Prince Charming, and Glooscap: the children's picture book quest for Canadian mythology

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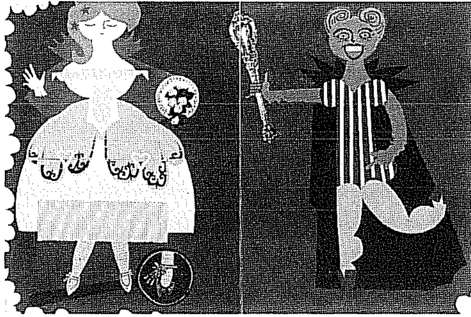
A foliosize French-English book, with striking collages and unorthodox text, Alan Suddon's *Cinderella* (Oberon Press, 1969) confronts the connoisseur of Canadian children's picture books with a cultural anomaly. At first glance, nothing about this lavish production seems home grown. Where is the impress of Canadian environment on Perrault's or the Grimms' folktale of the neglected younger sister — a tale that Bruno Bettelheim considers seminal fairytale for *any* culture? Where in Canada is the upperclass world where party goers dress in "chocolate cake" and "wear bottles on their heads instead of hats"? Suddon's illustrations are bizarre to say the least.

A closer look, however, demonstrates the Canadian artist's tendency to let the painting's foreground lead into the mysterious background.[1] And the first clue rests in a garish centrefold wherein the fairy godmother confers stardom on Cinderella (fig. 1). In this picture, the good fairy is a hybrid Ethel Merman/Doris Day/Jane Powell/Betty Davis/Wonder Woman, in a pose also suggesting the Statue of Liberty, whereas the object of her benevolence is a combination Disney Cinderella/Barbie/Mary Pickford (America's sweetheart, by birth Canadian) complete with bridal bouquet. This epiphany sends adult readers scurrying back into the collage's density to ferret out missed trailblazers. The result? A hint perhaps that Suddon is playing Charles Perrault to Canada's twentieth-century Prince Charming — Pierre Elliott Trudeau![2]

It is perhaps too much to assign specific identity to the characters in this modern version of court tales, but surely the principal players, i.e., the wicked stepmother, two elder sisters, prince and princess, and fairy godmother can be guessed at. For example, the stepmother in her first appearance is wearing necklace and bracelets of cherries and strawberries, with a gown consisting of a chessboard print — every inch the lustful, angry vision of Alice's Red Queen. The two daughters are pictured, one tall and thin, in riding dress, drinking sherry; the other short and bullish, given to hairbows and Black Watch shave lotion. They are definite representatives of genteel and populist sentiments respectively. In the context of their competition for the Prince's attention, it may not be too farfetched to think of them as the Queen's Progressive Conservative and New Democrat progeny wooing the reigning leader Trudeau — a reconizable political scene in 1969 when Suddon's *Cinderella* appeared.

Another interesting feature of the collages in this "children's" book is the



use of print materials to form a background commentary on the more garish frontal portraits. For example, one scene shows the deserted Cinderella weeping in the kitchen, wearing a dress composed of a newspaper clipping commenting on Afro-Asian politics, apartheid, and the machinations of U.N. world powers like Russia and China. The illustration of the coach materializing from a pumpkin shows a smoke halo composed of bits of a review of the Toronto pre-Broadway showing of Lerner and Lowe's *Camelot,* October 1960; and the path to the castle in another picture is a pastiche of apartment-for-rent ads from the Toronto newspapers.[3]

One of the more humorous bits, and a clue to the political overtones of the ball, is that the Prince is leaning against the wall next to a Gramaphone which is playing the Stephen Foster tune "My Old Kentucky Home" — thus the setting in which he encounters Cinderella for the first time. Furthermore, Cinderella's dance with the Prince is spotlighted as in an old Ginger Rogers/Fred Astair movie. The entire Hollywood, cult-of-personality, big brassy party which characterizes *this* Cinderella story is replete with sly pokes at the "Camelot-like" ascendancy of the astute and popular aristocrat from Quebec. In 1969, euphoric with the glow of centennial celebrations, and basking in the reflected glory of the Camelot years in America under President John F. Kennedy, the national press lionized Trudeau as a Canadian. Canada was proud to boast its own version of the good ruler — neither king nor president, but a brisk, witty, and intelligent prime minister.

