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**Cautious Rebellion:  
A Critical Study of the Canadian  
Historical Play in English**

by

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## Abstract

The Canadian historical play in English has long been subject to cursory, pejorative evaluation. Though a tradition of common practice has existed, almost unaltered, but still dynamic, since the earliest examples of the genre, there exists no articulated account of that tradition. Indications are that playwrights and critics alike have been largely unaware of the extent to which English-Canadian historical drama evinces a progress within a virtually paradigmatic structure. New developments in English-Canadian historiography suggest that a similar reconsideration of basic critical assumptions would benefit both the practice and the criticism of the English-Canadian history play. Building from a theoretical understanding founded in sociological and interdisciplinary cultural studies of the role of perception in “history” past and present, this study works to articulate a progress within a tradition, to set out the enduringly common features of English-Canadian historical drama.

Through analytical commentary on twenty-eight plays, divided into five of the most common topical and thematic foci of the genre, this study establishes the roots of contemporary common practice in the earliest examples of the genre published in the late nineteenth-century, and traces the evolution of that practice through its most significant point of change midway through the twentieth century. The study argues that criticism to date has not fully comprehended the parameters within which the English-Canadian historical play has usually been written. English-Canadian historical playwrights are, in fact, paralleling (sometimes even anticipating) developments in Canadian historiography.

Criticism of revisionist elements in the drama generally mistakes a strength for a weakness. Similarly, the omission of the non-Canadian historical subject from virtually all previous studies of the genre is an unnecessary limitation. Finally, and most importantly, the contemporary English-Canadian history play is not about history. Rather, it uses elements of history to critique and reconceive the present.

Ironically, the contemporary English-Canadian historical play tends, in its reclamation of figures marginalized in the past, to make heroes out of individuals who were profoundly mistrustful of conventional discourses of heroism. If criticism of the genre has been imperfectly conceived, so too has practice of the form sometimes revealed its own ideological blind spots.

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## Introduction

### Toward a Paradigm for English-Canadian Historical Drama

Studies of English-Canadian historical drama to date range from the brief summary treatment afforded it as a subgenre within the broader context of Canadian drama, as found in *The Literary History of Canada in English*, through the efforts of playwrights to theorize from their writing and research experience, to detailed academic analyses of the collective play, the historical play, and the memory play. Only one of these dissertations has been published: Alan Filewod's *Collective Encounters* (1987). The remainder of published criticism specifically focused on the uses of historical or documentary material in contemporary English-Canadian drama is in the form of brief articles in a variety of scholarly journals. The relative paucity of commentary leaves critics of English-Canadian historical drama in a position much like that encountered by the playwrights: there *is* a 'tradition' of sorts, either within which or against which to work, but there is nothing like a unified record of that tradition. The creative and critical traditions of English-Canadian historical drama are nowhere given an inclusive overview, since even Filewod's book is limited to *collective* and *documentary* plays. But each brief analysis of a single text, or even of a given playwright's oeuvre, constitutes a piece of a whole, however puzzling. The substantial problem faced by all criticism of English-Canadian historical drama to date is that no single critic, understandably, has come close, as it were, to even finishing the big picture against which to contextualize individual pieces of the critical puzzle. My intention is to assemble a frame for the picture those pieces can reasonably be argued to represent.<sup>1</sup>

picture those pieces can reasonably be argued to represent.<sup>1</sup>

In theory, a broad map of any territory should not discourage further exploration. Nonetheless, discouragement is precisely the effect that most summaries of the development of English-Canadian historical drama have tended to have, especially those found in *The Literary History of Canada in English*. The consistently dismissive tone of commentary tends to suggest that, although an ever-larger body of work is evolving, evincing a kind of cultural explosion in the theatre, the plays themselves are disappointing, inconsistent, and inadequate relative to the virtues of historical drama produced by the rest of the English-speaking world. Perhaps the most frequently recurring criticism of these plays is that they are revisionist, that they play fast and loose with the ostensible facts of recorded history. However, as the following summary of developments in Canadian historiography since the mid-1960s will suggest, the critical assumptions so frequently used to dismiss English-Canadian historical drama have themselves been under considerable interrogation. We need a re-examination of the critical assumptions repeatedly applied to English-Canadian drama in the recent past, as well as a reconsideration of the plays themselves in light of recent changes in historiographical methods and presumptions.

In part, the regularity with which contemporary criticism damns with faint praise the English-Canadian history play indicates the endurance of one theme common to a wide variety of such plays: Canada's reticence to pursue new, untried, or chancy alternatives espoused by the iconoclasts so often figured in that body of representation. As Northrop Frye observed in his celebrated "Conclusion" to the *Literary History of*

*Canada*, Canada's near-fixation on its own past typifies the response of any country with a foreshortened history, any country that has arrived on the international stage with many of a developing nation's self-discoveries already available in the world bank of common sense. As Frye implicitly registers, literary criticism of Canadian historical drama in English has been fixated on strategies and methods of the past, usually speaking in negative terms about the inability of the plays under evaluation to measure up to an established standard of value and practice.

English-Canadian historical drama is generally held to be either revisionist or myth-making in nature, both terms discernibly pejorative. Denied a developmental stage, and inheriting extant traditions, values and cultural myths from England, France, and the United States, English-Canadian dramatists, so established critical opinion suggests, have used plays to invent a Canadian mythology which is, somehow, unsatisfactory. Don Rubin, in his chapbook *Creeping Toward A Culture*, cites the Report of the Royal Commission on National Development in the Arts, Letters and Sciences (1951): "Our use of American institutions, or our lazy, even abject, imitation of them has caused an uncritical acceptance of ideas and assumptions which are alien to our tradition" (15-16). Subsequent efforts to create within "our" tradition have usually led to similar criticism, often rooted in debate over precisely what ideas and assumptions are *not* alien to Canadian dramatists. From early, generally dismissive accounts of the English-Canadian play as inferior, critical treatment of the English-Canadian historical play *has* slowly evolved toward a somewhat more favourable view, though the English-Canadian history play is still usually assigned second-standing. As recently as 1993, reference to the taint

Crucial to both the reading and criticism of the historical play is an understanding of what we comprehend by “the past.” To anyone prepared to accept the unexceptionable definition of “the past” as “anything that occurred before right now,” any theorizing of “the past,” or, with more complexity, dramatization of “the past,” might seem a waste of time. This study proposes a slightly more complex understanding of “the past,” arguing that such complexity should be a stimulus to active interrogation and comprehension of assumptions concerning perception of time. The readily obvious assumptions of this study are simply stated: there is no such thing as unmediated history, and human mediation unavoidably involves bias. The implications of such assumptions are rather more complicated and far-reaching.<sup>2</sup>

As David Lowenthal not surprisingly observes in his *The Past Is a Foreign Country* (1985), humans seem to reshape their pasts in order to suit their present needs. Individual reconceiving of the past can be understood as analogous to national revision of memory and history. More interestingly, though, Lowenthal goes on to conclude that “the pasts we alter or invent are as prevalent and consequential as those we try to preserve. Indeed, a heritage wholly saved or authentically reproduced is no less transformed than one deliberately manipulated” (xviii). There is no past that does not in some way involve the present. The artifact found is only brought to attention by the present act of finding; the dwelling preserved “just as they left it” is only seen by a present audience:

Memory and history both derive and gain emphasis from physical remains. Tangible survivals provide a vivid immediacy that helps to

remains. Tangible survivals provide a vivid immediacy that helps to assure us there really was a past. Physical remains have their limitations as informants, to be sure: they are themselves mute, requiring interpretation; their continual but differential erosion and demolition skews the record; and their substantial survival conjures up a past more static than could have been the case. But however depleted by time and use, relics remain essential bridges between then and now. (Lowenthal xxiii)

As anyone who has ever worked in Historic Properties will confirm, the display of relics and preservation of buildings involve as much performance as the staging of a play—in many contemporary instances even employing costumes, character, and similar theatrical accoutrements to facilitate the task of interpretation.

Writing of a double awareness of indebtedness to and resentment of inheritance, Lowenthal proposes a generational model for each society's encounter with its history:

Collective efforts to cope with a heritage at once revered and resented parallel individual needs both to follow and to reject parental precepts, an analogy perennially invoked in debates over imitation and innovation, ancients and moderns. Every inheritance is alike beneficial and baneful; every historically conscious society has had to reassess that balance for itself. (xx)

Put another way, “whether avowedly traditional or defiantly iconoclastic, every generation must reach a *modus vivendi* that simultaneously embraces and abandons

the ordinary processes of historical consciousness merge with increased national consciousness—arguably a state in which Canada has existed, intensity waxing and waning but never vanishing, since at least World War Two.

We cannot escape remembering any more than forgetting. Memory loss is defined as an illness, and the evocation of memory is so much a part of individual daily processes that, like respiration, recollection usually happens without overt individual awareness or manipulation of its mechanisms. To say that the manipulation is not overt, however, is not to say that it is not happening, any more than to be unaware of one's breathing or blinking is to be no longer performing the actions in question: "[f]ew waking hours are devoid of recall or recollection; only intense concentration on some immediate pursuit can prevent the past from coming unbidden to mind. But the memories that permeate the present are subsumed within a hierarchy of habit, recall, and memento" (Lowenthal 194). Memory is more than a sense of who we were, or from where we have come: "remembering the past is crucial for our sense of identity . . . ; to know what we were confirms what we are" (197). What we now are is always in part shaped by what we were, just as our understanding of what we were is always in part shaped by what we now are.<sup>3</sup>

It is important, then, to recognize that "history and memory are distinguishable less as types of knowledge than in attitudes toward that knowledge" (Lowenthal 213). Memory and history can best be understood as aspects of individual and social awareness: "Just as memory validates personal identity, history perpetuates collective self-awareness" (213). Further, historical and memorial records should be subject to the

self-awareness” (213). Further, historical and memorial records should be subject to the same sorts of scrutiny.

The major challenge arising from such a comprehension of the linked roles of history and memory, both for historians and for literary uses of history, is that “historical knowledge however communal and verifiable is also invariably subjective, biased both by its narrator and by its audience” (216). All history is narrated. When the historical dramatist invents explanatory linkages, or merely arranges the dramatic presentation of events to stress linkages already a matter of general consensus, the dramatist employs narrative strategies which look and function exactly as their historiographical counterparts do. Such similarity is sometimes sufficient to convince an audience that it is seeing a representation of unmediated history. While an audience disposed to take the content of a dramatic presentation for unmediated history might accurately be described as unsophisticated, it might fairly also be described as commonplace. Much of what we *do* know of history comes to us indirectly through entertainment, not directly through historical study or research.

Any community has a vested interest in the perception of a stable past. If what we are is inevitably tied to what we were, then instability in knowledge of the past prefigures instability in our present sense of self. Just as people are often prepared to question the memory of others while placing too great faith in the flawlessness of their own recall, so communities would prefer to believe in an unadulterated, unmediated past—a ‘then’ untouched by now. Simultaneously, we want that unadulterated past to be something of which we can be proud. That desire results in a transformation of the past

frequently been observed, history is usually written by the winners. Thus even studies such as Lowenthal's<sup>4</sup> are rooted in textual evidence produced largely by "literate elites who troubled to record their views and were probably more inclined than other folk to speculate about the past" (xxvi).

Thus, no matter whose agenda is followed for the tidying-up of history, there remains undeniable transformation in moving from that which happened to the record of that which happened: "History thus transformed becomes larger than life, merging intention with performance, ideal with actuality" (Lowenthal 356). We perform fantasies which our own time has refused us, reconstructing our pasts into an era suspiciously like our own. As Lowenthal argues, the major difference is that "we have no responsibility" for this invented past: "The present cannot be moulded to such desires, for we share it with others; the past is malleable because its inhabitants are no longer here to contest our manipulations" (356). We will not be called to account by our ancestors for the manner in which we have preserved and narrated the records of their lives. Instead, we call each other to account. We cling to competing views of what constitutes history and how history should be used, each insisting on the absolute fidelity of his or her individual representation.

In sum, whenever or wherever we find ourselves as we encounter the contemporary historical play, we inevitably bring our present-rooted interpretative strategies to our comprehension of it. Even the first reading of a document preserved in a freshly-unearthed time capsule—untouched as the document itself is by intervening history—will be a reading inescapably informed by what we know as we read it.<sup>5</sup>

history—will be a reading inescapably informed by what we know as we read it.<sup>5</sup>

But if we cannot escape our ‘situatedness,’ perhaps we can, with awareness of our position as readers *inside* the texts we are reading, exercise more control over the uses to which we put our readings. The contemporary English-Canadian history play commonly assumes a didactic function and often works to remind audiences of significant events which should remain vibrant in the communal memory. Equally important is recognition that the subjectivity of historical memory does have limits. The fact that history is mediated does not erase the datum of past events. As Lowenthal cautions, “scepticism carried to [the] extreme puts all reality in doubt and ends in utter solipsism” (190). My own study at no point proposes a rejection of the past itself, nor claims that events did not happen; what is open to construction, deconstruction, and imaginative reconstruction is our perception of the past.

With the foregoing as a theoretical foundation for the study, we turn to an examination of what contemporary criticism has made of the English-Canadian historical play.

Summaries of English-Canadian drama in *The Literary History of Canada in English* have tended to place the drama a distant third in achievement, behind poetry and fiction and nowhere near the quality of its contemporaries in Great Britain and America. Michael Tait, examining the years 1920-1960, writes that there is “a lack in Canada of a dramatic literature of any real distinction,” and examines a variety of putative reasons for the “comparative feebleness of Canada’s dramatic output” (2: 143). Among other possible causes, Tait suggests that the theatre, “that most extravagantly exhibitionist of

ostensibly characterizes English Canada (144, 143). “[D]istinctly unimpressive. . . . imitative and curiously irrelevant” qualify the products of such a reticence (160).

Much to similar effect, ironically, John Ripley, discussing the period 1960-1973, writes of “the evolution—or, more accurately, explosion—of Canadian theatre” and calls it a “cultural miracle” which defies “critical explanation” (3: 212). The apparently positive tone of his liminary comments notwithstanding, Ripley goes on to call most recent drama “the first raw attempts, with varying degrees of success, to . . . say something about ourselves” (3: 219). Ripley observes “the perennial fondness of Canadian playwrights for history,” but concludes that the “explosion” produced “no masterpieces” and that even the best known of English-Canadian historical plays, in particular John Coulter’s *Riel* and Sharon Pollock’s *Walsh*, fail to transcend “mere reconstruction of historical incidents,” and lack the “contemporary resonance and relevance” of their British counterparts, say of a Robert Bolt or a John Osborne (3: 221, 223).

Brian Parker and Cynthia Zimmerman, covering the period 1972-1984, seem slightly less judgmental than their predecessors, though criticism of the drama’s revisionary tendencies persists. Commenting on a growing tendency for the drama to record “the actual validity of . . . marginal experience,” coupled with the increasing irrelevance of any “Canadian ‘norm,’” Parker and Zimmerman describe the historical/political play as overlapping “a revisionary tendency” with an impulse to side “with the losers” and “to mythologize the past” (4: 199, 203). This latest progress report in the *Literary History of Canada in English* stresses the “cloudy implications” of all the

“Left-wing populism” to be found in English-Canadian historical drama (203, 209).

While a variety of left-wing populism was undeniably a defining feature of a great deal of historical and documentary theatre during the 1970s and after, it seems that such a categorization is made prescriptively (and not a little proscriptively).

These summary accounts, appearing roughly once each decade since the mid-1960s, indicate many of the more obvious features of the English-Canadian historical play, but seem to miss much of the significance of those features. The revisionary tendencies are not, as they seem to be so regularly considered, a weakness which English-Canadian historical drama cannot rise above, but instead a deliberately cultivated strength, a direction of inquiry which actually situates English-Canadian historical drama harmoniously alongside most contemporary Canadian historiography.

English-Canadian historical drama in the decades since 1960 develops in a pattern roughly parallel to that of Canadian historiography, occasionally diverging from the concerns occupying academic historians and actually embracing some components which the academy was simultaneously rejecting. Carl Berger, in *The Writing of Canadian History* (1976, 1986) provides a useful summary of the evolution of Canadian historiography since the mid-1960s: “The outstanding features of Canadian historiography in the two decades after the mid-1960s were a sudden acceleration of research and publication, broadening of the scope and subject matter of history, and destruction of interpretations that had once given meaning to Canadian experience as a whole” (259). These characterizations of historiography seem equally applicable to the writing of drama. Since the 1960s, there has been an explosion of publication and

performance, an increased range of subject matter, and a thorough challenge to received wisdom concerning Canadian identity and the meaning of the Canadian experience in the realm of the English-Canadian play. Both the aforementioned survey of developments in drama as recorded in *The Literary History of Canada in English* (volumes 3 and 4, covering the period 1960-1983) and the annual reports on the state of English-Canadian drama as published in the *University of Toronto Quarterly* confirm the extent of this growth.

As historiography itself began to be the focus of detailed theoretical analysis, according to Berger in 1976, “historians no longer agreed on what was central to their field of study and what was peripheral” (259). The sense of change and growing plurality increasingly highlighted in historiography is a feature not solely of Canadian scholarly endeavour. Berger quotes Graeme Davidson, an Australian historian: “Historians, with one or two illustrious exceptions, no longer see themselves as the interpreters of national character or purpose. If they champion a cause it is more likely to be that of a class, a party, an ethnic or racial group, a locality or a gender than that of the nation as a whole” (259). The long-held belief that “history was extremely important in promoting a community’s self-understanding and definition” (260), is one of the components of received wisdom most thoroughly challenged in the field of post-1960 historiography. Again, the same is true of the drama. Increasingly, playwrights have either confronted well-known stories and asked audiences to consider them as narrated from a different perspective, or have excavated forgotten tales from the past and challenged audiences to consider reasons why these narratives might have been either

merely forgotten or actively suppressed.

Berger writes of increasing research abroad by Canadian historians as “broadening the context in which Canada’s history was studied,” and adds that the “later sixties witnessed an intense questioning of the direction in which the country was moving” (263). While some historians (and, in general, the public) found such challenges and proposed changes threatening, “others were hopeful about the possibilities of change that were indicated by the loosening of the hold of older British-Canadian norms” (264). Berger refers to “the feminist movement, the native peoples’ rejection of their ‘colonial’ position in Canadian society, and, above all, student activism” as important agents in the cultural redefinition of history, and summarizes the developing patterns of the emergent ‘new left’:

In so far as it possessed a consistency of feeling the new left was hostile to hierarchy and authority (including interpretations of history that seemed to justify the flawed present). Those who shared its sentiments were disillusioned with electoral politics, instinctively sympathized with the rebels of the past—William Lyon MacKenzie, Louis Riel, Norman Bethune—and identified, despite their own predominantly middle-class backgrounds, with the victimized and dispossessed—blacks, immigrants, workers, women, and native peoples. (264)

It is not a coincidence that the “rebels of the past” under historiographical revaluation are also central figures of English-Canadian historical drama in the same period. Rick Salutin’s *1837* (1976), John Coulter’s *Riel* (premiered 1950, published 1962), and both

Rod Langley's *Bethune* (1975) and Ken Mitchell's *Gone the Burning Sun* (1984), address in drama these same "rebels of the past," inviting a reconsideration of the alternatives embraced by these iconoclasts, and a questioning of the official voices of their times which labeled each a 'rebel.'

Berger observes that "Reform movements which seek to change the future have always tried to rewrite the past" (264). Contemporary English-Canadian drama is certainly doing that. He also argues that the "new history . . . involved more than the sympathetic study of previously neglected groups, [and] owed not a little of its critical spirit to contemporary reform movements that were questioning institutions and practices" (265). Rather than existing merely as a record of completed events, history became, for some, "a force for remedial action and moral criticism, a weapon for attacking the abuses of the present by exposing their sources and pointing to better alternatives not taken in the past" (265). I argue that such "pointing to better alternatives" lies at the heart of contemporary English-Canadian historical drama.

When Berger writes of "demands for an apology for the removal of Japanese Canadians from the west coast during the Second World War, . . . legal cases involving aboriginal land rights, and . . . requests for the posthumous pardon of Louis Riel" (265), he refers to issues that are as current in English-Canadian drama as they are in Canadian historiography. As a consequence of new perspectives on our national history, so Berger argues, "Canadians in general were compelled to come to terms with moral wrongs in their historical experience" (265). Again, the drama has helped to compel this cathartic national self-revaluation. From John Coulter's *Riel*, through Sharon Pollock's *Walsh*

(1973) and *The Komagata Maru Incident* (1978), to the recent flourishing of plays from the perspective of groups once oppressed, as in Daniel David Moses' *Almighty Voice and His Wife* (1991, 1992), we see English-Canadian drama taking up many of the same subjects which have been under reconsideration in contemporary historiography. Berger surely makes a telling point when he recalls that the “growth of the professional study and teaching of history was only one dimension of an upsurge of cultural nationalism and an unprecedented popular fascination with the past” (265).

    Berger refers to the “retrospective impulse” that manifested itself in the post-1960 years in various art forms (266). He cites Pierre Berton, Heather Robertson, and Godfrey Ridout (in popular history, fiction, and music, respectively) as examples of individuals working with that impulse. But such a force—I would suggest—also indicates something of a progressive impulse, a way of going forward through re-examination of what has already been. Such progress through retrospection is characteristic of the postmodern era, which champions renovation as opposed to innovation, reworking existing modes as opposed to inventing something wholly new.<sup>6</sup> Other significant aspects of cultural practices now usually defined as postmodern have also directly affected the development of the English-Canadian historical play. The increasing distance between academic and popular historians, the decline of biography as a defining subject for the former, and the increase in perceived value of ‘localist’ studies—privileging the regional over the national, the specific over the general—are all components of recent cultural practice which have specific resonance in contemporary English-Canadian historical drama.

Berger suggests that “for all the growth in [their] numbers and publications,” academic historians have “become more isolated from the society in which they lived and in general have failed to respond to the enormous popular interest in the past—either in satisfying it, or educating it” (269). Part of that detachment results from a move away from biography as “the dominant form in Canadian historical writing” toward an occupation with “anonymous social patterns, with groups and classes rather than with individuals” (269, 268). The drama, which has always thrived on the individual, is thus moving with contemporary historiography in its questioning methods, but against it in its principal subject—the questions posed by particular individuals in opposition to their cultural norms. Whether the drama satisfies or educates the popular taste for history any more fully than academic historiography does is difficult to say. Factors such as the size and nature of audiences, and the differences in methods of delivery must be considered and, in some ways, are incompatible as standards of comparison. What is undeniable is that the drama is responding to popular taste while simultaneously attempting to educate that taste.

Berger argues that the resurgence of the ‘localist’ study represents “the extension of a pre-existing tendency rather than an abrupt departure from the tradition of Canadian historical writing” (282). Canadian Studies has been from its beginning interested in the regional and the particular. Assorted regional discontents during the 1970s, notably in Québec and in the West, merely led to the resurgence of an established form: “This appreciation for the local and regional arose from a strong positive identification with, and admiration for, the integrity of localities and provincial cultures. This was, at

bottom, a matter of sympathy, a feeling that history was not something that happened somewhere else—it happened in *this* place and was therefore worthy of attention and study” (282-83). These terms of reference go a long way toward supporting recent critical evaluations of the history play as valid only when it addresses an audience which is also its subject. However, I would argue that our enhanced knowledge of *this* place, which grows from increasing respect for the localist study, should lead us to recognize that we can also learn about ourselves through considering what happens to others. In our increasingly diverse social order, characterized by global economies and information systems, there should be fewer and fewer discernible distinctions between “us” and “them.”

To conclude this overview of parallel and divergent developments in Canadian historiography and English-Canadian drama since 1960, we must admit that while historiography has informed the practice of the arts a reciprocal influence is not seen. As Berger states, “professional historians have added little to our knowledge of painting or imaginative literature” (297). Art history and literature departments produced the majority of studies in cultural history, and most of this work “hardly impinged on the consciousness of most historians” (297). Berger ascribes this failure in communication to the fact that, while students of literature and art frequently turn to history to illuminate a text, historians rarely consider fiction and art as instrumentally illuminating of a period (297). Further, there is a distrust of such culturally ‘elite’ products as art and literature, on the grounds that they represent sensibilities limited to a leisured class. The contemporary English-Canadian play goes some distance toward erasing that class-

specific division as it frequently takes for its subject more populist themes, and, especially in the case of many collectives (as examined by Alan Filewod), are often no longer the product solely of a leisured elite. As the drama becomes increasingly concerned with issues of inequitable cultural practices, it becomes more populist. Also significant is the much wider range of cultural backgrounds represented by contemporary playwrights. A singular, elitist perspective can no longer accurately be said to dominate the form. Nonetheless, historiography has not embraced sources in the arts as frequently as the arts have profited from the increasing diversification of historiographic practice.

In summarizing reactions to the increasing diversity of historiographical studies in contemporary Canada, Berger writes:

The diversification of historical writing and experimentation in many fields were greeted by some historians as a liberation from a stultifying formula, an exciting new beginning. Few of them regretted that the historian had been at last released from the burden of constantly performing as some kind of national sage. Others . . . were apt to regret the excesses of revisionism and the fact that a substantial proportion of contemporary history was more likely to raise painful questions of guilt and grievance rather than provide positive perspectives on the major currents of national life. (320)

Berger's summary is equally applicable to developments in Canadian historical drama in English over a similar period. The dramatist is part of a larger cultural impulse, involved in practices beyond the boundaries of dramatic art. Like the historian freed from

performing as a national sage, the dramatist of the moment feels no obligation clearly to define Canada with each new play. Perhaps members of the academic establishment of literary criticism have been slower to accept the liberating components of the new diversification, regretting more than their historian counterparts the revisionism and increased guilt of the most recent work in their field. But, generally, it seems evident that the contemporary dramatist and historian are working in the same cultural climate, experiencing similar challenges from similar impulses in cultural development.

From this consideration of the parallel developments in historiography, I wish to turn to establishing a theoretical ground situated more specifically in current literary critical practice. Through an examination of the extant criticism of English-Canadian historical drama, I propose to demonstrate the relative strengths and weaknesses of approaches so far pursued and to employ a previously underused approach to analysis and comprehension of the subject.

Not surprisingly, when criticism turns from theoretical summary to specific analysis and close textual reading, it tends to be more immediately positive about the achievements of the drama. Most such studies begin with the premise that the extant summary criticism is inadequate. I will discuss the four most detailed studies of the English-Canadian historical play (three unpublished), all produced within a decade (1987-1996), summarizing the principal additions of each to the general study of the subject, the limitations that I see in each, and, finally, what I propose to add to these more or less solid foundations.

The sole major study of English-Canadian historical drama which has seen print

is Alan Filewod's *Collective Encounters* (1987). Don Perkins' "Revisionary Drama" (1993), Karen Grandy's "Memorable Acts/Active Rememberers" (1994), and Lois Sherlow's "Toward Interculturalism" (1996) each build on Filewod's methodological foundation, but, as unpublished dissertations, have understandably had less critical impact. However, each adds something significant to a responsible consideration of the English-Canadian historical play, while each also places certain limitations on the inclusiveness of the genre. I will draw a certain amount of my own critical foundation from each study, and make a case for expanding that inclusiveness. I argue that plays written in Canada about historical subjects outside Canada are, in their own right, equally effective versions of the "English-Canadian history play" as any texts written to be premiered directly before the audiences about whom they are written.

Each of the aforementioned studies develops a somewhat separate line of argument, pursuing one of several streams which might be said to comprise the whole of English-Canadian historical drama. I propose to examine the confluence of these various tributaries, to consider the contemporary English-Canadian historical play from a perspective informed by each of these slightly disparate approaches. Simultaneously, bearing in mind the increasing distrust of contemporary literature for any singularizing master narrative or grand design, I must stress that my combined perspective is not an attempt to reduce all contemporary dramatic expression to a single model, but rather an attempt to highlight aspects of common practice which are useful to comprehension of the genre's principal goals.

Alan Filewod: *Collective Encounters*

Filewod examines the documentary play, particularly the flourishing of collective playmaking in the 1970s. “Canadian drama,” writes Filewod, “has from its beginnings been partial toward what might be called the authority of factual evidence. This can be seen in a long line of plays that seek to revise Canadian history” (5). For Filewod, “the Canadian historical dramatist . . . promote[s] a specific ideology,” usually one that is “overtly nationalistic” (5). Filewod's study, though not negative about revision, does draw a distinction between historical drama and the documentary play, and focuses most of its attention on the latter.

In his “Preface,” Filewod writes of the same explosion—in his terms “an unprecedented revolution” (vii)—that was observed by John Ripley. Filewod, however, signals immediately his intent to diverge from received wisdom on the subject of the accomplishments and value of the English-Canadian theatre. He examines the proliferation of Canadian plays and Canadian stages, but rather than following the critical norm of his time (and criticizing what these plays and playing spaces lack) Filewod argues that the “development of the alternative theatre was an important stage in the evolution of Canadian culture from colonialism to cultural autonomy” (vii).

As stated in the report of The Royal Commission on National Development in the Arts, Letters and Sciences (1951), “the writing of plays in Canada . . . [in the years leading to 1949] lagged far behind the other literary arts . . . because of our penury of theatrical companies; these are few in number for lack of playhouses” (196-200; qtd. in Rubin 8-9). Further, Canadians generally accepted “second-rate touring companies

which had been sent through a handful of major cities” (Rubin 12). Filewod argues for a pattern in Canadian theatrical evolution vis-à-vis European and American models that is the reverse of the norm. Canadian dramatists first imitated American models as observed in the wide variety of American touring companies playing the Canadian circuit early in the century.<sup>7</sup> Later, English-Canadian drama began to imitate British models, quite the reverse of the general pattern of cultural evolution seen in English Canada throughout the twentieth century (cf. Filewod vii-viii). Filewod contends that the English-Canadian ““alternative theatre movement,”” which flourished from the mid-sixties through to the mid-seventies,<sup>8</sup> is a ““post-colonial”” one, no longer defining “itself in terms absorbed from a dominating power” (vii). Here, I agree with Filewod. My study, though, will focus on another subdivision of the same genre. For my purposes, Raymond Williams’ general model of cultural change (explored in detail below)—the residual, dominant, and emergent modes of cultural practice—can successfully be applied to the Canadian theatre scene. Viewed in the light of the Williams model, the defining characteristics which lead Filewod to call the developing alternative English-Canadian theatre ““post-colonial”” (vii) will be seen to be precisely those of an emergent cultural movement.

Filewod makes a crucial distinction between the subject of his study, the documentary play, and the subject of mine, the history play. “The documentary play,” he writes, “rarely survives as a ‘final’ text.” It is “a genre of performance rather than a form of literary drama” (viii, ix). It may use historical materials (indeed may sometimes use nothing which cannot be documented), but it is not a “history” play. In this crucial

respect, then, my study differs significantly from Filewod's, even though several of the conditions of creation, performance, and reception may be very similar for both subgenres. The history play is a play about history, which may contain no more factual material than the era of its focus—as, for instance, in several of David French's plays. The situation in which French's Mercer family exists is factual—the Mercers are part of the migration of numerous families from Newfoundland to Ontario and other parts of Canada in the 1940s and 1950s—though the family members, their dialogue and their 'plot' are not historical.

In broad terms, the contemporary climate in historiography, itself reflecting a more plural, inclusive cultural milieu, is the single most important component of the contemporary history play's historical context: re-examining history, telling alternative versions of well-known stories, considering alternatives previously rejected with the hindsight of knowing some negative consequences of the options initially chosen—that is what contemporary society is doing in a variety of contexts. Recycling, lowering fuel consumption, promoting multiculturalism: all are roads initially not taken. In that broad cultural sense, the increasing presence or popularity of plays on historical subjects constitutes but one component of a changing dominant in Canadian culture itself.

But historical subjects have always been popular in Canadian drama. Rick Salutin has argued that Canadian “works of the imagination seem to require the perpetual reiteration . . . that all this is about something real” (qtd. in Filewod 4). Filewod suggests that “Canadian drama has from its beginnings been partial toward what might be called the authority of factual evidence” (5). In short, the English-Canadian historical play of

the mid-1960s and beyond has been at once avant-garde and traditional, demonstrating both evolution and continuity in subjects and themes.

Filewod argues that “the self-appointed task of the Canadian historical dramatist has been to promote a specific ideology, and, in most cases, that ideology has been overtly nationalistic,” even though the operating assumptions of nationalism have “changed radically over the past century” (5). In the sense that current understandings of “nation” are more plural and inclusive than they have at some points been in the past, the English-Canadian dramatist is still “overtly nationalistic.” But that nationalism has undergone such radical redefinition and questioning, from the plays themselves as well as from other cultural sites, that, as Filewod has suggested, what is “nationalistic” in the 1990s is in some cases directly opposed to values expressed in equally “nationalistic” earlier plays. Consider, for example, the differing concepts of “nation” expressed in Len Peterson’s *Almighty Voice* (1970) as compared with Daniel David Moses’ more recent *Almighty Voice and His Wife*. Filewod writes that perhaps “the most important manifestation of the desire to define an indigenous culture” (in English-Canadian theatre at least) was “the recognition of regionalism as a determining factor in Canadian culture” (21). Regionalism is closely linked to political populism, and in the contemporary cultural climate, regional discourses are taking on national overtones, as smaller and smaller subdivisions of the Canadian populace write and perform their own stories from their own perspectives.

Crucial to the concept of documentary theatre as Filewod analyzes it, and equally crucial in a complementary sense to my own study, is the notion that a “popular

theatre” must address an audience which is directly involved with the subject matter of the performance; in Filewod’s words, “the significance of the theatrical event requires a personal or ideological relationship between audience and subject matter” (8). Such involvement has usually been taken to mean that the historical play, in order to be effective, must address the audience that it is about—in other words, that plays about non-Canadian history are not Canadian historical plays, since they do not have the necessary didactic personal relationship between audience and subject matter. What I wish to focus on is the other component of Filewod’s definition, the “ideological relationship” (8). I contend that the non-Canadian historical subject can (and usually does) have some ideological relationship to the audience it addresses. In summarizing his treatment of the Toronto Workshop Productions collective, *Ten Lost Years* (1974), Filewod suggests that political theatre, “by its very definition, assumes that an examination of its subject can in some way affect the lives of its audience” (79). I would argue that most contemporary English-Canadian historical drama is, by these terms, political, and that the subject under examination does not have to be a specifically Canadian one in order to “affect the lives of its audience.” While I do not deny in any way the particular effectiveness of the “home” subject addressed to the audience it is also about, I argue that effective drama need not be limited to such constructions only.<sup>9</sup>

Filewod writes that the typical “modern didactic historical drama” focuses on “a ‘world-historical’ character who typifies his epoch,” and “explains history through individual psychology” (9). The history play often has the appearance of a documentary, but analysis of available historical documents in comparison with the dramatic text often

reveals the dramatist to have invented freely within the confines of the general historical framework. The dramatist “selects particular episodes because of the normally invisible motives and meanings they reveal” and, usually, does not subjugate creative interest to historical data. An audience must, for the historical play, trust the “authority of the playwright,” and, in the historical play, unlike the documentary, the “problem of interpretation and authentication” is not foregrounded, indeed may not even exist in the text (12). Occupying the space between the documentary and the historical play is the so-called docudrama (and its sibling, the documusical)<sup>10</sup> which presents “re-creations of historical events” or attempts “to present a recognized historical reality in terms of narrative fiction” (15). Many plays of Rick Salutin and Sharon Pollock are good examples of the play “about ‘real’ events” (15). The key defining feature of these plays, for Filewod, is that they claim “documentary veracity,” but make no attempt at “authentica[tion] within the text” (15).

Filewod takes as his illustrative case the Riel plays of John Coulter (to which I will return below) and, having demonstrated how the history play differs from the documentary, devotes the main body of his analysis to the latter form. I will proceed in the opposite direction, using some of Filewod’s helpful definitions of characteristics of the history play as a starting point toward examining the genre he chose not to examine.

### Don Perkins: "Revisionary Drama"

Perkins argues that "a history play is written out of the shared past of the audience for whom it is originally intended, however that audience may be defined: a nation, a class, a region, a race, a gender, a locale, etc." (preface). For Perkins, a Canadian historical play can only be about Canadian history, and only be addressed to a Canadian audience, though that audience may be understood to be some part of Canada and not necessarily "Canada as a whole" (preface). Perkins posits a didactic role for the historical play, arguing that, for "a historical play to be able to work, that is, to help educate or inform the audience about its shared past and present, the audience must recognize its own experience or past on that stage. *Canadian* historical plays are defined as much by their audience as by their subject matter" (3-4). My chief quarrel with Perkins' position is that it limits the scope of the historical play solely to those texts which address components of the history of their intended premiere audiences. Plays about anyone else's history are not, in Perkins' terms, Canadian historical plays, but, presumably (as Perkins never overtly addresses his omission of them), plays written in Canada (and/or by Canadians) about historical subjects. I argue that the category of the historical play must include plays about non-Canadian history.

Perkins, as suggested above, builds from Filewod's argument that "the significance of the theatrical event requires a personal or ideological relationship between audience and subject matter" (8) to posit that "a history play is written out of the shared past of the audience for whom it is intended, however that audience may be defined" (preface). Though the qualifying phrase allows the possibility of numerous

definitions of “audience,” each of Perkins’ putative audiences is a Canadian one which needs, for maximum didactic value, to view treatment of a shared Canadian history. A Canadian historical play, then, must be about Canadian historical events; otherwise it teaches its audience nothing of genuine pertinence. Though Perkins is careful to stress that the “common past, and . . . consequent common present” of subject and audience do not necessarily exist only on a “‘national’ scale,”<sup>11</sup> the link must still be somehow a specifically Canadian one.

Perkins posits five foundational elements to the English-Canadian historical play: content, audience, intent, form, and historiographical background (preface). He observes as characteristic of the genre a frequent didactic intent, and insists upon the need for communal self-recognition in the events of the play. For Perkins, the major tonal shift in the contemporary historical play is its development away from a sense of “Canada as finished” (preface). By contrast, the contemporary play not only suggests that we still have a long way to go, Perkins argues, but also that we had not gone nearly as far in, nor always even nearly toward, the directions and destinations which pre-1960 English-Canadian drama tended to suggest to its audiences that we had already reached. Surveying Berger’s work, Perkins reaches similar conclusions to those stated above concerning the parallel developments of Canadian historiography and English-Canadian historical drama: “The image of Canada as a peaceful fair-minded nation whose problems were all solved years ago is one of the more frequent targets of historians and historical playwrights in the period after the mid-1960s” (22).

There are a number of summaries put forward by Perkins with which I can agree

without reservation. Some plays follow, some coincide with, and some precede recent historiographical analyses of the same people and events (5-6). Histories and history plays alike “may respond to a common audience interest, and grow from a common interest” without being at all dependent on each other (6). The goal of the contemporary history play is often “the retrieval and restoration to public consciousness of a ‘forgotten’ or ‘neglected’ figure” (8). Contemporary playwrights “favour dramatization or analysis of experiences of smaller interest groups or populations within the Canadian whole” (9). The general direction of contemporary English-Canadian theatrical writing has been toward a decolonializing of both play-writing and production (10). Ideas of nation, or physical representatives of national interests, are frequently observed “even within those plays that seek to treat the history of an ethnic group or a region as a viable subject in itself” (11). While the “smaller interest group” is the central focus of such a play, “the ‘nation’” is often seen “lurking in the background, surprisingly often as a threat, as a limiting, homogenizing, centralizing, imperialistic factor in the development of the smaller population” (11). Perkins suggests that “John Coulter’s Riel plays appear to be the first major works to raise the spectre of Canada as the imperialistic trampler of the rights of a smaller ‘nation,’ the Metis people of the North-West” (26). With all these observations, I generally agree.

In fact, I take exception to only one significant aspect of Perkins’ argument. Perkins seems to believe that the audience’s “own experience or past” cannot transcend specifically Canadian contexts (3). While it is undeniably true that the memory of local events, individuals, issues, and the like is valuable to an audience, such an audience can

also remember events, individuals, and issues that transcend local, and even national boundaries. While I have no difficulty in accepting Perkins' sense of the historical play as didactic and informative, I argue that an audience can be educated and informed by a consideration of past experiences shared on an international level. Further, I would argue that national and local significance can be discovered through observation of the histories of other places and times—that, in brief, the humanity of a given piece of historical drama might as easily instruct and inform as the nationality or locality of events portrayed.

Karen Grandy: “Acts of Memory/Active Rememberers”

Grandy provides what I think is a more inclusive approach. Her subject is the “memory play,” which though not necessarily historical in nature is often so. Grandy posits a connection between individual memory and history which allows for the inclusion of plays dealing with history outside Canada. Memory, she argues, plays a “role as a storehouse for unresolved matters” and is important “in the construction of identity”: history “may be considered the communal version of memory” (53, 59). Grandy also notes the “extensive overlap of concerns in certain recent historiography and the various disciplinary studies of memory” (59-60), a point on which all studies of the English-Canadian history play agree.

Observing that “there are structural questions which are not, typically, asked of plays” (1), Grandy draws attention to the perspective of presentation, the differences, defined as significant as long ago as Aristotle, between drama and narrative. In the

history play, we perform, or re-present, memory. As Grandy indicates, “memory’s temporal aspect presents a number of paradoxes. The past affects the present, but the present can also affect our memories of the past” (15). A convincing presentation of a historical subject in theatrical form (indeed in any form of creative cultural expression) can affect perception of that subject. Undeniably, such an effect was part of John Coulter’s agenda in writing *Riel*. “Drama,” writes Grandy, “with its built-in sense of immediacy, reminds us that the only route to the past is through the present” (15). Thus any understanding of ‘past’ is inescapably influenced by our inability to be situated in any time other than our own present as we examine that past; similarly, our ‘now’ is inescapably influenced by the past it attempts to examine and comprehend. The relationship between past and present, especially with respect to cultural practices such as literature, is a symbiotic one.

If history truly is “the communal version of memory,” then performance of history is one way of keeping open the national “storehouse for unresolved matters,” of allowing the collusion of past and present to be seen, and of forcing individuals to acknowledge the inevitability of “perspectived” views, the myth of the objective stance (59, 53, 61, 64). Because theatre casts its audiences in the passive role of spectator, contemporary dramatic practice, in order to compel that acknowledgment of inescapable perspective, has developed a series of “interfering” strategies designed to unsettle “a reader’s or spectator’s attempt to distance herself from what transpires on stage” (101). The contemporary historical play (Canadian and otherwise) relentlessly insists to its audience that the audience is involved in the subject of the drama: this play is about you.

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### Lois Sherlow: "Toward Interculturalism"

Lois Sherlow moves closest to the position which I propose to take as a starting point. Tracing developments in all subgenres of Canadian drama since 1960, Sherlow argues that "the development of the critical discourse on theatre in Canada has been inseparable from a profound questioning of the origins and future options of the cultural identity of the country itself" (2). Recent English-Canadian theatre has been calling "into question both Canada's contemporary conception of its colonial history and its construction of a postcolonial identity" (6). Sherlow's views concerning the interrelationship of Canadian practices with those dominant in international theatre build on the foundations set by Filewod (also advanced somewhat by Grandy) and encourage analysis of English-Canadian historical drama as itself one character on an international stage. It is "unrealistic," writes Sherlow, to believe that "Canadian culture, including theatre, could or should develop independently of international traditions and modern developments" (6). I argue that it is equally unrealistic to believe that the English-Canadian playwright examining historical subjects must be limited only to English-Canadian materials, as if Canada did not in any way interact with the rest of the world and was wholly free of international influences, discourses, and developments in cultural practice.

For Sherlow, all "postcolonial ideologies in Canadian drama" are "basically . . . responses to the past" (7). Sherlow points out the irony of postcolonialism's relationship to history: "it must establish its bearings in relation to history even as it attempts to move beyond it" (13). The English-Canadian historical play is thus to some degree bound to

recapitulate what it most desires to challenge. That irony is as much a condition of the existence of any individual audience member as it is of that of the playwright and of the subgenre.

The basis of Sherlow's argument, and the final addition to the platform upon which my study rests, is that the present is "intercultural," involving "combination, juxtaposition, or translation of elements from two or more discrete cultures to create a new synthesis" (8, 48). As Eric Hobsbawm observes in *Age of Extremes*, "the globe is now the primary operational unit" of human interaction, especially, but not solely in economics (15). Communication technology has rendered obsolete many national divisions which were, for our predecessors, controllers and guarantors of stability and comprehension of one's place in the world. Building on ideas voiced by Rick Salutin, Sherlow suggests that contemporary English-Canadian dramatists have attempted to build a postcolonial sense of nation "by bringing the concrete locale into a meaningful relationship with abstract ideas and historical events" (26). I argue that part of any postcolonial reconstruction or re-imagining of the whole project of drama must reflect the reality observed by Hobsbawm. Of course, the world remains subdivided along national lines; however, international and transnational concerns are commonplace. We are, as Hobsbawm also observes, truly residents of a "global village" (15).

Theories of interculturalism allow (perhaps even compel) the English-Canadian dramatist to examine history beyond the limits of national borders. Nationalism itself becomes a historical entity, part of a past which the intercultural present is constantly in the process of interrogating. "Theatre," argues Sherlow, "cannot exist without engaging

in inquiries into the nature of community” (39). Contemporary ‘community’ being at least in part global, contemporary theatre must therefore admit the potential relevance of ‘extra-Canadian’ experience to Canadian audiences.

From theory to practice:

observations from English-Canadian historical playwrights

Playwrights themselves have occasionally spoken to the issue of defining both the ‘Canadian’ and the ‘historical’ in the English-Canadian historical play. Robertson Davies long maintained that plays from outside the Canadian experience might speak effectively about (if not always to) Canadians. Davies spoke with Donald Cameron in 1971 of attending a production of *The Cherry Orchard* in Cobourg, and of realizing that most of the audience did not “know that the play [was] about *them*” (32). Davies went on to call Ibsen and Chekhov Canada's greatest dramatists, rejecting the insular view that a play must directly portray the audience it addresses in order to be relevant to it. Davies’ insistence that Canada shares characteristics with other nations is as true of historical subjects as it is of ‘invented’ ones.

Similarly, Ken Mitchell has drawn on his experience as a playwright to analyze the historical play. In his essay “Between the Lines,” Mitchell outlines several defining features of the English-Canadian historical play, gives some cautions about its development, and suggests some avenues for further exploration. Historical dramas are “Rorschach tests of our social psyche”; and, as Mitchell goes on to reflect, “invention or imaginative reconstruction can take place only at the personal level, not the public one.

... The audience must believe itself to be perceiving historical truth as well as essential truth” (265, 266). Finally, he argues that “the eccentric will prevail over the well-rounded conformist” as the best subject (266).

