand me. I'm not imputing to myself any suggestion of genius, or that Roger Sudden is a masterpiece. I'm merely pointing out my method, or lack of

method, and saying that the book was the absolute best I could do with whatever gift or method I had.

A lot of very bad books have been written in this way. The tale never quite emerges from the fog. The Russian writers made it quite a fashion, and some of them even made it interesting, so that their work is still being imitated in certain English and American circles. Of these Maugham (who admires some Russian writers) has suggested acidly that the foginess is due to a complete inability to concoct or follow through a plot. But of course he works in hard outlines and has no patience with subtlety except in his more mordant witticisms. Having found his curve he draws it with a firm black pen and that is that. I have to grope my way along my curve from start to finish and so I cannot pontificate on the subject.

You ask if you may quote something I said, and of course you may. But it seems to me that I have told you nothing of value in analysis. All I have done was to confess a weakness which in twenty years of arduous work and thought I have not been able to reduce.

Sincerely,

Mr. James Taylor,
Trueman House,
Sackville, N.B.