The advent of Suddon's *Cinderella* does more, however, than ring a clever 1960s Canadian change on the Perrault tale. I believe it also demonstrates both the desire for, and lack of, a useable Canadian mythology. Suddon's tale is a collage of the French original, the American musical *Camelot* with its Hollywood overtones, and the authentic English legend of the "good king," Arthur. Just as Canadian journalists borrowed American precedents to hype Trudeau, so does Suddon to poke fun. Of course, the connection between Cinderella/Guinevere/Mary Pickford is a kind of warning to the "prince" not to get pulled into foreign territory, for Suddon tells us at the end of his tale that the "stranger" who appears "suddenly from behind the staircase," dressed as Mae West, and winks at the newlyweds is known *only* to Cinderella, and to the reader, "though (to) no one else."

It is a clever tribute to the then new prime minister's commitment to bilingualism that Suddon's retelling of Cinderella is accompanied by a French translation done by a well-known Quebec raconteur, Claude Aubry, and that the snippets of print hidden in collage contain fragments of French texts. One also remembers how the "Matter of Britain" wended its route from Wales through French medieval romances starring Launcelot and the courtly knights, into fifteenth-century Britain, where Malory gave it substance in an heroic tale that animates the consciences and memory of England — the tale of the good king who sleeps only to return when Britain is in danger from the oppressor. In this century, T.H. White's multi-volume *The once and future king,* through reflection on the Arthur story, explores once again the question of what constitutes a good ruler. America's appropriation of White's story in Camelot/Kennedy/Hyannisport is a tribute to the memory of her English connection. Why, then, does Suddon mute this British/American tie by concealing Camelot behind Cinderella?

The clue to this divided psyche rests in the ambiguous rendering of pictures which confuses the story of the poor girl who marries the prince, with the concealed prince who inherits his rightful kingdom. Trudeau pulls the sword from the stone only to by waylaid by the unfaithful American wife masquerading as the orphan Cinderella. The lack of a subtle complementarity of text and pictures, however, leaves the reader assaulted by the striking, almost garishly bright colours which characterize the collages. In its conflation of French, American, and English folklore, the book confesses that Canada is operating symbolically in the detritus of its cultural imperialist forebears and neighbours. What saves this particular "Cinderella" is its clever distortions of the original tale in the interests of poking fun at the new Government of Prince Pierre!

But if Perrault's *Cinderella* is the archetypal story of the colonial condition from a French perspective, as King Arthur's is from an English, what clues does it offer to those who would like to tell stories reflecting the Canadian context? How shall our children's imaginations be nourished by native Canadian legends and tales?

Well, if we believe Northrop Frye's observation that Canadian writers demonstrate a "garrison mentality" as opposed to the United State's open frontier, or Margaret Atwood's contention that Canadian writers seem to relish depicting victims whose best option is survival, or that Canadians fancy being the hunted as much as being the hunter, and that all this is a result of finding ourselves in a far-flung country where settlements are strung out along vast and forbidding landscape,[4] then perhaps the concretizing of the land as a natural force in itself, would yield rich picture book fare for the contemporary artist-writer. Such an option has been attempted in a recent book *Look the land is growing giants,* by Joan Finnigan, with illustrations by Richard Pelham (Tundra Books, 1983).

Finnigan's historical researches on the Ottawa Valley contribute to the sweep and humour of her tale of the legendary "giant" Joe Montferrand, who was walking boss of McLachlin Lumber Camps in the Valley, and whose six sons followed the tradition of their father in working "wood and ice" by becoming the first Montreal Canadiens, and by spreading their progeny across Canada and the U.S.A. The rolling list of names and places gives a sense of the great sweep of the Canadian landscape and of the necessity of "giants" to have conquered the unfriendly territory. Pelham's pencil sketches are the perfect counterpoint to the text — Joe's mighty leap across the Ottawa river to escape the Windigo, the cinematic sequence of his epic battle with the savage creature, and the cooperative efforts "for the first time in the history of the Ottawa Valley," of the "Ladies' Aid of Ladysmith Catholic Church and the Ladies' Aid of Shawville Methodist," who "set up Baked Bean, Pie and Cake Booths to feed the multitudes on the hillside." The spirit of Joe's breed echoes in lines he speaks to Timber Baron Daniel McLachlin: "Just because you pay me/Don't mean you order me;/I am a man who would rather/Be dead than not be free." . . . Hardly the sentiment of one of the fictional characters described in Atwood's *Survival.*