Common to both Mitchell and Davies is the importance placed upon what audiences make of the material. Working playwrights stress audience perception much more than do academic critics. Any play may demonstrate deliberate didactic intent, but in order to succeed it needs an audience willing to be taught. Thus a play does not necessarily have to address the audience that it is about, but it does have to engage their willingness to ‘meet’ the material. Put another way, criticism may, in the effort to draw clear boundaries around a genre, exclude elements which do not seem as important in theory as they turn out to be in practice. Even (perhaps especially) Shakespeare knew that the survival of the theatre depended upon getting bodies into the building. Criticism, when it excludes the ‘extra-Canadian’ subject from consideration, may be excluding a component that is particularly attractive to audiences, and therefore particularly helpful to the continued evolution of the genre.

The foregoing briefly summarizes the recent history of criticism in the field of English-Canadian historical drama. What I propose to add to the process (and I stress that both the drama and its criticism are very much in ‘process’) has three major foci: reconsidering and revaluing ‘revisionism’ in light of recent developments in sociocriticism and historiography, adding the international historical subject to the category of the English-Canadian historical play, and arguing that the developing dominant of English-Canadian historical drama is the elevation of the iconoclast to the

status of icon. Raymond Williams' theories of the emergent, dominant, and residual manifestations of cultural practice provide a helpful model for comprehension of the significance of both individual plays within the genre and of the genre itself examined against the background of English-Canadian literature and contemporary culture.

In his *Marxism and Literature* (1977), Williams defines three aspects of culture: "residual," "dominant," and "emergent" (91). Using this dynamic model of cultural interaction, opposing any single 'Zeitgeist' view, one may argue that English-Canadian historical dramatists are finally recognizing just how long Canada has allowed what should be culturally residual—American and British models and measurement against approval from New York and London—to remain dominant. Activity which has been easily dismissed as revisionist and mythifying might be more accurately understood as necessary strategies generating a new emergent position for the English-Canadian dramatist—a position from which the dramatist can throw off the perceived need to strive for a 'uniquely Canadian' drama and can interact with contemporary theoretical currents that transcend national boundaries.

"It is clear," Williams writes in *Culture*, "that certain forms of social relationships are deeply embodied in certain forms of art" (148). Williams makes a case for the drama as an ideal form through which such a general idea is exemplified because of the drama's long history "in radically different social orders" (148). Williams also argues that "there can be no absolute separation between those social relationships which are evident or discoverable as the immediate conditions of a practice . . . and those which are so embedded within the practice, as particular formal articulations, that they are at

once social and formal, and can in one kind of analysis be treated as relatively autonomous” (148). Williams analyzes the classical drama of ancient Greece, noting that “a new formal element—that of acted dialogue between individuals—can be traced from its emergence within a specific general form to its emergence as an autonomous general form within which (and now setting their own formal limits) further specific forms were developed” (150). I do not suggest that the English-Canadian historical play is any more than just another of those “further specific forms” developing (with its own formal limits) from the evolution of the new formal element of “acted dialogue between individuals.” My point is that such “acted dialogue between individuals” has long been understood to transcend “merely local conditions” (151), an assertion raised in opposition to the frequent labeling of English-Canadian historical plays as somehow limited or parochial, lacking ‘international’ quality.

Williams writes that, until the theoretical problem is recognized as “a problem of convergence,” the sociology of culture (within which literature is a specific subdivision) will tend to be perceived as a specialized study area of loosely associated ideas, of dubious value outside its immediate specific interests (9). Though convergence, as Williams argues, involves a combination of “very different interests and methods” and includes “at least as many collisions or near misses as genuine meeting points,” it should not be regarded as either marginal or peripheral (9). Lowenthal’s inclusive approach to selecting exemplary texts which illuminate our perceptions of ‘past’ accepts Williams’ call for convergence. My own study attempts to follow both Williams’ theory and Lowenthal’s practice.

Williams' theoretical platform is "an attempt to rework, from a particular set of interests, those general social and sociological ideas within which it has been possible to see communication, language and art as marginal and peripheral, or as at best secondary and derived social processes . . . . [It is] concerned above all to enquire, actively and openly, into these received and presumed relations, and into other possible and demonstrable relations" (10). In other words, the first response to questions concerning the validity of this approach should be to return the question: what social practices make it seem 'natural' to question the validity of such an approach in the first place? Williams' model is fundamentally concerned with examining the very basis of cultural evaluation, the foundation of the act of questioning any set of perceived cultural practices.

Our understanding of culture evolves from a developed state of mind, through the process of such a development to the means by which such processes operate—which is where the arts (and, for this analysis, specifically drama) enter the debate. Williams posits two main kinds of culture: one with an "emphasis on the '*informing spirit*'" of a whole way of life (which he calls "idealist"), and one with an "emphasis on '*a whole social order*' within which a specifiable culture, in styles of art and kinds of intellectual work, is seen as the direct or indirect product of an order primarily constituted by other social activities" (11-12). Applied to the analysis of English-Canadian historical drama, Williams' 'idealist' culture can be understood as the broad political scope of Canadian self-definition: 'Canadian' culture, distinct societies, etc. The materialist aspect concerns itself with the processes by which that broad 'Canadian culture' writes, among other texts, historical plays. Each approach, Williams argues, "leads, necessarily, to intensive

study of the relations between ‘cultural’ activities and other forms of social life” (12).

Hence, as Williams writes, “‘cultural practice’ and ‘cultural production’ (its most recognizable terms) are not simply derived from an otherwise constituted social order but are themselves major elements in its constitution” (12-13). Alternately, social order does not precede cultural practice and production but is, in part, composed or written *by* cultural practice and production. I propose to examine “culture as the *signifying system* through which necessarily (though among other means) a social order is communicated, reproduced, experienced and explored” (13).

The literary text is one of several means by which an individual mind begins to formulate an understanding of its own culture. The literary text also reproduces a given set of social norms, either overtly or covertly (or, perhaps, both). What we understand as ‘ordinary’ Canadians of the ‘normal Canadian social order’ is partly what we have encountered in Canadian literary texts, as well as in other texts, covering all modes of communication, which say something to us about what ‘Canada’ is. I deliberately avoid stressing *English-Canadian* here, as I have done so often earlier, because even the ‘*pur laine*’ anglophone encounters Canadian texts *en français*—even if the attendant understanding is merely a recognition and admission of incomprehension.

I accept that, when I discuss English-Canadian historical drama, I am concentrating on a subdivision within several other layers of subdivisions, and a thinly settled subdivision at that:

## CANADA

└─> English Canada

└─> English-Canadian Arts

└─> English-Canadian literary arts

└─> English-Canadian dramatic literary arts

└─> English-Canadian dramatic literary arts with historical focus/subject

Yet even on this micro level, the basic convergences continue: part of what we understand as Canadian culture is both determined and reflected by the ways in which some few of our artists deal with history through the medium of drama. It may be a minuscule part of the whole. Almost undeniably, the majority of this nation's population will not even attain the lamentable level of incomprehension observed by Davies—that of seeing plays without comprehension of seeing themselves there figured. However, in many cases, it is precisely these people who are the 'population' of English-Canadian drama, though they may never see it or themselves in it. Like the voice Dylan Thomas creates in the poem "In my craft or sullen art," which laments writing first and foremost for lovers who, complete in each other, have no need for what is written, the English-Canadian historical dramatist is often writing about an audience that never sees the plays in and for which it is written. In this important sense, the comparatively tiny percentage of people who are actually directly engaging the idea of *Canada* through its historical drama is not an impediment to the validity of the study. The plays, as Ken Mitchell argues in his preface to *Rebels In Time* (1991), are directly experienced by a scant few, but they are about everybody—even about those who never see the inside of a theatre,

even (sometimes especially) about those who have no time for the plays themselves.

Williams also clearly identifies the principal challenge for contemporary cultural studies. He argues that “there is some practical convergence between (i) the anthropological and sociological senses of culture as a distinct ‘whole way of life,’ within which, now, a distinctive ‘signifying system’ is seen as not only essential but as essentially involved in *all* forms of social activity, and (ii) the more specialized if also more common sense of culture as ‘artistic and intellectual activities,’” including *all* signifying practices: language, arts, philosophy, journalism, fashion, advertising, etc. (13). That practical convergence allows valuable work to be done toward greater comprehension of ‘our culture.’ That work “has been best and most frequently done, either in general theory and in studies of ‘ideology,’ or in its distinctively new areas of interest, in ‘the media’ and ‘popular culture.’ There is then not only a relative gap to be filled, in these new terms, but also, from the quality of some of the work on the arts carried out from other positions, a sense of challenge” (13). It is that challenge to which I propose to direct this study—once again asserting that the narrowness of the field of study in no way diminishes the validity or applicability of such conclusions as may be reached. The ordering and signifying practices operating and converging within the narrow confines of English-Canadian historical drama mirror and reproduce those operating at all levels of our ‘culture’ and at all levels of the ‘history’ that provides the subject matter for the plays.

Canada has been coming slowly to terms with itself as a far from “finished” state. As Donald Perkins suggests, the “image of Canada as a peaceful fair-minded nation

whose problems were all solved years ago is one of the frequent targets of historians and historical playwrights in the period after the mid 1960s” (22). Correspondingly, Canadians have displayed increasing interest both in our own history and in that of other nations, in our own iconoclasts as well as those abroad. An ever-increasing number of plays with historical subjects, characters, and/or settings were produced and published in the 1990s. Williams reads Elizabethan/Shakespearean drama as “a quite extraordinarily open interaction of social order and social disintegration” (157), noting further that “[i]t is certainly no surprise, in retrospect, to find a form of total crisis in a society within forty years of a civil war” (158). I will not extrapolate from Williams’ survey of English drama as it developed 400 years ago a prediction of ‘inevitable’ civil war in the Canada of 2040. As Lowenthal observes, it was only “in the nineteenth century” that what we understand as the preservation of history evolved “from an antiquarian, quirky, episodic pursuit into a set of national programmes,” and “only in the twentieth [that] every country sought to secure its own heritage against despoilation and decay” (xvii). A major difference, then, exists between the late sixteenth and late twentieth century in their respective comprehensions of and obsessions with national history. While I thus hesitate to predict Canadian civil war based on Williams’ model, I will suggest that a nation increasingly uncertain about where it is going is not surprisingly increasingly interested in where it has been.

The second leg of my theoretical tripod employs some of Grandy’s terms, which allow us to address the subject in a way that Perkins’ terms do not. In the course of addressing several of the characteristic subjects for the English-Canadian history play, I

will include, where possible, texts which help audiences to examine the development of Canada's 'international memory.' Grandy notes that although texts may be personal, they may also raise "issues which are of public concern in the extra-dramatic world: war, racism, violence, nuclear annihilation" (101). Similarly, the 'extra-Canadian' historical subject may well raise issues beyond mere nationalism in their concerns, as in Timothy Findley's *Trials of Ezra Pound* (1994). Limiting the definition of the English-Canadian historical play to only such texts as address the history of their opening-night audiences impedes Canada in exploring its relationship to the rest of the world. While aspects of local history may be vitally important in all the aforementioned sub-categories, equally important to this nation at this point in its own history is the effort to understand Canada as a part of a still larger community. Therefore, I argue that what is 'Canadian' is but one subdivision of the community that is humanity. Grandy writes of plays presenting "reminders to the real audience of problems and conditions in their own world" (101), of eroding the protective barrier of the 'fourth wall'—that is, the false security of believing that what happens on the stage is not something happening in the audience's 'real' world. Such timely reminders are equally relevant, whether the subject is regional, national, or international.

My third and final focal point will be the increasingly iconic role of the iconoclast in the history plays of English Canada. Ken Mitchell mentions his own fascination with "the rebel, the misfit, the Socratic bone who sticks in the craw of the establishment, a flamboyant eccentric radical who chooses to go down in flames" ("Between the Lines" 271). The direction of the English-Canadian historical play has increasingly been toward

praising this sort of rebel and finding value in the iconoclast's challenge to the conservative norms of English-Canadian experience, epitomized by the oft-quoted phrase from the *BNA Act*: "peace, order, and good government." The iconoclast is a provocative medium for what Filewod calls "explain[ing] history through individual psychology" (8). Mitchell's summary of his own most favoured subject stands as a fair description of the subjects of many of his contemporaries. No matter what the specific historical focus of each play might be, the contemporary English-Canadian playwright almost without exception employs an iconoclastic character, often the protagonist, to critique dominant norms and to suggest alternatives.

Following this brief survey of current and recent developments in Canadian historiography and in the literary criticism of historical drama, I will examine in Chapter One the roots of common practice as seen through consideration of the earliest texts of the genre. These early English-Canadian history plays, a small number of texts spanning a large block of time, establish the skeletal outline of a common practice within which virtually all later English-Canadian historical plays can be seen to fit. Here will be considered the first English-Canadian history plays, Sarah Curzon's "Laura Secord" (1876, 1888) and Charles Mair's *Tecumseh* (1887, 1901), as well as one transitional text, Robertson Davies' early play "At My Heart's Core" (1950). The techniques of the earliest English-Canadian historical dramas will be examined in comparison to those of the contemporary period. I will suggest that Curzon and Mair *do* provide the contemporary English-Canadian dramatist with a native model for the treatment of historical subjects, but that the existence of such a model was (perhaps is still) virtually

unknown. Finally, Chapter One will establish the parameters within which virtually all contemporary English-Canadian history plays exist. These parameters are seen clearly in the genre's paradigmatic text: John Coulter's *Riel* (1950, 1962).

The remaining chapters will examine in turn four characteristic subjects of the contemporary English-Canadian historical play: the violence of the 'pioneer' era, relations between arriving European settlers and Canada's aboriginal population, the iconoclast who chooses political action within the extant social hierarchy in an effort to redefine it, and the rebellious iconoclast who is uncomfortable within any hierarchy and who lives by an entirely personal code. Within several of these categories, I will suggest further subdivisions to address issues specific to such matters as race, gender, and region. Obviously, some overlap exists. William Lyon Mackenzie King, Louis Riel, and Norman Bethune might each be classified as belonging to more than one of the foregoing categories. The categories themselves, however, though not mutually exclusive, seem to be inclusive in the sense that virtually all English-Canadian historical plays arguably belong to at least one of the foregoing subdivisions.

Chapter Two will address the most significant post-*Riel* stage in the evolution of the English-Canadian history play, the emergence of the local protagonist and the rise of 'ordinary' tragedy. This chapter will take as its focus the Donnellys of Biddulph and their appearance in several plays which emerged in rapid succession in the 1970s. These include the Donnelly trilogy of James Reaney, consisting of *The Donnellys Pt. 1: Sticks and Stones* (1975), *St. Nicholas Hotel, Wm. Donnelly, Prop* (1976), and *Handcuffs* (1977), published together as *The Donnellys* (1983); *The Donnellys: a musical* (1974) by

Peter Colley; and *The Death of the Donnellys* (1982), developed by Ted Johns from an initial performance as “Them Donnellys” (1974) at Theatre Passe Muraille.

Chapter Three will discuss a number of plays dealing with interactions between arriving Europeans and Canada’s Native peoples, as well as subsequent developments in the relations of the two groups during the twentieth century. The primary focus will be twofold: treatments of the extinction of the Beothuk people in early nineteenth-century Newfoundland, and dramatizations of how bureaucracy was used as a weapon in the later nineteenth century. The end of the Beothuk will be examined through Geoffrey Ursell’s *The Running of the Deer* (1981) and Michael Cook’s *On the Rim of the Curve* (1970, 1979). Sharon Pollock’s *Walsh* (1973) and Herschel Hardin’s *The Great Wave of Civilization* (1976), will provide a platform for considering the role of bureaucracy in overwhelming the aboriginal population. Finally, Daniel David Moses’ *Almighty Voice and his Wife* (1991, 1992) will present a native perspective on all the foregoing events.

Chapter Four addresses the one significant variant of the dominant figure in late twentieth-century English-Canadian historical drama, the rebellious figure who, working within the systems of normative authority, actually achieves a degree of success in challenging ‘the system.’ This chapter will engage those figures of a decidedly iconoclastic cast who found a way to work through political action, as in Ken Mitchell’s *Davin the Politician* (1979), Carol Bolt’s *Red Emma* (1976), Allan Stratton’s *Rexy!* (1981), and Diane Grant’s<sup>12</sup> *What Glorious Times They Had: Nellie McClung* (1974). A reading of Rising Tide’s *Joey* (1981, 1996) and Tom Cahill’s *The Only Living Father* (1991, 1997) will complete the consideration of the iconoclast within the system,

contrasting the same historical figure as dramatized through interaction with other characters and through the increasingly popular monologue format.

Chapter Five will conclude the study with an examination of that most ‘un-Canadian’ of figures, the “rebel in time” (to use Ken Mitchell’s words), the figure who simply does not conform, no matter what the consequences, to the general norms of his or her social surroundings. Perhaps paradoxically, this attention-drawing, sometimes apparently destructive antithesis to the common image of the dull, smooth, self-effacing Canadian, is the most dynamic figure in a drama which seems to suggest Canada needs to recognize more quickly what it can learn from its rebels. Canada’s rebels are not important for the threats they bring to the established order but for their creative (though not always comfortable) energy, for the ‘spin’ they bring to the settled sensibilities of Canada’s self-perceived stability. Included in this chapter is Ken Mitchell’s *The Shipbuilder* (1990), the only treatment of a completely fictionalized historical figure to be considered in this study. Canadian examinations of international iconoclasts will be treated through attention to Sharon Pollock’s *Blood Relations* (1980, 1981), Timothy Findley’s *The Trials of Ezra Pound*<sup>13</sup> and Mitchell’s *The Great Cultural Revolution* (1980). Finally, the study will examine the man who might fairly be considered the ‘model’ iconoclast, Norman Bethune, as presented in Rod Langley’s *Bethune* (1975) and Mitchell’s *Gone the Burning Sun* (1984). Dramatic treatment of Bethune is similar in form to that accorded Joseph Smallwood, each man being dramatized both in a full-cast show and in monologue.

In summary, I argue the following points. Firstly, to date, English-Canadian

historical drama has generally been not very well served by its critics. Secondly, English-Canadian playwrights are paralleling (sometimes even anticipating) developments in Canadian historiography. Thirdly, comprehension of “revisionism” is itself mutable: what the *Literary History of Canada* calls revisionism may eventually become ‘official’ history. Consider Riel. Also, the presence of revisionist elements is evidence of a recent general shift in several major cultural paradigms. Fourthly, the history of other people and places as written through the filter/focus of English-Canadian dramatists is as relevant to Canadian experience and identity as the undeniably important explorations of Canada's own history are. Fifthly, after all this lambasting of the ‘short-sightedness’ of criticism, I must, to be fair, also point out that contemporary playwrights seem themselves somewhat blind to a particular irony of current practice: the dominant mode of the English-Canadian historical play at the end of the twentieth century has been to elevate to at least something near the status of icon (perhaps ‘alternative icon’ might better express the idea) figures whose personalities and often whose public goals were iconoclastic. Contemporary dramatists often make heroes out of those whose approach to life might be summarized by the phrase “down with heroes!”

Finally, and most importantly, I contend that the English-Canadian history play of the later twentieth century is not about history. Rather, it uses elements of history to critique and reconceive the present. The iconoclasts of the past are not as important to the contemporary dramatist for what they did then as they are for what they suggest to “now.” In a world which, to judge by its current rampant dissatisfactions, obviously did not do it ‘right’ the first time, the consideration of previous options not taken offers a

second chance. Dramatizing, to use Berger's words, "better alternatives not taken in the past" challenges audiences to seize this second chance (265). If, as Perkins has suggested, English-Canadian dramatists have been resisting since the mid-1960s the notion that Canada is a country "whose problems were all solved years ago," we must conclude that our dramatists see the current state of Canada as problematic (22). Our past choices have not brought us our desired stability. The English-Canadian history play at century's end is not, then, primarily concerned with showing how things were. Instead, contemporary English-Canadian historical drama concerns itself with using elements of the past to explain how we wound up as we are. The most significant evidence in support of this contention is found in the increasingly commonplace insistence at the conclusion of plays that audiences must not only consider and evaluate the dramatized controversies of our history, but must also accept their own role in perpetuating stereotypes and their own responsibility to bring about change. Variance from known fact in the contemporary English-Canadian history play is not, therefore, merely dramatic licence. Contemporary playwrights adjust our past to help them contextualize their evaluations of our present and to set up their visions of our future. From that dramatization arises the challenge to audiences, either to pursue a new direction or, stated more passively, at least to avoid repeating old errors.

Herein lies yet another reason for including the extra-Canadian subject in any analysis of what Canadian playwrights make of history. Any scenario can provide an example—ameliorative, corrective, or pejorative. While local or national incidents of the past instruct and explain the present to itself, so do international incidents. The

extra-Canadian historical subject is never extra-*human*. *We live here*, regardless of whether those variables are defined as ‘we Canadians live in Canada’ or as ‘we people live on this planet.’ In fact, a parochial view of the value of history as a dramatic subject is part of the problem rather than part of the solution. Self-examination is vitally important, but self-examination carried out to the exclusion of all other foci produces a people at best intimately self-aware but at worst incapable of interaction.

English Canada, a population increasingly uncertain about where it is going, is attempting through its historical drama among a multitude of means to find out where it is going by examining where it has been. As Sharon Pollock suggests in her “Playwright’s Note” to *The Komagata Maru Incident*, “much of our history has been misrepresented and even hidden from us. Until we recognize our past, we cannot change our future.” I do not propose to complete a jigsaw puzzle, to reassemble all the scattered pieces of practice. What I do intend is to clarify the paradigm within which virtually all English-Canadian historical drama can be seen to be working, to present a framework of ‘straight bits’ within which the pieces comprising the heart of the picture can be better understood in relation to each other, and, by extension, in relation to the many other sets of extant cultural achievements or practices with which English-Canadian historical drama has been so long compared, to pejorative effect.

## Chapter One

### The Foundations of Common Practice

The tradition of historical drama in English Canada begins with two plays published in the 1880s: Sarah Curzon's "Laura Secord" and Charles Mair's *Tecumseh*. An examination of these Confederation-period texts reveals that, apart from the use of verse, the English-Canadian history play of 100 years ago differs in only one significant element from the contemporary history play. The methods of historical research, the types of subjects preferred, the nature and degree of fictionalization, and the intent behind the writing of the plays as evidenced in the work of Curzon and Mair are generally consistent with similar strategies and motivations observable in the work of contemporary playwrights such as Sharon Pollock and Ken Mitchell. My study proposes the existence of a paradigm for the English-Canadian historical play which is fairly straightforward and little changed in over a century.

The single major evolution in the common practice of the genre occurs after a long fallow period during which few historical plays were published. This evolution begins at mid-century and proceeds in two separate stages of development. Robertson Davies' "At My Heart's Core" (1950), in which traditional values remain triumphant but forces antagonistic to conservative traditions become more attractive, represents the first. The second, and most important, evolutionary step for the English-Canadian historical play in the twentieth century occurs with John Coulter's *Riel* (1950, 1962). Coulter follows the established methods of the English-Canadian historical dramatist but adds to common practice one crucial change which consolidates the paradigm that remains, a

half-century later, visible as the skeleton, as it were, of virtually every English-Canadian historical drama. I use ‘established’ and ‘common’ in part ironically since only a handful of texts treating historical subjects existed in English-Canadian drama before Coulter’s work premiered; the observation, though, is no less earnestly offered, given that the few extant plays seem to be already working within an established paradigm (influenced in no small part, one suspects, by Shakespearean models). Thus there is ‘common practice’ within a genre not commonly practised until the 1960s.

Michael Tait, writing in summary for *The Literary History of Canada in English* in the mid-1960s, concludes that “it is hard to discern any significant continuity or developing pattern in the course of Canadian drama” during the years 1920-1960 (2: 159). Tait argues that the “overriding impression” left by the Canadian drama of those years is that of “a group of playwrights . . . separated primarily not by space and time but by the absence of a common dramatic tradition, a tradition that may be accepted or challenged, but within which action produces reaction” (2: 159). It is Tait’s view that “the playwright in this country has hardly anything either to follow or to repudiate” (2: 159). Tait is both right and wrong. What he argues is generally true of the years 1920-1960, but does not remain true for the contemporary playwright. True, the existence of an unknown tradition is, in practical effect, equal to the non-existence of a tradition. But, while the quantity of models has been small, adherence to their “common dramatic tradition,” whether consciously or not, has been remarkable. In fairness, it must also be observed that any perceived following of these little-known models proceeds from a critical stance developed from without. The tradition exists, but playwrights generally

neither know nor deliberately follow it.

Apart from the one vital alteration introduced by Coulter in *Riel*, the practice of historical drama by English-Canadian writers has been generally consistent since the earliest examples of the genre appeared. What Sarah Curzon and Charles Mair detailed as standard practice in their essays concerning the writing of their historical dramas remains a major component of contemporary playwrights' practice. The evolution of the paradigm consists more of *additions to* common practice rather than *alterations of it*—again, with the same crucial exception seen in Coulter's work.

The English-Canadian history play can be generically understood as constructed within the following terms: (1) an individual at more or less distant remove from community norms (specific to their individual contexts, of course) enters into conflict with representatives of normative authority; (2) this individual possesses, again to varying degrees, a charisma that is usually rooted in a flexible combination of greater than average intelligence, energy, social charm, eloquence, and daring; (3) the alternative values or approaches to community practice espoused by the protagonist are usually seen to be in some ways attractive or admirable, but simultaneously disturbing; (4) the individual usually has a cadre of supporters, quite often involving family, who are loyal to the protagonist but also in some respects baffled by aspects of the protagonist's public self; (5) exploration of tensions between public and private "versions" of the protagonist's self is almost universally present; (6) the individual faces opposition to his or her iconoclastic views; (7) that opposition is almost invariably a mixture of extreme and moderate resistance—the extreme opposition more likely to come from peers

(neighbours, co-workers) and the moderate opposition usually coming from officers of normative authority (a fundamentally conservative faith in the basic decency of our social ordering institutions seems to characterize most English-Canadian historical plays); (8) as the plot of each play is complicated, the alternative views, no matter how attractive they might initially seem, become perceived as too costly, difficult, disturbing, or dangerous to accept and implement; and (9) the fate of the iconoclastic protagonist is almost invariably failure to achieve his or her most desired goals, as evinced by exile, imprisonment, or death (sometimes all three, as in the example of Louis Riel). A final characteristic feature of the English-Canadian history play is worth observing: there appears to be relative fidelity to the “known facts” of each protagonist’s fate. There seems to be no *Burning Water*<sup>1</sup> in English-Canadian historical drama.

The general form of this paradigm is observable in the particulars of English-Canadian historical plays of the nineteenth century. The one crucial difference which post-*Riel* practice displays is that the contemporary protagonist usually fails; in the earliest plays, and, indeed, as recently as 1950 (demonstrated, for example, in “At My Heart’s Core”), the protagonist either succeeds, or remains a popular ‘success’ even in defeat. As noted in the introduction, it is in part this virtually relentless focus of contemporary English-Canadian historical plays on the failures of imagination and will which leads contemporary criticism to consider the plays less than wholly successful and generally unimpressive relative to the history play produced in other national literatures in English. Once more, almost universally, the contemporary English-Canadian history play challenges its audience to ascribe the cause of the protagonist’s failure to normative

authority's inability to accommodate or incorporate the iconoclast, not to the protagonist's inability to conform to "safer" expectations. It must also be noted that, especially in the tragic mode, no protagonist is portrayed as wholly blameless; the Aristotelian flaw remains an important component of character development in the drama. Criticism, more often than not expressive of normative authority, to date has had difficulty accepting the challenges posed to it by the English-Canadian historical play. Coulter's *Riel* is the first of an ever-increasing number of such plays to pose these challenges to audiences and academic criticism alike. The analysis of "Laura Secord," *Tecumseh*, "At My Heart's Core" and *Riel* that follows works to indicate the existence of a tradition for dealing with historical materials.

Sarah Curzon prefaces her verse drama, "Laura Secord, The Heroine of the War of 1812," with the observation that it "was written to rescue from oblivion the name of a brave woman, and set it in its proper place among the heroes of Canadian history" (preface).<sup>2</sup> Curzon remarks that during "the first few years of her residence in Canada" she was "often astonished to hear it remarked . . . that 'Canada has no history'" (n.p. *passim*). This view, she asserts, is commonly held by educated and uneducated people alike. It is interesting to consider Curzon's observations of Canada and its history, as well as her motivations for writing her play, in comparison with the rhetoric of the historical dramatist of the 1960s and 1970s in Canada. Many conditions seem much the same as they were in Curzon's 1880s: a general lack of awareness on the part of Canadians of their own history and a belief by members of the literary community that the drama might be one effective method of addressing that lack.

Curzon defends her choice of Secord as a worthy subject, arguing that “to save from the sword is surely as great a deed as to save with the sword” and observes that the men of the 1812 battles were given far more “warm appreciation” in reports of their deeds. Again, the foundations of what would become the norm of Canadian historical dramatic practice in the contemporary period are clearly seen to have been present in the confederation years. The impulse to make known a forgotten or buried story, to raise the profile of a marginalized group, to consider, as Berger puts it, “better alternatives not taken in the past,” informs Curzon’s project as much as it does the work of dramatists a century later. The overt statements made by Curzon, critical of the literary climate and lack of historical awareness of her own time, also suggest that recent summaries of Canadian drama which have made the assertion that Canadian dramatists had no native tradition are facile, effectively overlooking both Curzon and Charles Mair in much the same way that the media of Curzon’s own time overlooked the narrative of Laura Secord.

Curzon’s chief criticism is of the general ignorance of people in her own era. She criticizes their pronouncements about Canadian history, made, in her view, with inadequate awareness of the subject. The same criticism seems equally applicable to much Canadian literary scholarship in the 1960s and 1970s. It is, however, important to recognize that the extent of national ignorance did, in effect, create a climate in which emerging dramatists did not *know* they had a tradition within which or against which they might write or react. The position within or against which the dramatist reacts is equally uninformed. Sarah Curzon, Stephen Leacock,<sup>3</sup> Roberston Davies,<sup>4</sup> David Adams Richards<sup>5</sup>—writers from every period in which Canada might fairly be said to have had a

literary history within which to recognize a “national” tradition—have lamented the general ignorance which Canadians have manifested toward their own past or toward their fellow Canadians. The repetition of this lament across several generations suggests that we must be cautious in making any assumption that the contemporary period has, at last, solved the problem of the “ahistorical” Canadian mind.

A final note in Curzon’s preface should be of interest to contemporary analysis. Curzon writes: “The drama of ‘Laura Secord’ was written in 1876 and the ballad a year later, but, owing to the inertness of Canadian interest in Canadian literature at that date, could not be published. It is hoped that a better time has at length dawned.” Perhaps, in the later contemporary period, Curzon’s “better time” is, if not wholly with us, then at least more easily imagined, more quickly recognized by more Canadians. The proliferation of Canadian plays on historical subjects in the 1990s seems to suggest at least, if not prove, as much.

Curzon’s assumption concerning the value of investigating historical subjects is stated overtly at the start of her text to an effect that anticipates the critical works of the years 1987-97 in her assumptions. “It is,” Curzon avers, “at all times an amiable and honourable sentiment that leads us to enquire into the antecedents of those who, by the greatness of their virtues have added value to the records of human history. Whether such inquiry increases our estimation of such value or not, it must always be instructive, and therefore inspiring” (i). The intention to both instruct and entertain that has come to be considered fundamental to Canadian historical drama by Filewod, Perkins, Grandy, and Sherlow is manifest in Curzon’s statement of intent.

Citing Dr. Ryerson to the effect that Loyalist settlers were too busy “doing” to accomplish much in the way of archiving, Curzon points to another component of the historical play which continues to interest writers such as Mitchell: the need for some invention in the face of the unavailability of documentary evidence. Curzon states that “little beyond tradition” (i) has preserved the details of the War of 1812 and of the years preceding it as the Loyalist migration northward took effect following the American Revolution. Curzon then quotes directly the certificate of Secord’s action as recorded by Fitzgibbon, the officer to whom she reported. Fitzgibbon himself observes at the conclusion of the document he wrote, that his commendation is a bare statement of extreme brevity conveying nothing more than the most basic facts of the incident. From the start, the incident’s documentation is cryptic.

For help in reconstructing the narrative, Curzon turns first to other extant documentary evidence of the time in order to determine such details as climate, weather, and terrain. Her methods again anticipate the common practices of the contemporary era which, supposedly, has no methodological tradition within which to work. Then Curzon turns to such communication as is possible with Secord’s still-living peers, who either knew Secord or knew of her accomplishment. Curzon’s reconstruction is further informed by consultation with surviving family members. Curzon’s methods, then, differ little from those of later twentieth-century playwrights—perusal of extant documents, consultation with any surviving witnesses who directly remember the subject of the narrative, and investigation of available family information. The spaces remaining are then imaginatively reconstructed using the available facts to guide and correct the work

of imagination.

Curzon's prefatory material has an almost evangelical zeal. She cautions against the loss of our history through delay in honouring those deserving honour and urges her contemporaries to guard against such a loss. It can be inferred from Curzon's tone that she at once believes her literary endeavour to be important and insufficient. She does not seem to claim for the literary text an ability to replace or to become a monument to the memory of significant historical individuals and moments. In this way she yet again anticipates the rhetoric of our own time; Curzon seems to be at least unconsciously aware of the truth that would later lead Berger to observe that "while literary and art historians frequently turn to history to illuminate a text, historians rarely consider fiction and art as keys to illuminating a period" (297). The literature is but a vessel, a partial means through which a national consciousness may be raised. Once again, the didactic role of the history play is overtly assumed.

Curzon's prefatory comments on her play are interesting for the light they cast on the relative stability of my putative paradigm for English-Canadian Historical Drama and for the resonances they strike in harmony with other recent theoretical positions, most notably projects of feminist scholarship to recover the works and reputations of forgotten women writers. What of the play itself?

For all of Curzon's insistence on praising the woman's part, she couches her introduction to the character of Laura Secord in utterly conventional terms. After a report from the front by a Quaker friend, who, against his will, found himself in the line of fire, the women of Secord's household fall to lamenting their powerlessness as women

(15). Crucial here, however, is the willingness of each woman to do her part if she “were a man” (15). Curzon writes her women’s voices within the likely restrictions of their time and place; but in their eagerness resides the foundation of Secord’s eventual achievement. As soon as she concludes the patriotic speeches of the women, Curzon develops a scene in which American soldiers bully their way through the Secord holdings, taking everything they fancy and behaving with arrogant malice, avouching military duty in excuse for their actions. The colossal impudence of the pathetic men, strutting, swaggering, and caring nothing for any of the deprivations they inflict upon their forced hosts immediately establishes personal motivation for Laura Secord’s act, just as their drunkenness affords her the occasion to overhear their discussion of invasion plans.

Curzon follows with a scene between Laura and her husband James during which the known historical facts of the situation are rehearsed: the American plan itself, the probable consequences of its success, the obstacles of distance and weather, and the reason why Laura and not her husband takes on the task of warning the British defenders. Here, Secord invokes her gender as security—“my sex is my protection” (20)—though her husband is unconvinced. There follows a lengthy discussion in which Laura sets forth the various reasons for the necessity of her act, overcoming one by one the objections of conventional masculine responsibility voiced by James. “Did I not promise in our marriage vow, / And to thy mother, to guard thee as myself?” James asks (21). Laura responds: “And so you will if now you let me go. / For you would go yourself, without a word / Of parley were you able” (21). In like manner she constructs all

objections to her plan which are rooted in the fact of her gender to be, instead, arguments in support of her being permitted to go. Despite the bravery of her intent, and the pre-feminist rhetoric of some of her expression of it, the scene is still about her seeking her husband's permission to try to save the country.

The scene demonstrates the conventional piety of its era. However, that conventional piety is, in part, challenged since it is evoked as part of the reasoning why Laura should not attempt her journey. Laura counters all the arguments voiced by her husband and relations, insisting that she should be allowed to defy all convention and go. When James protests that in his marriage vows he meant to exalt her above himself, she invokes temporal law concerning the equality of neighbours. To his complaint that she must be, as wife, far more than neighbour, Laura cites Scripture, placing love of abstract "good" before all specific commitments of love (22). The result, as history dictates, is that Laura is permitted to embark on her famous dangerous journey. The dominant impression of the scene is that Laura understands the subtleties of human motivation far better than does her husband.

The scene serves as an illustration of much of what Ken Mitchell defines as necessary to the development of the historical play. Curzon amply meets the requirement that Mitchell would later emphasize: "invention or imaginative reconstruction can take place only at the personal level, not the public one" ("Between the Lines" 266). The private scene rehearses the public facts; invention takes place purely at the private level. Mitchell's later proposition—that "the audience must believe itself to be perceiving historical truth as well as essential truth"—also accords with

Curzon's stated intentions for her play. Mitchell's argument that "the eccentric will prevail over the well-rounded conformist" as the best subject for historical drama is also amply sustained by Curzon's Laura Secord, who, though clearly operating within the "conservative" impulses guarding her actions, is "eccentric" in using the commonest arguments of civil and religious law against their conventional interpretations ("Between the Lines" 266). Analysis of Curzon's verse drama undeniably demonstrates not only that a "poetics" (if not, strictly speaking, a "tradition") for writing historical drama was in place in the confederation period of Canadian literature, but also that many of its standard practices remain defining points of the "new" Canadian historical play.

The play continues in like method, interrogating gender roles, questioning definitions of bravery and of nationality, and showing another side to the "uncouth" Americans, yet sustaining conservative values and repeating certain gender stereotypes, sometimes as voiced by characters who have barely finished challenging them—and thereby engaging a complex of impulses as seems entirely appropriate to a play treating questions of loyalty and courage. The didactic intent of the text is never in question. From Laura's early speeches to James about the legal and biblical equality of souls, through her widowed sister-in-law's encomium to the fallen Brock—"Oh, bravery . . . is born of noble hearts, / And calls the world its country and its sex / Humanity" (27)—to the many points at which Laura patiently explains the necessity of placing public good before private safety, the play insists upon teaching its reader or viewer (though it seems fairly clear that this play was conceived to be read, not acted).

Perhaps the most humorous example of a rhetorical *volte face* expressive of a

clear didactic platform for Laura occurs in her dialogue with her mother-in-law. The Widow Secord first claims to “hold that woman braver still / Who sacrifices all she loves to serve / The public weal” (32). Yet when Laura interrupts this praise of brave women with the news that she herself proposes to perform just such an act of bravery, the Widow responds: “You can’t, some other must” (33). Laura wins support from the Widow by appealing to the logic of the greater good—the way she overcomes all opposition. In this instance, Laura reveals the immense size of the attacking force and the enormously unfair odds that must be faced in such a “cowardly” surprise attack. “It was your love to me that masked your judgment,” Laura concludes, reiterating the necessity of putting public good before personal good (35).

Of the specific challenges of making her way through the woods, Secord says little in the sparse documentation she left. Curzon takes advantage of that vagueness to write scenes such as 2.3, at the end of which Secord confronts a rattlesnake and is able to scare it away, which action is followed by a speech evoking Eve and Genesis (41). This sole woman in ‘the Garden’ is not going to be fooled by any serpent. Similarly, her thoughts while en route, surely a time when a multitude of ideas must have passed through her mind, must be re-invented by Curzon. Laura Secord expresses her travelling monologue in the rhetoric of conventional piety: she considers in turn the foul nature of war, the enduring godliness of nature, and the eternal life of the spirit (42-5). Her encounter with the first friendly sentry allows for yet another paean to woman’s strength and her foundational role in the flourishing of nation (45-7). Curzon slightly compresses the documented account of Secord’s meeting with the allied Mohawk braves, presenting

them as well-disposed and helpful while eliding Secord's report of difficulty in convincing them of her mission. The 'softening' of the Mohawks' role seems to be thus accounted for by a generalized equality of representation in this play which is in harmony with the textual rhetoric so often voiced by Secord herself in justifying her decision to make the journey.

The completion of Laura Secord's journey is really an anti-climax. For Curzon, the medium is the message; the fact of the successfully completed journey is its own main point. With the message delivered, and accepted as true by Fitzgibbon, the rest of the military machinations which see the British overcome the Americans matter little. In accordance with "history," or perhaps only symbolically, Laura collapses in a dead faint once the job is done and has to be carried to her well-merited rest (60-2). Once again, Curzon develops the likely, perhaps even the probable, out of such documentation as exists.

One final component of Curzon's treatment supports one of the contentions of this argument: the presence of non-Canadian history in the text. Act III begins with Fitzgibbon and some soldiers in discussion of Napoleon's errors in the Moscow campaign, Nelson's strengths as man and commander, and the increasing rapidity with which news is carried to and from distant places (50-1). The discussion is, of course, primarily for Curzon an ironic frame to stress the importance of Secord's trip: while Fitzgibbon has the latest news from Europe and can comment with some accuracy on the career of Lord Nelson, he is unaware how close to death he is himself, and learns information essential to his personal and military survival via the most old-fashioned and

simplest of methods. Still, the scene does make plain the reality that should not need overt statement: Canada exists alongside other nations. Our history happens in context of other histories, sometimes intersecting, sometimes half a globe away, but nonetheless linked in time and humanity. Curzon appears to argue that Canada pays so much attention to other histories that it has no knowledge of its own; but it seems equally clear that her intent is not to elevate Canada's history so that it eclipses knowledge of others. Canada and Canadians need to recognize and value their history as part of and equal to the history of others, not as a substitute. Hence the appearance in this scene of Brock alongside Nelson and Napoleon, of Queenston Heights alongside Copenhagen and Moscow (50-5).

Curzon's play stands as one of two 'gateposts' at the entry to Canadian historical drama. In its methods, it anticipates many common practices of the contemporary dramatist. While it is safe to say that currently practicing dramatists rarely compose in verse, many other features of Curzon's script are still to be seen in the contemporary Canadian historical play—up to and including the presence of a few songs. The celebration of the 'ex-centric,' the guided invention of private scenes based upon recorded public evidence, and the didactic intent of the work all place it in close parallel to features highlighted in contemporary practice. These similarities suggest that any description of Canadian historical drama as rootless or without a tradition are at least somewhat over-simplified. The second 'gatepost' play, Charles Mair's *Tecumseh*, tends further to confirm these observations.

Mair's play, published in the year before Curzon's but written after it, is a longer

work, and contains more that is, strictly speaking, invented. Mair faces many of the same difficulties as Curzon does: a paucity of extant documents recording actual speeches of historical characters involved; the need to invent private character relationships to account for various public positions; and the deaths of many of those either personally involved or old enough to have lived during the years during which the events dramatized occurred. Mair employs lengthy footnotes to discuss the received history with which he worked in developing the play. His high regard for Tecumseh is evident in his own recording of the facts, reminding the reader of the positioned nature of all factual accounts. Similar examples provided by the various texts surrounding Louis Riel and *Almighty Voice* will later show clearly how exactly the same historical events can be constructed as deluded and inspired, cowardly and heroically noble. Mair's Tecumseh is not invalidated by the regard the playwright holds for the subject. He is, like all historical figures, merely textualized from and within a particular contextual perspective.

Another element shared by Mair with Curzon is the didactic impulse to correct the fading in memory of a significant figure in the 1812 conflict who was, at the time of the war itself, lauded as one whose name and contribution should never be forgotten by a grateful Canadian public. "To Canadians," writes Mair, "there remains the duty of perpetuating [Tecumseh's] memory" (189 n1). The perception that, within seventy years, the unforgettable was already well on the way to being forgotten echoes Curzon's view of Laura Secord and helps establish a tradition in English-Canadian historical drama: the reclamation and restoration of the forgotten figure whose role in our history is

in some way foundational to what we know and understand ourselves currently to be.

Tecumseh, as Mair portrays him, anticipates figures such as Sharon Pollock's Walsh, to a lesser extent Sir John A. Macdonald (as seen in texts as diverse as John Coulter's *Riel*, Ken Mitchell's *Davin, the Politician*, and Allan Stratton's 1991 play *A Flush of Tories*), and, arguably, at least as Coulter renders him, Riel himself. Each of these figures is a leader trying desperately to unite and sustain the interests of several widely disparate sub-groups within his jurisdiction. Unauthorized actions taken by various closely-positioned supporters (in Tecumseh's case—uncannily echoing the biblical narrative of Moses and Aaron in the wilderness—his own brother) serve to undermine fragile coalitions and provoke internal dissension. Mair shows Tecumseh to be politically prescient and, though the chief over-estimates the scope of the role he might play in the ensuing conflict, his anticipation of the War of 1812 itself gives the lie to any over-simplified notion of the 'ignorant savage' with no grasp of international affairs. As with Curzon's treatment of Secord, Mair's version of Tecumseh anticipates many of the most characteristic strategies of the contemporary Canadian historical play and, once more, suggests that, *pace* Tait, there did exist a tradition in Canadian drama for the treatment of historical subjects. Further, it is easily seen that, though in all likelihood unconsciously, current practice situates itself securely within that tradition.

"The author," writes Mair, "has made use of a few . . . well-known utterances of his historical characters and has kept as close to history as dramatic exigencies would permit" (205). His imaginary characters, he avers, are "not without example in the history of this continent" (205). Mair, though, does seem to invent more than did

Curzon, to feel the pull of those “dramatic exigencies” more strongly. In part, this invention seems to be necessitated by the scope of Mair’s subject. Curzon focuses primarily on a single individual during a brief, crucial period of her life. The action of the play encompasses hours, not months, and for long stretches, features no character but the protagonist; Mair is writing a larger story with more characters covering a greater time span. Tecumseh’s tragic fate differs from the triumphant success of Secord, and, though the actions of both characters have national overtones, Tecumseh’s status with respect to “nation” necessitates the development of more characters and more “public” scenes than did Secord’s essentially personal and private endeavour.

In Act I, Mair develops Tecumseh’s various challenges simultaneously. He must control his resentful brother, The Prophet; his niece is in love with a white man; and he has personal goals as well—to provide firm national leadership and to be a sensitive, caring individual in family matters. The question of consistency in authority informs the entire act, encompassing not only Tecumseh’s struggles, but also the perceptions held by the native population of the inconsistencies and inadequacies attendant on the assorted treaties as negotiated and subsequently ignored by the people of the “seventeen fires.” Invented characters and situations figure throughout the act, blended with factual characters and recorded historical incidents.

The increasing untenability of Tecumseh’s position informs much of Act II. The historical fact of The Prophet’s failed attack on Harrison is set up by a number of imagined reconstructions of the means by which The Prophet consolidated sufficient authority to take command. Set in opposition to the growing power of The Prophet is

Tecumseh's increasingly difficult role in co-ordinating the presentation of a unified face to the "Long-Knives." In the passages detailing the meetings between Harrison and Tecumseh, Mair freely interweaves fragments of speeches recorded at the time with invented commentary from a band of "hempen homespuns" who show the white extreme response to the Indians (just as The Prophet had earlier shown the Indian extreme response to the whites). Mair has the historical fact of dissension within tribal ranks to serve as a skeleton for invented scenes detailing the possibilities inherent in those oppositions. Crucial is The Prophet's cultural position as interpreter of the will of the Great Spirit. Like a high ecclesiastic urging the will of God upon military leaders, The Prophet claims spiritual authority (even claiming invincibility) for his military agitation.

