ORKNEYMEN IN CANADA

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On the Trail of Long Tom. W. Towrie Cutt. Toronto, Collins, 1970. 189 pp. $4.50 cloth.

Message from Arkmae. W. Towrie Cutt. Toronto, Collins, 1972. 96 pp. $3.95 cloth.

Seven for the Sea. W. Towrie Cutt. Toronto, Collins, 1973. 96 pp. $3.95 cloth.

Carry My Bones Northwest. W. Towrie Cutt. London, André Deutsch, 1973. 144 pp. $5.50 cloth.

Faraway World: An Orkney Boyhood. Wood carvings by Joseph Sloan, London, André Deutsch, 1977. 128 pp. $9.50 cloth.

If that ubiquitous pollster, whose face we so often see on television, were to ask the so-called "Canadian man-in-the street" where the Orkneys are, he might (from a few with memories of Scapa Flow) get a knowledgeable answer. If he should ask what part the Orkneys played in Canada's historical development, it is highly unlikely he would receive anything more than puzzled stares. But the truth of the matter is, though few Canadians realize it, those remote and windswept islands off the north-east tip of Scotland were the birthplace and training-ground of the men who first explored and settled Western Canada-the men of the Hudson's Bay Company and later of Lord Selkirk's colony. At the turn of the eighteenth century more than seventy-five percent of the Company's "servants" were Orkneymen; their descendants – the Isbisters, the Taits, the Corrigals, the Fletts – have helped populate the prairies. The stories of their forbears, the men who migrated, who "made fur king", who settled and saw Canada emerge into nationhood, are eminently worth repeating to our children; and now a good beginning has been made.

Over the past eight years W. Towrie Cutt, a native Orkneyman and a teacher-resident of Alberta for almost fifty years (now an octogenarian living in Victoria) has made a concerted effort to recapture and revivify the traditions and stories of the Orkneys, and also to depict some aspects of the Orkneyman's involvement in Canada's early history. The result has been four published novels for children and a book of childhood reminiscences. The first and fourth of these, *On the Trail of Long Tom* (1970) and *Carry My Bones Northwest* (1973) are fictional accounts of the participation of two Orkney boys in, respectively, the Riel Rebellion and the Selkirk settlement. The middle two, *Message from Arkmae* (1972) and *Seven for the Sea* (1973), take us back to the Orkney Islands and magically evoke the mythical traditions of his (or, for some Cana-

dians, *our*) people. The fifth and last of Cutt's books, *Faraway World* (1977), is a non-fictional account of his boyhood days, in the real world of the Orkneys during the first two decades of the twentieth century.

The fortuitous division of Cutt's books into two groups, which may for convenience be called the Canadian-based and the Orkney-based, brings us at once to the chief critical contention of this review: the Canadian-based novels, though they are well worth reading, are inferior in style and execution to the Orkney-based ones. And the reason for this is that Cutt, like so many "visiting" writers before him, is unable (in spite of the many years spent in Canada) to create a compelling sense of place, and to evoke the northern landscape in which his major characters have their existence. It is, of course, a familiar complaint – a complaint brought against such writers as William Francis Butler *(The Great Lone Land)* whose upper-class Anglo-Irish sensibilities prevented him from seeing and depicting the prairies in anything other than vague academic terms; but it is justified. Cutt is, and remains even when writing his Canadian-based novels, an Orkneyman, his imagination alive with his Islands' visual and tactile imagery, its mysticism and lore. That is why, when he is writing his Orkney-based fantasies, he is in *his* element. They are beautiful evocations of Orkney and first-rate stories; the Canadian-based novels fall short of their achievement.

Cutt's first novel, in fact, perhaps because he is too ambitious or because he is unsure of his materials, is the weakest of the lot. Not only is there a superficial sense of place ("The Landscape was kindly – the blue-green lake, the clear blue sky, the trees and brush flaming with red and yellow between the dark evergreens"), but there is a question of plausibility to contend with as well. *On the Trail of Long Tom* is a story of young Tom Findlater, the son of a Company servant and a Cree chief's daughter, who has (since the age of three when his mother died) been living with relatives in the Orkneys. He is now thirteen, big for his age, the strongest and fleetest in his class; and it is at this point that Long Tom, his father, wants his son back in Canada with him.