Another recent book which exploits the landscape for legendary material is *Petranella,* by Betty Waterton, illustrated by Ann Blades (Douglas & McIntyre, 1980). This is a delicately told story of a little girl's emigration from an unnamed European country, where streets are narrow and buildings tall and dark, and where there is little air to breathe. Petranella promises her grandmother, who is too old to take the long journey, that she will plant grandmother's flower seeds in their new home. However, due to an accident, Petranella loses the seeds along the roadside before she has arrived at her destination. What is her surprise later on to find beautiful blossoms growing along the road; her promise to her grandmother has been kept after all. Moreover, the old world love is preserved to this day in the new flowers that bloom alongside Manitoba roads. A variant of Johnny Appleseed's story but just as memorable in giving the discursive Canadian imagination a sense of place.

Those familiar with Ann Blades's other illustrated books must realize her great gifts for making the particular local landscape universally Canadian (cf. *Mary of Mile 18, The cottage at Crescent Beach,* and *A Salmon for Simon*). *A Salmon for Simon,* moreover, captures the feeling of aboriginal mythologizing of the salmon through the simple story of a boy who sets out to catch a salmon but ends by rescuing it from the clutches of a bald eagle and helping it return to the ocean. One might point out that these children's picture books do *not* convey the theme of being lost in harsh nature. There is no "garrison mentality" in Blades's illustrations of children in the Canadian landscape.

Three other recent books suggest alternate mythic use of landscape. The first is one in which Ann Blades has used her talent to Canadianize a European folktale, *Jacques the woodcutter,* retold by Michael Macklem (Oberon Press, 1977). This story, which may have been brought to Canada as early as the seventeenth century, was first recorded by Marius Barbeau and published in 1958 by Michael Hornyansky. In her illustrations, Blades captures with sly humour the setting of the Quebecois cottage on the edge of the woods, and of the local French landlord, Monsieur Louis, a fat cat who is eating up the woodcutter's larder, and by innuendo (he is pictured in shirtsleeves at the table), establishing himself in the husband's bed. Macklem's text, as well, reflects the egalitarianism of the pioneer landscape:

> There was once a woodcutter named Jacques who lived with his wife on the edge of the forest. Jacques and Finette had built the house themselves the first spring and summer after they were married. . . It had been hard work, especially for Finette, who was smaller than Jacques. But Jacques always said there was nobody like Finette for making shingles. And it was true, their roof never leaked.

The second recent book is a version of the Grimm fairytale *The fisherman and his wife,* retold and illustrated by Jenni Lunn (McGraw-Hill Ryerson Ltd., 1982), who uses her familiarity with Nova Scotia fishing village life to localize both her text and illustrations. In this retelling, the wife longs for such realistic accommodations as four bathrooms in her four-room house, and nine servants to do all her chores, and a job for her husband befitting their new status — i.e., "chief inspector for the Fisheries Department." One of the amusing scenes is a full-page spread of "wifey's" attempt to hold a garden party for her "friends," while a small army of seagulls fight the guests for food. (I myself have been robbed of a whole bag of hamburger buns by an enterprising Nova Scotian gull, as I momentarily turned my back to attend to the charcoal fire!) Part of the humour in Lunn's book is the contrast between the pretentious wife, with handblocked print dress, furpiece, hat and eyepiece, carefully and artistically balancing her teacup while her husband, still dressed in his boots, coveralls and cap is staring in puzzlement at a plate of strange hors d'oeuvres. The text is an excellent complement to the illustrations.

A third book is Joyce Barkhouse's rendition of a Prince Edward Island legend about the fiery death of a mysterious French woman who dared to try to enter

the Indian world by marrying the brave Kaktoogwassees, and who was branded as a witch and burned at Port LaJoye in 1723 (*The witch of Port LaJoye,* Ragweed Press, Charlottetown, 1983). P.E.I. artist Daphne Irving's watercolors add just the right touch of mysterious aboriginal life confronting the pious certitudes of the French clerics and of the "proper" French settlement folk who thought they were more civilized than the Indians. In the illustration "High and true her voice soared above the sound of the crackling flames" Irving captures the wildness of the free-spirited woman singing the angel's song while silhouetted against the flames a black robed priest holds up a crucifix to ward off her "heathen" chant (fig. 2). Echoes of Joan of Arc (and of the New England witches) give the picture a more than mythic force. *The witch of Port Lajoye* is a fine example of how local Canadian legend can be used to advantage in picture story books.