Act III presents the known historical consequences of the tensions which have been percolating throughout Act II. The battle of Tippecanoe is the crisis point bringing many of the conflicting impulses dramatized in the early acts into direct confrontation. Ignoring Tecumseh's express order, The Prophet stirs (his spiritual role means he cannot physically lead) his braves against Harrison. The results for both sides are bloody, but the eventual conclusion of the battle is a victory for Harrison's forces. The sequence is crucial for two reasons: the Prophet's "direct line" to the Great Spirit is seen to be cut; his promise of invincibility is clearly seen to be without substance. Also, the breakdown of the chain of command among the natives undermines Tecumseh's hope to be a mediator between the Americans and the British and forces him into siding with the latter.

Mair takes the declaration of war as an opportunity to praise Canada's loyalty;

Act IV opens with a choral celebration of “unyielding Canada” (96). Here, perhaps more clearly than anywhere else in the play, is its didactic intention evident. General Brock delivers a brief meditation on the martial climate of the times and calls upon Canada to make its “present good match [the] present ill” of the “many demagogues [and] aliens [which] urge it to surrender” (97). The rhetoric is decidedly small-c conservative and characteristically Canadian. A confrontation with American settlers who would, clearly, rather accept union with the U.S. than fight in defence of Canada reminds the audience that Tecumseh is not alone in having difficulty uniting all the people who are, theoretically, under his control. Once more, Mair employs a generally-known historical fact to create a dramatic balance supporting his general contention that “there is not in all history a nobler example of true manhood and patriotism” than Tecumseh (189). That Tecumseh and Brock share administrative headaches suggests that the Chief is to be understood as the equal of the General, an *alter ego*.

Much of Act IV is spent developing the situation of General Brock and chronicling the steps—civil, political, and military—toward full war. Brock addresses questions of loyalty and bravery with inspirational rhetoric. Mair is scrupulously fair to historical probability in making clear that similar questions are being considered by both the braves following Tecumseh, and by the Americans mounting the current invasion. Mair draws once again, occasionally, from extant texts of Brock’s public speeches, and supplements those utterances with invented dialogue. The conservative impulse dominates Act IV. From the speeches urging loyalty and preservation, to the conservation and protection of the native population urged by Lafroy, even to the victory

over Detroit by a masterpiece of posturing ensuring that no blood is actually shed, the text favours diplomacy over destruction. Brock's gifts to Tecumseh, honouring the chief's skills and character, are confirmed by the historical record, and sit well within a fundamentally conservative rhetoric. Brock rewards Tecumseh for the qualities Brock himself shares and values, further supporting, for Mair, Tecumseh's claim to nobility.

The final act is both a celebration of the qualities of human character which the play has promoted throughout and a lament for the loss of Brock and Tecumseh in whom those qualities are embodied. "O Canada!" the Chorus intones at the start, "Dark days have come upon thee" (148). The soldiery laments the leadership, or lack of same, displayed by Brock's successor, Proctor (V.i passim). The men recognize Proctor's alienation of Tecumseh—"whose cause / Lies close to ours" (150, 152-53)—as a strategic failing well before its consequences begin to be felt. Brock is eulogized, his very bravery and perpetual striving for excellence his "fault" (153-4), while Tecumseh, whom Proctor grossly underestimates (154-5), delivers an impassioned plea against the proposed retreat, citing everything from the King's past word to the simple cause of manly pride as arguments against Proctor's agenda, only to be not merely ignored, but also denied promised arms—unless, of course, they will be borne in retreat (156-7). Tecumseh threatens Proctor's life, but restrains himself from the act of killing, until, his spirit failing from the recognition that even his closest British allies are beginning to accept the need for retreat, he retires, saying "I am not what I was" (161).

Through to the end of the act and the play, Tecumseh's allies repeatedly thwart his wise leadership. Finally, refusing to retreat further, Tecumseh fights to the death and

is buried according to his own last instructions: “let no white man know where I am laid” (182). Tecumseh, at least as Mair presents him, has had enough of failed white promises; he will take no risk concerning the uses to which his body or memory might be put after his death. Mair concludes the play with overtly didactic eulogizing of Tecumseh by Colonel Baby, by the American leader Harrison, and by the soldiers who have sought and failed to find his last resting place. Tecumseh’s “soul . . . / Pierced to the heart of things” (184) and his qualities—strength, goodness, instruction, history—needed no external guarantor but “were himself” (184), an example to which the wise, Mair suggests, should aspire.

Perhaps most interesting for the evolution of the English-Canadian historical play is the manner in which the chain of command is maintained, even when the commander, Proctor, is thought a fool by most of his subordinates. When Baby asks “What can we do? We are not in command,” Elliott’s response is not to mutiny, but to “Force him who is” in command “to stir” by calling back the volunteers (151). The futility of that proposed action is immediately pointed out by Baby—“we might as well expect / Light from a cave, as courage from this man”—and the remainder of the scene plays out in laments and “mere conjecture” about what might be done were command to rest on other shoulders (151, 152). Mair conveys with clear approval such punctilious observance of the chain of command. In a gloss on the passage in question, Mair mentions that Proctor’s perceived failings as a commanding officer so incensed the historical Elliott that he issued a challenge to his superior. Proctor’s “responsible position as commander,” writes Mair, “justified him in refusing” to meet his subordinate in a duel

(202). One suspects that Coulter, given a similar incident recorded as historical fact, would have used the material quite differently. Riel, facing similar intransigence when proceeding by proper channels, would simply divert the channels until he *was* in command—as is evidenced, for example, by his assumption of authority to give the sacraments (*Riel* 76). Riel, in fact, would act as Tecumseh does. There is a limit to each man's indulgence of what he sees as folly in others. If necessary, each will countermand orders or agreements, assume responsibility even when it has not been offered, rather than continue in a futile course of action.

*Tecumseh*, though it does employ more invention than does “Laura Secord,” remains faithful to the known facts of recorded history and, though it appears to champion an ex-centric, actually promotes values that are conservative and traditional. Both foundational texts are fundamentally conservative, reflecting as much the values of their own era as do later, more ‘radical’ plays. It is an accident of history that the values of bravery, loyalty, effort, and nobility are displayed by a woman in “Laura Secord” and by a ‘savage’ in *Tecumseh* (185). Neither protagonist embraces values antithetical to normative authority; each rises to the admired apex in an effort to defend Canada, to protect it from the invading Americans.<sup>6</sup> Curzon and Mair thus established a solid foundation of common practice, both in the manner of attention paid to history and in the methods by which historical materials are incorporated into the drama.

After the late nineteenth-century beginnings of Curzon and Mair, though, the English-Canadian historical play enters a period of stasis. Few plays produced during the first half of the twentieth century addressed any Canadian subjects, let alone Canadian

historical subjects. As observed above, ‘Canadian’ theatre through the first half of the twentieth century was largely composed of touring British and American companies with their own repertoire of old standards. A scene in *What Glorious Times They Had: Nellie McClung* (Diane Grant, et al) effectively illustrates the situation. McClung’s supporters attempt to book the Walker Theatre in Winnipeg as a venue for their exercise in parliamentary satire. When told that the play the women wish to perform is self-penned, the manager responds “A Canadian play?” (E44). His shock is not provoked by female authorship, but by the fact that the script is Canadian. Walker’s surprise reminds us that the picture often presented of the evolution of Canadian drama—that is, featuring a lengthy period during which next to nothing happened following the early closet dramas of writers such as Curzon and Mair—is not an exaggeration. For a period of sixty years, nothing of significance occurs within the field of English-Canadian historical drama.

The single most significant play which stands between the confederation era and the contemporary period is Robertson Davies’ “At My Heart’s Core” (1950). Davies’ play, though written at the leading edge of the contemporary period, demonstrates fidelity to the modes and thematic values of the English-Canadian historical play observed in “Laura Secord” and *Tecumseh*. However, Davies’ play also seems to manifest awareness of the tensions emerging in Canada’s sense of itself during the time in which the play was written, the years immediately following World War Two, especially in the person of its antagonist. This uncomfortable and sometimes contradictory relationship between the overt theme of the play and the appeal of its antagonist foreshadows the emergence of new attitudes toward the dramatic use of

historical materials, some of which were already under development simultaneously in John Coulter's first version of *Riel* (which saw performance more than a decade before it saw publication). In brief, though Davies continues to develop the triumphant historical figure as one who embraces fundamentally conservative ideals, the forces embodied by the antagonist, though defeated in the play, are aligned to a degree with the role of the playwright. Thus one interpretation of the play is that, ideally, such a play could never be written.

"At My Heart's Core" is a narrow bridge over the wide space between the late nineteenth-century work of Mair and Curzon and the late twentieth-century work of playwrights such as Pollock and Mitchell. Davies' choice of *dramatis personae*, residents of historical record (and some subsequent literary fame) in the Peterborough area of 1837 Upper Canada, brings his play into the realm of historical drama. However, the action—such as it is: the play is unquestionably a drama of ideas—is rooted in nothing more historical than, as Davies himself puts it, the existence of a man "mentioned in contemporary memoirs" as someone "who tried pioneering and gave it up as a bad job" (114). The existence in and departure from the bush of this otherwise unremarked and unremarkable early settler allows Davies a framework for dramatizing, as part of the putative motivation behind the man's actions, conflicts between pleasure and duty, self-development and commitment to others, European memories and Upper-Canadian struggles, individuality and community.

Perhaps most germane to this study is Davies' observation that the writings of people such as Frances Stewart, Susanna Moodie and Catharine Parr Traill (all characters

in the play), as well as Anne Langton's diaries, and F. St.G. Spendlove's survey of Canadian painting from the nineteenth century, are fascinating as much for what they omit as for what they include (112). Davies proposes to address, in "At My Heart's Core," the "falsification of the new land" and the "intellectual loneliness of the pioneers" (112, 113)—both aspects of the same temptation that he places before Moodie, Traill and Stewart through the agency of his disenchanted settler, Edmund Cantwell. Davies differs from his predecessors, while anticipating certain of his successors, in using historical figures not to preserve the memory of a significant victory in danger of fading from the national memory but instead to populate an imagined scenario which dramatizes crucial philosophical issues of Canadian identity and self-awareness.<sup>7</sup> It is a history play of the sort perhaps best defined by Davies himself through the voice of his best-known fictional character, Dunstan Ramsay, who suggests in *Fifth Business* that "psychological truth [is] really as important in its own way as historical verification" (71). "At My Heart's Core" is an attempt to tell a psychological truth using characters of historical record to embody a discursive "tug-of-war" which, historically, did not occur. The psychological truth, Davies argues, is no less historical, no less significant to national self-image, even if the vehicle for the voicing of that truth is imagined, grafted on to history.

The play is set against the historical context of the Upper Canada rebellion of 1837. That temporal setting is significant not only for its historical specificity, but also for the general conditions which persist in times of civil strife. Any rebellion provokes consideration of the currently established order, its defining qualities good and bad, weak and strong. That Davies' characters oppose the rebellion is very clear at the outset (4-5),

though—as will be characteristic of conflicting discourses throughout the play—there is an undercurrent throughout of sympathetic comprehension of the grievances raised by the rebels. As will become paradigmatic for the English-Canadian history play, the forces of normative authority in “At My Heart’s Core” are, for the most part, open-minded and able to see some virtue in opposing points of view but, ultimately, embrace the conservative order as being preferable to the alternatives proposed by various rhetorics of rebellion.<sup>8</sup> Stewart, for instance, states that he does not “sympathize with any armed outbreak against law and order,” but also that “a grave suspicion assails [him] that what [they] have at York is order without law”—which condition “is tyranny” (67). However, although he has “been compelled to question a system of which [he is] a part” (67), Stewart immediately expresses relief that “Luckily most of [his] colleagues have avoided this discomfort” (67).

The Stewart house and grounds provide the setting for most of the play. It is also the Stewarts, in the final scene, who voice most strongly the play’s support of traditional sources of stability—family, home, and obedience to duty in all its forms. Mrs Stewart is, from the beginning, a voice of reason and calm, displaying a sense of humour, a recognition of both the existence and limitations of stereotypes, and an unfailing ability to apply common sense to any challenge, facing everything from midwifery in the midnight hours to management with equanimity of a drunken Irishman, and not long after preparing breakfast to boot. Frances Stewart’s admirable balance mildly contrasts the temperaments of her more easily unsettled friends, the Strickland sisters. When the sisters arrive, Susanna Moodie is described as having “a ladylike hint

of the drill-sergeant” in her demeanour” (5-6), while Catharine Parr Traill is “gentle and abstracted” with “a charming but rather vague smile” (6). Moodie’s rigidity and Traill’s abstraction are ‘verges’ between which Frances Stewart ‘steers,’ though, in keeping with the general rhetoric of desirable behaviour and personality presented by the play, neither of the women is extreme in any respect. This is a straight highway through the wilderness, not a meandering pathway, and these women, despite their discernible individual differences, are clearly part of the same social order.

Act One serves to set the intellectual and emotional climate in which Frances Stewart, Catharine Parr Traill and Susanna Moodie exist, before introducing their antagonist about two-thirds of the way through. With the arrival of the disenchanted pioneer, Edmund Cantwell (cf. Davies 114), the conflict of the text begins. Cantwell is “a handsome man, in the Byronic-Satanic fashion of the period” (24), and he is “of the generation of the three women” (24) whose souls he will proceed to tempt through the remainder of the play. It is important that Cantwell’s *bona fides* clearly establish him, like Conrad’s Lord Jim, as “one of us.” He knows the social milieu that has been left “at home” and he knows first-hand the struggles of pioneer existence. It is his ability to exploit the points of shared experience with Stewart, Traill, and Moodie, his ability to talk a common language, which makes him so persuasive.

Davies’ method allows him to voice ideas, even those with which he ostensibly disagrees, forcefully and attractively. Though he intends Cantwell to be the play’s antagonist, Davies writes the tempter’s dialogue, as it were “the devil cit[ing] scripture for his purpose,” so smoothly that those who “yield not to temptation” may appear

foolish in their fidelity to the straight and narrow. In part, Davies achieves this unusual state of flux between competing ideologies by making the temptations to which he subjects his characters almost entirely intellectual. Vice does not play a role, nor is there any hint of sexual licentiousness. The tempter, himself dissatisfied, explores temptation merely through planting seeds of doubt and recognizing the dissatisfaction breeding in others. Cantwell tempts each protagonist to do nothing more evil than to put her own interests first. The highly logical manner in which the benefits of yielding to the temptation are set forth undercuts the selfishness inherent in such a course. In fact, the wrong in this play seems only a variant way of being right, an equally valid approach to life rather than 'sinful' opposition to all notions of 'right living.' Davies may be argued to have fallen victim to Milton's curse: the devil is the most interesting character in the drama, and his logic is undeniably appealing.

A crucial component of settler dissatisfaction, that which renders so many of them so eminently temptable, is the simple fact that although they are settlers they are not at all settled. Home is not Upper Canada, but England or Ireland. Even complimentary descriptions of the new land are voiced in terms which praise aspects of the new land's resemblance to "home." Catharine Parr Traill reminds her sister that they "used to walk much greater distances in England and think nothing of it" (8). In all things, accomplishment is limited by changed conditions. The actual task is not the problem; the problem lies in the altered conditions under which the task must be carried out. Upper Canada is no respecter of class, breeding, or gender. Despite that, however, certain standards must be maintained; "Gentle breeding brings obligations" as Moodie

later states (50-1). In large part, dissatisfaction festers in the space between the perception of these obligations, received from a British upbringing, and the impossibility of meeting these obligations, impeded by utterly different demands for the merest survival in pioneer Canada.

Moodie mentions an inescapable yearning for “better days” (37). When Cantwell immediately comments on her phrasing, Moodie ameliorates her diction, saying instead “earlier days” (37), but the truth is out. Moodie ceases all pretence moments later when she describes the books of Maria Edgeworth: “They are a breath of a greater world to us here. We have little enough time to read, but half an hour now and then gives the mind something to feed on during the endless hours of sewing, mending, cooking, candle-making, preserving, gardening—all the tasks that devour our time in this Ultima Thule of civilization” (37). It is the most direct statement in the play both of lament for the lost home and of dissatisfaction with the seemingly endless mundane tasks found in the new dwelling place—and it is all Cantwell needs to invite temptation of the women.

Upper Canada is a rough Eden; its serpent needs little subtlety. Cantwell’s response to Moodie’s lament is blunt and straightforward: “It is, indeed, a demanding life. So much so that I am giving it up. And if I may say so, I think that many others might be wise to give it up as well” (37). Though Moodie’s reaction is immediately to reject Cantwell’s suggestion, the seeds of doubt have been planted; and Mr Cantwell is accomplished in the art of cultivating his garden. The women have already voiced the belief that temptation is all but alien to their current environment, and Moodie has brashly announced that “if any of [them] are to be tempted, it will not be by [Cantwell]”

(33). Cantwell's response—"I have received your assurance, madam, and I shall treat it with all the respect it deserves" (33)—is wholly ironic. He will accord Moodie's assurance no respect at all.

Frances Stewart is the first to be tempted. Given the opportunity to discuss mutual acquaintances at home in Ireland, Cantwell claims acquaintance with one Lord Rossmore, who, it transpires, not only was once a beau of Mrs Stewart's but also still carries her likeness in a locket around his neck. Once Mrs Stewart admits that, had she known they had "friends in common," she "should have called upon [Mrs Cantwell] many months ago," Cantwell exploits Frances's desire to communicate with those friends, allowing her to bring Rossmore back into the conversation. Given that opening, Cantwell tells her the tale of Rossmore's locket and suggests, with due respect to all involved, that Frances Stewart is better suited to elegant life than to the backwoods. He phrases the temptation simply: "You are beautiful, highly born, witty, and possessed of that wonderful generosity of spirit—that quality of *giving*—which raises beauty and charm to the level of great and holy virtues. What need has the backwoods of these things? You should not be here. You chose wrongly" (44). Frances Stewart responds not with argument, but with evasion, allowing Cantwell to read her prompt departure as an indication of his success in the temptation (44). He turns immediately to the temptation of Mrs Traill.

Whereas Cantwell tempts Frances Stewart with romance—less the thought of a different partner than the thought of a different setting in which her beauty and graces might be best displayed—he must tempt the Strickland sisters with the thought of

increased recognition of their considerable talents. For Mrs Traill, it is her reputation as a naturalist, particularly among those whom she herself immensely respects, that is the wedge of dissatisfaction. Traill, like Stewart, opens the door to her own temptation; Cantwell resembles the vampire who must be invited in before he can set to work draining the spirit.<sup>9</sup> When Cantwell mentions her fame as a naturalist, Traill responds: “If my fame were equal to my enthusiasm, I might have cause to boast” (45). Cantwell immediately insists that Traill’s fame is as great as one could wish it to be among those to whom her skills as a naturalist most matter. Though Traill professes herself not “worthy of it” (45), the respect of those whom she herself respects is flattering. It remains only for Cantwell to suggest that recognition of mere talent might become recognition of “genius” (46)—ascribing the choice of the word to the esteemed Mr Sheppard whose opinion matters so greatly to Catharine.

Unlike Frances Stewart, however, Traill responds with argument. Calling the praise “generous” but also “quite ridiculous,” she questions both Cantwell’s right “to pry in this fashion” and his comprehension of her situation. “A new country brings new hope,” Traill says, “and it also demands sacrifice.” Referring to her own dead child, she further argues that “New countries mean not only hopes fulfilled but hopes relinquished.” She concludes her refutation of “Beelzebub” by asking Cantwell “not to try to estimate the claims of [her] duty to [her] husband and [her] children” (47). The arrival of the word “duty” allows both Cantwell and his author to raise the crucial question of the second act: “Are you sure that you know what your duty is?” (47).

Again, as with Frances Stewart, Cantwell speaks his challenge bluntly and

simply: "I am suggesting that for your sake, and your children's sake, and for the sake of the advancement of knowledge your husband should play second fiddle to you" (47).

Cantwell's argument adroitly manipulates a mother's "heartstrings" by linking the advancement of knowledge with duty to her children, and quotes Traill's own phrase, "second fiddle," in arguing against her.<sup>10</sup> Traill, too, can no longer endure the argument, though her departure is, unlike Stewart's, more apparently a storming away than a mournful retreat.

Cantwell's final target is Susanna Moodie. It is in this final section of Act Two that Davies comes closest to losing his way, for, though Cantwell is 'wrong' so is Moodie. What Cantwell suggests about the role of art and the responsibility of the artist is his most logical and least selfish argument of the three, and Moodie's counter-reasoning seems more often than not a lamentable failure of vision as opposed to an altruistic acceptance of a personally limiting duty.

The arguments Cantwell puts forward to Catharine Parr Traill are never satisfactorily refuted; it is debatable whether those used to tempt Susanna Moodie *can* be refuted in a work of art. As Neil Carson suggests, "in his presentation of these two talented ladies Davies exposes his own divided heart" (219). It is difficult, perhaps impossible, for a working artist to present an argument opposing complete dedication to art *in* a work of art; the existence of the medium in which any such criticism is voiced in part undermines the criticism itself.<sup>11</sup> Davies may be able to cast doubt on the claims of social standing, old romance, and the expansion of knowledge, but when he presents arguments for and against devoting oneself first and foremost to one's art *in* a work of

art, the protagonist/antagonist relationship that holds elsewhere in the text seems reversed. Cantwell, far from appearing demonic, seems to be the voice of truth.<sup>12</sup>

Davies' own commentary on Moodie as he has portrayed her states that she "has tried to compromise with the demands of art and . . . seriously diminished her stature as an artist by doing so" (114). In comparing Moodie's claim to the title of artist with that of the loquacious and bibulous Irishman, Phelim Brady, and his bardic tradition, Davies concludes: "There is no doubt in my mind as to which is the greater artist" (114). Thus although, as Carson has observed, the real innovation in "At My Heart's Core" that differentiates it from the conventional morality play is in making 'sin' or 'evil' out of what so many might consider laudable ambition (219), Moodie's refusal to meet the demands of art uncompromisingly is, for her 'author,' an even greater sin than the ambition to write well in the first place.

Cantwell begins the temptation of Susanna Moodie carefully. The woman who is first described as a ladylike drill-sergeant (in the initial stage directions), and then by Brady as a "petticoated grenadier" (19), must be approached with caution. Accordingly, Cantwell's first sally is to seek Moodie's agreement that her sister's talents are greater than Traill herself has acknowledged them to be. Moodie refuses to be drawn in, voicing nothing more encouraging than "I really have no views on the subject" (50). As Cantwell continues to discuss concepts of duty, Moodie will grant him no more than that the conventions he voices are, indeed, the "accepted belief" of "most people" (50).

Cantwell's window into Moodie's weakness takes a long time to open. She gives him his first chance when, after a lengthy diatribe concerning the impossibility of making

money in Upper Canada if one has not already brought sufficient from “home,” he commiserates on behalf of “Poor Mrs. Traill” (51). Moodie’s startled reaction to hearing her sister named clearly indicates that she has been thinking of her own financial state throughout the monologue. Cantwell is, for the first time, wily; he continues to try variations on the basic theme of a woman’s duty, all the while phrasing his comments as understood to apply to the situation of Catharine Parr Traill. Whereas Cantwell completes the temptation of Frances Stewart within three pages of text, when he plumbs the soul of Susanna Moodie, it takes three pages for him merely to begin directly addressing her situation; when he finally does so, it is through the unexpected tack of expressing his belief that he and Moodie “have somewhat the same cast of intellect” (52). The surprise Moodie voices upon hearing this assertion allows Cantwell to open the topic of admired writers of his acquaintance, from which he builds rapidly to the theme that Moodie’s “abilities are in no way inferior” (52), specifically to those of Maria Edgeworth, whom Moodie has praised almost effusively earlier, and, by extension, to those of any of the circle who hold Edgeworth in esteem, which once included Lord Byron himself.

Even then, Moodie is more cautious than her sister and their hostess have been. She points out immediately to Cantwell that his own praise of her work cannot be accepted “as the approbation of Byron” (53). This merely gives Cantwell the opportunity to explore further the question of the praise of intellectual equals. When Moodie states that she is “unaccustomed to praise at all” (53), Cantwell broaches her last line of defence—so subtly that she is, as yet, unaware that he is doing so. Cantwell now

clarifies why he began Moodie's seduction by alluding to the experience of her sister. His attack grows direct: "you are in your sister's position. You must play second fiddle to the incompetence of Lieutenant Moodie" (53). When Moodie accuses Cantwell of impertinence, he plays his trump card: "Of course I am impertinent. People who care greatly for anything must be so" (54). By implication, if Moodie truly cares for her writing, for her potential as an artist, she must herself become "impertinent"—stop playing second fiddle to her husband and stop writing second-rate odes on conservative themes. She must stop thinking of her work as "scribbling" (54) and allow herself to believe Cantwell, whose challenge is bluntly stated: "Your work is art, and art is what gives form and meaning to life. Dare you neglect the sacred obligation which has been laid upon you?" (54).

Cantwell's challenge, one suspects, is close to the heart of his author. Here more than anywhere else in the text, Davies' ostensible promotion of duty over individuality seems in danger of failing due to the persuasiveness of his antagonist. Cantwell asks Moodie: "Do you suppose that the importance of literature is diminished because nobody hereabout understands it? Would music cease to exist because your neighbours were deaf?" (54). One recalls Davies expressing similar sentiments in his own voice in the course of numerous interviews. Comments concerning the slowness of Canadians to recognize merit (and, indeed, recognize themselves as portrayed) in works of art are frequently found in *Conversations with Robertson Davies* (Davis, ed.). The devil *can* speak true, and it is only the return of Catharine Parr Traill and Frances Stewart that saves Susanna Moodie from having to debate with Cantwell the very nature of art. One

suspects that such a debate could not occur, that Davies would not have been able to write such a scene, and that the arrival of the women is more than dramatic coincidence. Cantwell's arguments are virtually irrefutable, at least for those who value art as much as does Davies.

Cantwell now believes that he has successfully tempted each of the women. Each has given voice to an element of dissatisfaction with her current lot which will, again as Cantwell presumes, serve as a constant reminder of what might have been. Each, he believes, will be unable to escape the corrosive elements of her personal dissatisfaction. His transgression, as he puts it, is this: "I said what lay in *your* hearts, and you cannot forgive me. . . . you will always hear what your heart tells you. I have spoken your unacknowledged feelings; they will never be without a voice again" (59). And, in truth, though Moodie blusters once more about respect for duty, it seems that Cantwell's reading of the situation is accurate.

As the Act draws to a close, the women begin to bicker over which of them is most hurt by Cantwell's words, while Cantwell recites the verse that gives the play its title. His triumph seems complete. Only the arrival of Mr Thomas Stewart, whose bugled note of approach has, for the first time in his marriage, gone unheard, prevents what seems inevitable—the complete disintegration of the moral fibre which holds the ladies intact. At once, as the stage directions indicate, "the scene changes character sharply" (60) and the women begin to downplay the still obvious effects of what they have just considered. It is not coincidental that the arrival of a husband, returning from observation of the rebellion, begins the re-establishment of conventional discourses of

order and duty. Like so much else in this play, the challenge to normative authority is not so much refuted as interrupted and subsequently forgotten.

Act Three consists largely of Thomas Stewart's efforts, both as J.P. and as husband of one of the persons concerned, to "try" Cantwell on the charges levelled against him by the women. As this trial proceeds, Davies first establishes the importance of a sense of humour through the respect accorded the memory of the recently deceased clown, Joe Grimaldi (68-71). This respect draws lines of emotional and intellectual kinship between Mr Stewart and Cantwell, making Act Three less an interrogation of duty versus individuality and more a dramatization of male versus female strategies for dealing with responsibility and disappointment.

A crucial component of Stewart's approach to the matter is his assumption that there is only one kind of temptation to which a woman can be subject. He is first challenged by Traill, who states: "I resent this masculine exchange. . . . It is not by our beauty or our attractiveness to your sex that we seek to justify our existence" (73). When Moodie adds that Cantwell's temptation has not been to traditional feminine "agencies" Stewart is prompted to ask: "Then pray how did he offend you?" (73)—as though no other form of offence were possible. Following further discussion of the matter, Stewart gives an even more dismissive reading of the situation: "This fellow says that he has tempted you . . . . I know you all three far too well to attach the obvious meaning to his words. And if he didn't mean the obvious thing, what serious meaning can they have?" (75). Davies writes in his afterword of his impatience "with plays which assume that sexual temptation is the only temptation that does harm" (114). Asserting that he holds

“a better opinion of women than that,” Davies continues: “to destroy a woman’s peace of mind is subtler, more difficult, and may be permanently injurious” (114). One wonders whether masculine peace of mind is understood in similar terms.

Moodie attempts an explanation, careful to insist that she speaks only for herself: “Mr. Cantwell, by playing upon a foolish side of my nature, led me to feel emotions, and to admit ambitions, to which I had no right” (75). Traill amplifies: “in every heart there are desires which can never be fulfilled, and which are cherished all the more closely for that reason” (75). Dismissing the automatic suspicion of carnal passions as a mark of “worldly people” (75), she continues: “some of us know that intellectual passion can hurt as terribly as any flame of love” (76). It is as much argumentative liberty as Davies will grant the plaintiffs in the case against Cantwell, and it leaves the temptations of Moodie and Traill somewhat unresolved, as Carson has observed. As Stewart slowly begins to understand what Cantwell has been up to, both Traill and Moodie turn to self-accusation, insisting that any offence given by Cantwell “was made possible by [their] own foolishness and vanity” (77)—a claim which only Frances Stewart protests. Willingness to blame oneself, as evinced by Moodie and Traill, furthers the ambivalence of the play. What each has wished is not especially vain, yet, sympathize as we might with their desires, we are also clearly being led toward acceptance of their own complicity in the temptation as part of the play’s movement toward thematic closure.

As the play concludes, it obliquely addresses, in separate speeches by the Stewarts, two crucial issues in the dramatization of history (and, by extension, two challenges to any conclusions that academic study of the history play might draw).

Firstly, Stewart, frustrated by the reticence of the Strickland sisters to pursue Cantwell to justice, laments that he “cannot get one crumb of undisputed, factual information as to what [Cantwell] has done” (77). Twenty-five years later, Rudy Wiebe would likewise lament (in his story “Where Is the Voice Coming From?”) the problems of making story out of history. Discussing the saga of Almighty Voice and the final official encounter between the North West Mounted Police and “the Indians,” Wiebe observes: “An affair seventy-five years old should acquire some of the shiny transparency of an old man’s skin. It should” (135). Whether dealing with events of merely hours ago or with the acts of earlier centuries, the writer employing history as a vehicle for invention will not get those “crumb[s] of undisputed, factual information.” Human recall, our tendency to narrate experience (employing, naturally, all the rhetorical strategies of narration), and our involvement (no matter how great the chronological distance between narrator and events narrated) in that which is being recorded—all serve to render the recording of human experience inevitably the record of perception of fact, not the recording of fact itself.

Secondly, in her private dialogue with her husband once all the fluster has settled, Frances Stewart analyzes and passes judgment on Cantwell’s methods. Frances Stewart’s role as a voice of moderation and compromise throughout the play demands that the audience take her final words seriously, and understand them as meant without irony. Mrs Stewart frequently suggests a middle course, voices a gentle correction, or offers mild reproof to the more tendentious opinions voiced by her guests. Her moderate tone is seen immediately the play begins, as she attempts to counter Susanna Moodie’s

religious intolerance—specifically her belief that Methodists are responsible for just about everything currently going wrong. Stewart asserts that the Methodists of her acquaintance “are most respectable persons” (7), and reminds Susanna that Mackenzie, who “leads the rebellion, . . . is not a Methodist” (9). Frances is mild in her opposition, and even her teasing barely merits such a name: there is the passing remark that the first dozen lines of Moodie’s “Oath of the Canadian Volunteers” makes no reference to Methodists (10). Even this observation is sufficient to make Moodie stand on ceremony and offer to cease declaiming. Yet no matter how tetchy Susanna Moodie becomes, Frances Stewart is a model of neighbourly and friendly decorum in the treatment of her, to say the least, irascible guest.

Similarly, when Moodie and Cantwell argue principles of government with respect to the rebellion, it is Frances Stewart who turns the conversation back to the pragmatic question of the issue at hand: what to do about the Brady family troubles (30-1). Mrs Stewart invites Cantwell with all due politeness to join their meal, despite his rather aggressive presentation of self (33), and ‘reins in’ Traill when the latter suggests that the backwoods presents as one of its few redeeming qualities “a complete absence of temptation” (34). It is not surprising, then, that to Frances Stewart falls the pleasure of refuting Cantwell’s assertions, defusing and rendering harmless his temptation. Having discussed with her husband her shared past with and feelings for Rossmore, she concludes: “That was where Cantwell was so clever, and so cruel; from something which was past he created, only for a few moments, something which had never been. What he roused in me was not regret, but discontentment, disguised as regret” (85). The audience

is left with the reassurance that duty and married love prevail: “He had reckoned without *us*” (85), says Stewart, emphasizing the pronoun. It is equally clear that the Stewarts consider themselves successful; “Let us enjoy our victory a little longer” (86) is the final line of the play. Nonetheless, the audience is also left with the awareness that the tempter remains a success in his own eyes.<sup>13</sup>

The complex interplay of substantial philosophical issues, operating simultaneously on the level of the action of the play and on the level of the existence of the play itself as it employs discourses of representing Canadian history, accounts in part for the vague sense of dissatisfaction with the play so frequently voiced in criticism. Underlying the speeches of the Stewarts in the play’s conclusion is the reminder that if Frances Stewart, in particular, is taken at her word, the play itself, then, theoretically, should not exist, for if Cantwell has completely failed then so has his author. The reader is thus not quite sure as the play ends whether to accept at face value the apparent thematic conclusion it reaches. The reader may be further troubled by the possibility that if the ostensible theme *is* meant to be questioned, then the playwright has already passed judgment on his own work, effectively casting the audience in the position of those ‘unsubtle folk’ to whom Cantwell refers, those who cannot see beyond the obvious. Once again, the author, in tarring his antagonist, has apparently swiped himself with the same brush.

The implications of all this thematic tension for the historical dramatist are at once immensely liberating and threatening. If there is no truly undisputable “fact”—merely the record of perception of facts—then the dramatist *must* record perception,

make something psychologically true out of that which is not historically verifiable. In brief, the historical dramatist is free to do exactly what Cantwell has done: mingle invention with fact to get at a perceived truth. There lies the liberation. The threatening component is that it is perhaps impossible for the historical dramatist to avoid doing what Cantwell has done. Since Cantwell is roundly criticized for his efforts, there is heavy irony in the fact that Cantwell's method is exactly that of his author. Davies, in employing Frances Stewart, Catharine Parr Traill, Susanna Moodie, Edmund Cantwell, and Thomas Stewart in "At My Heart's Core," has "from something which was past . . . created . . . something which had never been"—the words with which Frances Stewart dismisses the tactics of the "so clever, and so cruel" Cantwell (85). It remains for the audience to determine whether or not the cleverness can or should be separated from the cruelty. Arguably, just as Cantwell has challenged Moodie with the obligation of art, the historical dramatist cannot separate clever from cruel; any use of the past will run the risk of offence.

Davies' play is, perhaps, a stronger bridge than at first suggested in that it occupies the space between relatively unproblematic acceptance of history as received fact and highly problematized interrogation of all received versions of past events. It is a text situated between the extremes of the history play seen as a device for preserving the memory of people and their deeds which might otherwise be too soon forgotten and the history play seen as a means for dramatizing alternatives not taken and reclaiming voices and figures marginalized by normative authority. It begins to employ the methods of questioning that will dominate the genre in the latter half of the century, yet its thematic

statement is ostensibly as conservative as those of its predecessors. In many respects, “At My Heart’s Core” epitomizes the English-Canadian history play: it follows its predecessors while somewhat diverging from them; it preserves and interrogates received notions simultaneously; and, in that often unconscious ambivalence, it stages a model of intellectual life in English Canada.

The first stage in the evolution of the contemporary English-Canadian history play anticipated a more problematic era through the dramatic device of celebrating an essentially conservative triumph over those impending complications set in a simpler, bygone time. The most significant and (as of this writing) most recent change in English-Canadian historical drama is the movement from celebration of successes to interrogation of failures. The contemporary dramatist examines how many of the conservative impulses once celebrated in English-Canadian literature also contributed to silencing or destroying a number of individuals who espoused alternatives to the status quo. The *locus classicus* of the contemporary English-Canadian historical play is John Coulter’s *Riel* (1950, 1962).

Louis Riel, it has been observed, “has emerged from history to become, for English-Canadians at least, the dominant locus, on stage, and in fiction, of the subject of Confederation’s unknowable and recalcitrant other” (Sherlow 142). Wolfgang Kloos goes further, linking Riel’s literary existence to the survival of awareness of the whole Metis people: “The Metis became a real people in literature when John Coulter’s historical drama, *Riel*, was performed on stage in 1950” (145). Coulter, himself an Ulsterman with first-hand experience of Irish struggles for Home Rule, saw Riel as an

international figure, a harbinger of the rise of popular resistance to perceived uncaring, distant, ignorant governments (Anthony 22-4, 32). For Coulter, Riel heralds what Eric Hobsbawm calls the “age of catastrophe” for “old empires,” the inevitable liquidation of “formal colonialism” (221).

Riel’s story touches on virtually every facet of this study. His status in Canadian history is under parliamentary revision; that revision has once more stirred both extremes of the forces of opinion which existed in Riel’s lifetime. His vision of Manitoba as a nation invites questions of how discourses of nation and region should properly be understood, and has obvious continuing relevance in the sovereignty debate both in and outside Québec. Riel’s firm belief that he was divinely inspired brings the issue of religious motivation for political action to the fore; even though he was at odds by the end of his life with both his priests and his Church, Riel’s status as Catholic reminds us that a great deal of the opposition to his politics was voiced in the rhetoric of Protestantism. His own ethnicity, his status as a *Metis*, foregrounds still unanswered questions concerning Canada’s choices vis-à-vis multiculturalism.

In addition, Coulter’s play is the foundational text of its genre, uniting all the foregoing aspects of Riel’s historical, social, religious, political, and ethnic person in one text. Riel is the *ur-iconoclast* of the Canadian mindscape, and his iconoclasm poses crucial questions for the entire nation. It is important to my line of argument to understand that Coulter conceived his Riel plays from the start as addressing international audiences and international issues. While the play stands as the archetype of Canadian historical drama, it should primarily be understood as the dramatization of a

popular struggle for self-definition, one which just happens to have a Canadian context. Riel, Coulter writes in his introduction to *The Crime of Louis Riel*, is “one of the strangest and most theatrical characters in our strange and theatrical North American story. . . . What he did and what was done to him were the subject of angry controversy in the capital cities of the world” (1). Riel’s case and cause stand as a microcosm of all “passionate struggles of subject peoples which are profoundly changing our world” (1).

There is no subtlety in Coulter’s approach. An audience will not find itself suddenly surprised as the performance nears an end to discover that it has been viewing an evolving political discourse, carefully positioned beneath the characters and plot. The issues, their historical precedents, their national and international significance, the terms of discussion and the instability of said terms are all foregrounded in the literal discourse of the characters. The didacticism of the play is overt throughout.

In *Louis Riel*, we have a character for whom religion means as much as it would mean little to later figures such as Norman Bethune. Riel’s politics are inseparable from his faith, his faith inseparable from his actions. It is perhaps impossible, then, satisfactorily to begin *Riel* in any fashion other than the one Coulter employs: Riel is offstage, while his family, supporters, and parish priest engage in agitated debate over the source of Riel’s authority and his claims to its authenticity. In the opening lines of the play, Riel’s supporters speak of his “solitary pow-wows with the Almighty” (1); Riel’s relationship to his God founds his relationship to his country.

Early in the play, Riel’s priest overtly invites recognition of the constructed nature of discourse, the oft-mentioned “unspoken ‘archive’ of rules and constraints”

governing a society. Someone (or some group) must decide what is to be “thought right” (4). Riel, start to finish, believes he has the right to make that decision. His belief brings him into conflict with both priest and bishop. Early in the play, the Priest confronts one of Riel’s supporters, O’Donoghue, and makes the link between history and the will of God perceptible enough—from one perspective at least:

PRIEST: History must unfold according to the divine plan in the mind of  
 God. Whoever or whatever tries to stop it will be broken.

O’DONOGHUE: Meaning Riel and the rest of us here, the Council, will  
 be broken?

PRIEST: Yes. If what you persist in doing is contrary to the divine plan.

O’DONOGHUE: As God won’t take us into his confidence about his plan  
 we must go on and risk being broken, if necessary, for what we  
 think is right.

PRIEST: And who will decide what is to be thought right?

O’DONOGHUE: Ah! Now *that’s* a question! But here’s the oracle [RIEL  
*has come in with his* MOTHER]. Ask him. (3-4)

This passage draws attention to the foundational elements of both the writing and the analysis of the Canadian historical play in English. The priest speaks of history, the divine plan, and the inevitability of disaster for those who oppose the will of God. The ineffability of Providence and the question of the right of human authority to decide the ‘true’ course also inform the priest’s position in the debate. For O’Donoghue, God’s refusal to speak specifically to the Manitoba question is as much an incentive to action

based on one's own perception of 'right' as it is for the priest a caution against action. Riel, even by his own people, is cast ambivalently as both oracle and adversary.

Crucial to O'Donoghue's argument is the notion that the risk of being "broken" is not only an acceptable risk but an imperative one. The essence of the challenge that contemporary historical drama presents to its audience is voiced by the characters: one must risk being broken in order to explore fully the potential of strategies and alternatives which are constructed outside the sanction of authority. Both audience and characters must decide 'right' for themselves, independent of, but not without the influence of, competing systems of order, or world views, including, but by no means restricted to, those cultural practices considered dominant and sanctioned within a given social order.

Interestingly, both Riel and his mother employ variations of phrasing indicating forbidden discourse when facing opposition from the priest in the name of the Church: "do not say this" and "you must not say this" both foreground the social fact of the existence and importance of permissible discourse (6). Iconoclasm, or rebellion, is often rooted in the act of challenging, or even changing, what it is permissible to say. It is an important irony of the situation that the iconoclast, protecting his own rhetorical position, turns to the same formula used by his opposition: certain things must not be said.

Riel's political vision issues from the principle that "the people of a country can not be taken over and incorporated into some other country without their own consent" (17). Obviously, his assertion has continued relevance in the current political climate. As Parliament, in the spring of 1998, considered official recognition of Riel as a "father

of Confederation,” debate flared once more on “letters to the editor” pages across Canada. One reader (a Mr C.N.R. Stewart, writing from Toronto) quoted to ironic effect a 1618 epigram from Sir John Harrington:

Treason doth never prosper;

What’s the reason?

For if it prosper, none dare

Call it treason.

Mr Stewart followed this quotation with the reckoning that “if Riel had succeeded in his attempt to secure for the Indians and Metis of Saskatchewan title to their lands, he would be regarded in the same light as George Washington, who, if he had failed, would bear the traitor label” (D7). In that conditional ‘if’ of historical analysis dwells the essence of the contemporary English-Canadian historical play. That the debate concerning Riel’s status continues to provoke heated and emotional exchange is evidence that what Coulter saw in Riel some fifty years ago remains relevant.<sup>14</sup>

Colonel Dennis is the first character to call Riel a madman. Early in his first conversation with Riel, Dennis casually states “I think you must be mad,” following that with “I think you’re a preposterous, presumptuous fool, fit only to be certified” (16, 17). When Dennis hears Riel’s intention to take over Fort Garry, he responds in the same vein: “I can only say if ever a dangerous irresponsible madman was at large I’m talking to him now” (19). This exasperated doubting of Riel’s sanity grows from informal expression into legal codification as Riel’s defence (against his will) at his trial for treason is that he is not guilty by reason of insanity. Riel’s situation is the most extreme

of all those to be studied here. For example, although Ken Mitchell's Janus Karkulainen (*The Shipbuilder*) is institutionalized as insane, he is neither the leader of a political movement nor on trial for treason against nation or empire. Even Ezra Pound (in Timothy Findley's *The Trials of Ezra Pound*) is accused of treason but not on trial for it—merely appearing at a competency hearing—and is not leading any active rebellion.

Questions concerning the definition of sanity are clearly linked in the play with the undermining of conventional stereotypes. Riel, stereotyped as the perpetrator of rebellion and agent of instability, incapable of seeing anything but his own mind's view, in fact urges compromise to O'Donoghue: "Fight, for a symbol. Never compromise. And it gets you what? Only to fight. . . . Here we must stand on the ground, and it is sometimes muck below our feet" (25). In his refusal to sever all connection with the British empire, to break what O'Donoghue calls the strangling "blessed old umbilical" (26), Riel undermines any narrow view of himself as a rigid agitator incapable of negotiation, or totally antagonistic to all conventions and traditions.

Just as Coulter later shows Sir John A. Macdonald as a moderate, in part forced to sweeping action by the more radical elements among those he represents, so he develops Riel in relation to his own supporters. The portrayal of both leaders echoes elements of Mair's portrayal of Tecumseh, showing the continued presence in English-Canadian historical drama of an impulse to present controversial leaders as less radical than some of their supporters seem to be, as figures straining more to reconcile extremes within their own power bases than attempting to impose radical extremism upon others. For instance, O'Donoghue's distaste for British authority seeks expression in gestures far

more antagonistic than Riel ordinarily will permit. Conversely, in the first act of the play the main representative of the military—with the Church, a conventional guarantor of stability and order—is a walking cliché of the bluff, gruff soldier. Wolseley spouts all the stereotypical conventions of the “military man” in drama: Riel opposes current order, therefore he is “A madman . . . ! Utterly mad! . . . Stark, staring mad!” (43). Compared with both his senior lieutenants and his chief opponents, Riel is placid and moderate.

Wolseley voices his criticism of Riel over the objections of Bishop Taché and despite the corrective words of Macdonald. The soldier cannot understand the exigencies of the politician. Macdonald’s explanation of the constitutional authenticity of Riel’s position is met with blank incomprehension (44-5). Wolseley refuses to discuss the death of Thomas Scott as anything but murder: “Murder I said and murder I mean” (44). Wolseley challenges the interpretation of the orders he receives from Macdonald while still in the PM’s office, grunts general criticism of all politicians everywhere, and is sufficiently abrasive to lead Macdonald and Cartier both to suspect he will not follow orders and to advise Taché to make every effort to get back to Fort Garry “*before* the Colonel and his—volunteers” (45-47). The rebel appears flexible and cautious, while the man of order is rigidly narrow of mind, a loose cannon as it were, in command of actual fieldpieces; the text makes it difficult to be certain which of the antagonists is the maniac with the gun.

Ottawa’s side of the crisis is presented in terms that remain contemporary. The Territories, Macdonald laments, “are still outside Confederation. We need them in” (42). Various rhetorical positions vis-à-vis the Québec of the 1990s echo Macdonald’s terse

summary. It is Macdonald who describes Riel in terms directly echoing Hamlet (43). Though Riel will explicitly reject the “Hamlet defence” at his trial (97), it is certainly part of Coulter’s agenda to have the Prime Minister describe the rebel in Shakespearean terms.