The year is 1883. There is unrest in the West: the Métis will soon send for Louis Riel and in two years the battles of Duck Lake and Batoche, the massacre at Frog Lake, the Riel Rebellion will have become part of Canada's history. It is with these important and tragic events that Tom becomes involved. The central conflict of his life (and of the book) is supposed to be between his loyalty to his father (to the anti-Riel faction) and to his own blood ties (the Indian and Métis cause). "What is my duty in this land? " is his persistent question. Unfortunately, that controlling conflict – the *raison d'être* of the novel – is never felt by the reader. Though young Tom (who tells his own story) often rationalizes he never agonizes:

> I was hungry as well as tired. Where did I go from here? I wondered. It would be useless to go to Battleford; the white soldiers would be smarting under defeat, and in no mood to make peace. I could not

> go back to Poundmaker's camp; Itka was there, and anyway I would not be able to escape a second time. My step-mother and sister were in Fort Pitt, prisoners of Big Bear who had been asked to protect them; if he was still in control he would be protecting them. To Fort Pitt I must go if I were to serve my sister and step-mother. Forty miles, I guessed, and the Saskatchewan to cross, perhaps ten miles away. I set out, still going north.

The reader rarely becomes emotionally involved in Tom's dilemma. It seems to me that a story of this kind, to succeed, must have an emotional impact.

On a more practical level, one is apt to be amused by or annoyed at the amazing versatility of this fifteen-year-old boy, not merely because he is fifteen (after all, David Thompson was only sixteen when he began his explorations), but because he is so precocious (he learns to speak French fluently on the voyage to Canada and Cree very quickly thereafter) and, above all, so omnipresent. At the height of the rebellion he goes everywhere: to the Red Deer River (to see Crowfoot), to Batoche (where he becomes Riel's prisoner), to Carlton, then Poundmaker's reserve, to Battleford, then Cutknife, to Fort Pitt and on to Big Bear's camp. He meets all the major participants (Riel, Dumont, Crozier, Poundmaker, Crowfoot, Big Bear and Middleton), is on intimate terms with most, and witnesses nearly all the major events. In a fantasy such omnipresence and influence might be acceptable; in an historical novel it tends to undermine the authenticity of the historical events themselves.

And yet, in spite of those flaws, *On the Trail of Long Tom* is still a readable novel, and possesses a number of redeeming features. Cutt's command of dialogue, for example, is very impressive; when his characters speak they live, and one wishes there were more communication between them, as indeed there is in his later books. Neither is he sentimental or condescending, two pitfalls difficult to avoid in such writing: his natives are neither nature's children nor savages; his Orkneymen are not all angels; the issues are fairly put; and there are no clear-cut answers or pat solutions. And in his presentation of the historical events Cutt is thoroughly accurate. If there is one thing certain it is that he knows his Canadian history, particularly that concerning the Hudson's Bay company and its servants. Thus, in spite of the weaknesses, for a teenager interested in that era and those events, *On the Trail of Long Tom* will be a rewarding reading experience, all the more so if that teenager is thereby encouraged to find out more about the Riel Rebellion, perhaps even to read such better books as William Bleasdell Cameron's *Blood Red the Sun* (now in paperback) or George Woodcock's *Gabriel Dumont* (a perfectly readable book for the avid teenage historian).

Turning to look at Cutt's second Canadian-based novel, *Carry My Bones Northwest,* we find that many of the stylistic weaknesses of the first have been overcome, principally because Cutt eschews the first-person point-of-view in

favour of the more objective third person, which allows him firmer control of his material. The conflict, similar to that of *On the Trail of Long Tom,* is therefore more fully realized because the author is able to develop the dialogue (his forté) and relies less on internal reflection (his weakness). As a result *Carry My Bones Northwest* is a structurally sound novel, thematically satisfying, in which the historical events are secondary to character development. In short, the story-line is coherent and uncomplicated.

The story begins with an historical fact: on June 24, 1794, the small HBC fort at South Branch House (on the South Saskatchewan River) was attacked and its occupants murdered by a band of Gros Ventres Indians. Among those killed was an Orkneyman, William Fea, and the only man to escape was Jon Van Driel. Cutt uses that event and those men as the basis for his plot: William Fea in his story (though not in real life) has a son (whose mother is Indian) who also escapes the massacre and, with the aid of Van Driel, makes his way down river to Cumberland House. From there young Willie is returned to his grandparents in the Orkneys and spends seventeen years in its mystical grip before returning to Canada in 1811 as one of Miles Macdonell's Selkirk settlers. Willie also, like Tom Findlater, comes face to face with his past, his native people and with the same question posed in the previous novel: "What is my duty in this land? " The resolution to his conflict, somewhat unsatisfactory it seems to me, is contained in Cutt's epilogue where the vague suggestion is made that the Indians who tell missionaries of "the man with the blue mark" are talking of Willie Fea who has, at last, found his destiny.