It compares favorably even with a book such as *The witch of the north* (Oberon Press, 1975), a collection of nine French-Canadian folktales, adapted by Mary Alice Downie, and illustrated with collages by Elizabeth Cleaver. Witch canoes, Jesuit Devils, Mother Superiors, and the Loup-Garou – familiar accoutrements of the Quebecois tale – demonstrate that the French immigrant imagination has successfully translated European tales into the Canadian landscape. The combination of an excellent text by Mary Alice Downie with the pictorial skills of Elizabeth Cleaver creates a fine work.

Fig. 2

Although the Canadian landscape itself is a mythic motif in several contemporary picture books, which focus on legendary materials from Canadian history, other attempts have been made to speak to the immigrant cultural myth of the Canadian Mosaic. Such is the wonderful picture story book *The Miraculous hind,* a tale of Hungary's founding by the Magyars. Elizabeth Cleaver, herself of Hungarian stock, has thoroughly researched her subject so that her collages depict authentic Hungarian attire and landscape, the theme of the wanderer finding a homeland being very much the heart of Canadian experience. Such, also, is the folktale series from Kids Can Press. My favourites are *The shirt of the happy man,* an Italian tale told by Mariella Bertelli, illustrations by Laszlo Gal; and *How trouble made the monkey eat pepper,* A West Indian tale told by Rita Cox, illustrated by Roy Crosse.

A caution about one way *not* to use traditional materials is to be found in *The Canada goose,* illustrated by Laurie McGraw (Horizon Press, 1980). Based on the operetta "The Canada goose" with story and lyrics by Judith Drynan, and music by Margaret Drynan, the picture story is a medley of Dr. Zeuss, Andersen's and Grimm's fairytales, the Wizard of Oz, and Alice, with a sugary, optimistic, chauvinistic message:

> "The Canada goose says that if we think about the good times and look on the bright side, we'll create our own magic," said the Motto ....
> And every one of them ... the Wizard, the Children, the Motto, and the Miseries ... silently promised that they would always look on the bright side and remember the good times. And one of the best times they would remember would be the day that they met the wonderful, magical,beautiful .... CANADA GOOSE!!

One hopes that the alternative to the theme of the "hunted" trying to "survive" is *not* belief in the Goose who always lays golden eggs! Our children deserve better fare.

The better fare that they are getting, and perhaps the beginnings of forming images and symbolic landscapes for Canadian children and for shaping a truly Canadian mythology, I believe, rests in three directions. One we have already discussed — the use of local legend. Just in Nova Scotia alone, for example, a series of good picture story books could be derived from Helen Creighton's *Bluenose ghosts,* or from the archives of the Black Cultural Centre, Westphal; or from Cape Breton and French Shore storytellers. Davis's *The poetry of the Canadian people 1720-1920* (N.C. Press Ltd., 1976), which echoes the authentic voice of the native and immigrant people who built Canada, could be mined for a series of picture story books on Canada like that of Peter Speier's *Erie Canal* with illustrations, text, and song, depicting an event in U.S. history.

A second way is recovery of the myths and legends of the native peoples. Northrop Frye notes that "an interest in Indian and Eskimo art, with all their nature-spirits, has grown into a fascination, and many of our younger poets — Susan Musgrave, John Newlove, Gwendolyn MacEwen — write as though

Indians and Eskimos were our direct cultural ancestors whose traditions continue in them and in us."[5] This kind of North American cultural primitivism is not unique to Canada. One has only to recall Fenimore Cooper's Chingachkook and the Lone Ranger's brave companion. What is different is the way in which the wilderness landscape intrudes on the Canadian imagination. Here the frontier is not inexorably westward, as in the United States, but northwards to a mysterious region which most Canadians have never seen.[6] In this milieu, Nature is not to be dominated, but to be respected, because its fierceness and destructiveness can murder even the brave and strong. A number of notable Canadian picture books have captured native myths and legends, helping to enhance appreciation and suggest emulation of the aboriginal peoples' kinship with the natural world.