Equally important to Coulter’s efforts is the overt recognition by Macdonald of Riel’s constitutional correctness:

My view is that on the Hudson’s Bay Company withdrawal no legal government existed, leaving a state of anarchy. In such cases the inhabitants may by the law of nations form a government, *ex necessitate*, for the protection of life and property. And such a government has certain sovereign rights by the *jus gentium*. This is laid down by Blackstone. A most important principle. And it is precisely what this—allegedly mad but actually very astute—creature Riel has had the gumption to grasp and act upon. (44)

Awareness of Riel’s political astuteness is all the more significant for being voiced by a man himself known (in some cases practically revered) for possessing that acuity in abundance. The incident is, finally, ‘typically Canadian,’ as the paradigmatic development of subsequent history plays confirms: authority often voices a (sometimes grudging) respect for the protagonist, while more violent opposition originates most often in peers, neighbours, even friends. There is a sense, then, in which “peace, order and good government” persists as an ideal, even in challenges to the extant system. The English-Canadian historical playwright will, most frequently, cast the highest authority

figures of his or her text as moderates, able to comprehend all positions in the debate and unwilling to act rashly.

The role of Taché, Bishop of St Boniface, further illustrates this tendency to cast the representatives of authority as more likely to be moderate the closer they are to the top. Present at the earlier meeting in Macdonald's office (scene 9), the Bishop returns to Manitoba and is observed throughout the scenes which end Act One to be steering a moderate course, neither so antagonistic to Riel as his parish priest had earlier been, nor wholly rejecting the good intentions of Macdonald's official position. In fact, both Macdonald and Cartier voice doubts about Colonel Wolseley to Taché (47), positioning the Bishop as a moderate in their own camp, opposed to the probable extremes to which the military will be likely to go. Taché offers political and spiritual encouragement to Riel and stands with him in his confrontation with O'Donoghue over opposition to Wolseley. It is Taché who formally conveys "the assurances of the ministers" and who is "not prepared to listen" to O'Donoghue's alarmist rhetoric (53). When O'Donoghue turns out to have been justified in his fears, Taché remains firm that political negotiation is the preferred form of fighting this battle: "Oh I will fight . . . . But where my fight may be of use. . . . I shall go at once, the weary trail again to Ottawa" (59). And it is Taché who counsels Riel both to flee the invading British troops and to remain convinced that, even in flight and exile, his cause is victorious—if not now then in time: "Whatever it may seem for the moment my son. Time will prove it. . . . [You must] turn your back on victory and wait . . . for God's time" (60). Unlike the parish priest, the bishop avoids any suggestion that Riel suffers from overweening pride.

As Part One draws to a close, the contrast between the riotous behaviour of Wolseley's troops and the earlier sobriety of Riel in his refusal to allow what he considers excess is employed to great ironic effect—a method that will also play an important part in several later plays, establishing the iconoclast as disciplined while the agents of authority are wanton and excessive, lacking restraint in the gratification of various whims. Upon taking Fort Garry, Riel orders an end to all drinking among his men, “till our position is established” (28). Rabbie, one suspects speaking for a majority of the men, says that Riel is “in sore need o’ a wee touch o’ a sense o’ humour” (28). In contrast, when Colonel Wolseley and his troops recapture Fort Garry, the forces of ‘authority’ and ‘stability’ riot in liquor to celebrate re-establishing ‘order’ once again in the west:

WOLSELEY: Bless me, isn't it a rumpus.

SERGEANT: Yessir! Men runnin' a bit wild, sir. Lootin' the liquor, sir.

WOLSELEY: What liquor?

SERGEANT: 'Ee 'ad it all locked up, sir. Strict t't 'ee was.

WOLSELEY: Yes, yes, mad, quite mad. (62)

The scene ends with Wolseley obliquely ordering the sergeant to go participate in the liquor binge (63). The inebriated forces of order control Fort Garry, victorious over the insane rebels and their enforced sobriety. The looting in liquor scene ends Part One of *Riel*; its rhetoric will be repeated in the play's conclusion.

Of interest to discussions and discourses of treason is that the armed recapture of Fort Garry is actually against the orders Wolseley received from the Prime Minister.

There are no charges of treason against Wolseley, however. As Klooss observes, “what is regarded as a crime in the natives becomes a normal military act of the Canadian forces” (149). A double standard exists throughout.

Part Two is set fifteen years later. Still in exile, Riel receives assorted letters encouraging his return. At this point he voices the sentiment that might fairly stand as a character note for virtually every protagonist of a contemporary English-Canadian history play: “What is it to be safe? It is not for me” (69). It is a recurring keynote of character that the protagonist views conventional happiness and safety in precisely the same terms by which normative authority views the protagonist’s alternatives: desirable but too costly to follow for their own sake, or for selfish reasons. For Riel, the valuing of an easy happiness above all else is “childish” (69). The arrival of Gabriel Dumont and other supporters convinces Riel that, in the words used by Taché, it is “God’s time” (70). The invocation of God’s will returns Riel to familiar territory: intense opposition from the Church.

In the following exchange between Riel and his priest, a question of correct definition of principle arises:

PRIEST: It is monstrous madness. And evil.

RIEL: It is certainly not evil.

PRIEST: I say it is. It is against the Church. Against  
religion.

RIEL: No, Father, no.

PRIEST: Armed rebellion! Disobedience to authority!

RIEL: It is obedience, to *the* authority above all  
 authorities—God.

PRIEST: What are you presuming to say?

RIEL: God has told me to fight, and I obey.

PRIEST: That is blasphemy! Rank blasphemy! (73-4)

The rhetoric of the priest is consistent with Michel Foucault's assertion that established religion is often perceived (or self-perceived) to be the guarantor of sanity. Foucault writes:

In the dialectic of insanity, where reason hides without abolishing itself, religion constitutes the concrete form of what cannot go mad; it bears what is invincible in reason. . . . Religion safeguards the old secret of reason in the presence of madness, thus making closer, more immediate, the restraint that was already rampant in classical confinement. There, the religious and moral milieu was imposed from without, in such a way that madness was controlled, not cured. ("The Birth of the Asylum" from *Madness and Civilization* 143)

Accordingly, when Riel refuses the advice of the Church, refuses to give up his "blind folly," his priest calls his planned rebellion "monstrous madness," a delusion fostered by "the enemy of [his] soul" (73-4).

The priest continues to assert the Church as the guarantor of social stability, threatening the loss of the sacraments to anyone who fires a shot (76). Riel himself is pronounced "arch-heretic" by his priest, who then refuses blessing for those going to

battle. Riel's response is to claim the authority of the clergy for himself—"I will give the sacraments myself! I am God's servant too!" (76)—a claim sanctified by the justice of his cause. The priest's opposition makes him, in Riel's words, a "traitor-priest . . . arch-traitor to the people" (76). The crux of the matter is not Riel's refusal to accept the notion that obedience to God is obedience to the highest possible authority. The problem is that Riel's personal vanity (or so his opponents construct it) leads him to presume to have been commissioned to the fight by God himself—that is, without the mediation of the priest/Church.

It could be argued that Riel's efforts to seek armistice with people sworn to arrest him for treason is evidence of genuine mental instability, or, at the very least, a stubborn refusal to face the facts of his situation. Once on trial, Riel is subjected to a "not guilty by reason of insanity" defence by his own counsellor, against his will. The trial, however, makes clear that Riel can only be considered 'insane' in that he does not do what the majority seems to wish of him, and he refuses to take any avenue of escape in order to preserve his life. Ironically, it is Middleton, having earlier called Riel "mad" for thinking he could negotiate an armistice, who insists upon Riel's sanity in testimony, refusing to tell the defence attorney that Riel's actions and expressions show any "indication whatever of mental aberration" (93). Riel, says Middleton, evinces a "rather acute intellect" and is, in fact, "deucedly clever" (91). The reflex opinion—"he's mad"—is not supported by court testimony in reaction to defence counsel efforts to have Riel declared legally insane. Those who were with him, whether bearing him ill will or no, also generally call him sane. Nolin, generally an unfriendly witness, says "I think he

knew what he was doing” (96).

Riel himself flatly rejects the Hamlet defence: “My Counsel, my good friends and lawyers, whom I respect, are trying to show that I am insane. It is their line of defence. I reject it. I indignantly deny that I am insane” (97). Though the defence persists in arguing what the Crown calls “a case of treason justified only by the insanity of the prisoner” (99), all testimony leans toward declaring Riel sane. “Insanity,” so the court proceedings signify, is the label used by the community to categorize that which it does not or will not understand.

With insanity refuted (at least, one suspects, for the audience, if not wholly for some of the participants in the trial) Riel’s political views must inevitably be examined in light of his religious views. If Riel is not “crazy,” can he be fairly considered to be inspired? The question of inspiration, however, merely raises the spectre of insanity again, as the court (one suspects fairly accurately reflecting a general public opinion) has no difficulty accepting divine inspiration in biblical contexts, or even in the lives of the saints, but cannot manage to accept it as valid when proposed as an explanation for the behaviour of an ostensibly ordinary man of one’s own time and place.

One doctor calls Riel megalomaniacal (103). Another, Dr. Jukes, in his testimony discusses the possibility of Riel’s place among the “men who have held very remarkable views on religion and who have always been declared to be insane—until they gathered great numbers of followers in a new sect—then they became great prophets and great men” (107). Off the witness stand, awaiting the verdict, Jukes recollects Pilate facing a similar challenge “in a case with, shall we say, certain parallels” (119). As the

trial progresses, Hamlet's "antic disposition" is specifically invoked. Policeman Bromley-Witheroe, a self-described "university graduate" (108), evokes both Newman—referring to Riel's writing as "a sort of *apologia pro vita sua*" (109)—and Shakespeare—"people have called Hamlet insane" (110)—but, when challenged concerning whether or not Riel might possibly have, like Hamlet, chosen to put "an antic disposition on," the officer can only respond, "I have never quite been able to make up my mind" (110). Such uncertainty constitutes part of Coulter's agenda. *Riel* anticipates the movements, in politics as epitomized by recent parliamentary debate and in historiography as summarized by Berger, to seek "the posthumous pardon of Louis Riel" (265).

Finally, testifying in his own cause, Riel argues that he "acted in sound mind in quarrelling with an insane and irresponsible Government. If there is high treason," he says, "it is not mine but theirs" (114). Riel turns the discourses of sanity and good government against his accusers. Despite the complexities of the situation—voiced in the play by figures ranging from doctors Jukes and Roy to political leaders Macdonald and J.A.Chapleau—it is not, of course, a successful defence. Riel is convicted and executed. Dr Roy's observation that working with "the deranged" makes one understand how "*precarious* is our hold on what we call sanity" (118) keeps the context-specific nature of sanity in the foreground, while Dr Jukes' evocation of Pilate keeps questions of faith in the fore (119). Chapleau stresses the tone of objections raised by the United States "against capital punishment for what is regarded as a political offence" (129), Macdonald countering that dealing harshly with the political offence is "a political

*necessity*” (129). Accepting that Whitehall will not intervene in the affair, Macdonald wryly observes that “this wretch Riel is actually forcing us to take responsibility and govern Canada. . . . The outlaw once more shapes the law” (130-31).

Coulter’s presentation of Macdonald epitomizes the representation of higher authority in the English-Canadian play: though Macdonald concludes that Riel “is a gone coon” (131), he does not dismiss either the validity of Riel’s position or the value of the effect Riel’s challenge has upon the practical workings of government. In saying “Live or die, [Riel’s] miserable existence is nothing compared to what’s endangered by it” (131), the Prime Minister voices a theme often repeated in English-Canadian historical drama: the cost of accepting the protagonist on his or her own terms is simply too great. Repeatedly, the protagonist is sacrificed, often with regret, because the individual is easier to affect than the society the individual seeks to change. Macdonald’s behaviour in the closing moments of the scene further stresses Coulter’s relentless message that the meaning of our lives consists almost exclusively in how we choose to make meaning. Coulter’s stage directions include “irritably,” “ironically,” “slightly burlesque and pompous,” and “offhand” (131) to describe Macdonald’s manner as he sets the date for Riel’s execution, and comments with some bitterness on his awareness that the execution will make Riel “one of the mortal instruments that shaped our destiny” (131). It is also no accident that Macdonald is beginning to drink his whisky with increasing frequency as he makes his choice of execution date. *What* happens is less important than how we *interpret* what happens.

In the penultimate scene, Riel is led to execution, reciting the Act of Contrition in

a manner conveyed as sincere and faithful (137-40). Coulter effectively contrasts the piety and strength of the convicted traitor to the system with the surly profanity of an off-duty trooper, tunic unbuttoned, who stands smoking a cheroot as Riel's procession passes. Riel and Father André complete the *confiteor*; then the trooper barks: "Son of a bitch!" The trooper spits, grinds his cheroot violently underfoot, and repeats the epithet, this time adding a "Goddamn" for emphasis (140).

The subsequent Riel plays by Coulter—*The Trial of Louis Riel* (1968) and *The Crime of Louis Riel* (1976)—though they add little in the way of further development in the genre of English-Canadian historical drama, remain of interest for this study by virtue of the fact that they exist at all. As Coulter details in his preface to the last play, he was commissioned to write both subsequent versions, each responding to a particular felt need for a means to present the material of Louis Riel's life and death which the original *Riel* did not facilitate. Unlike most trilogies, the Riel plays are not three different plays about Riel but rather three different ways of approaching and staging the same story.

"TRIAL," writes Coulter, "is strictly a documentary"—an observation of interest in that it confirms the presence of invention in *Riel*. It was "commissioned . . . as a tourist attraction" and is drawn directly from transcripts of the trial. Even then, of course, the text is selected and shaped, focused by the agenda of the playwright. *The Crime of Louis Riel*, Coulter continues, "is about the degree to which I see the Metis leader and the rebellions which he led as precursors of later and present uprisings all over the world, particularly the so-called Third World." The main reason for rewriting the initial story in the stripped-down refocused form in which it occurs in the 1976 text is to

make the Riel story mountable within “the resources of the country’s far from affluent local theatres” (*Crime* ii). Riel’s appeal, argues Coulter, is “as an emerging Canadian legendary hero” and the demand for a scaled-down, ‘affordable’ version of the play is evidence of “Canadians . . . demonstrating their joy at finding theatrical life in their own story” (ii).

*Trial* positions its audience as courtroom spectators. None of the scenes of Riel with supporters and family, all of which serve, in *Riel*, to humanize and make moderate the position of the ‘traitor,’ are present in *Trial*. Of the three, it is closest to being a documentary, not only in that it works exclusively from trial transcripts but also in its positioning of the audience. Audience experience of *Trial* is likely far more ‘true to life’ in comparison with the experience of the initial audience of Canadians who lived through the actual events than is the audience experience of the far more balanced *Riel*. This construction of the audience as courtroom spectators extends in the stage directions to having each arriving audience member scrutinized by officers of the NWMP (3).

The focus of the prosecution is also harsher than that shown in *Riel*. Osler, a member of the team of prosecuting attorneys, states the essence of the Crown’s case: “the rebellion was not brought about by the wrongs of the half-breeds so much as by the personal ambition and vanity of” Riel (9). The diction here is slightly stronger than in *Riel*, where the Crown (condensed in the figure of a single counselor) states that “this matter is brought about by the personal vanity of the man on trial” (89). The statement of the earlier text makes no disqualification of “the wrongs of the half-breeds” as a contributing factor. This slight amelioration of the diction employed by the prosecution

is fairly consistent throughout *Riel*.

Both the original *Riel* and the more compact *Crime* are, in Coulter's words, "freely adapted from . . . the historical records" (*Crime* iii). Comparison of the script drawn directly from the trial transcripts with those which feature more invention on Coulter's part shows how the playwright's free adaptation affects the presentation of Riel's story. In *The Trial of Louis Riel* much more is made of Riel's insanity. As discussed above, *Riel* presents (probably unavoidably) the suggestion of insanity, in particular as employed by Riel's defence counselors. But *Trial* makes much more prominent the question of sanity and the range of voices questioning Riel's mental state. Willoughby calls Riel's rhetoric "simply nonsensical" (15); Mackay says "just crazy" (18); for Ness, Riel is "a bit touched in the head" (20); to Jackson, he is plainly "daft" (25); André calls him "a fool" and "insane" (39); Garnot claims Riel is "crazy . . . very foolish" (41); Fourmand observes "two men in him," one of whom is "the bad Riel . . . Lucifer," and finds in "insanity . . . the charitable and Christian explanation" (42, 43); Dr Roy suggests "megalomania" and speaks of Riel's "insane delusion" of mission (44, 46); and Clarke says Riel is "certainly of unsound mind" (48). *Riel* downplays or completely omits many of these direct attacks on Riel's claim to sanity.

Even Middleton is manipulated by the prosecution into stressing the possibility that Riel might have made "idiotic" propositions during the course of his surrender (*Trial* 28). Faced with the report that Riel believes himself to be an emissary of his provisional government and not a prisoner of the Canadian administration, Middleton avers that "He must be mad" (*Riel* 98), but in the sort of colloquial way in which many refer to an

action or position performed or embraced by another with which one cannot agree.

There seems no suggestion that Middleton uses the expression literally to mean that Riel is clinically insane. Similarly, in *Riel*, Middleton does not use the word “idiotic,” either in the conversation with Riel during his arrest, or during the trial. By comparison, in *Trial*, the mild-mannered military antithesis to Wolseley remains a figure of calm, but is more verbally aggressive concerning Riel’s preoccupations—particularly his understanding of the religious component of his politics. That Riel is ““always bothering about his religion”” is a recollection made by Middleton in both texts (*Trial* 27).

However, in *Riel* such religious obsession is merely boring to Middleton, and a device for evading a troubling question long enough to “gain time to answer” (90). In *Trial*, Middleton considers Riel to be “a man imbued with a strong, morbid religious feeling mingled with intense personal vanity” (27), and there is no sense that his theological meanderings are even in part a sort of rhetorical screen behind which a more considered answer to a political question can be constructed. Though Coulter continues to represent Middleton as being far more moderate in his views than most of his contemporaries, greater fidelity to the documentary evidence of the trial reveals that even those somewhat sympathetic to Riel are less so in *Trial* than in *Riel*.

In *Trial*, then, the Crown’s case is much more personal. Riel is not merely a man with a different idea about effective government, but, as the testimony of Dr Willoughby, the first crown witness, seems to suggest, a man driven to avenge personal wrongs, jealously proud of his own awareness of the political exigencies of all sides, and prone to making sweeping generalizations (9-15). One component of Willoughby’s testimony

which is entirely absent from *Riel* is Riel's assertion that he considers himself an American now. Riel says he has been summoned from across the border by his half-breed kin to "help." Instead, once he is made privy to their plans, he considers the plans inadequate and feels that "the time has come for [him] to take charge" (12).

The dramatization of Riel's trial in the later play is more effective in that, of necessity, in *Riel* it forms but a small part of his whole story. In *Trial*, the trial *is* the whole story, and both the length of time during which Riel sits silent and the extent to which that silence must be almost impossible to maintain are much more noticeable. In *Riel*, the trial occupies thirty-six pages of text, including the dramatized conversations held during recesses and deliberations. Riel remains silent for only ten pages before his first, tentative interruption following the unfriendly testimony of his relative, Nolin (97). In *Trial*, Riel sits silent for twenty-six pages of testimony, fully one-third of the text, and, when he at last speaks, the audience is more aware, having heard seven witnesses (as compared to two in *Riel*), of the untenable situation in which Riel finds himself. He *cannot*, by anyone's terms, be right: he *must* be either a lunatic or a traitor. The constitution of the jury—neither a jury of Riel's peers in that no representative of either his race or his religion is present, nor in that its numbers are half those normally prescribed by the legal system under which Riel is being tried (55)—is yet another obstacle to Riel's receiving a fair trial. While the situation and its implications are no different in *Riel*, the audience's awareness of the weight of testimony and the conundrum Riel faces in trying to present his own understanding of his case is heightened by the sheer volume of testimony against him presented in *Trial*.

The question of religious inspiration forms a major component of the sanity debate. There is no consensus beyond the general feeling that many of the men involved, constructed as true Christians, readily accept divine inspiration as a feature of times and places other than their own, but cannot place similar faith in the divine inspiration of a contemporary. Coulter does not even have to stretch to the extent that he did in *Riel* in evoking sympathy for Pilate's dilemma. In questioning Father Alexis André, Oblate superior in the district of Carlton, the Crown states Coulter's alternative directly. André has insisted, in testifying for the defence, that Riel is perfectly rational in all matters save religion and politics: "On politics and religion he—he blew up. He was a wild man. A fool. . . . Insane" (39). Asked whether he would "deny that a man may be a great reformer even of religious questions without being a fool" (40), André responds "I do not deny history" (40). It is Coulter's assertion, as noted, that this is a fair description of Riel: a great reformer, a model for "movements all over the world in which an emerging people . . . insist on being left alone to mature" (qtd. in Anthony 61). André avers that he does not deny history, but Coulter suggests that history *is* being denied, both by Riel's contemporaries in trying him and by subsequent generations who either do not understand or utterly ignore Riel's place in our own history. As Dr Jukes observes in his own testimony, "views on [the] subject [of religious inspiration] are so different, even among the sane" (50-1).

In the final address of the defence counsel to the jury, once again Coulter's agenda benefits from simply reproducing the direct record of the transcript. The defence asks: "How is it that in the course of history what is just and right is rarely done because

it is just and right, but only because force has compelled it . . . ?” (54). It is an important question which Coulter demands his audience ask not only of themselves but of the trial they have just seen dramatized.

Riel prays before addressing the court, a gesture which is received with “*wonder and embarrassment*” by those present, but which, for Riel himself, is wholly logical and coherent (56). His address to the court voices so many of the messages Coulter speaks of in programme notes and interviews concerning his own intentions for the plays that one must actively recollect that Coulter has been working here from transcripts and has not put words in Riel’s mouth which Riel himself did not speak. Coulter could not ask for a clearer statement of theme than that which Riel himself provides: “one day perhaps I will be acknowledged as more than a leader of the half-breeds—as a leader of all that is good in this great country” (59). In taking consolation (while awaiting sentencing) that although he may be executed he has not been declared insane, Riel once more presents an attitude that, in other times, other places, other men, has been called noble—even divine. His “*low, pleading*” invocation of St Joseph (66), the last words he speaks in the play, are an equally effective reminder of his humanity. No matter how noble the cause, how spiritual the understanding of it, how devout the dedication to it, a man facing a sentence of death for his actions can be forgiven for reacting as Riel does.

*The Crime of Louis Riel* adds almost nothing to what we have already seen. It is, essentially, the larger play made more practical to stage by companies possessed of limited resources. Perhaps the only significant alterations in this third version of the Riel narrative is that Coulter takes the opportunity to revise *by omission*, leaving out specific

names and details of individual cases in certain conversations, all of which helps to make Riel the more general, “symbol[ic] almost” (1), forerunner of national self-determination for “subject peoples” around the world which Coulter has claimed him to be in the “Foreward” [sic]. One instance of this selective omission can be seen in a passage which is also interesting for its irony. In *Riel*, as the priest pleads for Thomas Scott’s life, he invokes a previous instance in which Riel has granted clemency. In *Crime*, the specific incident is elided. It is Riel’s response to the plea for clemency which echoes ironically as he faces his own fate: “Sentence of death is the law’s last resort. Clemency would make it a joke” (*Riel* 35; *Crime* 25).

Foundational to a more comprehensive understanding of Coulter’s Riel and the role that the character plays in shaping English-Canadian historical drama is the probability that Riel is actually a mixture of everything he is charged with or commended for being, no matter how mutually exclusive such extremes of characterization may seem. Riel is malleable myth; he is everything that both supporters and detractors claim. Coulter’s Riel plays present the “enigmatic, allegedly mad, allegedly criminal” historical figure of Riel in all his contradictions and invites, even demands, audiences to investigate all allegations, to answer individually the question: “when a man’s people—his tribe—his nation—are menaced, is it a criminal act punishable by death to organize resistance, armed resistance, and fight?” (*Crime* 1). While Coulter’s answer to the question is clear, his plays allow for the possibility of the opposite answer. It rests with the audience to complete the jury, to retry the case as often as there remains something to be learned from it.

The instance of *Riel* establishes as common practice the final component of my proposed paradigm for the contemporary practice of English-Canadian historical drama. Virtually all English-Canadian historical plays since *Riel* conform to the general pattern there consolidated. Coulter uses the same foundation as did Curzon and Mair. To that solid base, Coulter adds one small but crucial element, the keystone of the contemporary paradigm: the protagonist as historical “failure,” an iconoclast excluded from the dominant norms of his or her era.

As demonstrated above, when English-Canadian dramatists wrote of historical subjects in the years prior to *Riel*, the plays were generally celebratory in tone, focusing on accomplishment, on goals achieved, on the “good image” of the protagonist, even when—as in Mair’s *Tecumseh* for instance—the fate of the protagonist is tragic. However, the post-*Riel* English-Canadian historical play turns from the celebration and preservation of individual contribution to events of national historic significance, to the interrogation of situations and the attempted rehabilitation of figures notable for opposition to normative authority. The preservation and/or restoration of credit where credit is due for contributions made to the security of normative authority as practiced by Coulter’s few predecessors, is replaced by critical analysis of the processes and human representatives of such authority. Even the most conventionally successful of historical figures have been dramatized with emphasis on their weaknesses, on their moments of failure or inability to realize specific ambitions. English-Canadian historical drama of the latter half of the twentieth century, then, has moved from the celebration of success to the interrogation of failure, from praising the acts of an individual in the service of

Nation to criticizing the acts of Nation in suppressing ex-centric individual voices.

## Chapter Two

### Them Donnellys

One of the clearest illustrations of the changed climate of post-*Riel* English-Canadian historical drama is the immense popularity of the Donnellys of Biddulph as subjects for plays through the mid-1970s. The violent lives and deaths of this family of Irish emigrants had been the stuff of local legend in southwestern Ontario for generations. Beginning in 1973, however, at least a half-dozen plays emerged in a span of five years, dramatizing the local legend and elevating it, with varying degrees of success, to a national, even universal, narrative of persistence and survival. From regional ‘bogeymen’ and exemplars of foul behaviour at its most foul, the Donnellys evolved into symbols of personal integrity and non-conformism. They became rugged pioneers, forced into violence by the violence worked on them. The Donnellys emerged as victims of a social order imposed by neighbours who employed the apparatuses of normative authority to facilitate and excuse their own violence. While none of these plays presents the Donnellys as innocent victims—in Peter Colley’s words “there are no saints in this little tale” (A22)—each suggests or manifestly demonstrates that the Donnellys did nothing that was not also done to them by the very neighbours who complained so bitterly of how evil the Donnellys were. This effort to show both the Donnellys and their antagonists as cut from the same cloth questions perceptions and definitions of tragedy and challenges Canadian audiences to face some unpleasant home truths about their ancestors.

James Noonan suggests that James Reaney’s Donnelly trilogy—*Sticks and Stones*

(1975), *The St Nicholas Hotel* (1976), and *Handcuffs* (1977)—may be “the finest dramatic work ever written in English Canada” (288). It is certainly the most significant English-Canadian historical drama of the years following the premiere of *Riel*. Previous texts about settlers and the pioneer era, in virtually every Canadian literary genre, celebrated the taming of the land, the evolution and expansion of civilization, and the achievement of lives devoted to duty and hard work. The emergence of the Donnelly family as a fit subject for theatrical treatment demonstrates clearly the shift in focus from the conventional protagonist, a successful epitome of community integrity (cp. Laura Secord, Frances Stewart, and, in his own way, even Tecumseh), toward the protagonist perceived as ex-centric or failure—a protagonist often perceived in his or her own time as antagonistic to the smooth functioning of established civil authority and to the stability of the community itself. The Donnelly saga, as examined by a number of writers, shows not only the dirt, sweat and toil of pioneering but also the encrusted blood from wounds both accidental and deliberate. From *Wacousta* onward, Canadian literature demonstrates that settlers brought a great deal of Old-World baggage into their new land. The various plays treating the pioneer years that appeared in the post-*Riel* climate began to suggest, even to insist, that whatever we may currently define as “Canadian,” whatever sense of stability we enjoy, exists because *some* of our ancestors, acting on Old-World prejudices, shaped Canadian society by violent, occasionally criminal, opposition to the alternatives proposed by some of their neighbours.

Noonan, introducing the one-volume edition of James Reaney’s Donnelly trilogy, suggests that, upon seeing *Sticks and Stones*, we “wonder why no poet-dramatist has

come along earlier to recreate our past in such a way” (3). The simplest explanation is that ‘we’ were not previously ready to have our past shown to us “in such a way.” Reaney’s trilogy reminds us directly that our ancestors were prone to bigotry evinced in racial and religious prejudice, that land claims and other disputes were often settled by violence, and that the voices and structures of Church and Law were sometimes used to facilitate, or tacitly condone, criminal violence, including murder. Reaney’s trilogy shows more than a few of our nineteenth-century forebears were something of terrorists. The Donnelly plays uncover the extent to which prejudice and violence inform Canada’s history. The plays find in the Donnelly family not the ogres of early twentieth-century local lore, but instead a fairly average pioneer family at least as equally sinned against as sinning.

Coulter’s *Riel* demonstrated that a person with claims to leadership of a nation could be silenced by a more powerful set of national state apparatuses in the interests of the ostensibly greater good. Reaney employs some of Coulter’s strategies for dramatizing the conflict, ensuring that both sides of the question are presented, while simultaneously leaving no doubt in the mind of the audience concerning which side of the argument the playwright supports. *The Donnellys*, like *Riel*, demonstrates Canada’s capacity for violent action to silence alternative perspectives. Reaney’s work reminds its audiences that governments are nothing more than individuals chosen by the electorate of the community, province, or nation concerned. Repressive state apparatuses are employed by governments because the ordinary citizenry wants them to be so employed. *Riel* was trying to establish Manitoba; the Donnellys were trying to establish a single

farm in a tiny corner of Ontario. The discourses and strategies employed to contain each are largely the same.

Reaney, in his author's note (published both in the text of the collected trilogy and as part of the opening night programme for *Sticks and Stones*), conveys the play's historical foundation: "The play is based on the story of an actual family who came out from Ireland in 1844 to Biddulph Township 18 miles from London, Ontario, and were nearly annihilated by a secret society formed among their neighbours 36 years later" (11). Most important to this analysis is Reaney's immediate and clear signal that the play is "based on" the Donnelly story. Though painstakingly researched over a lengthy period, *The Donnellys* does not purport merely to document. In particular, Reaney changes many family names, "some . . . for humanitarian reasons" (Noonan 277). Reaney also invents a different fate for some of the secondary characters, notably Will Donnelly's first love, Maggie (127). Altering the known fate of an historical model is usually performed in the service of reflecting the contemporary climate. Though the historical model for a character may not have reached precisely the end that Reaney writes, such fates were common enough in the era portrayed, were a facet of the community being reflected on stage. Reaney works in harmony with the general premise quoted earlier concerning 'our' uses of history: it is "far better to realize that the past has been always altered than to pretend it has always been the same" (Lowenthal 412).

*The Donnellys* trilogy conforms closely to common practice as outlined in Chapter 2, with the initially obvious exception that the protagonist in this case is not a single individual but a family. Mr & Mrs Donnelly,<sup>1</sup> their seven sons, and their visiting

niece serve as a group protagonist, as hydra-headed and multi-faceted as the reputation their neighbours contrive for them. Similarly, though various members of the community serve as focal points of opposition to the Donnellys, no single individual is cast as antagonist. Since the trilogy is a community story, the development of both protagonist and antagonist in such a way is entirely appropriate.

Another way in which the Donnelly plays do not quite fit the emerging pattern is that the family has no consistent support in their community. Usually, even the most eccentric, the most iconoclastic protagonist of English-Canadian historical drama has some support from the surrounding community. Not so with the Donnellys: even Tom Donnelly's blood-brother, Jim Feeney, eventually betrays him (78-9, 82, 227, 264-5). The Donnellys have moments in which they seem to be at least as much a part of the community as any other settler (cf. 76-7). In *Handcuffs*—in which foot-stamping and hand-clapping are written directly into the script as gestures of opposition to or support for the family (194)—they have neighbours who believe them to be unjustly maligned. But ultimately they can trust no one outside their own kin.

Otherwise, the Donnelly plays both continue and advance the emerging pattern of common practice. Outsider status is inherited from the political history of Ireland. In Tipperary, James Donnelly will not swear allegiance to the Whitefoot secret society and is therefore labeled a "blackfoot."<sup>2</sup> Despite the overtly stated hope of both Donnelly parents that Canada will be a place for a new start (20, 91), Irish politics follows them to Biddulph, and sets the family against the majority of their neighbours (15-6, 50-1, 56, 87).

Established authority most immediately issues from those neighbours who fill such local offices as magistrate (124), priest (165), and constable (200). The provincial justice system also plays a minor role. A political agenda, coupled with high personal stakes behind many political postures, also informs the situation (cf. 155). Each of these levels of authority and community structure interact, forming allegiances against the Donnellys that are forged from a complex of political, social, religious, economic, and personal elements. Public motives are frequently advanced to justify the satisfying of private grudges. Also important to the shaping of new boundaries for tragedy is the fact that throughout the trilogy authority at its highest remains regional. The highest spiritual authority represented in the plays is a bishop, and in the sole scene in which the highest secular authority—the Governor General—appears, he and his wife are described as being “in period dress . . . out of the play, both in fact and effect. Perhaps marionettes” (65). This is a local story, but the playwright conceives the tragedy as transcending its specific setting.

The foundation of the conflict is simple: the Donnellys refuse to swear allegiance to the emerging power structure of the new community. But they also refuse to do as some other unwelcome erstwhile neighbours have been made to do. Their refusal to be chased out, unlike some earlier unpopular residents, leads to violent clashes with those power groups in the community who wish to be rid of the Donnellys.

However much the essence of the conflict is readily definable, the source of the Donnelly charm is more complex. In harmony with established practice, the protagonist is made to possess a charisma that sways audiences positively. Part of the Donnelly

charisma is developed through the playwright's expressly-stated support for the family. While the Donnellys are, in many respects, everything they are accused of being, they are clearly cast as the tragic heroes of the trilogy. Reaney overtly expresses his view that the Donnellys "decided to be Donnellys"—that is, chose to become what everyone already said they were—only after considerable losses suffered while trying to live according to the rules their community claimed to embrace (11). In other words, Reaney constructs the Donnellys as acting in self-defence, even if, on occasion, their resulting behaviour conforms to a cliché of many competitive sports: the best defence is a good offence.

Yet another aspect of the Donnelly charm is the extent to which various family members conform to the stereotype of the 'lovable Irish rogue,' an image which thrives in much world literature in English. That generally ameliorative stereotype seems to be at work in the presentation of the Donnelly family, particularly as figured in the quick wit of Mrs Donnelly (131, 218) and the intelligence of Will (124). Reaney frequently dramatizes incidents in which various Donnellys are arrested at public functions, haled away from the innocent social merriment of dances and wedding receptions. Thus their persecutors are made to seem insensitive or even deliberately manipulative, regardless of the extent to which the law may support their actions. These represent deliberate choices for Reaney. The Donnelly family saga could as easily be told by casting them as principal villains and architects of their own destruction (and indeed was so told before Reaney began his research and writing). Suffice it to say that the playwright is clearly on the side of his protagonists, fascinated by their story and its implications for the Canadian present, and is convinced of the serious import of the events dramatized.

The audience, naturally enough, is encouraged similarly to sympathize with the Donnellys as their tragedy unfolds.<sup>3</sup> In addition to portraying the Donnellys as charming rogues, Reaney slowly (and usually subtly) weights their antagonists with pejorative value. The law is, in the main, unable to imprison any Donnelly for any crime for any longer than a few months; Bob, incarcerated for two years, is the sole exception (151). In response to the perceived inefficacy of the law, citizens (including the priest and the constable) form a vigilante committee. This group manages to profane the Scriptures by setting up its “Donnelly Death Lottery”—Donnelly names written on scraps of paper to be drawn from the Bible (177). Politics is equally shallow: Timothy Corcoran, on the campaign trail, “manipulates a puppet version of himself” in giving his speech, and cannot speak without prevarication when he is quizzed by Will Donnelly and others concerning the stances he will take should he be voted to Parliament (154, 155).

Even religion promotes vigilantism instead of charity. One of the Donnellys’ few staunch supporters, Theresa O’Connor, says that the people who have “taken to hating” the Donnellys so much are “church proud” (195). The behaviour of the Church leaders shown in the plays seems to confirm that the Church is not helping matters. Father Connolly, the new priest imported to set the district back in order, occupies himself with proving “who is the priest of this parish” (216-7) and with raining prophetic (and impotent) curses on “the guilty party” (216, 248), until he has a crisis of conscience about his role in the eventual suicide of a young couple whose family religious backgrounds admit no possibility of the love the couple insists they share (227-29). His Bishop, ostensibly a more benign figure, is nonetheless subtly constructed by Reaney to

be highly manipulative. He will work to free Robert Donnelly early from prison, to “give this family one more chance” (226-7), but this help is offered on the understanding that the next time Corcoran runs for election in the district, he will receive total Donnelly voting support (227). The Bishop deals with Father Connolly’s crisis of conscience by berating him and then physically beating him back to his job (229). On a more subtle level, in one passage the Bishop’s diction echoes the wording of the gospels used to present Satan’s temptation of Christ in the wilderness: “let us go up in the tower of my cathedral—higher, higher, higher yet till we see?” (220; cf. Luke 4:1-12, Matt. 4:1-11). Reaney leaves little doubt that no matter how much the Bishop speaks of wishing to be fair to everyone, what he really wishes is to be fair to everyone who conforms to his views of how things should be. Though the Bishop insists that some good “will come of this severity” (229), one is left at the end of the trilogy with the distinct impression that any such good, including the existence of the plays themselves, has grown despite the Bishop and his ilk and not because of anything such agents of authority have done to help.

Meanwhile, the ‘soldiers’ of the vigilante committee gamble for Tom Donnelly’s raiment as part of the plot to frame the Donnellys and secure community support for the final attack being planned against them (233). Jim Feeney has betrayed Tom by borrowing clothes from him which he turns over to Carroll’s vigilantes. As with the account of the Bishop’s taking his secretary up to a pinnacle of the temple, so the wording of this scene deliberately echoes the biblical narrative of the soldiers casting lots for Christ’s garments at the foot of the cross (Matt. 27:35). Though some might be

inclined to suggest that Reaney has crossed into blasphemy by thus associating Tom Donnelly with the Saviour, there can be no doubt of the intent underlying such a characterization. Equally beyond doubt is the overt echo of *Riel*. Similar in tone is the posthumous memory of Bridget, seeing herself and her murdered cousins “walking as in a fiery furnace” (266), echoing Daniel 3:15-29. It is particularly interesting from a theological perspective that this final biblical echo should be from the Old Testament. The representatives of the Christian New Testament ethic have been decidedly wanting throughout the trilogy, and this late image casts the Donnellys as avenged under the old dispensation, even if not forgiven by the new.

The law again shows itself to be both insensitive and illogical as it pursues the arrest of Mrs Donnelly. The charges are patently ridiculous, and overtly presented as such. As Theresa O'Connor twice states, Mrs Donnelly is “accused all the time of doing things it would take an athletic hoyden of sixteen all her time doing, let alone an old woman in her sixties” (200, 241). Yet the agents of the law pursue and arrest her at the home of her daughter, in front of her grandchildren (244). If picking up Will at his own wedding and John in the midst of a dance showed the agents of the law in an unflattering light, arresting and handcuffing “grandma” in front of the grandchildren paints the law as deliberately malign. When she is finally taken, audience sympathy is squarely with her.

The Donnellys speak what they perceive to be the truth in all circumstances. To borrow a phrase used in another context in the play, the Donnellys attempt to wear “one face under one hat” (155). This alternative, when compared to the puppetry of politics, the incompetent and insensitive law, and the heartless, manipulative and presumptuous

Church, cannot fail to appeal to a contemporary audience. Reaney addresses an audience that has seen political, legal, and ecclesiastical scandal aplenty. Late twentieth-century scepticism concerning the integrity of our various agencies of established authority ensures that the Donnellys are received as the honest figures in the trilogy. But there is an important distinction between innocence and honesty: no one claims the Donnellys are innocents. What the Donnellys do, typified by James the younger's assault on then-constable Berryhill (143-4), is admit to what they *have* done wrong while steadfastly refusing to accept responsibility for what they have not done.

The Donnelly alternative is motivated by perhaps the most fundamental human impetus reflected in all literature: survival. Ironically, since opinions concerning what is essential for human survival frequently clash, the survival instinct may impel individuals towards choices which bring violence and destruction upon them and threaten their survival. The Donnellys believe that staying in Biddulph is essential to their survival. Though not welcome in their community, the Donnellys have invested enough time and energy into their land to make leaving it out of the question. In one sense, the Donnelly perspective promotes a community in which all folk can co-exist harmoniously. On the larger scale, the Donnelly refusal to vacate promotes the rejection of Old World values which are mere baggage, transported from 'home' (cp. Davies) and embraced in the New World in order to make its strangeness feel more like 'home.' The whole Blackfoot/Whitefoot controversy has next to no relevance in Canada, being rooted almost completely in British absentee landlord exploitation of Ireland. Mrs Donnelly states this challenge directly, but so early in the first part of the trilogy that it is easily forgotten

during the events that follow (16-21).

The potential and attractiveness of the Donnelly alternative are obvious. Particularly to a contemporary audience, one inundated with consciousness-raising about the harmful effects of racism, prejudice, and narrow-mindedness, the promotion of peaceful co-existence, of throwing off ancient prejudices, and of giving everyone enough room to grow at an individual pace in the wide-open new land of Canada is bound to seem attractive. The Donnelly refusal to leave Biddulph is, as voiced by Mrs Donnelly in Reaney's reconstruction of family dialogue, the essence of what coming to the New World was supposed to be about: "We're not there anymore . . . not an old country, but a new country these Canadas. . . . Not in Ireland. No, not there. With old names—Blackfoot, Whitefoot, slavery and fear. Here is a new fiddle, . . . and we're free as it is to play all the tunes" (20-1). Harmonious community, characterized by diverse, free expression, is a consummation devoutly to be wished. Even the Donnelly neighbours would rather have a peaceful community than a violent one, so much so that Sarah Farl (Pat's widow) and Mrs Gallagher turn to Mrs Donnelly for help in stopping Tom Cassleigh from his torture of Sarah's brother, Donegan (76-7). "Are there no men to stop this?" Mrs Donnelly asks; "They're afraid of Cassleigh," Sarah Farl responds, "or they like watching" (76). That the widow of James Donnelly's victim would turn to Mrs Donnelly for assistance at such a moment suggests that, at least in the earliest stages of the community's conflict with the Donnellys, the lines of division were not so firmly drawn as to be uncrossable.

However, as is the case for virtually every protagonist in contemporary English-

Canadian historical drama, the Donnelly alternative will cost normative authority dearly. Peaceful co-existence involves sloughing off tradition, treating the bits of identity stamped by Europe, embraced by so many as sole guarantors of individual integrity, as just so much antique rubbish. It involves letting go of old grudges, and changing the public practices of entire families—for example, the rigidity of approach that pushes Jerome O’Halloran and Katie Johnson to eventual suicide. It also requires that some of those most highly placed in the New World’s authority system cede some of their power and, harder still, some of their claim to property. Authority of a certain kind never enjoys criticism, nor will it stand for being challenged in its own spheres. When Norah Donnelly tells the priest that “there are always two sides to every story,” his response is blunt, delivered during a segue from private visitation to pulpit, suggesting that Father Connolly intends his words to be *ex cathedra*: “There are not always two sides to a story. There is one side, mark this, and one side only” (215). Not long after, Mrs Donnelly is advised by her lawyer that even if she and her husband are speaking the truth about the magistrates and their accuser, she should “not even dream of telling them so to their faces. . . . [W]ith persons of power it is wise to be discreet” (245). Authority will often also stand on ceremony for reasons having little to do with respect for proper hierarchy or discretion. Behind all the political and religious rhetoric that circles the Donnellys and their neighbours, one must also never forget that if the Donnellys do leave, their land is there for the taking.

The current dominant in Biddulph is a conservative political order, largely but not solely Protestant. George Stub is an Orangeman, but he backs the Catholic Timothy

Corcoran in district elections, while James Donnelly and family, Catholics, support the Protestant Grit candidate, Colin Scatcherd. Two of the Donnellys biggest enemies, Stub and Cassleigh, rise during the course of the plays to become Justices of the Peace. Opposition to the Donnellys thus becomes institutional policy. Just as Mrs Donnelly has directly voiced early in *Sticks and Stones* her belief that Canada should be a place allowing a new start and a cutting free from Irish-English prejudices, so her husband states directly late in the play that a principal cause of his unpopularity is his Grit politics, his complete refusal to support the dominant Tory agenda (88). Donnelly soon reiterates his wife's earlier challenge concerning the freedom that should be guaranteed in Canada: "No, this is a new country we live in, it's not back in the old country we're living. Mrs Donnelly and myself are free to do as we please" (91).

The Donnellys are nothing if not plain spoken; that too makes them enemies. Mr Donnelly's confrontation with Tom Cassleigh at the conclusion of *Sticks and Stones* is a classic example: "I built this road before you were ever heard of or the Fat Woman and her husband who got half our farm away from us. Before Stub drove out the Africans and you killed the Englishman, I helped make this road with Andy Keefe who you've finally chased out, to your shame" (92). These are words guaranteed to inflame the temper of a man who has just proudly announced himself "the first Catholic Justice of the Peace in this township" (89), and followed that up with "Yes, we want you out of the township . . . you Blackfoot face of a dog" (90). Mr Donnelly's behaviour here, of reaction not instigation, typifies Reaney's mode of presentation throughout the trilogy.

The Donnelly habit of violently voicing the truth as they see it is part of their

complexity. Compared to their neighbours, the Donnellys are remarkably honest and straightforward, yet as the trilogy develops—from the time of the burning of their barn in 1867 onward—the Donnellys are clearly not passive victims of abuse, sitting quietly while ruthless and unscrupulous neighbours systematically work violence on them. Horses are ridden to exhaustion or mutilated; Donnellys are accused and never cleared (141-2). Jim, Tom and Bob Donnelly threaten Frank Walker at his bar with “a scorching inside of six weeks” if he will not serve them (143). Interrupted by Constable Berryhill, who holds “twelve warrants” for Jim’s arrest, the brothers pursue the officer, tearing some of his beard out and pummeling him with stones (143). Then James takes the arrest warrants out of Berryhill’s pocket, tears them up, sprinkles them over porridge, and feeds them to the Constable. “I’m only feeding him the ones we didn’t do,” says James when asked why he is doing it at all: “This one here—I’ll eat myself, yes I did beat that grocer up . . .” (144). These admissions of guilt demonstrate the complexity of the Donnellys’ situation. Midway through *Sticks and Stones*, Sir Edmund Head, the Governor General, passes opinion on James Sr and the petition made by Mrs Donnelly for the commuting of his sentence: “I don’t think you can call him innocent. But my feelings are . . . that he did not present his part of the story soon enough” (66). It seems a characteristic Donnelly pattern throughout the trilogy: initially, silence or evasion is preferred to pleading their side of their various cases. By the time each accused Donnelly reaches the point of speaking his or her version of events, minds have already been closed to new evidence.