But it is not the beginning or the ending which gives the novel its strength: it is the middle, those years in Willie's life spent among his Orkney forbears, steeping himself in their traditions, exploring their mysteries and myths. Those chapters are packed with exciting and fascinating events and people. In the depiction of the "fey" Packy woman, the ritual of tattoos, the mystery of second sight, the Candlemas rites, the threat of press gangs, Cutt delights and excels. Here, one feels, his own boyhood is revivified; he is now in *his* element.

And because Cutt remains in his element – continues to re-create his Orkney boyhood (dreams and reality) – his last two novels, *Message from Arkmae* and *Seven for the Sea,* are even more successful than the first two. One has no hesitation in calling them "excellent" stories, for both children and adults. They cannot, however, be so easily put into précis form as the other two and I will not demean them by doing so. Though they have plots (and exciting plots as well), their strength and beauty lies in their evocation of all that is Orkney – the Orcades: the kelpies, the sea, the mist. They are magic and mysticism; they have, as Tolkien might say, the trademark *Of Faerie* written all over them. One must read them to appreciate them and perhaps this passage will tempt some to do just that:

> The sea was calm – almost motionless. Moonlight shone over the bay. Mansie rowed slowly, dipping his oars into

the water as quietly as he could, fearful of being heard and seen. This fear left him when he was half way across the bay, but now he had to be careful not to frighten the seals.

Beyond the moonlit expanse of the bay, the sea was dark and opalescent, and twinkling marbles of light shot through it as stars shoot in the sky. Moonlight flooded the pram as it swashed over the glittering water. Mansie now rowed into Siver's Geo, through the middle of the channel and to the upper edge of the flood, then beached the pram. Carefully the boys got out, and then lifted the pram up the shore. They crawled up the beach to the grass and lay down in an old kelp pit – a pit in which seaweed used to be burned.

They waited while the moon climbed to its zenith. Below them the sea swayed up and down, up and down. Erchie's teeth chattered.

'Are you cold, Erch?' asked Mansie.
'My feet are.'
'Sit on the edge of the pit and put them on my guernsey.'

They continued to wait. Erchie's teeth stopped chattering.
'I'm warmer now.'

'Whist!'

A far-away sound rippled over the bright waters. A hollow sound, yet like a whistle, as if someone were fluting through a tube. Then came an answering note, much nearer, and lower pitched. Mansie felt Erchie's feet press into his back.

Then came another voice, from the middle distance, and an answer. The boys looked towards the sea.

It seemed that fifty heads were bobbing in the shining water. There came now a medley of sounds, as if recorders were tuning up. These sounds swelled louder, gathered together and then formed into a regular rhythm.

Eun ee deunn, eu, eu,
Eun ee deunn, eu, eu,
Um eu, um eu, um.

The voices were sweet, and the song now flowed shoreward as though the singers were moving in. The moon, now at its zenith, silvered beach and promontory. Then for a long while

all was quiet.

'Listen!' whispered Mansie hoarsely, for the song had started again.
At the beach from which the singing came, Erchie saw two or three dark masses – he could not tell whether they were seals or shadows. He looked up. The sky was cloudless, blue and star-studded. The song continued, rather louder. And then something, or some things, appeared on the grass, swaying slightly. Not yet could he tell if they were shadows or substance. He rubbed his eyes. Something was definitely there, swaying back and forth, and the movement seemed to keep time with the repeated song.

Oonie, oonie, oonie, eun.
Oonie, oonie, oonie, eun.
Euloom, euloom.

Erchie and Mansie, the heroes of both books, search out the mysteries of their islands, the sources of their folklore and, by magic, become involved in events which take them back to the past when seals and men lived in harmony together.

There are, then, several ways in which W. Towrie Cutt's novels might be enjoyed. For the teenage boy or girl who would know more about the Orkneys and about the Orkneyman's participation in Canada's history, the four provide an excellent and pleasant introduction. Perhaps, after that initial contact, curiosity might lead the reader to Cutt's last book, *Faraway World,* in which he describes, in a matter-of-fact manner, what his boyhood life in Orkney was like. For the lover of fantasy, or even for the lover of nature, Cutt's *Message from Arkmae* and *Seven for the Sea* (the latter being my favourite) will offer new and delightful experiences. For the Canadian-history enthusiast (surely there are some) *On the Trail of Long Tom* will prove challenging and will, one hopes, send the reader scurrying to the sources. And for the teenager who simply wants a good story *Carry My Bones Northwest* will adequately meet that requirement, as indeed will any of the others. It is perhaps needless to add that grownups will also be charmed by Cutt's novels. In any event, W. Towrie Cutt, like the Orkneymen he writes about, deserves to be better known in Canada; his contribution, like theirs, is worthy of praise.

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