One example is the collaboration of William Toye and Elizabeth Cleaver in reproducing such works as *How summer came to Canada* (Oxford Univ. Press, 1969); *The fire stealer* (Oxford, 1979); *The mountain goats of Temlaham* (Oxford, 1969); and *The loon's necklace* (Oxford, 1977). *The loon's necklace* is a Tsimshian legend which tells of the way in which Loon helped an old man to regain his sight and in return the man gave Loon his beloved shell necklace. For each of these nature myths, Cleaver has taken pains to feel her way into the text. One striking illustration is the full-page rendering of the old man holding on to the loon's wings as they dive beneath the surface of an ice-green lake. The strangeness of the medium which can sustain the old man's leap of faith lingers in memory as a peculiarly arctic baptismal sequence. A few more of my favorite examples are the portrait of Glooscap talking to his friend loon about the Queen of the South. Here, Glooscap's physiognomy, and the tangled vines in his hair are so characteristic of Blomidon that in staring at the headlands from across the Minas Basin, one almost expects Glooskap to materialize out of the face of the cliffs (*How summer came to Canada*).

Likewise, how evocative for Canadian children are the scenes of the Objibwa magician Nanabozho, who shapeshifts into a rooted tree or a small rabbit in his quest to bring fire to the wigwam so that his old grandmother Nokomis won't have to chew raw meat. My favorite illustration from *The fire stealer* depicts Nanabozho holding his arms to heaven as they grow into birch limbs and planting his feet into the earth as roots of the great tree. Cleaver captures the primitive sense of being in harmony with nature which Canadians want to espouse for their children as an alternative to dominance and manifest destiny.

Several other collections, which have outstanding illustrations and a representative selection of Indian nature myths — pourquoi stories, trickster tales, and creation myths — but which (like *Witch of the north*) are designed for middle-grade readers, should be mentioned. These are *Windigo and other tales of the Ojibways,* retold by Herbert T. Schwartz, illustrated by well-known Ojibway artist and storyteller Norval Morrisseau (McClelland and Stewart, 1969); *The*

adventures of Nanabush: Ojibway Indian stories, told by Sam Snake, Chief Elijah Yellowhead, Alder York, David Simcoe, and Annie King, compiled by Emerson and David Coatsworth with full colour paintings by Francis Kagige (Doubleday Canada, 1979); and *Tales the elders told: Ojibway legends* retold by Basil Johnston, of the Royal Ontario Museum's Department of Ethnology and member of the Cape Croker Indian Reserve in Ontario, with paintings and drawings by Shirley Cheechoo, a Cree artist of Manitoulin Island. Feminists will be delighted with the creation myth "Mother we will never leave you", a variant of the Genesis account in which Spirit Woman gives birth to birds, animals, and fish, but being lonesome asks the Great Spirit for a mate. When her wish is granted, their coupling brings forth the rest of creation. The ruffed grouse, rabbit, and whitefish are faithful to their mother and stay with her even when all the other creatures go away.

The third way is really a variant of the second — and that is to use Indian and Inuit myths and legends but to embody them in the adventures of a child with whom the young reader can identify. Two excellent examples of this technique are Maria Campbell's *Little Badger and the fire spirit,* illustrated by David Maclagan (McClelland and Stewart, 1977/1980) and Garnet Hewitt's *Ytek and the Arctic orchid,* illustrated by Heather Woodall (Douglas and McIntyre, 1981). Each book contains a list of characters — *Ytek* with a phonetic guide to pronunciation of the Inuit names — and *Badger* with a glossary translating the Indian names into English; and each book features lavish full-color illustrations, in watercolor (*Ytek*) and mixed media (*Badger*).

The Inuit legend, carefully researched by Hewitt, tells the story of how a boy's courage enables him to overcome his fears and leads him to an underwater valley where he encounters the spirits of Tuktu, the caribou embodied as Inuit, and learns their secret: "The life of Tuktu and the life of the Inuit are like one." The double page illustration of the underwater valley suggest the harmony of a world where human and animal are indeed one, protected by the overarching trees and the rainbow stretched across the ice mountains. This scene is reinforced by a subsequent picture of the caribou herd with Inuit hunters paddling in the background. However, arctic menace looms over the boy as he heads home with a full sled of caribou meat, and the illustration of a giant polar bear which springs out from the page so unexpectedly is vivid reminder of the northern terror that lurks in the Canadian psyche of Montreal-born Woodall. Indeed, the potency of the arctic orchid itself, which springs up in the icy desert and asks to be eaten, thus revealing the roots from which the flower has sprung, reminds one of the fascination for underwater life that is manifest in some recent Canadian writers (e.g. in the Indian wall paintings concealed under water in Atwood's *Surfacing* and in the subterranean lake kingdom in Nichols' *The marrow of the world.* There is almost a Northwest Passage of the mind here.