The principal reason why the dominant remains dominant in the Donnellys’

situation is the cumulative weight of local preference for the status quo. Equally important is the fact that the dominant forces are not above using a variety of dubious methods to remain dominant, including pseudo-scientific ‘offender profiling’ of the Donnellys, clandestine meetings employed to circumvent due process, and actual physical violence. While the bureaucratic machinery is manipulated to serve the personal interests of those already in power, figures of doubtful qualification such as James Carroll are promoted to positions of civic responsibility.

The concerned citizens’ committee, headed by Finnegan—who is in direct financial competition with the Donnellys in the local stagecoach business—hires, with town council approval, Hugh McCrimmon, a private detective, to ferret out “the perpetrators of certain crimes” (145). Meeting “in camera,” as McCrimmon puts it, or, in Finnegan’s more direct diction, in “hiding” (145), the group is told that the Donnellys “have done all these terrible things and they’ve been charged, but the constables can’t arrest them” (146). McCrimmon therefore begins to arrest the Donnellys for trivial offences. In disguise, he attempts to infiltrate “the outlaw’s nest” (147). McCrimmon burns a dollar bill in front of Bob Donnelly, finding psychological proof of Bob’s pyromaniac leanings in his fascination with the sight. The detective tortures the “weakest” of the Donnellys’ friends to obtain “all their plans” (149, 150, 151). When McCrimmon’s intriguing secures nothing greater than a two-year sentence for any Donnelly, he moves on and James Carroll moves in, becoming constable in Lucan and stirring Sid Skinner, once jilted in favour of Mike Donnelly, to think of murdering Mike. Carroll actually rehearses Skinner in the steps that the ostensibly spontaneous quarrel

will follow, and secures for him a whole new identity and job to help him get away and start over (163, 164). When the agents of authority follow such courses, it becomes next to impossible for audiences to trust anyone claiming to represent law and order.

The characteristic tensions between public and private versions of the self are seen in the differences between the Donnelly family reputation and the Donnelly family's sense of self. The children experience all manner of teasing, and their father's early run-ins with the law become local myth, finding expression in children's playground rhymes and the like (70). But at home, the Donnelly children are instructed in catechism (14-5) and given examples of their human rights and obligations. Mrs Donnelly demonstrates courage and a willingness to place wounded personal feelings second to the communal good in her intervention with Cassleigh over his treatment of Donegan. She shows charity, as recollected by Will in the face of mob oppression: "My mother's taken the hunger off a great many of you in days gone by when your parents sent you to our school with no lunch" (175). Tom Ryan's recollection of the sentimental song about "Pa" is set in opposition to his own father's perpetual drunken abuse (129ff), from which he seeks shelter at the Donnellys. Explaining his choice to his mother, Tom says simply, "there's love there" (132). Even Donnelly violence has its charitable side. Will Farl's remembrance of beatings from his father leads him to call the Donnellys friends because they killed his father (133). Their interaction with their community relentlessly presents them with a public version of themselves that conflicts with their domestic self-image. Since Reaney frequently dramatizes Donnelly home-life, the audience finds itself encountering the public version of the family exactly as the family members themselves

encounter it. The discrepancy between the two portraits is always obvious.

As Reaney puts it, the Donnellys “decide to be Donnellys” only at the conclusion of *Sticks and Stones*. To that point, covering the years 1844-1867, that which the community might say is “typical Donnelly” is more myth than reality. Yet, as observed in the incident with James Jr and Berryhill, Donnelly violence is not entirely mythical. As the plays progress and the Donnellys occasionally decide to do what they have already been accused and convicted, as it were, of doing in any case, the gap between the mythical and the actual Donnellys diminishes. In Reaney’s vision, though, that line is never wholly erased. In the other versions of the story, the dividing line disappears.

The Donnelly trilogy, in harmony with common practice, presents both moderate and extreme resistance to the protagonist. In the case of the Donnellys, moderate resistance takes the form of land disputes, claim jumping, forgetful or temptable landlords and application of the letter of the law to force land seizures. The debate concerning land ownership and squatters’ rights is not understood in identical terms. Whereas landlords such as Grace (40) are concerned with the abstract, monetary value of property, the Donnellys are concerned with the practical value of property as a source of shelter and basic subsistence.

Extreme resistance takes the form of violence done to property and to person. Toward the close of *Sticks and Stones*, someone burns the Donnelly barn. When genuine recourse to the law produces, correctly, minor sentences for minor offences, vigilantism trumps up more serious criminal charges. The final instance of extreme resistance is the torture, murder, and burning of the four members of the Donnelly family still resident in

their farmhouse in February 1880 (251, 255, 257). Mike has been murdered earlier (178), and John is shot later that same night, mistaken for his brother Will because he is, unexpectedly, spending the night at Will's house (251). Death is a fate common to many protagonists in the English-Canadian history play. Just as the Donnellys are unconventional in filling the role of protagonist as a group, so do they partly escape that common fate. That some of the Donnellys survive is both a mirror of the historical events and a function of their unusual "family-as-protagonist" role. The deaths which form part of the historical record inform the playwright's sense of the events as tragedy, while the historical fact that some Donnellys survived allows the playwright, quite literally, to give the family the last word. Temporally, the ghosts of the Donnellys directly address their present audience at the beginning of Act Three of *Handcuffs* (252-55); textually, Pat, Bob, Will, and Jennie place remembrance stones at the Donnelly house site in the fall of 1880, surrounded by an abundant crop of wheat (272).

Reaney's trilogy is founded, appropriately enough, on three basic themes: opposition, appellation, and transformation. Pairs of opposites are set in a counterpoint that echoes throughout the plays. Also significant is the manner and reasoning behind opposition. What one opposes, why one is so opposed, and how one goes about the business of indicating one's opposition are concerns of both the Donnellys and their sundry antagonists.

Opposites inform the entire trilogy. Noonan suggests that these include "Protestant and Roman Catholic, Grits and Tories, Whitefeet and Blackfeet, Church and State, the Girl with the Sword and the Fat Lady, and the false picture of the Donnellys as

opposed to the true image of them” (282). The Donnellys sometimes appear admirable when their views or motivations are compared to those of their neighbours. Will Donnelly, for instance, wishes to marry for love; in contrast, Mercilla Maguire marries George Stub solely for advancement in social standing contingent upon Stub’s future political success, and when that success is not forthcoming, leaves him (112, 155-6). The violent, unprincipled “cripple” is a model of romantic idealism while the clergyman’s daughter, overtly acknowledging her “depths of meanness” (112), is a social mercenary. Similarly, the Donnellys shelter Tom Ryan and Will Farl, providing them family comfort which the boys do not receive from their own families. Though this generosity contradicts the community’s image of the family, it too becomes a source for further criticism when community members accuse the Donnellys of “stealing” these lads from their rightful families. However, each boy’s perspective on life with his own father undermines what might otherwise constitute common sense.

Appellation is foregrounded through one of Reaney’s most frequent devices, the choral or individual litany of names—settlers, towns, dates—sometimes recited to link scenes and sometimes recited underneath other components of stage action (23-30, 33, 35, 46, 53-4, 68-9, 85, 100-02, 117-9, 130, 211, 219, 243, 245). The entire trilogy places great importance on the act of naming, and the equal importance of accepting (or rejecting) one’s appellation. Of particular significance is the familiar “sticks and stones” rhyme, which, like so much received wisdom in the plays, is interrogated and reconsidered. Mrs Donnelly quotes the old saw in an effort to calm her husband after he has had a confrontation with Pat Farl over Farl’s calling the Donnellys “Blackfoot”:

“There’s a proverb,” Mrs Donnelly says, “that sticks and stones may hurt my bones, but words will never harm them.” Mr Donnelly responds immediately: “Not true. . . . Not true at all. If only he’d hit us with a stone or a stick” (44-45). The name-calling aggravates “as if a thousand little tinkly pebbles keep batting up against the windows in [the] mind just when it’s a house that’s about to sleep” (45-6). Mr Donnelly feels, not without justification, that words are merely a prelude to sticks and stones, that accepting someone else’s label is more permanently destructive than any breaks and bruises would be. It is this rejection of the proverb that informs Mr Donnelly’s decision-making throughout the trilogy. He (and, by extension, his family) prefer physical injury to spiritual self-betrayal.

The final and most important of the three themes, transformation, provides a concept for integrating many otherwise disparate scenes. From the initial emigration to the New World to that final transformation which challenges by inescapable inclusion every character and every audience member, the plays examine the process by which separate threads of lives are entwined until they are knitted together, each transformed into something different by interdependence. Early in *Handcuffs*, the sewing machine is called “part of the play’s spirit” (191). Similarly, the final major dance sequence repeats and blends all previous themes (238-9). From the opening strains of “John Barleycorn” (13-14) to the final image—“where once there was a house/home, four stones” (273)—the trilogy chronicles the complex interplay of all the forces involved in the process of becoming, and challenges its audience to acknowledge their complicity in all that has been allowed to be.

The very words we use to express our understanding of self and others become shifty, untrustworthy—always pointing somewhere beyond themselves—as the drama manifestly interrogates strategies of dramatization. “Show me the scene where I kill Farl,” Mr Donnelly shouts at “Mr Showman Murphy” of the travelling medicine show (48). He proceeds to correct factual and representational errors in the performance, then to re-enact the incident in a form that offers a completely different prelude to Farl’s death (50-1). The device is repeated (68, 79-80, 102-3, 236) until, eventually, representation becomes unmistakably foregrounded as *re*-presentation, forcing audiences to question all they think they know of history, to confront the truth that no history is an unmediated record of fact. By having the performance interrogate its own performative norms, Reaney reminds his audience of the extent to which comprehension of event is linked with performance and perception of event (cf. 78, 82, 99). By the end of Act Two of *The St. Nicholas Hotel*, the audience is being directly confronted about its role. Will and the Chorus imitate the warning of generations of mothers: “be quiet, or the Black Donnellys will get you.” Will continues, alone: “Isn’t that what most of you in this room think of us as being?” forcing the audience (both halfway through the play itself and halfway through the trilogy) to examine its own assumptions (158). When the final act of *Handcuffs* begins it is 1974, and the audience is directly confronted by the ghosts of the Donnellys. At first these spectres address a representative figure of the present, a young drunken tough who has fallen on their gravestone while ‘summoning’ their spirits: “Is it too much when the curtain between you and us, between your life and our life, between life and death starts wavering and swaying?” asks the ghost of Mr Donnelly (254).

Before he can be freed, the youth must “First unlock the handcuffs in [his] mind” (254), the conditioning that defines the Donnellys according to stereotype. Finally, together with Tom, the Donnelly parents recite their history in poetic form, directly addressing the audience :

look we are everywhere

In the clouds, in the treebranch, in the puddle,

There. Here. In your fork. In your minds.

Your lungs are filled with us, we are the air you breathe (255)

The scene then cuts directly to the night of the murder with neighbours “watching the Donnelly house go up in flames” (255). Each audience member is thus joined to the hand that struck the match—spectators at the crime scene.

It should be observed that Reaney rarely has the Donnellys overtly express comprehension of the implications of their actions. The family does not generally speak in terms of peaceful co-existence or of national independence from ancestral heritage. They are not theorizing their actions; they simply *act* in accordance with their beliefs. As an effective literary work should do, the play finds its ‘universal’ in statements of the particular that are not understood as universal by the characters involved, but which transcend the specifics of those characters and their dramatized situations to address the separate yet connected realities of a variety of audiences.

At the same time that James Reaney was immersed in his Donnelly research and writing, at least three other Donnelly plays were in workshop and production, two of which were subsequently published in revised formats following performance of the

original scripts. Peter Colley, working with composer Berthold Carrière, created *The Donnellys: a drama with music* under commission from Theatre London in 1974. Theatre Passe Muraille, under the direction of Paul Thompson, mounted “Them Donnellys,” also in 1974. That script was eventually reworked by Ted Johns into *The Death of the Donnellys*, produced at the Blyth Summer Festival in 1979 and published in 1982. Remaining unpublished is the sixth Donnelly play of that three-year span, “Boys, You Have Done Enough Tonight,” written by Hugh Graham and originally produced at Trent University, Peterborough, again in 1974. The very existence of the play is documented only through Colley’s citing of it as extant “Additional background” to his version of the play. There seems to be no printed text surviving.<sup>4</sup>

Each of the extant variations on the Donnelly story remains faithful to the general outline of events, while choosing to present its protagonists in subtly but also significantly different manners. Each includes a few minor characters not found in other versions; some character names differ from text to text; and each chooses a slightly different method of demonstrating its own status as a text of the present interrogating the past. Predictably, as both Ted Johns and Peter Colley tell the story in a single play, each simplifies or omits steps in the sequence of events upon which Reaney, with a trilogy, has time to dwell. In consequence, Reaney’s version of the saga, by sheer weight of evidence, seems both most thorough and most balanced, more fair to all involved—even when that fairness might seem unmerited.

Colley’s *Donnellys* are as much a mixture of motivations, as multi-faceted as are Reaney’s. However, Colley relies more on presentation of violent scenes and renders his

Donnellys less cleanly, as it were, than Reaney. Like both Reaney before and Johns afterwards, Colley takes time to stress in an author's note that his play "does not claim to be the exact truth" (A5). Insisting that "we will never know for sure" whether there was justification for the killings, Colley presents his play as "a dramatic representation of the way it may have occurred, using as much of the available information as possible" (A5). Having thus stressed that he does not claim to be presenting "exact truth," Colley proceeds to claim precise documentary authority for "some of the events and dialogue" which he informs us "are taken directly from newspapers and court records of the time" (A5). Colley's version of *The Donnellys* is, then, simultaneously an imagined representation of what might have happened and a dramatization of documentary evidence—as far as such exists. These tensions are observable throughout the play.

Colley employs stock characters more frequently than does Reaney. He invents the garrulous, bibulous Tim Mulligan as a narrational device for centring the whole of the play. This choice has both merits and flaws. Given the bewildering variety of events and personages dramatized in all three versions of the story, audiences might appreciate the presence of a unifying figure whose commentary will occasionally explain or point in the right direction. Mulligan, however, is a comic figure, described as the "Eternally drunk Irishman," and always playing for laughs (A6). The tragedy of the Donnelly story is somewhat undermined by the use of this figure of comic relief as its controlling interpreter (A6). When Mulligan sinks to lines like "the seven deadly sons" in describing the Donnelly boys (A49), or talks of mixing castor oil with whisky to give you "a better run for your money" (A68), he may get laughs but one wonders to what extent comedy is

appropriate.

Supporting Mulligan in representing the community are two groups of ‘general citizens,’ one female and one male. The women’s group is composed of one “very pregnant and rather slow-witted” woman, one “old and crotchety,” one “Strong minded” who “Doesn’t believe gossip,” and one who “Doesn’t like the Donnellys, and believes everything she hears” (A7). These characters meet in sewing circles and speak the mind of the town and district (A52ff). Their gossip is somewhat useful for conveying background details to the audience, while simultaneously presenting the range of community reaction to escalating local violence. As evils accumulate, hearsay becomes positive proof of guilt: “I was told” is the repeated phrase of the moment (A61ff). Similarly employed is an aggregation of men, including one “grumpy old man,” an “extremely slow-witted but brutal member of the vigilante committee” (A6), and assorted other male stock figures. The presentation of character is handled, as in Reaney’s trilogy, by a small company of actors, most of whom play a variety of roles. Colley seems to be trying for a slightly more conventional structure in casting, but the result is negligible.

Colley also makes more than either Reaney or Johns of the stereotypical division between English Protestant and Irish Catholic. While those common pairings of nationality and denomination exist in all versions of the story, Colley simplifies the complexities underlying Donnelly support for someone such as Colin Scatcherd, for example, choosing to present the lines of antagonism drawn as much in black and white as they might have been perceived to be in the Tipperary from which the Donnellys

emigrated. Colley actually sets the earliest part of his play in Ireland, showing the “whiteboys” at work putting pressure on Jim Donnelly (A9-A17). The Whitefoot agitation is shown by Colley to be the direct cause of the Donnelly’s emigration to Canada. Also interesting for its own sake in this Ireland scene is some development of the Donnelly parents before their children become part of their thoughts and motivations. That is an element not found either in Reaney’s trilogy or in Johns’ play.

When the action shifts to Upper Canada, Jim Donnelly is portrayed as being much more aggressive in his pursuit of land than he was by Reaney. Colley’s Jim Donnelly has had enough of all landlords (A19)—another interesting piece of his character not as clearly seen in any other version, in that, opposed to landlord interference as he is, he *should* sympathize entirely with Whitefoot motives, if not necessarily with their methods. The consequence of Colley’s choice to dramatize “whiteboy” scenes in Ireland and to develop Jim Donnelly’s early actions in Canada more aggressively is a clearer understanding of why Donnelly will not “kneel” in either of the plays. The “whiteboys” are merely using landlord tactics to oppose landlords; Jim Donnelly refuses to exchange one form of master for another.

Community tension is clearly signalled from the start. As the Donnellys try to determine who owns the land they propose to squat on, they are told that “Half of Lucan’s from Tipperary” and that from the start of settlement in the township “Protestants, Catholics and bastard Blackfeet” have been co-existing *and* fighting about it (A20). Mrs Donnelly is so unnerved by these early echoes of Tipperary that she asks about the possibility of moving elsewhere from the start, but Jim Donnelly will move no

further. When Carswell, the owner of the land upon which Donnelly has been working for some time, shows up to claim rights to his property, the negotiation merely alluded to by Reaney is dramatized by Colley as intimidation, with Donnelly doing most of the threatening. He verbally and physically abuses Carswell, eventually choking him with his own collar (A23). "As soon as I earn enough money, I'll pay you for the land," Donnelly tells Carswell (the same agreement as dramatized by Reaney, but achieved here by force), and adds "And you know what'll happen to you if you go running to the law" (A23). Reaney's Jim Donnelly is portrayed as a trusting, simple, immigrant farmer cheated by a forgetful, avaricious landlord out of half the land he has worked so hard to clear. Colley's Jim Donnelly simply sees some land he likes and takes it by force.

Colley clearly states, through Mulligan, that there will be "no saints" in this story (A22). It is in this regard that both he and Johns differ most fundamentally from Reaney. While it would be unfair to suggest that Reaney perceives the Donnellys as saints, he is beyond doubt certain that they have been misjudged and misrepresented, and he directly challenges his audiences to confront their own roles in the perpetuation of the Donnelly stereotype. Both Colley and Johns, however, are non-committal on the subject of whether or not the Donnellys have been unfairly written into history. Both playwrights dramatize conflicts similar to those developed by Reaney, and reach similar endings (in part as dictated by the notoriety of their historical model); but neither Colley nor Johns is as clearly sympathetic to the Donnellys. Reaney is out to correct perceptions of the Donnellys; Colley and Johns seem to wish to do no more than dramatize the various perceptions.

Accordingly, Colley employs more crudity in diction (cf. A26-7, A51, and especially the murder scene, A95) and shows directly more violence on stage, some of it performed by various Donnellys and some not. All the Donnellys are more crude than they are seen to be in Reaney's trilogy. This difference in portrayal is especially evident in Mrs Donnelly, particularly when her husband has his initial confrontation with Pat Farrell. She blusters and threatens Farrell just as her husband does—"You're going to wish that you never said that, mister!" (A30)—and calls her sons to watch their father "have some fun" fighting (A30). Though she is soon seen cautioning Jim against further fighting with Farrell (A33), and fulfilling a role similar to that imagined for her by Reaney—making poetic commentary on the significance of the action at major plot points (A34-5)—Colley's Mrs Donnelly is never as admirable a figure as Reaney's version of her is. Johns will further coarsen the presentation of the character.

Colley shows Pat Farrell as directly intervening in the dispute between Donnelly and Carswell, not because Farrell wants that land in particular, but because Jim Donnelly is "treacherous" and "a Blackfoot" (A27). The land dispute thus becomes a side-effect of the older Irish political scene. Farrell convinces Carswell that Donnelly's promise of eventual payment is worthless, and buys the land out from under the Donnellys without so much as mentioning that such negotiations are taking place (A29). When the court reviews the transaction and awards half the land to each of the antagonists, Farrell (made all the more cranky by the fact that he launched the suit to start with) responds with endless, agitational public complaints about the Donnellys (A32). The subsequent killing of Farrell thus seems less accidental than Reaney suggests, and less exaggerated by time

than Johns portrays it to be. After listening to Farrell's incessant grouching through the course of the evening (here portrayed as a dance following the barn-raising bee), Donnelly loses his temper and threatens to "whip [Farrell] to the edge of the grave" (A34). Donnelly also quite overtly "*poises to hit Farrell with the handspike*" (A34). Whereas Reaney conveys the sense that Jim is literally struggling to get "Farl" off his back when he strikes (51), and Johns (uncharacteristically) suggests that Jim chooses his weapon by pure chance (2), Colley here shows Jim Donnelly at the end of an already demonstrated short fuse, deliberately choosing to kill Farrell.

Regardless of the variety of ways in which the killing of Farrell/Farl is portrayed, the consequences remain the same. Colley's use of Jim Donnelly's absence—two years spent hiding around the district followed by seven years of imprisonment—falls somewhere between the detail dramatized by Reaney and the almost complete omission of these incidents from Johns' presentation. Community voices participate in the search for the fugitive, giving the audience their first glimpse of the community in stereotype since the Donnellys arrived in Biddulph (A38-40). Similarly, Colley presents Mrs Donnelly's petition for the commuting of her husband's sentence, but in less detail than Reaney does. Colley chooses to show the incident of Mrs Donnelly's taking the children to church to seek sympathy for her petition as representative of the entire struggle (A42). Restricted by the limitations of trying to write the story in a single play, Colley generally chooses single illustrative moments of the many steps the story takes; Johns, by contrast, omits large quantities of the extant plot, choosing instead to dramatize at length scenes of heightened tension between the Donnellys and their opponents.

The family, in Will's words, "close[s] the ranks" (A44) for safety and awaits the end of Jim Donnelly's time in prison. Colley's diction in this transitional moment continues his generally consistent pattern of steering a middle course between Reaney and Johns in his portrayal of the family. Will speaks of the family being "frightened" but never showing their fear (A44). Colley, in giving these words to Will, also shows more of Will Donnelly's reputed refinement of character and mental agility than Johns does. Colley shows the Donnelly children keeping themselves to themselves, and growing up fast; they grow into their reputations in part because of their perceived need to keep themselves safe. While their father is in prison, the children fight in response to insults received; sympathy is, at this point, more with the Donnellys than perhaps it will be at any other point in the play. Yet as they defend their family name, the Donnelly children, including Will, begin to add to their bad reputation through the increasing use of violence (A47). Colley thus establishes the manner by which, according to his reading of them, the Donnellys build their bad reputation on the foundations of family loyalty—a commonly defended impulse finding expression in increasingly indefensible actions.

When Will brags of stealing a bottle of whisky "out of old man Thompson's shed" (A52) there is nothing in him of the intelligent and creative figure he is often described as being. He is just being "a Donnelly." Soon after, Will invokes the family's negative image to justify revenge: "Those Ryder boys could club their grandmother to death in the constable's office, and we'd get blamed for it. Let's give them something real to complain about" (A58). Will's words raise another issue common to all treatments of the story: the extent to which rumour is credible and gossip believed. In

each of the plays, people tend to believe in the Donnellys' guilt, even, sometimes, in the face of contradictory evidence (A61).

Colley presents the rise of the vigilante committee through direct contact between the law, represented by Magistrate McLaughlin, and the Church, represented by Father Connolly.<sup>5</sup> McLaughlin directly states the need for vigilante action and the priest immediately seconds him. There is no hiding the purpose of the group behind less precise names. Everyone tells the priest that the Donnellys are responsible for the various crimes that have been plaguing the district and he seems to accept that information without a moment's hesitation (A62). Colley handles the appointment of James Carroll to the position of constable with similar brevity (A63). The most important consequence of Colley's choices in this passage is that all complexity of motivation, all uncertainty is erased. There is no subtlety, no moral qualm from anyone involved. When Jim Feeheeley (Feeney in Reaney's text, and Pat Ryder in Johns') refuses to "swear against" his "best friend" Tom Donnelly (A65), James Carroll immediately "*grabs Feeheeley in an arm hold. Father Connolly goes on with the book. He pretends not to see what Carroll is doing*" (A65). As with Johns' treatment of the vigilante group, the immediate collusion of Church and law here does not create sympathy for the Donnellys in what they find themselves up against but rather the impression that all participants in the drama are equally reprehensible.

That said, Colley does appear to make some effort to make the agents of order seem worse than the people they are ostensibly trying to control. He does this by having his comic relief, Mulligan, interrogated by Constable Carroll (A67-8). Suddenly, the

figure whose job it has been throughout the play to lighten the tension is caught in the grip of the tension. His feeble attempts to be non-committal merely get him in more trouble. He is in danger of being cut open by Carroll when he manages to extricate himself by the simple device of accusing someone else (A69). Just before he meets with Carroll, Mulligan announces to the audience his intent to have a “deaf spell” for a while, to stay away from any apparent involvement with all sides (A67). “I might as well have stayed in Tipperary,” he laments, reminding the audience of the roots of the dispute and, perhaps, suggesting that if the audience reviewed the beginning of the story armed with what they now know there might be more sympathy for the Donnellys after all (A67).

This general sense of greater sympathy for the Donnellys is maintained through to the end of the play. Though Colley never quite loses sight of the early assertion that the play is without saints, he does, as the action moves toward crisis and climax, show most of the backstabbing, most of the recriminations, most of the duplicity, and most of the worst of the violence as emanating from the vigilante committee and not from the Donnellys. Carroll, in particular, is more vulgar in diction, more violent in act as events unfold (A76-77). Formal authority, as embodied in the judge who hears the various cases brought against the Donnellys, reiterates the view that “there is no doubt they make bad enemies” (A76). However, in harmony with common practice that portrays the more highly placed agents of authority as more benign figures, the judge condemns the prosecution for “the number of times [it] has dragged this family into court with just a modicum of evidence” (A76). The judge’s caution notwithstanding, it is clear to the Donnellys that they are losing support: “One by one they’ve stopped talking to us,” says

Jim. "One by one they've stopped coming around" (A79).

Colley orchestrates the murders, the sundry vigilantes attacking from various positions of concealment once Carroll enters, ostensibly on official business. Carroll himself strikes the first blow (A93). The action is highly stylized, and is restricted to a sudden, intense burst of action which is over in seconds, followed by a freeze and immediate transition to the deposition of Johnny O'Connor, the only witness (A94). Colley once more steers a course between Reaney and Johns, dramatizing the violence more overtly than the former but for much shorter duration than the latter. The playwright intersperses scenes from the murders with O'Connor's subsequent trial testimony, allowing the impact of the extreme violence portrayed (the most graphic and extreme depiction of any of the texts) to be ingested by the audience incrementally (A95). Once the gang kills John (as in the other versions of the story, he is mistaken for his brother Will, thereby indirectly saving Will's life), the scene returns from the trial to the night of the killings as Johnny O'Connor seeks help at a neighbouring farm.

Colley adds one other scene that neither Reaney nor Johns develops. After the reporters from London and Toronto ask the basic questions, and through Mulligan, the legend in all its exaggeration begins to swell, the audience is shown the vigilante group's principal agents celebrating the killings (A100-01). They laugh and remind each other of the more gruesome details, shouting "We'll be heroes yet!" (A100). But they are overtly rejected by their fellow townspeople, who make a point of snubbing them, turning away and "*remaining motionless on stage*" (A101). The play by now has become wholly supportive of the Donnellys, showing all other levels of the town to be riddled with

hypocrisy.

As Colley's play winds to a close, Will attempts to investigate what happened to his family, but meets only with "I saw nothing" / "I heard nothing" / "I know nothing" (A103). Father Connolly, who was present at the founding of the vigilante committee, swears in court that it "was already in existence," that he "did not instigate it" (A103). The scene shifts from witness box to pulpit and, as Father Connolly, in tears, delivers his funeral oration, the scene freezes and Mulligan comments: "There was more than a few in that house of God that day wishing them eternal torment between the lines of the Lord's Prayer" (A105). Will attempts to make the law for once serve him rather than pursue him, but the jury returns a "not guilty" verdict and, in harmony with the historical record, no formal responsibility for the crime is ever declared. As one of the community men tells a reporter, "the murderers are the most respectable men in the township, good farmers and honest men. But they had to do it—there was no other way" (A100). Respectability seems decidedly tawdry as Will declares himself "too tired to fight any more," and the cast as a whole closes the play in a song about how "the legend of the Donnellys / Has only just begun" (A106).

Colley moves from an initial non-committal attitude toward the Donnellys, through a gradual shifting of support for them, to a conclusion which, if not trumpeting their cause (as Reaney might fairly be said to be doing), is at least challenging to any settled perceptions the audience might have managed to cling to by shutting its eyes to the brutality of the murder sequence. Colley's version of the story is problematic in that it is neither as aggressively positive as Reaney's nor as neutral as Johns'. Colley seems

to have difficulty deciding precisely what his stance is. In that respect, his play may at least be granted the recognition of being called honest. It is a rendition of the story which accurately evokes the emotions likely felt by many, both at the time of the events portrayed and in years since, when trying to comprehend what went wrong and who was responsible. In that way, Colley's play fulfills, more clearly than does Johns', the didactic function that so frequently figures in the English-Canadian history play. *The Donnellys: a drama with music* does not overtly teach a specific lesson so much as remind its audiences of the need to interrogate the lessons they have already been taught.

The final published version of the Donnelly tale, *The Death of the Donnellys*, takes a different approach to the events as reconfigured by either Reaney or Colley. In his author's note, Ted Johns voices the intent to present neither history nor documentary but "a study in law" through the dramatization—the laws of family, of society, and of God (iii). Among the devices unique to Johns' version is the presence in the cast of "Uncle Orlo," who passes on to his own descendants the tales of "Grampa Kelly" (2) concerning the Donnellys. Johns names these minor characters after the two principal authors of historical studies of the Donnellys, Thomas P. Kelley and Orlo Miller. Kelley's *The Black Donnellys* (1954) and its successor, *Vengeance of the Black Donnellys* (1962), are, it is generally felt, anything but unmediated truth. Kelley's version of the historical record is sensationalized and exaggerated, perhaps more fictional than the plays. Miller's *The Donnellys Must Die* (1967) is usually considered a balanced corrective to Kelley's excesses.

Accordingly, Johns has Uncle Orlo establish the tale, including the habit of

exaggeration surrounding all versions of the Donnelly legend. *The Death of the Donnellys* begins with the confrontation between Jim Donnelly and Pat Farrell (Farl, in Reaney's trilogy) at the neighbourhood barn-raising. Johns relegates the whole of the Irish background to occasional mention in passing (1-2), and, like Reaney, confronts the audience with reminders that the tale they are about to see is a construct. However, whereas Reaney intersperses throughout his trilogy reminders that the story has on occasion been exaggerated and altered to make a good tale more fun in the telling, Johns uses a prologue to present a single reminder of the re-presented and exaggerated nature of the materials in the play. The mythic aggrandizing of detail, the inflating of all possible extremes, the accretion of data subsequent to the events dramatized are all shown through Uncle Orlo's presentation of this first moment in which James Donnelly runs foul of the law. The fight between Donnelly and Farrell is first shown as "Realistic Fight" (1-2), taking 14 lines of text, most of it stage direction, then as "Mythic Fight" (2-4), which fills most of two pages. The mythic fight—the fighters played by two women, each mounted on the shoulders of a male actor—features inarticulate grunts of rage in place of dialogue between the combatants. In addition to muffling dialogue and exaggerating the size of the combatants, Johns equally distorts peripheral actions in the scene: Donnelly and Farrell, "doing all kinds of hard drinking" (2), guzzle from washtubs, and the hand-spike with which Donnelly kills Farrell is a "five foot two-by-four" (3). The whole scene is narrated by Uncle Orlo, whose reporting is imprecise: "So Donnelly says something to Farrell. . . . And Farrell says something back to Donnelly. . . . Then Donnelly said something worse to Farrell" (2-3). The combined effect of these

devices is to foreground the reported, re-presented, filtered, exaggerated nature of the story with which most of the audience is familiar, to stress the distance that already exists between the events, the recording of those events, and contemporary perception of those events through narration. Also stressed is the relative simplicity of what ‘actually happened’ in comparison to the complexity of what has been subsequently made of it.

In general, both Johns and Colley simplify. One of the most significant examples in Johns’ play is the petition of Mrs Donnelly to have her husband’s death sentence commuted. Whereas Reaney presents the sequence at length, showing Mrs Donnelly struggling up and down the roads of the county seeking signatures on her petition (in a manner reminiscent of Laura Secord’s journey, though, of course, in keeping with the major alteration that Reaney’s plays make to the genre, in service of a personal goal, not a communal one), Johns elides the whole episode, covering the petition and commuting of sentence in a single paragraph of narration from Uncle Orlo.

The remainder of the family is presented to the audience in a sequence of rhyming verses, set against the rhythms of a step dance, which quickly draws lines of antagonism between the town and the Donnellys: “On this side’s Lucan — over there, them Donnellys” (4). As in Reaney’s trilogy, the Donnellys are allowed to voice their own version of events, here summarized by Mrs Donnelly as “A couple of thugs we’d like to name” and her husband’s addition, “‘Twas them not us should take the blame” (4). Similarly established is Will’s relationship with Maggie (here Thompson), the eventual death of John Donnelly, and the characters of the most aggressive of the brothers, Bob and Tom (5).

The effect of such a quick rhyming summary, accompanied by the patterns of the dance and the energy of the “crowd reaction” (a repeated stage direction), is to highlight both the variety of information that any attempt to comprehend the story must come to terms with and the sense of repetition and rhythm in the events. The rhyme lightens the tone of the opening, and is perhaps intended to counter the likelihood that at least some of any audience will expect all the worst they have heard about the Donnellys to be the truth. It also diminishes the seriousness of the violence involved. Johns’ prologue seems to try to invite without overwhelming the audience, but may, by its light-hearted tone, undermine the tragic impact of the story. The presentation is reminiscent of the medicine show as mocked by Reaney, and although Johns has overtly recognized the problems inherent in re-narration of the events through his “mythic fight” scene, he has not entirely avoided those problems himself.

The play begins with that ground and tone established. Act One opens with Mr Donnelly’s evasion of arrest and the struggle of Mrs Donnelly to raise the eight children in his absence. This material is also covered in brief representative scenes, Mr Donnelly singing his tale in the form of a prison blues intercut with dialogue between Mrs Donnelly and her increasingly rambunctious sons. Johns continues to stress the humorous possibilities of the story, first showing Mr Donnelly unable to identify which son is which upon his return from seven years in prison (8-9), then pitting him in a match with “the one man who can really beat [him]” (9), his son Tom. However, the friendly fight almost gets out of control; Tom is embarrassed to discover himself “shaking [his father] like a rat” (9). Lightness of tone is maintained by Mr Donnelly’s praise of his

son's pugilistic abilities, but a hint of uncontrollable rage is present. It will be a keynote for Johns' portrayal of the Donnellys throughout: they are subject to losing sight of the specifics of their circumstances and to over-reacting. It is a different view than that developed by Reaney, who usually presents all Donnelly excesses as either reactions to excesses performed against them or as not performed by the Donnellys at all.

An important action for contemporary audiences is Mr Donnelly's repeated attempting to discipline his boys. Act 1, scene 3, part I is titled "Family Court, Belt Scene" and, not surprisingly, Mr Donnelly uses violence and force to curb the behaviour of his sons. Though Mr Donnelly is attempting to bring his wayward lads under control, to stop them from their pranks, contemporary audiences will immediately perceive his solution as part of the problem. Of equal importance to Johns' general characterization of the family is his suggestion that Bob and Tom actually *are* responsible for the various incidents of barroom brawling and horses being taken out of neighbouring barns at night and ridden to exhaustion (14). Reaney's Donnellys are accused of such things, but rarely shown directly to be responsible for them; by contrast, Johns makes clear quite early that the Donnelly sons are often guilty as charged and that violence is the norm for both recreation *and* correction in this family court.

Another variation from Reaney's method is that Johns presents *Mr* Donnelly as the voice of reason and the one who reminds his family of the stakes involved. It is James Donnelly who reminds the boys of what they all might lose as a consequence of their shenanigans: "We came to this country because there was land. Now we're not going to lose that land. We're not going to throw it away on court costs and lawyers' fees

and bails and bonds and fines. We're not going to lose it over something as stupid as twenty dollars worth of stamps" (17). Mrs Donnelly, in Johns' version, is much less intelligent and much less charming. It is she, for instance, who proudly stresses the boys' fighting abilities (9). Though Mrs Donnelly reads the future in tea leaves (21), she is often unable or unwilling to speak what she sees; "oh, never mind" becomes a favourite phrase. Thus, while she appears to have knowledge she also appears to be incapable of using it, in complete contrast to her portrayal in Reaney's trilogy as the unflagging agent of energy who holds the family together.

Equally different in presentation is Maggie. In Reaney's *St. Nicholas Hotel*, Will's first love is a sheltered girl, loyal to her father, giving him all the money she earns as a servant, writing gentle and touching love letters to Will and exchanging them by all manner of subterfuge. Maggie's father all but imprisons her, his hatred of the Donnellys painted as blind prejudice. In *The Death of the Donnellys*, Maggie is part of Will's "Hellin' Around" (as Act One, Scene Two is titled), pretending to be William Porte's wife, injured in a stage accident, so that the lads can get into Porte's brandy supplies—supposedly to aid the victim's recovery (12). When Porte discovers the deception, Maggie brazenly kisses him, saying "I won't tell if you don't" (13), and then promptly answers Porte's wife, who is inquiring about Porte's whereabouts, with "He's kissing me" (13). As Maggie makes her escape, Porte calls after her "You young she-devil" (13). It is a fair description of Maggie as Johns renders her. Her eventual separation from Will is not, as in Reaney's play, at her father's instigation; nor is Maggie incarcerated in a convent as she is in Reaney's version (where she dies, a tragic, lonely, symbolic figure).

Instead, she is furious at Will's assorted unfulfilled promises of wealth, his promised "coach and six white horses" thundering down the road (20). Will says "You'll have it all, Maggie. You'll have the world" (20); but when he fails to make it reality, and mismanages their plans to elope, Maggie castigates him: "You, who were going to take me out of this hell-hole, you have dug the pit deeper" (34). Will's apologetic reaction—"This ain't the way I planned it, Maggie" (34)—is met by the blunt rejoinder, "Tell it to your wife. But don't tell it to me" (34). Later, as the vigilante committee forms and chooses a new constable, Kennedy is rejected because his sister Nora is Will Donnelly's wife (59). "Whatever happened to Maggie?" asks Porte (59). There is no explanation. The portrayal of Maggie as more mercenary and Will as vaguely inarticulate contrasts completely with Reaney's vision of the tragic, forced end to the romance, and of Will as the most expressive and articulate of the Donnelly family. These differences are an important reminder of the extent to which all the plays are *based on* the Donnelly story, a reminder that the events of our history are less significant than our perception and representation of those events.

In general, Johns portrays all characters as rough and ready sorts. On the way to the "chivaree," the Donnellys and Pat Ryder steal the town bell. They are, at first, challenged by William Porte, but in the space of a few seconds he grows sentimental about his own first night as a married man and is soon encouraging the lads to "Take the bell. Take the wheelbarrow. Take the whole town for all I care" (24). During the chivaree sequence itself (Act 1, Scene 7) even the bride is loud and aggressive, confronting her father-in-law with vitriolic rage and dismissing him with "if you ever

want to see your grandchildren and bounce them on your knee, get up on your hind legs and walk” (32). Will Donnelly displays next to nothing of the intelligence and erudition with which Reaney invests him. Though Maggie says he “belongs in the council chambers of the world” (32), there is no evidence to support such a claim. Will forgets his own elopement plans in the fun of the chivaree and, rejected by Maggie, staggering drunk, he fiddles while his brother Bob smashes their friend, Kennedy, with a two-by-four (35).

In Johns’ version, the Donnellys resort more quickly to overt and intense acts of violence. Bob’s ‘disciplining’ of Kennedy in the chivaree scene is typical. The accusation of mutilating horses, flatly refuted in Reaney’s text, is not only here confessed by Bob but even signed, after a fashion:

Well I went down to Flannigan’s stables  
 And I went in beside his horses  
 And I opened their mouths  
 And I reached inside  
 And I grabbed their tongues  
 And I pulled them out  
 And I cut the tongues out of every one of Flannigan’s horses!  
 And I nailed them up on the wall.  
 And I spelt T-O-M. (46)

Later, at the Ryder wedding, Will resists arrest by kneeling Constable Everett in the crotch after mocking him with genteel show (53). Bob and Tom join the fray, Bob

holding the constable upright following Will's knee in the groin so that Tom can kick Everett in the face (53).

Johns, unlike Reaney, is not so much rehabilitating the Donnelly reputation as he is showing that all of those involved were equally prone to violent action, premeditated or otherwise. In that regard, Johns actually swings away from common practice to a greater degree than either Reaney or Colley. Johns' Donnellys present neither a demonstrable alternative to normative authority, nor any particular charisma. Johns seems content, despite his stated intent to produce "a study in law" (iii), to present action for its own sake, to tell the story because it is an exciting story. For example, though the play purports to "study" law, the attempts of various antagonists to oppose the Donnellys via legal proceedings is conveyed only briefly, and in song—a single character using a "blues" format. The second chorus of the 'Court Blues' aptly summarizes Johns' general approach: "Great recreation / Good participation / Family entertainment" (54). A didactic purpose is not immediately evident, and is, even where discernible, at best secondary in emphasis to the entertainment value of the show.

Porte chairs the vigilante group and keeps a record of all proceedings in his book (57, 59). The first order of business is to replace Everett as constable. James Carroll, alluded to in the court song, is hired as a virtual unknown; his connection to the Farrell (Farl) family goes unmentioned (62). The change in constables is called for because Constable Everett has been too zealous in pursuing his duties, in the course of which he has imprisoned Porte overnight to sober him up (57). The new constable, it is felt, should be Catholic because "this new man has gotta get along with Father Connolly"

(61). This first mention of Father Connolly in the Johns version immediately links him with the vigilantes. He is described in terms that even the Protestants respect; he is a man who can accomplish great things, someone “who will do his duty, come what may” (62). Such rhetoric of fidelity to duty will excuse much rigidity of approach, and even some criminal behaviour, as the play progresses.

Common to all versions of the story is Carroll’s method of employing torture to secure anti-Donnelly testimony. But, just as Johns’ Donnellys are prone to more intense violence, so the description and staging of the violence performed by their antagonists are more explicit and brutal. In *The Death of the Donnellys* it is Pat Ryder who fills the role of the Donnellys’ betrayer. He is strung up by his thumbs, then jerked up and down by Carroll’s men (75). Pat refuses to co-operate, so Carroll leaves him suspended by his thumbs and grabs him by the shirt front, shaking him until finally Pat says what Carroll wants to hear and promptly passes out (76).

Much is elided in Johns’ version of the story. The shift of loyalties that turns some former friends into enemies of the Donnellys is abruptly displayed through the figure of Grouchie Ryder, whose change of heart is hasty, and based on circumstantial evidence (67). Similarly, the deaths of James Jr and Mike are mentioned in passing after the fact, alluded to only as examples of how neighbourhood gossip surrounds the Donnellys and distorts facts (67). There is no Johnny O’Connor to witness the final slaughter: Johns shows the whole murder in all its gory glory directly to the audience, in highly stylized experimentation with freezes, double- and single-speed action, and passages rendered in naturalistic mode, all juxtaposed (81).



- Will: No crazier than this world is gettin'. No crazier than men who burst into a woman's house, stare at her, and scare her, and tell her to get out.
- Kennedy: We were warning her, the way we're warning you. We're saying things have got to get better or they're gonna get worse.
- Will: Well, I say the place to start is here. I say shake hands and start again. (waits)
- Kennedy: I can't.
- Will: John. Come on. We're within a hair's breadth of something really important here. Can't you see that? (73)

Kennedy refuses the peace overture. Will promptly says, "You missed a chance to see the Donnellys on a good day. Now you're gonna see them on a bad" (74). The audience is immediately forced to reconsider Will's pacifist stance in the previous scene.

Johns conforms to habitual practice in his conclusion. Though characters have been combined at some earlier points in the story, and though much has been omitted, the deaths of the Donnellys are dramatized in accordance with the historical record. Will remains alive and it falls to him to state the overt theme in conclusion. But the audience has not been prepared by his earlier appearances for the poetic quality his final words assume. Regrettably, it seems fairly clear that the last thing the audience sees and hears in the play is not the character reacting to his family's tragedy, but his author using the character as a mouthpiece.

This butchery. This maddened beast of death. Let it stand.

Let it stand.

Let it be a measure of how far we are from heaven.

How close we are to hell. (85)

It seems clear that Johns, in moving through the laws of family and society to end with the laws of God, intends his audiences to see all participants in the drama as equally blameworthy, equally flawed, equally responsible. Only in this final scene does the audience get a clear sense of didactic purpose in the play. Whereas Reaney suggests to his audience that we are all responsible for our own Donnellys, Johns suggests that we *are* all Donnellys—that what we have seen should remind us of our humanity and of how far that humanity has fallen from the spiritual ideals which it was ostensibly created to embody. Regrettably, Johns' choices in dramatization are not as praiseworthy as the thematic intention for which he makes those choices.

The major challenge presented to audiences by the Donnelly story, in all its variations, is a profound and simple one: to every audience member, the plays suggest that some of our ancestors might have violated just about all of the ten commandments in the name of order and of God. State apparatuses are inflammatory rather than palliative in their effect; the Church hides behind itself, using its reputation to *avoid* taking helpful action; the legal system coerces co-operation; the forces of order (as in parts of *Riel*) are drunk and disorderly. Our sense of self as Canadians, distinguishable from our southern neighbours by our love for peace and order, is challenged; the various barn-burning incidents display Ontario in images directly comparable to Faulknerian Mississippi. In

Reaney's trilogy, even the stage directions cast the audience as complicit with the disruptive forces; characters associated with repressive strategies of control sometimes exit into the audience (cf. 152).

The Donnelly saga also presents challenges to critical response, especially in the area of dramatic form. Reaney's Donnelly trilogy is the most unconventional of the three approaches to the story, both in its structure and its expression. Stage directions sometimes indicate uncertainty about what should be happening on stage, or incomplete comprehension of how a certain desired effect should be made to happen (cf. 57, 72). The scripts emphasize the work that both actors and audiences must do in assembling the story. They draw attention to gaps, uncertainties, and inconsistencies, as when a trumpet is used in place of the words of an argument, both suggesting the stridency of the exchange and demanding that the audience imaginatively complete the sense of the argument (138). Props change their function, evolving symbolic meaning as the plays unfold, as in the case of Will Donnelly's fiddle, sometimes a real instrument, sometimes merely sticks held together. Will even speaks with the fiddle, in one of several instances in which music replaces words (115). A small handful of actors portrays an entire community; *characters* (i.e. not merely the actors but also the people they portray) are aware of themselves as participants in a play, aware of the end of the story toward which they work, as in Mr Donnelly's much-quoted line "I'm not in hell for I'm in a play" (81-2), or in John Donnelly's description of his own death and autopsy (199, 250). Reaney's plays are also dramatic poems, their language at once literal and highly figurative. An important example is the use of "crossings" (161)—literally intersections of road and

rail, but by extension interactions between characters, as well as methods of opposition, including (frequently in these plays) many examples of 'double crossing.' The subject of the plays is brutally realistic, yet sometimes that violent reality is conveyed in distanced abstraction. In brief, the trilogy resists easy classification, and furthers the challenges made across world drama in the later twentieth century to definitions of what constitutes a fit subject for tragedy. Colley and Johns are less experimental than is Reaney, but each author presents his story in highly symbolic, representational style, calling for a flexibility in both actors and audience in receiving and reconstructing the story.

In extending the boundaries of what can be considered tragedy, Reaney's Donnelly trilogy represents the next major evolution in the English-Canadian historical play after *Riel*. Louis Riel, for all that he was clearly an individual in conflict with a system, was also an individual understood to be representing many others. Riel was an MP, a political leader, and a spokesperson for the *Metis* nation. No matter what his personal stake might have been, most of the actions which render Riel so large in the Canadian consciousness are undertaken in a public cause. The Donnellys were not trying to make a nation or a province, just a farm. They do not speak for all expatriate Irish, just for themselves. They do not send one of their number to Ottawa. They just want to make a success of the farm they have already done so much of the cultivating work on, and they refuse to be bullied by neighbours into taking the easy way out. Reaney's Donnellys expand the canvas of the English-Canadian history play, by allowing the most local of situations to be treated as tragedy.

## Chapter Three

### Our Home And Native Land

Of all the major subjects for English-Canadian historical drama, the exploration of how arriving Europeans dealt with the aboriginal population of an 'uninhabited' land is perhaps the most controversial. The European/aboriginal collision has been examined by descendants of both sides, a situation unique among the various subjects for historical plays here under study. The Donnellys, for instance, did not, in their own time or via direct descendants in ours, get to write their version of their story for the stage. By contrast, First Nations' playwrights such as Daniel David Moses and Tomson Highway address the aboriginal/settler issue informed by both contemporary cultural practice and by Native traditions and perspectives, writing at once from emergent and residual cultural positions. Dramatic treatment of how the Founding Nations interacted with the First Nations is simultaneously of immense significance to comprehension of a Canadian past *and* a major concern in the Canadian present.

In the cases treated previously in this study, as well as in most of those to follow, the English-Canadian historical play is written either by a descendant of the group which constituted normative authority in the era of its subject, or by a detached observer with no direct connection to either side of the conflicts portrayed. It is fair to say that each playwright is at least indirectly a descendant of the 'winning side,' since even those who have no direct personal, familial, or professional connection with their subjects live in the society that has evolved as a consequence of normative authority maintaining its dominance over the alternative strategies voiced or acted by the ex-centrics of our past.

Thus there is, in many contemporary texts, a sense of expiation built into the thematic imperative that contemporary audiences should confront options not followed in our collective past, and should at least examine what there may be to learn from those previously rejected options. Frequently, then, the English-Canadian history play constitutes, in addition to an effort to educate the present, also an apology to the past. For the first time in this study, however, we will also see the English-Canadian history play as written from the perspective of descendants of the 'antagonist,' a text which does not make apology so much as demand it.

The English-Canadian historical play which deals with questions of interaction between European immigrants and aboriginal North Americans may also differ from other English-Canadian historical dramas in one other major respect. Whereas in most texts classifiable as English-Canadian historical plays the protagonist enters into conflict with agents of established authority and is, to a greater or lesser degree, excluded or silenced by those agents, in the 'native play' the protagonist may *be* an agent of normative authority. The process of confrontation and realization is not necessarily centred in an individual (like Riel) or a group (like the Donnellys) opposing a hierarchy of authority imposed by an external agency. Instead, a principal source of conflict in the 'native play' is the slow realization on the part of a representative of that external agent or agency that the antagonist is *not* the native people, but rather the machinery of the establishment to which the protagonist belongs. The greatest challenge of the 'native play,' both to character and to audience, devolves from a conscious apprehension of complicity: "we have met the enemy," as it were, "and he is us."

Methods of dramatizing the conflict between the Founding and the First Nations are diverse. Michael Cook's *On the Rim of the Curve* (1970, 1979) and Geoffrey Ursell's *The Running of the Deer* (1981) examine extremes of confrontation in the past, as epitomized by the plight of the Beothuk tribe in early nineteenth-century Newfoundland. Sharon Pollock's *Walsh* (1973) and Herschel Hardin's *The Great Wave of Civilization* (1976) focus on choices and their immediate consequences to both sides in the era dramatized. Reference to *Walsh* and *The Great Wave of Civilization* also returns this study to one of its foundational premises: the importance of considering the dramatization of historical events occurring outside Canada's borders. Both plays focus on conflicts between aboriginal and white populations in the North-American West of the later nineteenth century. In each text, action crosses the border between Canada and the United States: in Hardin's play the main action takes place in the American West, while in Pollock's, though the setting is Canadian, the main elements of conflict and complication are international. Finally, while most plays in this subgenre address to some extent both the initial conflicts and confrontational politics of the settlement period and the contemporary consequences of past actions, occasionally a text will treat both aspects equally. Daniel David Moses' *Almighty Voice and his Wife* (1991, 1992) successfully examines both choices then and consequences now, striking an equal balance of attention to both.

The extinguishing of an aboriginal people constitutes the most extreme consequence of collision between the Old World and the ostensibly New. History gives us the incontrovertible fact that the Beothuk, who once thrived in and around

Newfoundland and Labrador, began to decline following their first contact with European settlers and, by the end of the 1820s, were extinct. The fact of their extinction is incontrovertible. Controversy concerning the cause of their extinction, the responsibility for the complete eradication of a whole population, and the contemporary obligations arising from that historical reality rages. From one perspective, the Beothuk were hunted to extinction by ruthless European invaders who saw the natives as an impediment to their use of the island's natural resources. From another, the Beothuk were unfortunate victims of circumstance. Alteration in the migratory routes of the caribou, the principal source of food and clothing for the aboriginals, forced the Beothuk to alter their own habit of remaining inland, away from the arriving colonists. Inevitably, once the Beothuk emerged from the interior, conflict ensued. Some writers have portrayed that conflict as the tragedy of two groups of people, each with similar goals and intentions, frustrated to violence by an incapacity to communicate.<sup>1</sup> Others have suggested that the European settlers *did* bear responsibility for the extinction of the native peoples, not because they actively hunted the tribe to extinction but because, by competing with the tribe for natural resources, the Europeans exhausted the available resource base. Simultaneously, the introduction of European viruses to the local environment attacked the Beothuk immune system with terrible force. This factor also accelerated the process of irreversible decline.<sup>2</sup>

Arguably, neither Cook nor Ursell is interested in dramatizing the full complexity of the 'truth.' What seems to drive both *On the Rim of the Curve* and *The Running of the Deer* is an impulse to romanticize the Native peoples while expanding on the faults of

the invaders. It is important to note that exaggeration of stereotypes in a direction opposing past norms may serve as a healthy corrective. Cook and Ursell, in presenting a version of events positively skewed in favour of the Beothuk, are in one sense doing nothing worse than restoring balance to a comprehension of the situation. Where previous texts favoured the European perspective, these favour the aboriginal side of the conflict. Also, the impulse to dramatize the Native tribe sympathetically is part of the emergent cultural practice of reconsidering roads taken in the past, of interrogating the consequences of some of the options our ancestors chose. As long as audiences recognize the reactive, compensatory nature of the presentation, the didactic function of the texts remains useful.

Ursell's *The Running of the Deer* is arguably less about the Beothuk than it is about the one moment in the record of Newfoundland settlement at which it might have been possible to negotiate a treaty between the settlers and the aboriginal population—a treaty which might, in turn, have prevented the subsequent extinction of the tribe. As Ingeborg Marshall states in her extensive ethnography of the Beothuk, “[c]ircumstances were never again as favourable as they had been in 1768 and 1769” for establishing amicable relations between the Europeans and the aboriginal population (94). As Ursell's title suggests, borrowed as it is from the meagre extant records of Beothuk hunting practice, describing a situation in which the hunted animal has already been trapped, the tale he has to tell can have but one end. Ursell focuses on the brief tenure of Sir Hugh Palliser as Governor of Newfoundland, especially the events of Palliser's final year in the position (1768-69), during which he commissioned John Cartwright to lead an

expedition into the centre of the island in an effort to make friendly contact with the Beothuk (Marshall 84). On that historical foundation, Ursell erects a play that is, in its specifics, almost wholly invention, but which seems generally faithful to the temper of the era it portrays.

Ursell develops a romantic subplot, alters the known outcome of Cartwright's expedition, and invents a number of local figures to interact with the historical personages of Palliser and Cartwright. Each element of the invention exaggerates the emotional stresses of the era, attaching attitudes known to be held by various quarters of the population to specific character voices who can expound those attitudes and act upon their stated principles. Thus, the play barely involves the Beothuk directly. Its focus is on how the social, political, and economic forces of Newfoundland and England in 1768-69 combined to frustrate all efforts to contact the Beothuk peacefully. Ursell's exaggerations and alterations of the known facts, then, do not necessarily indicate ignorance of the historical record. Ursell condenses widely separated incidents from the historical record into a more unified dramatic space, accompanied by invention employed to explain the broad cultural forces which affect the ultimate resolution of the conflict—the extinction of the tribe.<sup>3</sup> Regrettably, Ursell's handling of his material, despite its potential, is at best awkward, and the end product is a play at odds with itself which leaves its audience focused more on the imagined tragedy of a single individual than on the greater historical tragedy of the encounter between European settlers and aboriginal residents.

One difficulty arising out of Ursell's method is that the protagonist is never

clearly identified. Early on it appears that the representative Beothuk characters, Bahnithnar and Shoonathin, will fill the protagonist's role, but these figures actually appear only twice in the play. At various points a case can be made for Palliser, for Cartwright, for the proto-feminist Jane Scutt, for St. John's itself, or even for "this God-damned country" (59) as the true protagonist. The constantly shifting focus leads one to conclude that it is the time itself, and not any single figure living through the time, that is the main subject of the play.

Conventional practice in the English-Canadian history play positions the protagonist(s) as outside the community and/or its dominant norms. Ursell's Beothuks are certainly outside the community. They are, as a plot device, literally camped outside St. John's, and they do not actually appear on stage until the end of the first half of the play. They never speak, a detail which effectively reminds the audiences of difficulties in communication between the aboriginal population and the European settlers. Though their ways and their characters are discussed throughout the text, the representative pair that Ursell invents for his dramatic purposes are only seen once more, when they are murdered by the agents of a local merchant, apparently as pawns in a personal power struggle, but otherwise inexplicably since reward money is offered for their survival, not for their deaths.

If it is at all possible to argue for a single figure as protagonist, that figure would be Jane Scutt, daughter of the merchant whose men kill the Beothuk, unofficial fiancée of John Cartwright, conversational acquaintance of Governor Palliser, and the figure whose actions in the final scene seem to represent both the frustration of all those who

attempted to make peaceful contact with the Beothuk and the extremes to which such figures were sometimes driven by standing in opposition to the dominant norms of their community. Jane Scutt speaks dialogue which sounds as though it is informed by everyone from Mary Wollstonecraft to Naomi Wolf. She out-Hermia's Hermia in her insistence upon self-determination and her right to speak her views no matter what her father or brother may think. If Ursell intends Jane to be the protagonist of the play (as her role in the crisis and denouement suggests), she is certainly outside the norms of her era. Her relationship with both Cartwright and the Governor positions her as a sort of Newfoundland-based Frances Brooke—an intelligent and erudite woman who, in England, would have a peer group to which she might comfortably belong, but who, in the wilds of barely settled North America, seems almost a grotesque anomaly.

Regardless of who or what is understood to fulfil the function of protagonist, the agencies of normative authority are clear and commonplace. Authority rests with a variety of agents, each responsible to those above them on the next level in a hierarchy. Parents exercise authority to support the demands of the merchant class; the merchant class must negotiate with the Church; the Church is used by the civil service; all of the foregoing are ultimately responsible to the Governor, who spends most his time in the play trying to keep one or another of these branches controlled. Government dictates to religion which dictates to economics which drives family.

The nature of the conflict in *The Running of the Deer* is as complex and confused as the identity of its protagonist. Initially, Governor Palliser's efforts to make friendly contact with the Beothuk are driven by international politics. The French have made

some alliances with the Mi'kmaq (5), a situation which prompts the English to consider political overtures to the Beothuk, traditional enemies of the Mi'kmaq. Later, a possible French-Irish agreement is cause for some of the anti-Irish sentiment in the community (23). Even tensions between the Colonies to the south and their northern counterparts discreetly register their presence in the historical background. It is important to recall that the battle of the Plains of Abraham occurred less than a decade before the action of the play and that, as recently as the early 1760s, St. John's had been temporarily seized by the French. This is not a stable, settled community in peaceful times. Indeed, Palliser remains actively opposed to Newfoundland's being anything more than a large fishing station, and takes deliberate steps to return much of the white population to England. Under no circumstances should we interpret the Governor's interest in the aboriginal population as being merely the unbiased inquiry of science, nor his efforts to prevent permanent settlement as the altruistic desire to leave the land to its aboriginal inhabitants. No matter how Cartwright conceives his Exploits River expedition, the government is fundamentally concerned with securing its own native battalion, as it were, to match the machinations of the French, and with streamlining its administrative responsibilities in North America.

In the opening scenes, the audience is misled concerning which of the many strands of conflict will come to matter most in the play. Early scenes dramatizing various community tensions alternate between the serious and the ridiculous; and it is the ridiculous which turns out to be the force provoking the play's crisis. Anti-Catholic agitation begins the play: a raid by the local Justice of the Peace (echoes of the

Donnelly's) interrupts mass, one of the accompanying soldiers slapping a woman across the face as she receives holy communion (1-2). Immediately we move to Government House where we are introduced to Horsenaill—"The name is Hars-nill!" (3)—senior civil servant to the governor. Though Horsenaill is surely something of a debased fop, he will prove to be the major antagonist. Despite his eventual importance to the plot, however, Horsenaill is chiefly concerned in this introductory scene with his own status as fashion plate and his disdain for the lowlife of St. John's (3-7). The extreme distancing between the significance of violence done in the name of religion and order, and the insignificance of the petty dissatisfactions of an obnoxious buffoon strikes a discordant note. The imbalance is all the more apparent when Ursell shifts his scene back to the legal proceedings against Roman Catholics. When the Justice of the Peace pronounces that "the room in which the filthy rites were conducted will be burned to the ground" (9), an even greater discrepancy between the apparent relative importance of the juxtaposed scenes is obvious. Yet it is "Hars-nill" who will drive the play to its crisis, and the role of Protestant-Catholic tension will fade into the background. Nothing about the manner of Horsenaill's introduction at all prepares us for his eventual importance.

Other conflicts arising through the course of the play are representative of the era. The increasing power of the merchant class and its effects on the common settler are explored through the character and dealings of Scutt throughout the play (11-12, 40-1). The debate over purpose for European involvement in the New World is here recapitulated in the insistence of Governor Palliser that a permanent settlement is not necessary, as opposed to Scutt's argument that all aspects of the place must be fully

exploited commercially (10, 12, 23, 40-1, 42). Jane Scutt's interaction with her family develops issues prominent in 1970s feminist writing, addressing both gender and generational conflicts (26, 54). On the literal margin of the town and of the text, the audience finds the last example of conflict germane to the era: the Beothuk representatives Bahnithnar and Shoonathin. They camp outside St. John's not because they have not been permitted inside the town but because Bahnithnar has insisted on being put ashore from Cartwright's ship when two of Cartwright's sailors fall ill with "putrid throats" (4). Thus, Ursell dramatizes *some* component of virtually every significant conflict in Newfoundland of 1768, showing how public conflicts affect private and personal dealings and vice-versa. However, the effort to do so much in such a small space ensures that no single component of conflict is thoroughly developed. The dramatic direction of the play eventually subsumes the larger conflicts of the setting into the personal struggles of an individual. Though such a practice is not at all uncommon (hinting the scope of the larger issues by dramatizing their effects on a limited range of individuals in a fixed setting), it seems that Ursell only decides on Jane Scutt as the central figure of his play about halfway through its action.

This uncertainty concerning the intended protagonist affects consideration of all other components of the play. In common practice, the protagonist displays a charisma which evokes audience sympathy. Ursell (to be fair to him, himself being fair to the complexities of his temporal setting) allows most of his characters greater or lesser charisma, which allowance, in turn, diffuses audience sympathy. If we argue for the Beothuk as the fulcrum for the seesawing of those forces which produce the play's

tensions, it is, at least, possible to make a division between those characters whose various personal motivations lead them into supportive attitudes toward the Beothuk and those whose antipathy to the natives leads them toward exploitative or violent behaviour.

Examined from this perspective, Cartwright and Jane are charismatic in that they hold moderate views and propose a generally pacifist stance, an interest in enquiry and acquaintance as opposed to exploitation and domination. Cartwright's calm demeanour and conventionally heroic disposition clearly indicate that he merits admiration. Jane's proto-feminist rhetoric may also have been intended to appeal to a late-twentieth-century audience; equally, though, her portrayal might be read as an insult to the intelligence of such an audience. The voicing of assumptions common in the 1970s by characters living in the 1760s admits either response. One suspects, however, that the quality of her views would carry more weight than their anachronistic presence, and that Jane is meant to be sympathetically received.

Of the other characters, Governor Palliser is ambiguously charismatic in that he is always poised between goodwill and personal indolence, apparently eager to treat the Beothuk well, but unwilling to do anything that will disturb or complicate his own circumstances. Wholly without charisma are characters such as Horsenail and Scutt (though the motivations of each are given fair and equal treatment). The Beothuk themselves, as represented by the two contacts Ursell imagines for Cartwright, are in some respects the most charismatic figures in the play, in part because of their silence. They appear to be peaceful folk, in harmony with nature, but deeply suspicious of the unknown. Their movements are ritualized; all description of them is skewed to positive

effect; and their eventual deaths are manifestly intended to be symbolic. Indeed, it is only the fact that audience attention is substantially focused on attitudes to the Beothuk that allows a moment's consideration of these otherwise minor characters as possible protagonists.

The alternative proposed by all the characters sympathetic to the Beothuk is the one usual to all drama treating interaction between the new arrivals and the old inhabitants: we could live more like they do. A proposed peace treaty with the Beothuk would be the formal vehicle of such recognition. The play commends the communal orientation of aboriginal social structure, a keynote in English-Canadian literary treatment of virtually every aboriginal community. Such commendation challenges acquisitive, competitive European modes. It is not a coincidence that so many writers in so many genres of literature in English find the communal organization of tribal economics and social structures a tempting alternative to the bloated capitalist strategies that have simultaneously given us so much progress and brought so much pollution, extinction, and destruction. The aboriginal understanding of property, alluded to by virtually every writer who has ever employed native characters in even the smallest roles, is perhaps the jewel in the crown of the alternatives represented by the historically excluded protagonist(s). Family loyalty and communication are also significant; equally, disloyalty and blocked communication lead directly to the play's tragic crisis.

The potential and attractiveness of equal distribution of resources, of more family-oriented loyalty in one's approach to life, are obvious. As is common to virtually every English-Canadian historical play, social stability and order, freedom from petty

jealousies and bickering, and a greater sense of individual belonging are associated more or less directly with the historically-silenced alternative represented by the protagonist. Equally common across the genre is that the cost of redrawing the social, political, economic, and individual map is immense. In Ursell's setting, acceptance of the Beothuk, even of their own right to live in their own way, let alone accepting some of their ways as more desirable than our own, would require fundamental rethinking, both in Government House and in England, of what Newfoundland should be. The European self-image, as bringer of civilization and order to savage, lawless territory, would have to be completely rewritten to admit the possibility that aboriginal cultures already possessed discourses and systems of religion, education, law and order. Resources would have to be shared. Finally, as in all such cases, some individuals whose lives had been spent in hoarding personal power and authority would be required to cede that power and yield to a redefined understanding of authority, one justly cognizant of "Us" all.

Additionally, such changes could only be put in motion by those in power, those who, in any era, have the most to lose by instituting change. The current dominant, as Ursell portrays it (once again somewhat altering the received historical record in order to simplify and stress basic tensions) favours English, Protestant, West Country merchants who profit from manipulation of available resources. It is a harvest mentality, which takes frequent recourse to litigation in order to establish the rights of small groups of people to vast resources. It maintains itself through strict adherence to the letter of the law, and achieves its ends sometimes through the basic exhaustion of its opponents (20-1). A considerable incapacity for acting upon good intentions, accompanied by some

'buck-passing,' ensures that the dominant remains so. In order to create a context more favourable for consideration of the alternatives embodied by the Beothuk way of life and espoused by those who wish only to meet the aboriginal population on its own terms, the profit motive must be disabled. Considered in that light, the battle was lost when the first European boat left the Old World in search of the passage to India.

Ursell generally works within the common pattern of establishing resistance to the iconoclastic alternative, but late in the play he develops two plot twists which somewhat deviate from the norm. Moderate resistance in the religious sphere takes the form of harassment of Roman Catholics—which, we must recall, is in accordance with the law of England, not merely a feature of prejudice acted out on the fringes of civilization in the ostensibly barbaric New World. Similarly, moderate resistance to Jane Scutt's independence takes the common form of a proposed marriage arranged by her father through the financial agency of the local clergyman (14-5, 53-5). But the most apparently benign form of resistance, and the one that affects all levels of conflict in the play, is inaction. All conflicts involving Governor Palliser are preemptorily resolved, in a sense, by his abrupt decision to return permanently to England (59). That decision taken, the governor abdicates responsibility for and even interest in all others. In the final moments of the play, he is simply too tired to care any more how any of these problems might be solved. He can return to England, and thus the problems, for him, will cease to exist (59-60).

Extreme resistance also takes a common form: the murder of those seen to be the greatest threat. Bahnithnar and Shoonathin are murdered by Scutt's Irish-Catholic

lackeys and Jane Scutt's brother, Tom. These men are themselves acting on instigation by Horsenaill for the motive of personal revenge. Thwarted in love and given insufficient respect (at least in his own eyes), Horsenaill destroys the original of the treaty he is set to copy (51-2), and sets out to wreck Cartwright's reputation (38), in the process scuttling Palliser's hopes of achieving amity with the Beothuk. Other forms of violence against the Beothuk have already been reported second-hand by Cartwright (31). Extreme resistance in the text stops with the Beothuk themselves—another reason for considering them to be, despite their relatively austere presence, the thematic centre of the text.

The stance of the text toward its protagonist(s) is ambiguous. The play seems to champion moderation and peaceful co-existence, yet none of those who embrace such views are rewarded in the play's conclusion. Palliser is exhausted and past caring, while Cartwright is frustrated to silence (59-60). Though Ursell considerably wavers from the historical record throughout the play, he does not alter the situation of either of his historical figures. The conclusion of the text is most harsh on its most iconoclastic figure, Jane Scutt. Employing a strategy used earlier in the play (38), Ursell gives us an effect before revealing its cause. He first presents an exhausted and disheveled Jane accompanying Cartwright to report the deaths of Bahnithnar and Shoonathin, as well as that of Tom Scutt, to Palliser. As the scene progresses, revealing the governor's unwillingness to pursue further action in light of his own retirement, Jane damns Palliser in no uncertain terms. "She is distraught," says Palliser, who then departs to his "other matters" (60). Only when he is gone, at the final moment of the play, does the audience

see that Tom is dead because Jane has shot him where he stood in the Beothuk camp over the dead bodies of Bahnithnar and Shoonathin (60). This final shock wrenches the audience's comprehension of Jane's character. Suddenly, we see that Jane has joined the forces she was fighting against; she has used violence, murder, to support her argument. Jane's murder of her brother undermines some of what she has argued for throughout the play; she falls victim to the 'revenger's tragedy,' as evinced in the play of that name, herself becoming, through her oppositional acts, exactly what she once opposed. It is difficult to determine whether Ursell presents Jane's situation at play's end as reflecting what should be, or merely what is.

Ursell, certainly, proceeds by a free adaptation of the historical record. The historical Sir Hugh Palliser aggravated and impeded, rather than favoured, West Country merchants and their monopoly interests. Palliser clearly established fishermen's salaries and brought merchants strictly to account, particularly in limiting liquor sales. The governor also employed the famous Captain Cook to survey the coast of the island, producing vastly improved maps of the whole territory. The Custom House, described as Palliser's own "precious" institution (12), was in place before he arrived to take his position in St. John's, a direct consequence of the town having fallen briefly into French control in 1762, which reawakened British interest in and attention to the colony. Many of the Irish settlers, in fact, were not initially fishermen but ex-soldiers from the military action that retook St. John's from the French.

With respect to the Beothuk, there is evidence that the historical Palliser and Cartwright both thought as their dramatized counterparts do, though there is no record of

a proposed treaty in Palliser's time (perhaps accounted for dramatically by Horsenail's destruction of the document). Most significantly for the events Ursell dramatizes, the historical Cartwright made no contact with the Beothuk (Marshall 87). His expedition to the Exploits discovered many signs of tribal life, and informed considerable conjecture about how the aboriginal people went about their daily lives, but there was no Bahnithnar and Shoonathin. The historical record suggests that had Cartwright's expedition met any Beothuk they would certainly have extended such an invitation, but no contact was made. Ursell imagines a contact, likely building from the records of such encounters as later occurred, and situates that imagined contact at the point in history when it might have had the greatest positive consequence. However, he does not take invention further. The imagined Beothuk of his play are destroyed just as their historical models were. The raising of the stakes achieved by inventing a contact merely serves to foreground how much was eventually lost by the failure. The violence that Ursell invents for the crisis of his text is in no way exaggerated—only translated to an imagined setting. It is worth noting that the descriptions of violence against the Beothuk which Cartwright reports earlier in the play are drawn directly from the historical Cartwright's letters (31).

Somehow, then, despite willingness to employ stereotypes both of character—"We poor Irish" (35)—and staging—especially the thunder and lightning at the crisis point (56-7)—and despite straying regularly from the received historical record, Ursell manages to dramatize perhaps the most crucial moment in the collided histories of the Beothuk and the English, the point at which the administrative intent of the colonists crossed from benign concern into indifference. The invention of Jane Scutt seems to be

a device for situating these national tensions within a more compact familial and personal context. Jane's fate—failure to protect the Beothuk, apparent alienation from her fiancée Cartwright, the blood of her brother on her hands—may, perhaps, be interpreted as a microcosmic representation of the eventual guilt of all those involved who, despite good intentions, took no action to prevent the eventual destruction of the aboriginal people.

Regrettably, however, that interpretation is conjecture performed with a good will. The conclusion of the play seems to contradict its own general stance concerning peaceful co-existence and the acquisition of knowledge; the extreme resolution of Jane's subplot is sufficient to leave the audience with the impression that the play was really about her, little more than a romantic tragedy played against a convenient historical background. One suspects this impression was not Ursell's intent. His handling of the materials at his disposal seems to cloud, rather than to facilitate, any didactic role that his history play might fulfil.

Michael Cook's *On the Rim of the Curve* is, if nothing else, much more consistent in the message it sends its audience. That message is simple: everything you see here that is atrocious, terrifying, disgusting, demeaning, sick, perverted, and violent is your own responsibility. Cook employs the device of a circus ringmaster to introduce and comment upon the action and its relevance. The Ringmaster addresses the audience as willing and complicit partners in the execution of the Beothuk for entertainment. Stereotype after stereotype arises, each voiced by the Ringmaster in tones indicating that he fully expects the audience to accept such stereotypes without question. The

Ringmaster describes brutal violence, offered in casual, offhand diction, and at every turn reminds the audience that they invest in everything they are seeing—they buy it because they want it. Cook challenges audience expectations in several other ways, including having the performance of the play ostensibly continue through its own intermission. Music, too, is used, as it so often is in the English-Canadian history play, but not in its common manner—‘cute’ songs which allow comic, or at least satiric, relief. Instead, Cook employs music throughout as punctuation, contrast, and characterization of the Beothuk. *On the Rim of the Curve*, then, represents something of an assault upon its audience. The play blames the extinction of the Beothuks solely on the Europeans and equates the physical violence done to the Beothuk by our ancestors with the emotional violence done to their memory by subsequent generations through perpetuation of stereotypes and refusal to accept responsibility.

There is no confusion about the protagonist in Cook’s play. The Beothuk, as represented by the historical figures of Nonosabasut, Demasduit, and Shanadithit (together with some few, typically, nameless members of their population), are beyond doubt the heroes. The stage is a “series of curved platforms . . . angled diagonally . . . ascending so that the last, left platform ends, literally, on the rim of a curve” (9). Cook strictly separates the aboriginals from the invaders: “*Throughout the play the Europeans occupy the right platform, the Indians the left*” (9). The only interaction between the separated platforms occurs at moments when the Beothuk are abused. In the middle of everything is the Ringmaster, on a slightly raised dais. The stage is supported on “thick palings” which are intended to remind the audience of “the type used by the Beothuck

Indians to trap caribou as they crossed the Exploits River” (9). Whereas Ursell contents himself with allowing Cartwright merely to describe the structure (despite the fact that the structure is the source of Ursell’s title), Cook builds the physical set on the model of the trap, bringing its metaphorical significance much more obviously to the audience.

Cook shows none of Ursell’s ambiguity of intent, or uncertain focus of sympathy.

Cook’s Beothuk are admirable, his Europeans obnoxious from start to finish.

The outsider status of the protagonist is thus confirmed in every possible manner, from differences in costume and bearing to physical placement on the stage. There is, perhaps, no other play in this entire study which so clearly establishes its lines of opposition. Even Reaney’s use of ladders in *Sticks and Stones* as devices to corral and divide assorted citizens of Biddulph is shifting and fluid, the ladders rising as needed then returning to being dormant props as each particular sequence ends. Whereas Ursell kept the Beothuk offstage for most of his play, Cook keeps them present at all times, an incessant reminder to the audience of what is at stake in the resolution of this particular conflict.

Normative authority rests in all the usual places, from the presumption of their own superiority on the part of common white settlers, through the common social structures represented by economics, religion, and politics. In the figure of the Ringmaster, Cook establishes a centralized representative of all European authority systems. All that happens in the play is filtered through the perspective of this epitome of spectacle for its own sake. The device allows Cook to make the play at once a didactic entertainment and an apology for the cruel necessity of its own methods. The

story of the Beothuk is a circus, exploitation for entertainment's sake, and the audience is, from the opening lines, forced to confront their perception of and participation in everything they see.

The conflict, too, is much more simplistically represented here than it was in Ursell's play. There are no individual Europeans here, no Jane Scutt or John Cartwright to attract a degree of audience empathy. The Europeans are almost indistinguishable from each other (reminiscent of the old racist saw "those people all look alike"). The group presumes itself superior in every way to the natives yet undermines its self-perception at every turn through unprovoked violence, degenerate and debased language, narrow-minded prejudice, and puerile reasoning. By contrast, the Beothuk, though assigned only a small portion of the total lines of the text (approximately 10%), demonstrate superb self-awareness, comprehension of the necessity for harmonious balance between humans and nature, deep spirituality, and totally selfless generosity—all expressed in elevated, poetic diction. Cook is careful, though, not to sanctify the Beothuk; they show extreme violence to a half-breed, for instance (30-1), which indicates that they too can practice exclusionist politics. But, in general, the Beothuk display all the qualities which the Europeans boast as solely European characteristics.

As ever, the attractiveness of the protagonist is countered by the difficulty or cost of rising to the challenge that the protagonist's alternative offers. The Beothuk might still be alive, still using much of their traditional territory (which, to this day, remains largely untouched by settlement). But that outcome would have required Europe to reconceive itself wholly, to admit the truth of what John Cartwright himself wrote in

1768: “The English fishers [display] an inhumanity which sinks them far below the level of savages. The wantonness of their cruelties towards the poor wretches, has frequently been almost incredible” (qtd. in Marshall 91). Far from being benign bearers of light and advanced civilization, of Christian mercy and political intelligence, many Europeans performed acts at least as violent as those attributed to the ‘savages’ and, in the name of decency and of God, displayed crudity, depravity, and malignity. The Beothuk could have been saved, but only if the incoming European settlers could have erased their entire sense of self, confronted painful home truths, and learned to live in a manner which, arguably, humanity in general has still not managed.

The current dominant in Cook’s play is doubled. There is a dominant in the era dramatized—exploitation for the sake of commerce—and there is also a dominant in the era addressed—exploitation for the sake of entertainment and titillation. The dominant remains so, and transcends its historical roots, because of a continued willingness to “see no evil” (19) from one generation to the next. The rape of the anonymous Beothuk woman (31-2) is a microcosmic representation of the interaction between the two cultures, and its barbarity is meant to be understood both literally, as applied to the era in which the interaction occurred, and figuratively as applied to the cultural uses we have since made of the ‘Indian.’

Cook’s protagonists differ from those found in the majority of English-Canadian historical drama in that they have next to no support for their position. The Beothuk have even less community support than did Reaney’s Donnellys. Of all the Europeans presented in the play, only Buchans (23-5) and Gilbert (36-8) could be said even mildly

to support the native right to fair treatment. For everyone else, including (in the rhetoric of the text) the contemporary audience, the natives are merely another exploitable resource of the island.

Similarly, Cook's Beothuks rarely face the moderate resistance that is commonly raised against the protagonists of most English-Canadian historical drama. Such limited moderate resistance as Cook does choose to dramatize is so insignificant when seen in light of the repeated violence, rape, and murder employed earlier in the play that it almost appears as a twisted blessing, leaving the audience relieved that all that has happened this time is a little prejudice or cultural manipulation. Ready acceptance of hearsay (28) and the use of "wine . . . to ease communication with the savages" (38) pale in comparison to the murder of a pregnant woman and her small child (15), the huge "*photographic replica of Nonosabasut lying dead on the ice*" (20), the "dance of death" in which a native woman is stalked and then murdered (20-1), the 'inadvertent' murder of yet another woman (22-3), and the strategic device of setting fire to Beothuk tents and lying in wait to shoot the inhabitants one by one as each emerges to escape the fire (27).

As mentioned, Cook's play is, from start to finish, an indictment of the audience as the inheritors of European tradition. Only once in the entire play does Cook allow perception of the irony that, increasingly, informs Newfoundland comprehension and evaluation of the Beothuk tragedy. As the 'second act' begins, and the Ringmaster delivers his "welcome back" speech, he considers for a moment the career of Lieutenant Buchans: "Unimportant man, really, he neither killed 'em or saved 'em, but he did give his name to a town, a mining town where for years the miners, the inheritors you might

say, was treated like the Indians was treated. Funny, that. How the conquerors take on the role of the conquered. But enough lies” (27). Cook’s reminder of patterns of exploitation and inadequacy evokes the contemporary collective, *Buchans: A Mining Town* (1974). It is a critical position later explored, for example, by Richard Budget, who argues that the economic downturns of twentieth-century Newfoundland life, together with such crises as the collapse of fisheries resources, have given the province at large a better understanding of what it must have felt like to be Beothuk two centuries ago.

Apart from that one moment of suggesting that history might have slightly altered the Europeans’ perspective, Cook’s play is relentless in its insistence that the audience face its own complicity in the extinction of the Beothuk people. The play begins with the mechanics of representation foregrounded, actors checking props, an author wandering through the company like a stage manager making sure everyone has turned up at the call. As the actors reach their initial positions, each turns back-on to the audience, their “*silhouettes thrown against a backdrop of imprisoning bars*” (9). The Author addresses the audience directly as “friends, for friends I account all I don’t know” and then remarks that “[v]oices, in cold Canada, are often all we have” (9). From that austere beginning, the ‘fourth wall’ breached, dismantled, destroyed, the play questions its audience, its subject, its own motives, and its themes, leaving the audience, within two pages of text, surrounded by a whirl of questions without answers, as imprisoned by conflicting discourses as the symbolic actors frozen in position on stage are imprisoned by posture and lighting.

The Author poses the fundamental question at once: “how do you write of a vanished people?” (10). With the general absence of incontrovertible evidence, the fading of memories, and the interference of self-interest affecting the presentation, the play seems doomed from the start. The Author insists that he is not apologizing, merely “saying that there’s no conclusion to this. None possible. Its [sic] a series of false starts, you might say, leading back to the central question that’s never been asked” (10). The Author asks the audience to help “piece the skeleton together” and then poses the second of his three foundational questions: “Is everything that happens to us determined in a dark past, making a mockery of will?” (10). In “hindsight . . . the Beothuks failed to adapt. That’s all” (10). But it is not all that the play proposes to examine. There is one final question before the Author vanishes from the text: “Do you believe, with Plato, that the aggressor is more to be pitied than the victim of aggression? Are we deserving of such pity?” (11). Himself vanishing, claiming he does not know the answers to these questions, and suggesting that it “is possible that they never existed at all” (11), the Author is replaced by the Ringmaster, and the play becomes an exploration of the most negative answers to those provocative questions.

The Ringmaster immediately announces: “stay with it folks for we also have an Indian or two present and if you’re good, you can all help pull the trigger,” a proclamation greeted with applause by the Europeans on their stage right platform (11). He continues: “but first, a word from our sponsor . . . the Beothuk Indians . . .” (11) [ellipsis in original]. There follows a frozen moment of silence, lasting thirty seconds—an immensely uncomfortable span for the audience—during which the

Beothuk on the stage left platform remain absolutely immobile and facing away from the audience (11). All that the Author has suggested of alternative and competing ways of seeing is erased. From here, there will be one way of seeing only: the Europeans arrive, bringing violence and slaughter with them, and pursue the Beothuk to extinction, even, via the agency of their descendants, adding insult to injury after the last Beothuk is dead. In this way, Cook manages at least to suggest that he does not excuse himself (and, by extension, literature) from the general critique the play offers; the “Author” waxes philosophical and vacillates, but the play does not. By the end of the play, Heaven itself has been portrayed as ‘Indian’ and the violent, exploitative Peyton has been refused forgiveness (44, 46). The stance of the text is clear beyond doubt.

Challenges to the audience mount. Immediately following the brief “word from our sponsor,” the audience is treated to an “extremely trustworthy report” from a vaguely Elizabethan courtier, who writes of how the native people “are very barbarous and uncivilised,” dressing in skins, believing “much in auguries” and evincing marital jealousy (11-2). His words are challenged by two furriers who suggest that the courtier can only know of native jealousy from going “after a piece of red” (12). The furriers then amiably discuss their own recent sexual experience with native women, arousing the curiosity of the courtier:

COURTIER: (*Excited*) Was she willing? Compliant? Enthusiastic?

2<sup>ND</sup> FURRIER: I dunno, b’y. She wor dead by the time I got to her. Still warm though, that’s what counts. (12)

Their barbarous incivility is immediately seen, not reported, to be more savage than

anything ascribed to the ‘savages.’

Juxtaposed with poetic speeches from an “INDIAN WOMAN,” connecting human reproduction to nature’s cycles—“I sing a song of the salmon flicking the dark sea aside with his tail . . . . What God has sent you to fatten the child in my belly?” (12)—and an “INDIAN MAN,” voicing images of deep commitment and connection—“I sing a song of her who lay long with me in the liquid days. We cast one shadow sleeping. . . . Moon. Throw my shadow to her across the big water” (13)—we have a juicy bit of gossip between two “Elizabethan” ladies concerning one Lady Mary and her experiments. In the evenings, Lady Mary is “educating” one of “the Red Men” (brought back to Europe by “the silly Genovese”) in “the courtly skills” (12-3). It is clear at once that Lady Mary is using the native man to explore her sexual curiosity; and the contrast between what the Beothuk feel for each other and the total absence of feeling displayed by the Europeans once more illustrates the text’s sense of where true savagery lies.

As Reaney did in dramatizing the neighbours of the Donnellys, so Cook faces his audience with the fact that many of our godly ancestors were foul-mouthed, violent, and prejudiced people, whose actions were as often criminal as not. Following a catalogue of ‘Indian’ characteristics voiced by a Courtier and two gossiping ladies, the audience is treated to a dramatic example of the means by which the Europeans attempt to “bring [the natives] to a knowledge of God”—ostensibly the principal motivation for European interaction with the aboriginal population (14-5). It is a brutal scene, worth examining in full in that it encapsulates the rhetorical position of the whole text:

*An Indian Woman detaches herself from the platform and runs down*

*centre stage, dodging through the Courtly Trio. At the same time, the two Furriers roar down the European ramp, carrying muskets, in pursuit.*

1<sup>ST</sup> FURRIER: There she goes.

2<sup>ND</sup> FURRIER: Head her off.

*They chase her about centre stage. Once again she tries to dodge through the Courtly Trio, but one of the women trips her as she seeks to burst through. The Trio breaks to make way for the Furriers. The Indian Woman lies sprawling.*

1<sup>ST</sup> FURRIER: *(Threatening her with musket.)* Kneel, ye bitch. Kneel. *(The woman turns and kneels.)*

2<sup>ND</sup> FURRIER: Thats it. Now lets see yer tits. *(The woman, with great dignity, slowly bares her breasts.)*

1<sup>ST</sup> FURRIER: Mother of God. She's pregnant.

2<sup>ND</sup> FURRIER: This'll stop her breeding. *(He fires at her, point blank. She topples slowly. There is a slight movement. An infant [is] discovered under the Indian platform.)*

1<sup>ST</sup> FURRIER: Look. Another one. A baby.

2<sup>ND</sup> FURRIER: Where.

1<sup>ST</sup> FURRIER: Crawling through the brush.

2<sup>ND</sup> FURRIER: Fire, man, fire. Don't let the little bastard get away. *(Courtier and the two Ladies, in unison...)* Fire, man. Fire. *(The 1<sup>st</sup> Furrier takes aim and fires.)*

1<sup>ST</sup> FURRIER: That's done fer it. (*They turn back to the dead woman. 2<sup>nd</sup> Furrier kneels and inspects her.*)

2<sup>ND</sup> FURRIER: Jesus. She had some set on her. Look. The milk's running out.

1<sup>ST</sup> FURRIER: I suppose we could've waited a bit. Made some use of her.

2<sup>ND</sup> FURRIER: Fer God's sake, b'y, they stink worse'n old ewe. Come on. They's more up ahead. (15)

Leaving the corpses to rot under the bushes, these representatives of the culture which possesses the "knowledge of God" wander off, accompanied by the Courtier and the two Ladies, all singing "The Dwarf's Marching Song" from Disney's *Snow White* (16).

The scene raises several important points that are germane to the remainder of the text. Perhaps most important is that the court is complicit in the violence; one of the Ladies actually trips the fleeing woman, and all three representatives of the upper class join both in urging the shooting of the infant and in the 'Disneyfication' of the whole scene as it ends. The debased diction of the furriers, coupled with their bestial sexuality,<sup>4</sup> contrasts sharply with the elevated language of the Beothuk, and with the comparatively neutral tones employed by those at court. As is commonly observed across the corpus of English-Canadian history plays, refined and dignified authority has an apparently limitless number of "ragged-arsed" buffoons to carry out, misinterpret, or totally mangle its instructions and intentions. Finally, in having the furriers butcher both an infant and the unborn child in its mother's womb, Cook leaves no room for sympathy with the

Europeans whatsoever.

Cook is a mere six pages into his script, but its principal values are all firmly established. The European court is concerned only with its own gratification, the local agents of established authority are violent, primitive, debased creatures, and the aboriginal is a simple, poetic, spiritual, loyal, noble being, hunted for sport and destroyed by European greed, for the entertainment of European audiences—and their descendants. As the play progresses, this trio of foundational assumptions will be staged and restaged until the uncertainty initially voiced by “the Author” becomes a direct statement of the contemporary audience’s culpability.

Typical of Cook’s interweaving these three separate thematic threads is the scene involving the Businessman. First the Businessman is introduced: a “neatly dressed, middle aged, slightly greying, military moustached, rather paunchy but otherwise fairly trim executive type” (18-9). He is named the winner of a “skull found by a bulldozer operator in Northern Newfoundland and used as a pipe holder until saved for posterity by a keen eyed Lady American tourist,” but he is unsure what to do with it. His wife “has a mortal fear of all things to do with death,” so he cannot display the object openly. Cook uses the character of the wife to assault the “See no evil, hear no evil” nature of many contemporary audiences. She does not mind things being killed—might perhaps include her husband in the list of things she detests—but is, in the Ringmaster’s words, “a model of circumspection. . . . Providing the murderous act takes place out of sight, she’s quite happy” (19).

The Businessman already has the solution to his own problem, though he needs

the Ringmaster to elicit it from him. The Businessman has “a den . . . lined with leather bound copies of the Reader’s Digest ... Canadian edition of course. . . . A nylon bear skin hangs over the wall, and an antique replica of a sealing musket, circa 1819 is nailed, at a jaunty angle above a well stocked bar” (19). This description of his cultured living space earns him applause from the European platform. The mocking tone in Cook’s portrayal is evident. The Ringmaster proceeds to present the Businessman with a “*huge photographic replica of Nonosabasut lying dead on the ice,*” murdered “while unlawfully attempting to rescue his wife from the King’s agents” to add to the decor in his den (20).

Next, the Ringmaster shows the Businessman “not a woman . . . . [but] a Red Indian” being hunted to death. Death becomes a spectator sport, history the indulgence of the present in the excesses of its past. An Indian Woman runs “*in and out of the circle . . . pursued in slow motion*” by the Europeans as The Ringmaster calls a play-by-play description (20). This method of narrating the scene charges the audience with gross insensitivity through its very format. As the woman reaches exhaustion at the end of her “dance of death,” the Ringmaster and the Businessman watch her bare her breasts and plead for mercy (20-1). “I didn’t come here for a strip show,” splutters the Businessman; “What would my wife say? Breasts are dirty....” (21). The Ringmaster, always willing to make sure representatives of normative authority have enough rope, concurs, adding that “Indian breasts are disgustingly dirty,” and reassures the Businessman that “she won’t get away with” this crass attempt to use her sex as protection (21). Praising the hunters who surround the pleading woman for their control and discipline—their “animal” growling and violence set in stark contrast to the dignity of the woman, who clearly merits praise

but receives none—the Ringmaster tells the Businessman that it is his decision whether the woman lives or dies, thus deliberately linking the initial explorers with their descendants: “Its [sic] your show” (21). The Businessman—not surprisingly since we have already seen him purchase the skull—turns two thumbs down on the Beothuk woman’s plea for mercy and she is surrounded and destroyed.