Good as is *Ytek*, so is *Little Badger and the fire spirit.* Maria Campbell has used her own experience (cf. her book *HalfBreed*) to recreate the Indian legend of the quest for fire. Driven by his people's need to escape the winter's cold, Little Badger seeks fire for warmth. Unlike Firestealer, Little Badger is just a blind Indian boy, who, taught by his friend Grey Coyote, is able to journey without harm past the four forces which guard the Fire — mountain goat, mountain lion, bear, and snake. His secret to overcome the ferocity of these alien forces is his gentle touch and voice. Since they do not perceive him as a threat, their hostility is disarmed. "I do not want to hurt you, so why should you want to hurt me?" The snake is so astonished that he does not notice the boy moving past him. Even the Fire Spirit, who has never been seen by mortal, is intrigued by Little Badger, and in thanks for his bringing the warmth of friendship to the heart of the mountain, Fire Spirit restores the boy's sight and gives him a lighted torch. As the boy ascends from within the mountain, he realizes that the drumbeat which has sustained his courage is the beating of his friend Grey Coyote's heart. "Little Badger laughed as he climbed down the mountain. Around him was the sound of the drums, the pulse of the world, the music of the universe." The illustration "the music of the universe" (fig. 3), which ends the book shows that Maclagan is in tune with the spirit of Campbell's text.

Another feature which makes this retelling memorable is that the legend is set within a frame — the visit of a contemporary Alberta Indian girl to her grandparents. This family unit, like Grey Coyote and Little Badger, have a grace and beauty about them that only the consciousness of *being a family* can evoke. Let us hope for further Campbell/Maclagan collaborations and more

...the music of the universe.

stories from Campbell's well of memory....

We began our quest for a usable Canadian mythology by reflecting on what was called in 1969 the "best Canadian picture book ever."[7] As I have said, though, what *Cinderella* really demonstrated was the absence of a usable Canadian mythology. However, in the past fifteen years, that lack is disappearing, if current children's picture books we have noted are any example. In 1979, Claude Aubry noted the strides Canadian children's literature had taken and the number of titles being published, but he warned that we are not doing nearly enough:

> ...if the Canadian author for children is not better encouraged, if the publication of children's books in Canada remains a low priority, our literature for children will die, for it is in its infancy. Then our children would have nothing of our history, of our geography, of our folklore, of our traditions, and of our way of life; they will not have fiction created by Canadian imaginative minds. Our children will then ignore what we are, and what we were, what is Canada, and what made it. And then, they will not feel Canadian any more, and then Canada will have lost its personality, its soul, its identity.[8]

If it is the task of a culture to root its children in time and place, in a landscape of hope, perhaps no better vehicle can be found in the present age than a steady supply of well-told, well-illustrated Canadian myths and legends which foster the spirit of the "Giants," "Witches," and "Little Badgers" who have walked, worked, and worshipped in all the outports, ice-caves, and fire-mountains of this great land.

NOTES

[1]Northrop Frye, *Divisions on a ground: essays on Canadian culture* (Anansi, 1982), pp. 50-53.

[2]Perrault's 17th century *Cinderella* is thought to be inspired by Louis XIV's court.

[3]It is possible to identify the Toronto Broadway tryout because the collage includes mention of the O'Keefe Centre whose opening was inaugurated by the *Camelot* production.

[4]Frye, *Divisions on a ground;* and Margaret Atwood, *Survival* (Anansi, 1972).

[5]Frye, *Divisions on a ground,* p. 69.

[6]Eli Mandel (ed.), *Contexts of Canadian criticism* (Univ. of Chicago Press, 1971), p. 7 and Frye, *Divisions on a ground,* p. 49.

[7]*In Review* (Autumn, 1969).

[8]Aubry, "The Canadian author for children still lost in the barren lands," in *One ocean touching,* ed. Sheila Egoff (The Scarecrow Press, Inc., 1979), pp. 200-201.

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