Cook continues to weave his three principal strands of thematic attack in the scenes presenting Sir Humphrey Gilbert (32-9). Here, the selfishness of the European courts is revealed through Gilbert’s amiable inefficiency. It is significant that Cook brings Gilbert into the play as an anachronism. Peyton and others, participants in events nearly 200 years after Gilbert’s arrival, are introduced long before him. Chronologically, Gilbert’s arrival in the play is already too late. Gilbert proceeds to blather endlessly about his monarch’s purpose in sending him, and about European intentions for the New World, while the Ringmaster snipes openly at him, criticizing everything from his taste in fashion to his political obstinacy, until Gilbert is finally told by the Ringmaster to “skip the exposition” and get on with his role (33).

Gilbert’s protracted musings upon his own meditations “while upon the savage waters” dramatize the distance between the philosophy and the realities of New World exploration (33). Gilbert, idealized representative of Elizabeth I’s court, is well-meaning but completely out of touch with his surroundings. As he circumnavigates his address, he is repeatedly reminded of the time he is consuming. “Perhaps then,” Gilbert responds, “I should commit this to print” (34). “Publish it anywhere but here, sir,” the Ringmaster responds, “The fish can’t read. And those that spends their lives catching ‘em isn’t about

to learn” (34). As Gilbert ponders the Wycliffe Bible he has been given, a token of appreciation from his “fine” men, as good a “band of lusty whoremongers, murderers, and stockfish men as were ever assembled” (34), the Ringmaster summarizes Gilbert’s place in the play: “He ran aground in the entrance to St. John’s Harbour, too. We had to go out and row him in. It was, ye might say, a characteristic start to four hundred years of misrule” (35).

Gilbert proceeds to seek representatives of the “Red Indian” population, in order to bring them back to “have converse” with the Queen. Ben Jonson has been commissioned to write a new masque, “The Virgin Queen and the Noble Savage,” and Gilbert brings gifts and liquor to facilitate the process of getting some of the locals aboard his boat. As he waxes poetic about his yeomen “made in England,” not one of whom is “so mean and base that has not noble lustre” in the eyes, his imported Morris dancers seek out the “houses . . . people . . . rum . . . wenches” they’ve been led to expect, and reminisce about wives and/or girlfriends left in England (36). The contrast between Gilbert’s formally anachronistic diction and the earthy, sensual concerns of his crew once again undermines all official explanation of European intentions. Though Sir Humphrey issues the challenge that “History has to be made” (38), the audience sees that it has already been made, that it is not as Europe formally intended. Gilbert, like many other highly placed representatives of authority in the English-Canadian history play, is benign but utterly out of touch with the reality of his situation. It is no accident, either, that Gilbert exits into the audience (39).

Like the intermission and the second act, Cook’s ‘Act Three’ is announced by the

Ringmaster as being already underway, but otherwise unsignalled in the text. It is shorter, and serves primarily to write the final judgment on many of the Europeans introduced earlier. The furriers, for instance, who pursued and murdered the pregnant Beothuk woman and her infant, are seen reporting from their own graves, their souls plagued by their actions, eternally restless (42-4). At length, they discover that there is “a deer fence round Heaven”; they are astonished by this Beothuk structure, which “them preachers” did not mention, and they learn that they will spend eternity reliving the moment of their drowning. Their response, ignorant beyond the last, is “Damned Indians” (44).

John Peyton too, introduced as a man “who’d track an Indian for a month if they so much as stole a sail needle” (11), is last seen bowed under an imagined weight on his back, breathless and unable to shake off the “stink of death.” Ignored by both the Indians and Lieutenant Buchans—with whom he so bitterly quarrelled earlier (23-5)—Peyton “*staggers about centre stage, trying to claw at an unseen foe*” while Indians circle him, chanting. He begs to be released from his burden, the responsibility for the death of Demasduit whom he has taken from her husband and who has died on the way out of the woods (19-20, 25-7). An Indian leads him to the water and shows him his own, solitary reflection: “It is yourself you carry, old man. . . . You must pass on with your burden” (46). The anonymous man suggests that both the Europeans and the Beothuk must face their own “stones in the heart of the healer” (46-7) and, accordingly, the play moves to the final moments of the last known Beothuk.

Shanadithit, “the last of [her] people” and “chosen to be the book of [her] people,” at last makes her appearance (47). She speaks in a poetic trio with Demasduit

and Nonosabasut, who encourage her *not* to yield anything to the Europeans that will “keep [them] alive in the minds of men” (49). She cannot resist leaving a “capful of words . . . . Memories slipped through fingers. Pictures for a book” (49) and she is, despite what she shared with European culture, “*received . . . embraced . . . taken among*” the spirits of her people (50). Cruelly, but with historical accuracy, the text has already sullied her memory through the Ringmaster’s earlier report on the fate of her grave:

Shanadithit, she was put down properly, Church of England, a big ceremony, man that is born of woman and all that... and they buried her in the cemetery of the big stone church on the South Side of the City. (*Chokes with laughter.*) And one hundred and thirty five years later they pulled it down and covered it with concrete. The last of the Beothuk Indians sleeps beneath a road... Oil trucks thundering up and down... the boys parking for a bottle and a feel on a Saturday night.... That’s a good one, eh.... (42)

The Ringmaster is left alone in the spotlight following Shanadithit’s passing into the hands of her people. The “*rich, sonorous, triumphant chords*” of the musicians fade and the Ringmaster urges us to “[h]ang on a minute” before we “rush off about whatever business sustains [us]” (50). He reads Shanadithit’s obituary:

Its from *The Times* of London. Of course. September 14<sup>th</sup>, 1829. Its about her and them. An obituary. Very big on obituaries, *The Times*. Only the best people get noticed in there, of course. Funny isn’t it. All

the crowd that scratched and fought and settled the place... none of them got in. Took an Indian to put Newfoundland on the map. A dead one. . . . We made no mistake about that, did we? . . . God bless you all and may you all be saved. Don't forget to tell your friends about us. Without your support, we'd never keep a show like this running .... (50)

It is the final bluntly ironic statement of the play's attack upon its audience.

Marshall suggests that as "the basis for . . . traditions" concerning the Beothuk has come to be "widely questioned," emergent literature in the last few decades has frequently centred "around questions of blame and guilt" (5). Cook's play epitomizes that emergent literature. Cook echoes Coulter (both, coincidentally, transplanted Irishmen whose most famous work grew out of Canadian historical situations) and anticipates Daniel David Moses, particularly in laying direct responsibility on his audiences. His play is an important transitional stage in the treatment of the aboriginal-European conflict in English-Canadian historical drama. Further it suggests that all civilization is permanently on the rim of a curve, that our history is always in motion away from its starting point, that what we have done may, in time, also be done to us.

The extinction of the Beothuk occurs in consequence of European/aboriginal conflicts of the late eighteenth and early nineteenth century. The later nineteenth century, when virtually any hope of peaceful co-existence had been overwhelmed by gold strikes, railroads, and relentless Western expansion in both the United States and Canada, is the temporal setting of the remaining plays to be addressed in this chapter. Ursell and Cook both show the effects of bureaucratic intransigence. In Pollock's *Walsh* and

Hardin's *The Great Wave of Civilization*, bureaucracy becomes the principal weapon in 'the Indian Wars.'

Hardin and Pollock also remind us of a truth that much subsequent politically-correct romanticizing of the aboriginal population often forgets: intertribal battles also occurred. Just as white Europeans, before and after contact with North America's aboriginal peoples, repeatedly fought internecine wars and killed each other in huge numbers, and just as the white men of the United States fought the bloodiest war ever contested on the North American continent, so North American aboriginal tribes fought with each other as well as with the encroaching settlers. Tribal infighting was perhaps never more frequent than in the latter half of the nineteenth century as the last native control of the west eroded. Different headmen disagreed, even within individual tribes, about the next correct strategy to adopt. Some buried the hatchet (literally) and accepted reservation life; some buried the hatchet in their enemies and fought to the last; some emigrated to the "White Mother Country" to the north.

Herschel Hardin, in a style not unlike that employed by Ursell, develops his text by situating mostly invented characters against the background of significant historical events affecting their present lives. Hardin's Blackfoot and Piegan protagonists are living through the moment at which the mythology of the "open West" finally collapses. The belief, long maintained, that the west was sufficiently spacious to permit peaceful co-existence without drastic alteration to the interests and habits of either aboriginals or settlers, is, by this point, an evident fiction. The play opens in the spring of 1867 and the Northern Blackfoot Confederacy is beginning to feel the practical effects of the 1865

treaty with the American government: specifically, “white men still appropriate the lands . . . but the government makes no payments” (8). The pressure of white commercial interests, aggravated by nearly sixteen years of gold strikes and rumours of gold strikes across the northwest, has caused a breakdown in traditional methods for hunting the buffalo: the use of rifles is affecting the ecological balance. Meanwhile, early efforts to abide by treaties through the creation of reservations managed by “Indian Agents” are collapsing everywhere through a combination of incompetent administration, failed plans, and the ubiquitous presence of liquor (8). Into this historical landscape come Hardin’s characters, stymied at every turn in their quests for self-knowledge and community survival by the simple fact that they are living through an era during which all the rules for both are changing.

Little Dog, representative of the Blackfoot Nation, is Hardin’s protagonist. Together with allies such as Shoots-in-the-Air (Little Dog’s ‘Dumont’), Bird Woman (the voice of truth throughout the play), and Chief Bird Rattle (representing the older generation), Little Dog attempts to oppose his myth and cultural identity to the practices of the ever-present traders. Since corporate interests are profit-driven, cynical, and, in this play at least, generally beneath contempt, Little Dog’s efforts are foredoomed to failure.

Outsider status is significant in this play not only because the Blackfoot Confederacy finds itself opposed to white U.S. interests but because it finds itself battling the Piegans as well. White traders are the vanguard of normative authority (19, 23-4) and, as is frequently the case in the subgenre, they are by no means ideal

representatives of white civilization. If anything, most of the traders are ‘white trash’ (49), people already on the fringes of the society they claim to represent, and prone to extremes in a way more highly-placed authority is not. These traders are concerned only with how to “treat ‘em right to fake ‘em in” (25), working towards “One hundred percent profit” (45). When the traders lose control, the army enters.

As in *Riel* and so often since, alcohol is a problem for the forces of authority; the guarantors of order are as likely to be as drunk and disorderly as the unstable crowd they have been sent to control (60). The root of the problem is that treaties are not being kept. Bureaucracy lacks both will and means to enforce official policy. Thus, though the Blackfoot gain a measure of revenge within the play, particularly against the worst of the traders, the force they are opposing is larger than all the weapons, and faceless. Normative authority has as its final arbiter the bank balance; any course of action which maintains that balance in the black, no matter how much ‘red’ might need to be spilled or destroyed in the process, is that which will be followed.

The Church, often an agent of normative authority, is presented by Hardin as being paralyzed by its own internal dissension. Representative figures, Father John and Father Joseph, arrive late in Hardin’s text, and are in opposition to each other from their first speeches, the old and traditional against the young and liberal. Father Joseph immediately challenges the motives and methods of the Church, especially its symbiotic relationship with exploitative commerce: “Everything that is white stinks here” and “white religion is the prophet of deceit in this grotesque pioneering of the Northwest” (81). Before the end of the scene, Father Joseph is calling for religion to be “the great

two-edged sword” to oppose “the pagan commerce” (88). Father John, however, counters Father Joseph in every respect, debating every point. Father John’s hell and fire sermon to Little Dog is received indifferently. Father Joseph laughs as Little Dog, like Huck Finn, responds: “I prefer to go to hell” (89).

White trading turns the natives from co-operative to competitive hunting (11). Returns on exchange of buffalo skins pit individuals against each other, undermining the much-praised collective orientation of tribal life. Tobacco and liquor are employed to facilitate business interests and cloud judgement (26-8); “Mixin’ hooch is what marks off the successful trader from the absolute failure,” Snookum Jim boasts (28). The effect on the individual warrior, as Bird Woman overtly states, is that “[f]irewater has made him a slave of the white-stained hand” (31). Liquor turns even the best-motivated warrior to extremes—Little Dog trades his wife for an extra jug (49)—and the mode of exchange among the tribes moves inexorably from community to hierarchy (75-6).

Hardin’s characters demonstrate all the charismatic components typical of the protagonists of English-Canadian historical drama. Little Dog and Shoots-in-the-Air are introduced as reasonable, analytical, loyal, traditional, sharing, introspective, and intelligent—all qualities displayed during initial confrontations with other members of Piegan and Blackfoot Nations (9-23). Hardin employs language in a manner similar to Cook, gracing native scenes with poetic and imaginative dialogue and description and labouring white trader exchanges with fragmented structures and crude diction. The opening scenes seem designed specifically to dramatize the distance in quality between the superior natives and the ignorant whites. Scene 1 in the Piegan camp laments the

ongoing changes and their effects on native spirituality and subsistence (14-22) . Poetic, musical diction is employed by all characters in a scene which features the arrangement of a marriage: “I am Shoots-in-the-Air. I ask that Sitakapoki, daughter of Flat Tail, become the wife of Little Dog. . . . They have met once ... many times ... where willows grow thick” (16). Contrast the delicacy of this negotiation for the hand of Sitakapoki with the diction employed in scene 2 by the traders, Geary and Snookum Jim (23-51), as they prepare their “hooch” for use in securing via trade “a raw, red piece of ass! Heaves like a cow in heat! . . . [a] hot, juicy red-bellied bitch” (45, 49).

Hardin’s native characters are usually smarter than their white adversaries (33). Liquor is essential for the white traders as one of the few devices which can create a perceived equality—lowering the natives to the level of the white man. Even the Blackfoot use of a dead comrade’s body for one final attack on the trading post, though grim, evinces an intelligence which the white traders never show (53). The natives are always willing to listen and tend to speak truth (85-6, 89). Their alternative way is epitomized in this text by what has already been, in hindsight, irretrievably lost at the outset: full communal equality. The early stages of the script foreground the principles of equality at work in tribal life (12). As Little Dog expresses it, “what is ours is yours, for everything is held in common with the tribe” (19). Yet before this brief summary is even voiced, laments are heard. Strangling Wolf bemoans the days gone by when “buffalo were distributed evenly among the people” (11). The first of several overtly didactic songs compares the “dog days” of “all together” with the “horse days” of “each alone” (13). From the start, then, the play is already a lament for what is past and

unrecoverable, even while its protagonists cling to faith in the possibility of restoration. Once more, hindsight is flawless; Hardin's audience knows how Little Dog's story must end. The attractiveness and potential of the alternative is great, but the audience is aware that the return to traditional ways has not happened, and equality and balance, sobriety and order, are more fiction than fact—in the white world as much as in that of the native.

The cost of embracing the proposed alternative to the dominant order is immense. Capitalist competitive trade would have to cease; liquor would have to be removed from the trading floor; and the role of the military would have to be reconceived. In short, “the commercial principle” (95) would have to be invalidated; the foundation of existence of the whole United States be rewritten. As Snookum Jim says, facing his own final showdown, “This is what made us what we are, the independent man that has chopped an empire that's opened up this country” (106). The audience knows from the opening curtain that “the great wave of civilization” (63) is going to drown many who cannot or will not swim with the tide. It has been told directly that “the great wave of civilization” is opposed to logic, that “a businessman using logic is like a whore using a chastity belt” (63). The dominant remains dominant through a mixture of chemical support, profit incentive, and sheer weight of numbers. The size of the collected opposition—stated clearly in Father John's cautionary sermon to Little Dog (89)—and its technology ensures that what the historical record dictates will not, in this text, be contradicted.

*The Great Wave of Civilization* departs slightly from common practice in that even the moderate resistance offered the protagonists in this play has extreme

consequences. Bribery and increased liquor lead only to more of the behaviour which is already causing inter-tribal dissension (31). The common insult, conventional voicing of anti-native stereotypes by whites, takes on more force when it is used by the white traders to foment trouble between the natives. Snookum Jim insists to Big Feet, for example, that he cannot trust his Blackfoot allies: “Brother, my ass. . . . He’s stingy and mean and he can’t stand anybody else enjoyin’ life. A Blackfoot’s a puritan . . . . He’d skin your corpse and mend his lodge with it, instead o’ lettin’ it rot natural” (32). The constant undermining of another’s *bona fides* happens inside the white camp as often as it does outside, reminding the audience that, in the world of competition for commercial profit, no one really trusts anyone else. Even letting nature take its course has severe consequences in this play as Geary sees the drunken Big Feet outside the trading post, unconscious in sub-zero temperatures, and simply leaves him there—with predicable results (51).

Extreme resistance merely makes the inevitable destruction happen a little more quickly. Army raids, sometimes in the form of pre-emptive strikes (76-7), in theory prevent trouble before it happens but in reality kill people who have done no immediate wrong. There is no honour or loyalty among the traders. Geary finally begins to sympathize a little with the native’s plight; Snookum Jim, recognizing an enemy to commerce, shoots his former partner and gets back to business (94). When Culligan is lured out of the white traders’ shelter and butchered by Little Dog (100), his eulogy mentions that he “died in the midst of a fiscal year” (100), and Snookum Jim’s response to being accused of ultimate responsibility for Culligan’s death is “I made a profit”

(105). No matter which side of the “great wave of civilization” a given character might find himself on, the slightest mistake kills.

Hardin’s text is relentlessly critical of the commercial principle, wholly in support of the values already fading from the native way of life. Flat Tail, the old chief, laments that “the dreamer is dead,” that there is no one remaining who knows “the signs of the Great Spirit” (16, 17). History and narrative are held to be essential to survival, but equally shown to be already vanishing from the native way: “The past was fearful... but he remembered it. That was important. / Once. No more. / The dreamer is dead from grief. / . . . If we are to survive, the wise must lead the hunt, the story-teller should prevail” (17). But the story-teller does not prevail because his dreams and stories are polluted by firewater (31). The play mocks the overt cynicism of corporate greed, particularly in the passage which gives the play its title (59-68). Hardin shows the military to be a crude mechanism bent on unthinking destruction: “Thinking is treason. / It’s proved beyond reason: / The only good red man’s a dead man” (78). The Church resembles the tribes, internally divided between young and old, except that in the Church it is youth which tends toward the just position. But the Church fails at the crux of its testing, reverting to exhausted rhetoric about eternal punishment as opposed to helping in any way to affect the behaviour that it says must be changed (88-90). The Blackfoot Confederacy withers and fades, its loss lamented in Bird Woman’s closing song, one line from which states clearly the stance of the play: “the white man with his laws and trade has killed the power of wisdom. // In one generation” (110-11).

Among the challenges the play presents to its audience is the suggestion that

beggars “are an invention of the white man” (10). Every mendicant is in part made by the system that so often scorns or ignores beggars. The self-proclaimed “phi-lo-sophers” and “realists” (41)—the traders—are shown to be neither wise nor astute. When Little Dog trades his wife for another jug, the audience is challenged to examine its reactions: do we blame the savage for his unconscionable act, or do we criticize the trade system which allowed such a barter to be made? In passing, the play suggests the extent to which attitudes were influenced by the manipulation of the press (61), thereby reminding audiences that the constitution of the United States provokes and authorizes much of what happens in the pursuit of trade (66), and concludes with the direct suggestion that “civilization” is based solely on exploitation without intelligence or conscience (92). Commerce eats its own. Like Macbeth, who laments that he “is in blood / Stepped in so far that, should [he] wade no more / Returning were as tedious as go o’er” (3.4.137-39), the trader finds that “[t]here’s no turnin’ back. There’s no changin’. Once yo’ git into it, yo’ git into it, and there’s no turnin’ back” (107). The contrast in levels of diction between the Shakespearean example and the contemporary echo is, one suspects, entirely deliberate. That this particular text is set more in the U.S. than in Canada does not affect its relevance to Canadian analysis; like the native peoples themselves did, the thematic values and challenges readily cross the border.

Sharon Pollock’s *Walsh* dramatizes the events surrounding just such a border crossing: Sitting Bull’s journey to Canada following the battle at the Little Bighorn, the notorious “Custer’s Last Stand.” Sitting Bull leads his tribe across the U.S.- Canadian border into the Northwest Territories (present-day Saskatchewan), following the

complete rout of Custer's forces in 1876. Sitting Bull's intent is to embrace Canadian laws and customs, to bury the hatchet in the United States, and to settle with his people on the northern side of the border for good. Canadian law is embodied in the person of Major James Walsh, commanding officer of Fort Walsh, and superintendent of the North-West Mounted Police. Pollock's play is a study in the methods by which government intransigence and bureaucratic impedimenta rise to become the most successful weapons in the "Indian wars." It dramatizes, as does Ursell's *The Running of the Deer*, a historical moment at which, had government acted differently, subsequent harsh consequences might have been mitigated or perhaps altogether avoided.

Crucial to analysis and comprehension of *Walsh* is never to lose sight of the fact that the play is called *Walsh*—not *Sitting Bull*. Just as Shakespeare's *The Tragedy of Julius Caesar* is not entitled *The Tragedy of Marcus Brutus*—despite the fact that Brutus' role is at least double the length of Caesar's—so Pollock's *Walsh* is neither about the tragedy suffered by Sitting Bull, nor, really, about the personal circumstances of the life of James Walsh. *Walsh* is the tragedy of the Europeans, a study of how excessive insistence on the rightness of their own models and beliefs deprived the European settlers of a richer interaction with the native population. It is not a study of physical destruction, but rather of emotional and cultural loss—all the more tragic for often not being recognized as such. Pollock examines the Platonic notion which Cook's "Author" voices in the beginning of *On the Rim of the Curve* but which is apparently rejected by the action of Cook's play. Pollock may not be arguing that the aggressive white race deserves more pity, but she is certainly working within the Aristotelian model of

catharsis which insists that, coupled with a recognition of the ultimate responsibility of the tragic hero for the provocation of the tragic events, there must be a sense of pity for the destruction of the innocent and others in the hero's wake. Viewed in this way, Pollock's play is a study of the responsibility of Canadian government for the destruction of Sitting Bull and his people, the tragedy of European belief in its own inherent superiority. Walsh, like Julius Caesar before him, is the representative of the system, the focal point for dramatization of how the mechanics of bureaucracy work through the individual; he is not the instigator of the tragedy, merely its agent.

Walsh serves as protagonist in the play, a surrogate for the normative authority he represents. He is the front-line of authority, the commander of what Joseph Manzione called, in his study of Sitting Bull's years in Canada, "not just a law enforcement agency, but an entire legal system on horseback" (7). Walsh's outsider status is unconventional for the English-Canadian historical play. As is clearly demonstrated in Pollock's text, though Walsh is part of the power structure, he is also distanced from it. Walsh's authority is subject to that of his superiors in the North West Mounted Police, and those superiors in turn must report to the bureaucrats of the federal government in Ottawa. Even Ottawa, nominally reporting to no one but the Canadian people, must continually concern itself with possible ramifications of Canadian actions in London and Washington. In the setting of the play, then, Walsh is the figurehead of authority, an inside-outsider. It is the task of the play to demonstrate precisely how often this historically significant officer was forced to be a figurehead rather than an agent. Through development of the number of instances in which Walsh's basically sound

judgment was questioned and his proposed actions blocked, Pollock dramatizes the extent to which Sitting Bull and his people were defeated not by the military force of the enemy they grappled with, nor by the daily challenges of food shortages and radical alterations to their habits of living, but by an enemy they almost never met in the flesh—by bureaucracy.

Walsh faces a common human conflict: reconciliation of the tensions between human instincts and professional duty, between irresistible desire and immovable obligation. He must choose between two opposed value systems, each of which he believes to be equally worthy of loyalty but which, by historical circumstance, have become mutually incompatible. For Walsh, action is either right or wrong; for his superiors, a third state exists. *Walsh* is, among other things, a dramatization of the rise of the “expedient” as a motivating factor in human behaviour.

Pollock uses an introductory framing moment to remind the audience of the inevitability, the completed pastness of all the action they are about to see unfold. We are introduced to James Walsh in a Yukon saloon near the turn of the century, and the play begins *in Walsh's mind*. The events of Pollock's “prologue” are played in highly stylized movements, with freezes, intended to convey an “*impression . . . similar to that experienced when one is drunk or under great mental stress*”; all is observed by a character from Walsh's memory who exists “*only in Walsh's mind,*” standing “*outside of the prologue scene*” (9). The prologue segues directly into Act One. The effect of this non-naturalistic staging is to foreground sharply Walsh's mental state, and to establish his personal consequences first. It is one of the devices by which the play moves through

its title character to reach beyond his personal situation. *What* happens to Walsh is given in the prologue. The play concentrates on *why* it happens, drawing the attention to Walsh's entrapment in bureaucratic framework—the true antagonist of the play.

Through Walsh's perspective, we begin in "The Klondike! 1898!" (10-16). There, during a bar brawl, Walsh re-enacts the steps of his earlier fight with Sitting Bull, dogged in his mind by the disapproval of a young NWMP recruit, Clarence Underhill. Far from the days of his command in the NWMP, "Major Walsh" is "Commissioner of the Yukon now" (14), a "grafter" whose job includes taking "ten percent off the top" of all findings (12). He has joined the bureaucracy, and is an embittered, surly man (15). At the precise moment at which he replicates the movements he once used to subdue Sitting Bull, a final freeze occurs and Harry, a minor figure in the introduction, steps through the frozen characters to deliver a history lesson (16-9).

Harry identifies Major Walsh as "an original member of the first contingent" of the North West Mounted Police (16)—a fact important in dramatizing the extent to which the actual operations of the force diverge from the initial benign conception of its role. The rest of the speech reviews the events of the battle of the Little Bighorn, a recitation which makes it perfectly clear that Pollock does not intend to follow American received wisdom on the subject. "Old Glory Hound Custer" is roundly castigated for employing a winter strategy in fighting a summer war, and for sadly misjudging the stance vis-à-vis the white man of the tribe he attempted to attack (16, 17). In Harry's view, "the day Custer met Sittin' Bull was the beginning of the end for Major Walsh" (16), which is true on both the personal and the national level. Keeping in mind Walsh's

symbolic status, we can understand Harry's comment as applicable to Canada's ability to maintain its own integrity of policy in the face of opposition from its powerful southern neighbour. The story of Custer's Last Stand is a story, in part, of broken treaties on the part of the American government; it is also the beginning of the end for Canada's ability to establish and maintain its own 'Indian' policies.

Without a break in the action, the freeze ends and Harry's final lines in his lecture take us into Act One: "Across the line, in the country of the Great White Mother, Major James A. Walsh of the North West Mounted was enforcin' law and order as decreed by Her Majesty's Government" (21). The line establishes a bureaucratic tension that is too easily overlooked: it is 1876, and Canada has been its own Dominion for nearly a decade, yet it remains the "country of the Great White Mother" where the laws are decreed by "Her Majesty's Government." Ottawa struggles through the whole of the play (and by extension through the whole of the end of the nineteenth century) to maintain a precarious balance of goodwill between London and Washington, attempting to satisfy two outside agendas which, though officially allied, are by no means identical, and sometimes are in complete opposition to each other. As Manzione puts it, "Canada was a hostage to the United States for the good conduct of the British Empire" (41).

Early scenes illustrate Walsh's charisma by dramatizing the quotidian pressures he faces: procuring sufficient supplies in the still isolated Fort Walsh<sup>5</sup> (21, 25-7), trying to re-educate the nomadic tribes to become settled agrarian people (22-3, 27), reconciling differences between white and native conceptions of "property" (31-6). In each case, Walsh is seen to be pragmatic, with an understanding of the realities of everyone's

situation, and possessed of a negotiator's capacity for keeping all sides at the table—an ideal administrator for such an area. His response to the bigotry of the enraged Mrs. Anderson demonstrates his capabilities. Annoyed by the fact that the Major is even taking the time to listen to Crow Eagle's side of the story in the argument concerning his theft of her spare washtub, Mrs. Anderson demands: "Whose side are you on, Jim?" Walsh responds: "I was unaware we were choosing sides. My job is to keep the peace and see that justice is done" (33). While the line serves as a good summary of Walsh's character in the early going, it also points to a problem: he cannot maintain his professed ignorance concerning the choosing of sides for long.

Walsh is also shown to be exceptionally brave and level-headed. Confronting an Assiniboine, White Dog, on a charge of horse theft, and surrounded by Gall, Sitting Bull, and the remaining Sioux—some 500 braves in total—Walsh not only insists on settling the charge but also forces the man to apologize and withdraw his threat of a future "meeting" (46-7). The fact that Walsh listens to White Dog, understands and accepts his version of events, but absolutely refuses to allow White Dog anything not covered by the letter of the law impresses his own subordinates, the native leaders, and the audience. In Pollock's rendition of the scene, it is Walsh's bravery and fidelity to careful interpretation of the law that impresses Sitting Bull enough to begin to trust and speak openly with Walsh.

Underlying each of these scenes is a critique of assumed superiority of 'white' knowledge, and a reminder of the situation-specific nature of a great deal of common sense. "You think a white man's the only person kin know anythin' for sure!" Harry

charges Clarence. “Whyn’t you try askin’ an Injun who killed Custer?” (24). Louis Leveille, the “Fort Walsh scout” and Metis (30), furthers the criticism of one-sided white knowledge when he instructs Clarence:

Take all da books, da news dat da white man prints, take all dat Bible book, take all dose things you learn from ... lay dem on da prairie ... and da sun ... da rain ... da snow ... pouf! You wanna learn, you study inside here ...

*He taps his head.*

... and here ...

*He taps his chest.*

... and how it is wit’ you and me ...

*He indicates the two of them.*

... and how it is wit’ you and all ...

*He indicates the surroundings.*

Travel ‘round da Medicine Wheel. Den you know somethin.’ (30-1)

Harry reminds us that every story has multiple perspectives, while Louis promotes knowledge gained through experience, not through textual analysis.

Criticism of received wisdom is not limited to characters who stand outside the power structure. The Major, Harry suggests, is about to “write the Prime Minister, tell ‘im to stuff his farm u-tensils” (23). When Walsh discovers the latest shipment of farming equipment, his reaction shows that Harry is not exaggerating this reported disrespect for the P.M.: “Are you telling me, man, that once again the government has

seen fit to burden me and the natives of these parts with another load of seed and equipment to rot and rust when they know goddamn well, because I've told them time and again, that these Indians are not, and never will be, farmers!" (27). It is crucial that Walsh is already beginning to falter under the weight of bureaucratic ignorance. The outburst is rhetorical, and Walsh provides his own answer: "Well ... can't be helped, can it?" (27). Fort Walsh must solve its problems despite "those fools in Ottawa" (31), elected by the even greater fools, "da people dat sent dem dere" (31).

Walsh finds himself torn between the desire to help the natives maintain their traditional ways and the knowledge that those ways cannot continue in the changed climate created by white presence in the West. Though he recognizes the futility of attempting to make settled farmers out of nomadic hunters—asking himself rhetorically as he watches Crow Eagle leave, "can you see that man bent double over a hoe?" (37)—he is painfully aware that "when the white man comes, the buffalo goes.... And with the buffalo goes the life [the natives] have known" (37). The inevitability of this change makes it no less difficult to deal with pragmatically, however. Attractive as preserving the traditional native way of life might be, the cost would be astronomical. As was the case for Hardin's Blackfoot warriors, Pollock's Sioux would only be able to maintain their traditional ways if the whole of the English-speaking world completely redefined its understanding of capital and commerce. Walsh (and, once more, by extension, Canada itself) is in the unenviable position of being able to see and comprehend the impending collision of forces without being in any position to prevent that collision. What could be done, Pollock's play suggests, is to ameliorate the

consequences of the collision. It is Walsh's tragedy, and Canada's, that such a course was not followed.

Walsh is obligated to follow orders, but orders can be inadequate preparation for reality. An unexpected wrinkle in relations with the Sioux fleeing the U.S. following Custer's debacle is their claim of long-standing British loyalty. Gall greets Walsh, claiming the promised protection offered the Sioux nation when they fought in defence of "the grandfather of Queen Victoria" (44). Walsh examines the medal Gall gives him as evidence in support of the Sioux claim: "It's a George III medal. The Sioux fought for the British in 1776 against the Americans" (44). In stage directions, Pollock adds: "*His orders from Ottawa have not covered this exigency*" (44). Not only did the Sioux claim protection based upon their loyalty to the Crown in the U.S. War of Independence, but some also claimed direct descent from north-side ancestors in the early nineteenth century (Manzione 45). As crossing the line was commonplace, the claim is not at all far-fetched.

While Walsh consults Ottawa concerning the Sioux claim, Sitting Bull consults the Blackfoot and Cree, finding that Walsh's reputation is high among all the northern people. The first indication that all concerned will be victims of protocol occurs when Walsh receives his answer from Ottawa: "My chief says the Queen is not responsible for you. . . . The Great White Mother has made peace with the Americans. . . . It was decided the Sioux belonged to the President in Washington" (53). Still, the Sioux are welcome to stay as long as they can be self-sufficient and, most importantly for international relations, as long as there is absolutely no use of the Northwest Territories as a base for

raids across the line. But as Walsh points out, the Sioux will not be able to remain self-sufficient for long: “The buffalo will soon be gone” (54). Sitting Bull’s reaction reminds the audience that the root of the whole problem lies in U.S. violations of treaties concerning the Black Hills of Dakota. Walsh’s response to that objection is crucial both to comprehension of his character and to Pollock’s stance in the text: “I tell you this because I am a soldier and I must follow orders, but I am a friend also. White Forehead... / *He indicates himself.* / ...does not say this, Major Walsh says this. / *He speaks officially*” (54). Walsh overtly draws the distinction between profession and person, uniform and man. It is a relentlessly widening gap.

With the arrival of General Terry from the U.S.—officially for international negotiations between Washington and Ottawa on the status of the Sioux but unofficially already reported by Sitting Bull to have cast himself as agent of Custer’s vengeance—we see Walsh’s flexibility thrown into relief. Terry is the voice of white supremacy: “Control of the savage, elimination of the savage aspects of the Injun’s character” is the goal, though “what you’d have left, be goddamned if I know” (69). Aside from providing, for Pollock, a focal point to demonstrate how much more close-minded and aggressive the Americans are, Terry also reminds the audience of an important factor in contemporary comprehension of all these events: the role played by the press—“Savage [the Indians] may be, but I’ll tell you this, Major, they are kittens compared to the Eastern press. . . . Not a man among them [the journalists] I’d have at my back in fight” (70). In fact, Pollock downplays the role of the press as it specifically related to Walsh. Walsh was the target of vast amounts of criticism in U.S. newspapers, not merely those

such as the *Helena Herald* (Montana) which might have been expected to be rabidly pro-Custer, but also from journalists in the east, particularly in Chicago (MacEwan 170).

The Act ends with Sitting Bull's official decision to remain in Canada (76). From here, the presence of the Sioux is solely Walsh's responsibility. The dialogue between Walsh and Louis which ends the scene clarifies the implications of the current situation:

LOUIS:

Louis trust da Major to do da right thing.... Dis is da month when da green grass come up, da moon of makin' fat; dis is spring.... Can da Major make da spring come for da Sioux? What can you do for Sittin' Bull?"

WALSH:

Everything within my power.

LOUIS:

How much is dat?

WALSH:

Say what you mean, Louis.

LOUIS:

Louis choose to trust, but da Indian can do nothin' else but trust.... Trust ... or die .... Sometime, trust *and* die.... Can da Major make da spring come for da Sioux?

WALSH:

You trust in me ... and I trust in those above me .... Quite simple,

eh? Now let's get on.

*He goes to leave.*

LOUIS:

Da Indian say he would trust da Great White Mother more if she did not have so many bald-headed thieves workin' for her!

*WALSH stops and turns.*

WALSH: *angrily*

The Sioux have a case ... a strong case ... and I shall present it!

LOUIS: *softly*

Who stands behind you dere?

WALSH:

Honourable men!

*LOUIS spits. (77-8)<sup>6</sup>*

Pollock gives no false hope. Walsh's trust in the honour of his superiors will become the focal point of the second act until that trust is completely eroded.

Walsh's letters to his wife allow the audience to see more of the private man than is often the case in the English-Canadian historical drama. Pollock stages husband and wife physically distanced, and interweaves personal reminiscence with meditation on duty to develop a picture of Walsh as a man who cannot, in any circumstances, forget his obligation to duty. The exchange is decidedly *not* a dialogue; husband and wife speak in alternate lines, but they do not converse. As Mary Walsh muses about how she is getting older, James laments the "gross and continual mismanagement of the Sioux" that has

happened “across the line.” He directly voices his own confusion: “they ask for some sort of justice ... which is what I thought I swore an oath to serve!” (88). It is significant that Mary becomes “*distant*” at this point and the lights begin to fade on her. Even in his most private moments, Walsh cannot let go of his sense of duty, nor escape the conflict he feels over what he perceives as a shift in the very essence of that to which he had dedicated his life.

Walsh’s confrontation with his immediate superior, Colonel MacLeod, raises another complication. Walsh has circumvented “proper channels” in dealing with his American counterpart on local matters (91). Walsh, it is alleged, is privately countering his public statements, short-circuiting his duty to encourage the Sioux out of Canada just as he short-circuited the chain of command in approaching his American counterpart directly (92). The complaint is, as MacLeod suggests, merely a formality; the real problem is the perception of the United States that Canada is impeding the process of American Justice by “giving sanctuary to those responsible for the Custer Massacre” (93). Walsh’s reaction is yet another refrain of Pollock’s theme: “Custer was responsible for the death of himself and his men! For Christ’s sake, speak the truth” (93).

Slowly, the truth does surface: the U.S. and Canadian governments are not in the least concerned with individual cases, or the specifics of the Sioux claim. Each government wants to hear only confirmation of its own chosen course of action, its own version of events. MacLeod hints at the practical consequence of this truth: “You play chess .... Sometimes a pawn is sacrificed on one side of the board to gain an advantage on the other . . . . It might be possible to consider Sitting Bull and the Sioux as pawns”

(96). When Walsh refuses to cooperate, insisting that the Prime Minister is responsible for explaining the whole import of his orders to those who must carry them out, MacLeod diagnoses exhaustion and conveys the Prime Minister's orders: stop feeding the Sioux and apologize for breaching the chain of command. Once more, Walsh is faced with a challenge to his personal comprehension of duty. He has followed his orders, as he repeatedly insists, yet doing his duty has brought him to a point at which he stands in danger of being forced to resign because of dereliction of duty (99).

Alone with Harry, Walsh confronts the meaning of what has happened to him: "I've always thought of myself as a man of principle.... Honour, truth, the lot.... They're just words, Harry. They don't exist. I gave my life to them and they don't exist" (102). Harry's response is an uncharacteristic moment in Pollock's otherwise generally consistent use of the character as an interpreter of events to the audience: "Ain't nothin' I can do" (103). Perhaps Pollock intends nothing more here than to suggest we can all become part of the problem.

There remains only the physical confrontation with Sitting Bull which has been foreshadowed in the Yukon prologue. Sitting Bull, pained by the necessity of the action, requests "provisions for [his] people" (111). Walsh gives the official government answer: "Your provisions wait for you across the line." When Sitting Bull presses the issue, Walsh loses his temper: "God knows I've done my damndest and nothing's changed. . . . Cross the line if you're so hungry, but don't, for Christ's sake, come begging food from me!" Sitting Bull stands on his dignity as "the head of the Sioux nation" but Walsh aggravates him further, saying "I don't give a goddamn who you are!

Get the hell out!” (112). The rejoinder provokes Sitting Bull to reach for his knife, which action in turn moves Walsh to physical violence, twisting Sitting Bull’s arm, throwing him to the floor, planting a foot in the middle of his back, and “*sending him sprawling*” (112). The incident (mentioned but not documented in the historical record—cf. Manzione 118, MacEwan 149) is merely a graphic representation of what has already been done, emotionally and morally, to the Sioux nation. The subsequent departure of the Sioux, the incarceration of Sitting Bull in Fort Randall—despite American promises that “nobody’d be punished” (123)—and the final report of his death are all anticlimax.

Pollock uses the activity upon which Walsh is engaged when the news of Sitting Bull’s death reaches him—staging a mock Indian attack to celebrate the opening of the railroad—not only to critique the force as a parody of itself in its own time but also, one suspects, to call into question all aspects of ceremonial celebration that continue to draw resources from the addressing of real problems. As Sitting Bull, from beyond the grave, voices a death lament in terms which echo the Bible, Walsh removes his gun and tunic, placing them on his desk, and then, lifting his hands above his head, slams them down on his desk (128-9). It is an inarticulate, ineffectual gesture, much too little protest, and far too late.

Pollock’s development of historical events into dramatic form differs in one or two important respects from common practice. Firstly, there is almost no extreme resistance in this play. If we read Walsh as protagonist, the most extreme resistance offered the protagonist is his eventual transfer to Qu’appelle, away from the irresolvable tensions of Fort Walsh. He is opposed, in keeping with the theme of the play,

bureaucratically. Even if a case is made for Sitting Bull as protagonist (a case which does not really seem plausible), extreme resistance to him personally, by extension to his people, happens offstage, reported only in Harry's epilogue, and imposed by the United States forces.

Secondly, despite having perhaps more documentary evidence upon which to draw than any other playwright under discussion in this chapter, Pollock employs a surprising amount of invention, as well as manipulation of the extant record. Ken Mitchell has discussed the need for invention at the private level in most historical plays. But Pollock is more free from that need than most of her peers. She has at her disposal, for example, letters from Walsh to his wife from which to draw some sense of the private individual, as well as many letters written by Walsh in the course of his professional duties. That Pollock invents characters to help dramatize particular ways of thinking is not at all unusual; what *is* surprising are some of the points at which she veers from the received record.

Her most significant invented character is Clarence Underhill, a lad from Glengarry who might well have walked out of the pages of Ralph Connor. Clarence begins the play as a raw recruit, replete with all the standard Eastern prejudices against Indians that come from parochial upbringing, fueled by even the most cosmopolitan media reports on conditions in the Wild West. Entering the play convinced that he and his fellow officers are all in danger of imminent attack and hoping for his chance "to kill the man who killed Custer" (24), Clarence is welcomed to Fort Walsh with the advice that he should keep "[his] eyes, ears and mind open" and "[his] mouth shut" (26). As

Clarence experiences his new surroundings and meets actual members of Sitting Bull's camp, his prejudices slowly fade. Taking instruction from Louis, McCutcheon, and Walsh, Clarence eventually becomes an even greater supporter of the Sioux cause than is Walsh himself. During the Nez Percé evacuation, Clarence gives his overcoat to a pair of child refugees (62-3), then attempts to help another woman and her baby before discovering that both are dead. He listens to Sitting Bull explain the Medicine Wheel (65-7), and begins to form a fondness for Sitting Bull's young son, Crowfoot. It is Clarence who voices incredulous reaction against what will eventually become government policy: "You don't let people starve to death, do you? Just 'cause you wish they'd move someplace else" (85). Later, he gives Crowfoot his knapsack (104), discusses the tribe's troubles with Sitting Bull himself (104-07), and screams in protest when Walsh physically opposes Sitting Bull (113). Clarence has practically to be carried off in order to follow the order he has been given by Walsh in the wake of the incident (113), and must literally be carried off when later, drunk, he reacts very badly to hearing Harry announce "the end of the Sioux nation" (123).

Clarence's role in the play is clear. He demonstrates a principal challenge to the audience: confront your prejudices by making actual contact with the people involved. It is interesting, then, to consider that Clarence is an anomaly among the NWMP, that the historical record suggests that any character in his position would far more likely have grown less sympathetic to the Sioux cause as events unfolded. Manzione observes that as the years of Sitting Bull's exile in Canada progressed, "the police officers' attitudes . . . changed. Sympathy turned to toleration, and then to mild contempt, an evolution

that reflected changes in attitudes and policies in Ottawa” (118).<sup>7</sup> The path that Pollock dramatizes through her development of Clarence is the reverse of that suggested by the historical record.

Other variations on the historical record are less obvious than the sustained development of Clarence. The character of “Pretty Plume” seems to be an invention. Grant MacEwan mentions the presence of “a squaw” at the conference between Sitting Bull and General Terry, and Manzione identifies her as Flying Bird. Whereas Pollock presents the woman as the sole voice of the Sioux—“the bearer of our children” is our speaker, asserts Sitting Bull (72)—it seems that Sitting Bull himself did most of the talking in the meeting with Terry, assisted by several other headmen of the tribe. Flying Bird made one representation to the committee on behalf of the women and children, who outnumbered the braves approximately five to one (Manzione 45), and MacEwan suggests that her presence was “a premeditated insult to the Americans” (127); but there is no sense that Pollock’s portrayal of the woman as the chief negotiator for the Sioux has any basis in the historical record. An early indicator of Walsh’s faith in the good intentions of the Sioux is probably absent from Pollock’s version of the story because of the difficulty inherent in staging it: Walsh took advantage of an offer to rest by taking a nap in one of the Sioux tents, performing one of the more impressive acts of trust—sleeping in a stranger’s presence (MacEwan 79). Another incident missing from the play which appears in the historical record adds a level of complexity to the bureaucratic negotiations that Pollock probably (and, one suspects, rightly) felt would confuse the lines of antagonism drawn: Pollock makes a great deal of Walsh’s disgust with Ottawa

for sending shipments of farming equipment to help the nomadic hunting tribe (22-3, 25-7, 36-8). Conditions had so changed by 1879 that when Sitting Bull's nephew, Watogala (who does not figure in the play) appealed to Ottawa to send farming assistance, Sir John A. Macdonald's government, more concerned with settling the situation in the West than Alexander Mackenzie's previous administration had been, *refused* the request (Manzione 134). All these variations from or omissions of elements of the received record simplify Pollock's thematic development.

Pollock is somewhat more subtle than many of her peers, censuring less frequently and less stridently, but she does present the same general portrait of our ancestors as that found in most English-Canadian history plays. Particularly repellent is one of Louis' anecdotes concerning the "mighty nice tobacco pouch" he saw belonging to an American, "made from breast of Indian woman he killed at Sand Creek" (52). It is not surprising that several of the play's most pointed criticisms are voiced by Sitting Bull. In a long speech describing his "good friend Crazy Horse of the Oglala" (56) Sitting Bull creates a portrait of that famous warrior, notorious for the intensity of his resistance to the white man, which stresses his loyalty and his sense of family far above his reputation for violence. The death of Crazy Horse is presented in graphic terms: "his arms were pinioned by his red brothers and a white soldier pushed his bayonet into Crazy Horse's stomach! It took one night for him to die" (55). White men still point to the "great gouge gone from the wall" behind where Crazy Horse was struck and "laugh and joke" about the old cliché of the best kind of Indian (55-6). Clearly, the Sioux have no monopoly on violence—either physical or emotional. Describing the plight of the Nez

Percés, another American tribe attempting to seek refuge across the northern border, Sitting Bull says: “As we speak, Nez Percés are rotting, their bodies full of bullet holes, their heads smashed in with gunstocks and bootheels. Would you term this a natural death?” (59). Faced by Walsh with the tribe’s choices, Sitting Bull reflects: “I know many who took the white man’s promise. . . . I would ask their guidance, but all of them are dead” (75). Sitting Bull’s most direct criticism is also his simplest: “How does the white man sustain himself beneath the weight of the blood that he has shed?” (62).

Most significantly for Canadian audiences, our much-vaunted “peace, order and good government” appears, in part, to have been achieved by a triumph of expedience over justice. Walsh reports on a case he has tried: “I sentenced that Sioux to six months imprisonment and fined him twenty dollars, for that is the law! But where’s the justice in it?” (109). Even more overt is Harry’s condemnation of bureaucratic procedure that ends the play: “Sir John A.’s policy for dealin’ with the Sioux was an all round winner... beats Custer all to hell! Not half so messy . . . . Quiet, simple and effective . . . . Do not delay in returning to the United States, for that course is the only alternative to death by starvation” (124). These challenges, when added to those voiced by Sitting Bull, create a climate of guilt and responsibility in the play which situates it squarely within common practice. The theme of white responsibility unites all the variety of plays about the subject—even, perhaps especially, those written by First Nations playwrights.

Pollock’s *Walsh* uses the specific and well-documented details of the relationship between Walsh and Sitting Bull as a microcosm of the relationship between Canada and its aboriginal population. Confused and stressed by conflict between good intentions and

practical reality, between national will and international politics, Walsh fails. Given Pollock's belief that "much of our history has been misrepresented and even hidden from us," and that "[u]ntil we recognize our past, we cannot change our future" ("Playwright's Note," *The Komagata Maru Incident* n.p.), it seems clear that she is charging her audience with the responsibility to recognize its own failure.

In many ways, Daniel David Moses' play *Almighty Voice and his Wife* unites all the foregoing discussion. Moses employs both naturalistic and symbolic structures to address confrontations between white and native systems of authority and spirituality. He examines the consequences of confrontation both in the historical setting of the events dramatized and in the present, arguing that audiences must accept responsibility both for self-interrogation and for right action toward others as a consequence. All these are approaches and themes shared with the other dramatists here considered.

But in one significant way, Moses' play does something that none of the others addressed in this chapter do: it treats the historical moment and its consequences from a First Nations perspective. Though there is little distance between Moses' play and those already discussed, particularly in the conclusions each reaches concerning responsibility, it is important to the evolution of the drama at large that stories should be told from all available perspectives. In one crucial sense, then, Moses' play is significant because, at last, a play from the native perspective has found a way into the cultural dominant of contemporary theatrical practice.

The first act of *Almighty Voice and his Wife* is naturalistic—so conventionally naturalistic that some early reviewers were annoyed by its slow pace.<sup>8</sup> The scenes and

dialogue seem conventional to the point of seeming stereotypical. The narrative is strictly chronological. Only the punctuation of scenes by projected titles seems a device of the contemporary theatre, an intrusion of 'movies' into the world of "the Saskatchewan prairie" of 1895 to 1897 (64). Only as the second act unfolds, with its complete and utter contrast to the style of the first act, do we realize just how many alarm bells that first act should have set ringing. Part of Moses' skill with this play is the manner in which he provokes his audience to question stereotypes by first subjecting them to a panorama of *positive* prejudices and cliches. The discomfort thus aroused is, at least in part, intentional.

Where most early reactions to the play stopped was at the point of recognizing the discomfort; few seemed to consider *why* the ostensibly tedious, stereotypical, uncomfortable first act should so appear. The play is structured and developed with precise logic. Moses' play is a mirror, and like any mirror it does two things: reverses images and reflects them. The first act is a reversal, demanding reflection on the part of the audience. The second act is a reflection, demanding of the audience reversal of the ease with which many either accepted the stereotypes of the first act or reacted negatively to them because they were bad theatre and not because they were biased treatment of aboriginal culture.

Following the first scene, "Her Vision," a visual anticipation of the death of Almighty Voice, Act One follows strict chronology until it reaches its end in scene nine, "His Vision"—Almighty Voice's 'deathbed' vision of his child. The story of Almighty Voice's courtship of White Girl, their wedding night, his arrest for the theft of a cow,

their subsequent flight, the killing of the NWMP officer Colin Colebrook (significantly unnamed in the play), the increased pursuit of Almighty Voice, their last moments together, and, very abruptly, his death—all pass without chronological rearrangement. At the moment of Almighty Voice's death, at the end of Act One, one might expect the play to end. Indeed, Len Peterson's play *Almighty Voice* ends at just that moment. It is, after all, the 'end' of the story. But Moses' theme, in part, is that the death of Almighty Voice is nowhere near the end of his story; it is merely the end of Almighty Voice's life in the flesh.

The protagonist of the play is nominally its title character. As with Pollock's *Walsh*, however, a case can be made for Almighty Voice (and his wife) being interpreted as microcosmic representatives of Canada's aboriginal people. Particularly as the second act develops, it seems clear that Moses is examining far more than the interaction of two lives, far more than even the symbolic value of Almighty Voice as the last 'Indian' officially killed by police in the line of duty. Through the manipulation of stereotypes, Moses suggests by the end of the play that Almighty Voice's death is greater than the end of one man's life, and that the action of the play addresses the whole panorama of Aboriginal-European interaction. Thus the 'outsider' status of the protagonists becomes that of aboriginal, perennially outside the European-Canadian garrison—perhaps never more so than after the walls disappeared and the weapons were stored.

Normative authority, like everything not of the world of the protagonists in this play, is voiced but never seen. Representatives of white order, from "that Sergeant over at Duck Lake" (67), to the "stupid Sergeant" who pursues them (69), to the "mounties,

soldiers, farmers everywhere” who surround Almighty Voice at his final stand, are all seen through the eyes of the protagonists (72). Even authority within the tribe—parents and visionaries alike—exist as Almighty Voice and White Girl speak them for us. All stereotypes of representation are still present, but reversed. Contrary to the commonplace of never seeing any but the white English-Canadian way of doing and thinking, the audience is shown the opposite extreme: a world in which all things white exist only through native representation.

The conflict mirrors that of every play which treats the subject, but once again is reported from the native perspective. Now the dense ones, the ones whose “stupid faces [all] look the same” (67), whose theology is infantile (cf. scene 3), who cannot seem to think for themselves, who show a herd mentality, who are “so stupid they keep their memories on stuff like snow” (71) are the whites. Residential schools and the lies told to the children taken there—“they said everybody here had died of smallpox” (66)—sustain the division between native and white. The sundry white authority structures attempt to impose their ways of seeing and their guarantors of identity on the native people. White Girl is told that she “could live forever, but [she] had to marry their god” and take “the name of their god’s mother” in order to make that happen (66). Almighty Voice must identify himself as “John Baptist . . . one of their ghosts” in order to collect his treaty money from the agency (66). All of these strategies are repeatedly called “stupid” (66) and when White Girl insists that they use the white names, she does so in order to fool “that god,” who “won’t know it’s us if we use their names” (67). Even the act of accepting the white appellation is a gesture in rejection of the purposes behind the act of

renaming.

The charisma of the protagonists is, again significantly, exactly in harmony with common practice. Their language is endearing; there is a roguish charm about both White Girl and Almighty Voice; they are a young couple in love. The absolute normality of their jealousies, their sexual energies, their habits of conversation serve to stress all that they have in common with their audience—their mutual humanity. Their ingrained respect for elders, the matter-of-fact manner in which the experience of previous generations is consulted and incorporated into daily life, also attracts audiences. White Girl seeks Spotted Calf's advice because she wants them "to make her a grandchild" (69) and her mother-in-law will know "how to get ready. Woman stuff" (69). Almighty Voice "has listened to [the] fathers and heard what they say" (69). He is "a warrior who makes the mounties face their own stupidity" (71). Spotted Calf "still remembers" traditions and proper procedure for fasting and meditation; she manipulates the priest into giving news of her incarcerated husband while he thinks he is converting her. But, as White Girl says, "she sees through him . . . and his glass god" (71). They are intelligent, connected to their myths and rituals, and resourceful, able to use the whites' unshakeable faith in their own superiority to subvert white authority. Most simply put, they seem to know themselves. That confident sense of identity, while so much around them assails it, cannot help but elicit sympathy.

Moses carefully employs the simplest of diction to develop a picture of the most commonplace elements of white civilization as alien. "School's a strange place," says White Girl, "All made out of stone" (66); audiences must confront the use of the word

“strange” in the description of something so familiar. Inside the school, White Girl is told she must “marry their god” in exchange for eternal life. This god is “a jealous god . . . like a ghost . . . Or a white bird” (66), descriptions and tropes common to Christian discourse. To Almighty Voice, however, a husband you cannot see is “a stupid husband” and the insubstantiality of the Christian deity is mocked (66). But god is also like glass, “like a rock you can see through. . . . Some of the walls at the school were . . . wall[s] you could see through” (68). Their god is “like the glass. He’s hard. He cuts you down” (69). Soldiers “have these clear beads they look through. Far away comes real close. All the walking in between seems to disappear” (68). When the mountie finally catches the fugitives, his spyglass is momentarily mistaken for the eye of the glass god (69). Later, in custody, White Girl mocks “that tame little flame” which the whites “carry in that tin and glass pot” (70). All this defamiliarization through diction creates a vaguely Brechtian effect, at once conveying the sense of how Almighty Voice and White Girl might actually have felt during their encounters with white culture while challenging audiences by putting them in exactly the same position—having to decipher the meaning of familiar items described in unfamiliar ways.

The alternative posed by Act One is the usual one: the appeal of the ‘lost’ tribal way of life. Sharing, strength, courage, and loyalty—especially White Girl’s unceasing support of her husband (68, 69-70)—are all lauded. Similarly, the potential for such an ideal is immense. It appears to the contemporary audience as a model of how things could be. The staggering contrast of Act Two is all the more effective in this regard. The cost for established authority of accepting the alternative view is also consistent with

all the plays we have so far seen: namely, white culture would have to reimagine itself completely. The current dominant is maintained through the usual mixture of mild and extreme resistance, the milder forms in Moses' text often taking the form of teasing. The teasing, however, is misinterpreted at one crucial juncture—Almighty Voice is told he will hang for stealing a cow that belonged to the White Mother (67)—and the resistance shifts from mild to extreme in consequence. Once again, extreme resistance is military and legal, backed by weapons, and the ultimate fate of the protagonist is death.

If Act One were all there was to Moses' play, it would not merit much attention. It would be little more than a common piece of theatre employing a variety of stock situations and developing by way of predictable complication a plot that ends tragically—all merely restating everything that went before it. But Act One is deconstructed by Act Two, and everything that is stereotypical, simplistic, and straightforward about Act One suddenly comes under intense scrutiny as Moses employs the devices of vaudeville to examine and condemn the way the twentieth century has employed 'the Indian' for entertainment.

Act Two is entitled "Ghost Dance" and the motif of the dance unifies the act, as did the motif of visions in Act One. There are, however, two decidedly distinct dances in operation. Almighty Voice's Ghost attempts spiritual celebration of his life, but is corrupted, mocked, and thwarted by White Girl—now in the role of the Interlocutor—who leads him through every stereotype and cliché of twentieth-century representation of 'the Indian.' The action takes place "on the auditorium stage of the abandoned industrial school" (64) which played such an important role in White Girl's

experience in Act One. The decrepit, abandoned setting is thematically relevant: the white project, the civilizing of the savage as directly named in the plays of Hardin and Pollock, is now derelict, but the stereotypes it created and sustained have survived the machinery of the era and still thrive.

When the Ghost is first addressed by the Interlocutor, he responds in Cree and continues to do so until the Interlocutor addresses him by a bevy of names: “Names, names, they’re all the same. Crees all wear feathers. Dead man, red man, Indian. *Kisse-Manitou-Wayou*, Almighty Voice, *Jean Baptiste*! Geronimo, Tonto, Calijah! Or most simply, Mister Ghost” (73). The paralleling of the names by which Almighty Voice has been known in Act One with three twentieth-century names, two of them white inventions and each associated with white stereotypical representations of the native, immediately casts the Ghost as a stereotype, undermining the dignity of his death. When he reacts to “Ghost,” the Interlocutor responds “Now we’re speaking English” (73). Indeed we are.

The initial exchange between the Ghost and the Interlocutor sets the tone of the whole second act and is worth examining at length.

**Interlocutor:** Boo! Almighty Ghost, Chief. Now we’re speaking English.

**Ghost:** What? Who are you?

**Interlocutor:** Wow! You’re supposed to say How. How. You know.

Hey, Pontiac, how’s the engine? Can’t you stick to the script? You’re too new at this ghost shtick to go speaking *ad liberatum*.

**Ghost:** Let me go. I don’t know you. Let me dance.

**Interlocutor:** Here here. Stop, I say. How dare you! Don't you know, do I have to remind you this colourful display, these exotic ceremonials belong later on in the program? Listen to me, Chief. One doesn't begin with a climax, an end. Unmitigated foolishness, I'll have you know. If you begin at an end, then where do you go? Do you know? No. Dare you tell me? Well? What have you got to say for yourself?

**Ghost:** How—

**Interlocutor:** That's more like it!

**Ghost:** How did I get here? What's going on?

**Interlocutor:** What's going on! The show. The show! These fine, kind folk want to know the truth, the amazing details and circumstances behind your savagely beautiful appearance. They also want to be entertained and enlightened and maybe a tiny bit thrilled, just a goose of frightened. They want to laugh and cry. They want to know the facts. And it's up to you and me to try and lie that convincingly. And since all the rest of the company is late for the curtain, this is your chance, your big break for certain.

**Ghost:** No, I won't dance for you.

**Interlocutor:** But you have to toe the line, Chief. We all do.

Unless—here. Let me smell your breath. Bah! Like death warmed over. I've warned you before. You choose to booze and you're back on the street where I found you.

**Ghost:** Leave me alone. Go away.

**Interlocutor:** Don't you realize you could be internationally known, the most acclaimed magic act of the century?

**Ghost:** What do you mean?

**Interlocutor:** The Vanishing Indian! (73)

The passage employs virtually every stereotype in the white cultural repertoire.

Also significant in the foregoing passage is the direct addressing of audience expectations. Echoes of Cook's Ringmaster (and of Tom Stoppard's Player)<sup>9</sup> are present in the role of the Interlocutor, as well as in her words about the task of presentation to an audience. Moses follows common practice in ascribing to the audience a measure of responsibility for what they see portrayed. Stereotypes persist because people continue to employ and believe in them. These "fine, kind folks" want entertainment from the Indian, as well as enlightenment, perhaps, and titillation certainly. Just as Cook's Ringmaster directly calls his musings on the evolution of the conqueror "lies" (27), so Moses' Interlocutor describes the task of presenting "the facts" to the audience as the presentation of convincing lies. This is the first of several direct challenges to the role and self-perception of the audience in Moses' second act. These challenges will accumulate and fuse in the climactic moment.

The Ghost first refuses to be led by the Interlocutor. He returns to reconstruction of his death scene in memory and, despite the Interlocutor's interruption warning "the ladies in the audience" that "the details of the following story may not be for the faint of heart" (73), he continues his recollection. The Interlocutor keeps up a running barrage of

mocking commentary—“His leg was gone. Talk about wounded knee!” (73)—and undermines the dignity of each of the Ghost’s memories. When he recalls his final meeting with White Girl, the Interlocutor mocks his Cree name: “Kissy *Kisse-Manitou-Wayou?* Did you give her some tongue?” (74). As the Ghost speaks of his first knowledge of the birth of his son, his tormentor counters with “Your last meeting, your last touch. . . . Was it savage love? Did you throw her a fuck? Did you have a last quicky?” (74). Spotted Calf’s death song is mocked as further evidence of both the musical talent in the family and its predisposition to manic-depression (74). The Interlocutor closes the scene by direct address to the audience—“Now don’t you think this is just too touching, ladies and gentlemen?”—and then “*she changes the title placard*” (74). Even in this small way, Moses makes clear the manipulation of the image of the Indian. The titles of Act One were projected, reminding the audience of cinema; in Act Two, they are handled directly by the Interlocutor, reminding the audience of the extent to which white culture perpetuates native stereotypes. The Ghost will be led.

As each subsequent scene unfolds, another mechanism for white definition and dismissal of the native is satirized through a combination of terrible puns, parodic songs, and direct confrontation. Songs appear as they will in the variety-show tradition, but each features sarcastic or stereotypical lyrics sung to well-known white tunes. These songs are doubly damning: they skewer the styles and stereotypes of the early twentieth-century music hall—the foundation of ‘Canadian’ theatre for several decades—and they also seem to parody the contemporary convention of using songs as didactic and humorous intervention in otherwise tragic narratives.

In scene two, the Ghost slowly begins to play along with the vaudevillian representational format. The first song starts as an Interlocutor solo but grows into a duet. It is followed by “the latest dance craze,” the “Buck and Squaw,” performed “*to a verse of the Charleston*” (74). By the end, the Ghost attempts a kiss, but the Interlocutor refuses. As Black minstrel show stereotypes are evoked and added to the mix, it is the Ghost who changes the scene placard; the show is starting to get out of the Interlocutor’s control. The symbolic weight of Moses’ parodic structure is increasing.

In the third scene, the Ghost casts Mr Interlocutor in the first of several stereotypical roles. Her protests against being so cast are rapidly overwhelmed and she proceeds to skewer local politics by delivering the speech of “Mister Drum, a loyal citizen of our territory” (75). Mister Drum addresses “the Indian problem”—in essence, the fact that those “pampered red skins” are not content with all that we whites have already given them (75). Moses exposes clearly the commonplace rhetoric of controlling ‘them’ to benefit ‘us.’ Puns and old jokes end the scene, foregrounding the way in which language is often employed as an escape from responsibility.

Scene four addresses the use of the military against the native population. To the Irish tune of “Derry Down,” the Ghost and the Interlocutor perform the longest song in the play, “in honour of all our heroic boys in uniform”—a piece of conventional rhetoric immediately undermined by the Ghost’s offer to “even honour those boys out of uniform” (75). With crude rhymes—“That wit who usually performs Mister Bullshit”—reversals of expectations—“one little, two little dozen mounties”—and a rundown of the usual supporting cast—“the crowd of concerned civilians, including the disappointed . . .

farm instructor and his friend the ever hopeful . . . missionary priest”<sup>10</sup>—the scene is set. But when the Interlocutor asks the Ghost to consider re-presenting himself, to re-enact his own death, the tone changes abruptly: “Fuck you! I’m not going through that again for your entertainment” (76). Though the line is ostensibly addressed solely to the Interlocutor, it constitutes an uncomfortable moment for the audience.

The song marshals all the methods of state control, ideological and repressive. Words, pens, laws, blankets, rum, newspapers, guns, and the Church all find their way into the lyrics. It is a hymn to white supremacy, underscored by the constant threat of violence:

We have the guns, the guts, the wit.

We know that you are stinking shit.

We did it to the buffalo.

Want to be next? Yes or no? . . .

We are the men, oh let’s say it again, to kill

them damn dead Indians. . . .

We have the bucks and you do not.

Is it a wonder you got shot? . . .

We know that treaties are for fools. (76)

The Ghost finishes his portion of the song feeling like a newspaper—“read all over”—

which leads to the final punch of the scene. “Better read than met,” says the Interlocutor. “I have never in all my days had the displeasure. Newspapers are our bastions of truth.” Truth can be obtained without dirtying the hands; white understanding of native life can be transmitted without any inconvenience such as visiting the reserve. The newspaper *is* the bible; “is it any wonder you got shot?” (77).

Over the Interlocutor’s protests that it “is not a regular part of the programme,” she is pushed into singing “Sioux Me”—to the tune of “Amazing Grace.” The song hints at exploitation of native women through alcohol-aggravated prostitution.<sup>11</sup> Its final verse challenges all the romanticism of the first act, and by extension all lamenting of lost, idealized history: “How beautiful / A place the past! / We are where we are” (77). Insisting that she knows “the order of the show” and that “the show must go on,” the Interlocutor seizes control once more, shaking off the pathos of the preceding moment, which might have produced “a real tear . . . washing the war paint” (77).

Scene 6 presents the mock-melodrama, “a short drama of spiritual significance.” It presents the exploitation and near-rape of “Sweet Sioux” by “the villainous Chief Magistrate.” As in the cases of civilian (scene 3), military (scene 4), and sexual (scene 5) oppression of the native, the white legal system is corrupt, violent, and exploitative. The Ghost, playing the Magistrate, introduces himself: “Give me some rum or I’ll shoot you in the bum. I need fire water for a starter. Then off I go on a hunt or to court. Order, order, I say to the buffalo. Right between the eyes I warn the prisoners.” Coming to collect the outstanding money for the deed on the land, the Magistrate attempts seduction. When that fails, Sweet Sioux only saves herself from rape by revealing

herself to be “Corporal Red of the Mounted Police” in disguise (78). This nick of time salvation is barbed at best, as the mountie kills the magistrate and marries the “real” Sweet Sioux—presumably rescuing her from being Indian. Phrases such as “Indian giver” keep white repressive discourses foregrounded as, once more, self-perceived generosity and spirituality are shown to be selfish and carnal (78).

Moses begins to draw his many foci of satiric criticism together in the final scenes. The Ghost approaches the audience directly, seeking some “new friends in the pit” (79). The irony of the theatrical term reminds the audience that Almighty Voice could well have used some new friends in that other pit in the moments leading up to his death. “Will you help me down?” the Ghost asks, directly imploring the audience to let him out of the role-playing, to meet him as a person. The Interlocutor cajoles the Ghost into a final song. The subject is the moon as a female symbol of protection and potential. That it is sung to the tune of “God Save the Queen” is almost a gesture of understanding, if not forgiveness, in spite of everything done to Canada’s natives (and some of those from the U.S. as well) in the name of that queen.

The marriage of the traditional song of closure with new lyrics of a different closure segues into a reminder that marriage is an institution, just as an insane asylum is. The momentary rapport that seemed to exist between the Interlocutor and the Ghost vanishes under a barrage of stereotypical bad jokes. “How many Indians does it take to screw in a light bulb?” asks the Interlocutor. “What’s a light bulb?” the Ghost responds, triggering another stream of invective:

You, sir, you, I recognize you now. You’re that red skin! You’re that

wagon burner! That feather head, Chief Bullshit. No, Chief Shitting Bull!  
 Oh, no, no. Blood thirsty savage. Yes, you're primitive, uncivilized, a  
 cantankerous cannibal! Unruly redman, you lack human intelligence!  
 Stupidly stoic, sick, demented, foaming at the maws! Weirdly mad and  
 dangerous, alcoholic, diseased, dirty, filthy, stinking, ill fated degenerate  
 race, vanishing, dying, lazy, mortifying, fierce, fierce and crazy, shit, shit,  
 shit shit... (80)

“What’s a light bulb?” the Ghost repeats. The response, open to interpretation, provokes the conclusion of the play.

In an echo of so much Canadian literature, suggesting nothing so much as a kinship existing among everyone rooted by any ancestry in this country, the play closes with a question of identity.

**Interlocutor:** Who are you? Who the hell are you?

**Ghost:** I’m a dead Indian. I eat crow instead of buffalo. . . .

**Interlocutor:** Who am I? Do you know?

**Ghost:** I recognized you by your eyes.

**Interlocutor:** Who am I?

**Ghost:** White Girl, my White Girl.

**Interlocutor:** Who? Who is that?

**Ghost:** My fierce little girl. *N’weegimagun.* (My wife). (80)

The dialogue finishes in Cree. The Ghost wipes the whiteface makeup from the Interlocutor’s face. “*He removes one glove and throws it on the dead fire, she does the*

*same with the other. The fire kindles*" (80). The Ghost, finally, begins to complete his Ghost Dance. "*The Interlocutor removes the rest of the white face and costume and becomes White Girl again. She cradles the costume in her arms as the spotlight drifts away to become a full moon in the night. White Girl lifts her baby-shaped bundle to the audience as the Ghost's dance ends*" (80). They have rediscovered and embraced their identities. The "baby-shaped bundle" held to the audience should be understood as a significant challenge to audience responsibility. If it is read as representing a child, the challenge is to accept the child on its own terms, to allow it to find its own identity instead of bearing a yoke of stereotype strangling it from birth. If, however, the bundle is understood merely to be the costume White Girl has just taken off, her gesture of holding it up to the audience parallels the Ghost's earlier effort to meet the audience directly; it says to the audience: "Here. These stereotypes are yours. We have no use for them. Please take them back."

Moses demonstrates the historical naturalistic style as seen in Ursell, the critique of racial stereotype as entertainment as seen in Cook, the manipulation of theatrical conventions to make anti-conventional points as seen in Hardin, the analytical comprehension of the historical forces at work as seen in Pollock, and the awareness of the bleak, bitter reality of twentieth-century consequences following from their nineteenth-century foundations as seen in plays such as Carol Bolt's *Gabe* (1976). *Almighty Voice and his Wife* contains elements of every play so far considered, and employs those resonances to make a statement that none of the other plays could make: a statement of reconciliation and acceptance of self from within the native population. In

that regard, its challenge to non-native audiences is profound.

The English-Canadian history play is perhaps nowhere so likely to voice profound challenge and nowhere so likely to fall into cliché as it is when considering the interaction of the European settlers and their descendants with the aboriginal peoples and theirs. There is, it seems, one simple explanation for the emotional resonance these plays in particular create: it has been a long time since behaviour such as that dramatized in the various Donnelly sagas was commonplace; it has probably been only seconds since the last time some of the repressive strategies employed in the plays discussed in this chapter were last used.

## Chapter Four

### Iconoclasm Compromised

The choice facing any iconoclast is a simple one: resist normative authority by external opposition or join it and attempt redefinition from within. Though in theory any arm of authority would be as suitable as the next from within which to launch a challenge to the extant system, in practice all subdivisions of normative authority are linked to and under the direction of the political state or government. Accordingly, the iconoclast who chooses to oppose authority from within almost exclusively chooses to do so through some aspect of the political process. One consequence of the adoption of the political process is that such an 'iconoclast' becomes less iconoclastic. In general, no figure opposed to the status quo pursues the political process as a means of instigating change without, in some respect, becoming part of the structure being criticized. The 'Trojan Horse' method of resistance demands that the attacker be received within the structure under attack. Inevitably, then, there is compromise. A second, more encouraging, consequence of adoption of the political process as a means to rebellion appears to be that one has greater chance of achieving at least some of one's iconoclastic aims. In the following group of plays, three of the five protagonists, unlike most of those who choose other methods of resistance to authority, seem to achieve a greater degree of success. That feature separates these plays from the main body of English-Canadian historical drama.<sup>1</sup>

That said, it will be observed that not all who follow the political route achieve

success. Even Riel was an elected member of the House of Commons, as Macdonald wryly observes in Mitchell's *Davin, the Politician* (77). This chapter will begin with consideration of two figures whose embracing of political action did not bring about their desired changes in the structures of normative authority. Both Nicholas Flood Davin, as written in Ken Mitchell's *Davin, the Politician*, and Emma Goldman, as written in Carol Bolt's *Red Emma*, pursue a form of political action to achieve their aims, and each, ultimately, fails.

Davin's public career was a curious mixture of aggressive individualism and political naivete. His stance regarding the integrity of his role as member representing his district led him, ironically, into situations in which he opposed his own party.<sup>2</sup> He thus frequently undermined his chances of further advancement within the party hierarchy by antagonizing most of the men who might have helped him rise. As a Western Canadian MP in days when the future cities of the west were still little more than tent parks, Davin was an outsider despite belonging to the party in power; the interests of Ontario and Québec tended to dictate the political agenda in Ottawa. During Davin's later years in Ottawa, he was a member of a ruling party which was spiraling into disintegrated confusion over leadership and direction. His last terms were served in opposition. In a very important way, then, Davin's failure was not solely a consequence of his abiding sense of independence, but was inextricably connected with the fortunes of the party to which he belonged. Nonetheless, Davin must be seen to bear some individual responsibility for many of his more controversial stances assumed over the course of a lengthy public career, as well as for his personal fate.

Authority for Davin issued from the upper echelons of the federal Conservative party. Davin is “a rebel,” always on the edge of dissent in relation to his own party, and his ego is always open to exploitation by the opposition (56). Davin’s disagreements with Sir John A. Macdonald and his successors dramatize the (still extant) tensions between Canada’s eastern and western interests. “In the West action counts!” insists Davin; “You must understand that, if you want to hold the voters” (57). As Mitchell develops Davin, it becomes clear that Davin’s own impatience, “defiance” and “arrogance” are his strongest enemies (76). They are the driving forces behind his “monumental self-delusion” (103).

Though in general true of each iconoclast here considered, it seems especially obvious in the consideration of the political iconoclast that what is charismatic to one person may be neutral or actively annoying to another. Davin’s charisma recalls that of the Donnellys. Davin is, in many respects, a stereotypical stage Irishman. Garrulous and bibulous to a fault, he simultaneously possesses the poetic vision necessary for initiating change. He believes that “Small talk has no place in a big land!” and that “Words are like coins—they’ll get thin from overuse” (14). Davin also has the necessary enthusiasm to share his vision convincingly, as he shows both in anticipating Macdonald’s desire to see the first issue of *The Leader* (18), and in his firmly-stated belief that the west is “the promised land,” a place where can be created “a new society” (20). He is a myth-maker: his description of the cow which “froze where she stood” last winter and has “been [milked . . .] for ice-cream ever since” (21) is reminiscent of the legends so frequently embroidered by many of Robert Kroetsch’s fictional westerners. Davin is a celebrator of

the potential of western life, a devoted supporter of the right of the west to respect—both self-respect and respect from the established east.

Davin's loquacity is sometimes irresistible, as observed when he talks his way into Kate Hayes Simpson's literary salon despite her initial reaction to his arrival (24-7). He advocates alteration of "the deplorable state of women" (31). He enjoys creating controversy for its own sake, as he says directly upon hearing that Québec and Ontario are at loggerheads over his editorials in *The Leader* concerning Riel (35). Davin insists that his newspaper "is not a mouthpiece of Ottawa" (36), and his initial status as M.P. is free of the taint of perceived ineffectiveness often vaguely shrouding long-term backbenchers. Above all, Davin recognizes the extent to which appearances often sustain faith and confidence, as is shown both in his disguising himself as a priest to interview Riel on death row (37ff) and in his agitation, once in Ottawa, for "new courthouses immediately at Medicine Hat and Regina" because "there is no belief in justice served up in tavern or livery stable" (57).

Reckless charm and relentless wit serve Davin reasonably well in public life, though neither without risk. His reckless charm is epitomized by his political survival following his release for publication of a report on one of his speeches filed *before* he actually delivered it (58-9). When a storm prevents him from delivering the speech, his pre-filed report of its triumphant reception sees print anyway—in the play through bad timing, and in history through ambiguous communication of instructions on Davin's own part. Somehow, Davin survives the embarrassment created. Mitchell highlights Davin's relentless wit throughout the play, perhaps nowhere more amusingly than in his apology

for using an improper mode of parliamentary address: “Did I say ‘that man,’ Mr. Speaker? I apologize to the Honourable Member. I am sorry I called him a man—and I retract my thoughtless remark” (108-9). These assets carry him a long way, but never far enough.

Davin’s alternatives are attractive. Starting in ‘untouched’ territory, Davin proposes to avoid all European errors, to build on the lessons learned from the mistakes of others. He agitates for full democracy, insisting that “there is room for honest conflict” within party ranks (32, 57). Davin insists that the needs of individual ridings must at least be given a hearing, be allowed the opportunity to challenge party policy. Further, he insists on trying to keep questions of language rights separate from questions of religious faith: “We can *protect* French rights without becoming slaves of the Roman Church!” (95). Though voiced in stereotypical Protestant terms, the foundation of Davin’s approach to protection of minority language rights is valid. As well, contemporary audiences recognize Davin’s efforts to answer a question which, like so many other questions addressed in English-Canadian historical drama, remains unanswered. Davin’s alternatives are at least sufficiently attractive as to win a degree of support from contemporary audiences, for whom many of his radical proposals now seem very much like common sense.

But also in harmony with the general development of proposed alternatives to the dominant norm, Davin’s proposals are in part based on false premises and in part too far-reaching for his contemporaries easily to accept. Davin’s insistence that “the North-West is not tainted with . . . bigotry”—both as carried over from Europe and as practiced in the

east—is plainly false (95). Though he trumpets the creation of “a new society—without five centuries of bloody war behind it,” Davin is immediately reminded of the concerns of native peoples (20-1). The “outrages in Manitoba” (21) evoked by Stanley Burroughs remind audiences that the North-West was already past the point at which it could fairly be described as ‘untouched’ before Davin took his first turn on the hustings.

Despite the odds against him, however, Davin gradually achieves some of his goals and, for a time, his reputation grows. Soon, *The Leader* is quoted in northern U.S. newspapers (69), and Davin publishes a collection of his verse. His disparagement of Ottawa “pomp and ritual” (55) makes Davin seem pragmatic. He challenges Cabinet “dead wood,” but does it in the House, appearing to support the opposition, and accusing Macdonald of “using his power against” the ordinary poor homesteader (61). His earliest actions in the House upset his colleagues but do not, at first, totally alienate them. Especially important to his early survival is Davin’s agreement with Macdonald concerning French language rights (65). Even after Davin annoys, distances, or actively opposes most of the party hierarchy in Ottawa, his popularity in his own constituency remains high. As Kate Simpson tells him, he cannot be defeated in politics “as long as [he has] the people with [him]” (77). This popularity may be accounted for, in part, by the assertion Mitchell makes in his preface that “extremists and ‘disturbers of the excrement’” are common in Saskatchewan and that “feisty and defiant attitudes toward the world” are arguably characteristic “of the province, or of the Prairies” (xiii).

As ever, the cost of pursuing the iconoclast’s proffered alternatives is held by the current dominant to be too great. Conventions of parliamentary procedure and party

solidarity would have to be thoroughly reconsidered and rewritten were Davin's approach to be adopted. By promising, in the name of the government, concessions that he has been given no authority to extend, Davin loses federal Tory goodwill (52). Invariably, it is Davin's greatest strength, his self-confidence, which is also his Achilles' heel. Gradually, Davin alienates even those who began as his supporters. In his refusal to accept the inevitable decline of his political success—attributable in some aspects to forces beyond his own direct control—Davin demonstrates a characteristic common to most of the protagonists here examined: the inability to recognize the cyclic nature of power, the inevitable necessity of one's eventual departure from the public sphere. Maintaining the status quo pleases the more powerful Ontario and Québec interests. Deep-seated prejudices—religious, linguistic, and geographical—combine to establish familiar East/West, English/French walls of opposition (92). While much of what Davin espoused made sense, and while some of it has subsequently become common sense in Canadian politics, in his own era, dominated especially in the 1890s by the steady disintegration of the federal Conservative party following the death of Macdonald, his views were in the minority. Though Davin argues that a political party "cannot give in to this baying for blood from every damned bigot in the country" (92) it seems that the exigencies of political balance do force a certain amount of yielding to bigotry in the electorate. The suggestion is one of the several that Mitchell develops which challenge a contemporary audience's comprehension of its political heritage.

Among Davin's supporters is Endo Saunders, who begins the play young, idealistic, and naive, and grows progressively more disillusioned as the years

pass—though remaining more loyal than not, to the end. Kate Hayes Simpson at first opposes Davin on aesthetic grounds: his Irishness is the antithesis to the cultural development which she hopes to bring to Regina. Soon, however, Davin has charmed Simpson, and their personal relationship forms the main source of private conflict of the play, the level at which Mitchell, in accordance with his own stated principles of dramatizing history, is allowed the greatest freedom of invention. The federal Minister of Justice, Stanley Burroughs, is also an early supporter. Eventually, for a wide range of reasons, Davin loses all these allies. The gradual erosion of Davin's support reaches a symbolic and literal zenith when he is opposed for election by Walter Scott, a former supporter and editor of Davin's newspaper.

The tensions of the play are familiar to contemporary audiences. Politically, the west repeatedly demands more support and respect from Ottawa. When that support is not immediately forthcoming, Davin's impatience allies him with opposition critics; his "railing against his own government" draws praise from Liberal newspapers (62). For Davin, the perennial Conservative/Liberal opposition is irrelevant. They are just labels—words, not actions. The conflict between Catholic and Protestant also informs the public tensions of the play (30-2), epitomized by Davin's reporting on the case of Louis Riel (35).<sup>3</sup> In private, as will be seen in most of the plays discussed in this chapter, there are tensions concerning individual morality and commitment, differing standards of "correct" behaviour which cause otherwise sound public alliances to falter. As the relationship between Davin and Simpson develops, her concern for the health of their personal relationship begins to affect Davin's public presentation of self. Simpson's

refusal to become “Mrs Davin” (44-6) establishes a tension which will haunt Davin to his last moments. As is frequently observed, romantic tension will exacerbate most other tensions, as in Walter Scott’s efforts to convince Kate Simpson that Davin is less than she deserves (63-4). Ultimately, Kate Simpson’s refusal to marry Davin is rooted in her refusal to be directed, to have major aspects of her own life decided for her. Ironically, her stance with respect to Davin mirrors his own stance with respect to his federal party. The cyclic interconnectedness of private and public tensions, as Mitchell suggests in his preface, admits of no easy separation.

As is common in the cases of those who sought change by working within the system, Davin faces no truly extreme resistance. He experiences moderate resistance in merely getting in to see Macdonald, let alone getting the Prime Minister to listen to his ideas, or take them seriously. The committee system of parliament, the necessity for patience with the slow and involved means by which ideas are disseminated and debated, impedes Davin, not least by aggravating him into frequent losses of temper and public criticism of his own colleagues. The recalcitrance of his peers to push for faster action on matters of vital importance to Davin adds to his dissatisfaction with the system. He is unable to bend to Macdonald’s dictum: “Here you get what you want by compromise” (67). Consequently, Davin is shut out of Cabinet, bypassed in favour of former governor Edgar Dewdney (74-5), and he loses credibility by embracing radical reform platforms, such as female suffrage (80-1). Davin faces his greatest resistance from an electorate which, after eighteen years, tires of both him and his party (99). The only physical violence Davin faces, however, is from his own hand (121).

Mitchell is scrupulous with his dramatization of the known facts. As Mitchell indicates in his preface, Stanley Burroughs is “a fictional person” created in order to give Davin a single “political confidant . . . throughout the play” (7). Other slight variations from the received record include Davin’s dramatic offer to “take the pledge” in the midst of an election campaign (97), the suggestion that Davin’s intransigence in the House directly causes Macdonald’s final fatal decline (78-9), and the use of Walter Scott as the returning officer who casts the single vote which returns Davin to the House for his final session. Davin did take the pledge on the campaign trail, but not as his own idea; the act was on the insistence of “Daniel Mowat, president of the Regina District Liberal-Conservative Association,” and was performed not in the midst of the Moose Jaw speech but in the pages of *The Leader* some days later (Koester 109). Though Macdonald’s health could not have been improved by Davin’s disturbances, there is no record of the dramatic moment of Davin shouting “I am prepared to divide this House!” while Macdonald “*slumps in his seat, ill*” (78-9). By contrast, Davin’s apparently heartfelt eulogy for Macdonald (79) is well-documented. Similarly, his return to the House with a one-vote majority in the 1896 general election is a fact, though the returning officer in question was not someone so closely involved with Davin’s earlier career as Walter Scott had been.<sup>4</sup>

Generally, Mitchell’s handling of the received public facts accords with his basic stance in the text—sympathetic to Davin but not falsifying his record. *Davin the Politician* challenges its audience in a number of ways. From the start, Mitchell asks his audience to consider where anyone’s story truly begins, to examine the limitations and

inclusiveness of every life story (13). As might be expected in a play about a western regionalist politician, there is little love for Toronto expressed in the text; particularly humorous is the early scene in which Saunders, Burroughs, and Davin drink celebratory toasts, all very enthusiastic until Saunders proposes “To Toronto” following which “*there is an embarrassed mumble*” before they grudgingly drink (17). Denigration of Toronto in texts from the ‘rest of Canada’ is nothing new, but its presence here is significant to Davin’s sense of self. Davin voices some controversial assertions: Riel will need to start a war “before Ottawa wakes up to the problem” (28); the North West Mounted Police are “little more than a private army” whose “officers preside in total ignorance of the law” (32); few MPs “can satisfy both” loyalty to government and to constituents (65). In his capacity as aspiring poet, Davin even offers some literary theory: poetry is a “way of seeing” but is designed for appreciation and not as an engine of change (104, 31). As this view of poetry is itself contained within a work of art conceived by its author as addressed to “opinion moulders, the people who determine cultural values” (6), one suspects that Davin’s own views do not, in this case, coincide with those of his author.

The play presents little in the way of challenge to criticism. As do so many English-Canadian historical plays, *Davin, The Politician* employs songs—at times to no apparent benefit beyond facilitating a technical change backstage. “Riel’s Song” (37) is a good example; it seems to exist solely in order to allow the actor playing Davin sufficient time to don the “robe and hat . . . false beard and . . . large silver crucifix” (37) of Riel’s confessor, “Père André.” Perhaps the greatest challenge from a play which suggests that poetry is not an agent of change is the occasional suggestion that literature

may have political value. This is nowhere more apparent than at the publication of Davin's book of poems, which Scott considers "of more political than literary value," its launching an "occasion to announce his candidacy" (89). Davin argues that politics "is the only instrument of change" (31). His assertion, repeated within a work of art which questions the value and role of art, reminds us that art may be consciously political in nature.

Accordingly, *Davin, the Politician* presents one of Mitchell's most deeply held political beliefs. Burroughs advises Davin that "caution is a virtue" (18). Davin's response—"Spoken like a true Canadian"—reminds us that impulsive enthusiasm is also "truly Canadian" and that Canada might benefit from considering the advantages of both means of proceeding. As Kate Simpson suggests to Davin, one must not "fear being laughed at" otherwise one will "never succeed in poetry, or politics" (33). Success involves risk, despite the frequent words of the successful in praise of caution and prudence. Put another way by Riel, a "land of extremes" needs some "extremists" (39). Davin's failure, as Riel predicts (40), is to attempt too much, to be unable or unwilling to recognize limits—both those of his own character and those imposed on him from without.

Recognizing limits imposed from without is of crucial importance to analysis of Carol Bolt's *Red Emma* (1976). Emma Goldman's most significant limits are those imposed by her author. Sandra Souchotte states that Bolt wrote the play for a specific performer in the role of Emma (12). In consequence, Bolt does not attempt to treat Goldman's whole life (as, in contrast, New York playwright Martin Duberman attempts

to do in his 1991 play *Mother Earth*). As Souchotte explains, “Bolt was far more interested in Emma the adventuress than Emma the revolutionary. Eschewing the dictates and concerns of political drama, she calls the play a romance, allowing . . . a belief in heroism to supercede the intricacies of political argument” (12). Bolt’s fascination with the romantic aspects of the story leads her to dramatize only Goldman’s later teenage years, generally oversimplifying the political issues prevalent in Goldman’s ethos. Bolt presents a one-dimensional Emma, a naive, charmingly enthusiastic youth whose political education is almost irrelevant in comparison with her romantic adventures. The result is a play which, in words used to describe Emma herself, is “*endearingly naive*” (176), yet, paradoxically, more faithful to Emma Goldman the person than its free and easy approach to her political allegiances might suggest.

Emma Goldman, whom Bolt labels “Queen of the Anarchists,” is a teenager attempting to promote her as yet barely-comprehended political views in a capitalist world dominated by middle-aged men. Goldman’s political marginality, whenever it is foregrounded, is attached to her love life. It is, in fact, in the one moment in which she attempts to use her sexuality in support of a political agenda that she is described as “*endearingly naive.*” *Red Emma*, I would suggest, then, has little to do with either the history or the politics of its protagonist; anarchy and history serve biology and psychology.

Normative authority in the play is embodied in the police, Pinkerton agents, politicians, tycoons—such as Henry Clay Frick—and their henchmen, and apologists for anarchy. All are male. The anarchists, male and female alike, are categorized as

foreigners espousing foreign ideals. The essence of the conflict is that set forth by Marx and Engels: worker vs capital. The current dominant, capitalism sustained and protected by violence, remains so for the usual obvious reasons. Anarchism needs money to fight money, and there is never enough support. Internal squabbling also weakens the anarchist cause, and the audience early perceives that each revolutionary believes himself or herself to be the one truly committed to anarchy, while the rest of the comrades struggle with imperfect comprehension of their political stance. Helen Minkin's criticism of Goldman late in the play provides an effective description of virtually every character's sense of self—capitalists and anarchists alike: "You think no one understands anything but you" (167). Thus, despite there being some important questions posed in the play concerning the manipulation of power—as, for example, when a disenchanted Berkman accuses Most of only leading the revolution because he wants the power (158)—the dominant order remains so not least because its opposition never mounts a concerted attack against it.

Although Bolt's decision to portray Emma Goldman only as teenaged adventuress limits any serious consideration of Goldman's political ideals, there remains some sense of the attractiveness of the protagonist's proposed alternatives. Goldman and her coterie promote (though do not always live by) principles of individual and gender equality. "We are all equals," Berkman pronounces; "We are comrades in anarchy" (133). "Tell Most he's equal," responds the eternally pessimistic Fedya. "If you can get him off the grandstand" (133). Similarly, though Most begins his relationship with Goldman on a political footing, he is, immediately, patronizing (though, to be fair, apologetic for it).

Soon, Most is plying Goldman with wine, finding her “*intensity overpowering*,” calling her “my young naive lady,” and expressing to her his deep “need of ardent friendship” (138-40). Many of us talk a better game than we play, and intellectual comprehension is often challenged by biological impulse. It appears that Bolt would like audiences to see the virtue of the ideals while avoiding being too judgmental when the characters who voice those ideals cannot quite manage to live by them.

Goldman herself seems to have an ability to discern the real value in individuals, to find and encourage people’s strengths. A variety of “backwards” praise settles on the “*anarchist kids*” (144)—a sort of praising with faint damns—when their own petty squabbling and hormone-driven rants are seen in comparison with the rhetoric and methods of their capitalist adversaries. Compared to the narrow-mindedness (150-1), obtuseness (144-5), and positive eagerness for violence (151) seen in Frick’s “*giggling and leering*” henchmen (155), the “children” are benign. Goldman undeniably has a sense of serious purpose, seen especially in her growing awareness that all the anarchist theory she has learned is almost totally irrelevant to the real worker (159), but that vital quality is often undermined by her naivete, as in the discussion with Fedya over posing nude (160), and in her later argument with Most (168-9). That Goldman is sufficiently self-aware to recognize some of her own naivete is also a positive element of her character (174-5). The charisma of the protagonist is, virtually always, a facet of individual personality, however, and, unlike that observed in many other protagonists within the genre, is only obliquely related to her political ideals.

The alternatives proposed include full equality of gender (again, though, with

little indication that it is likely to be practised, even within the anarchist movement), along with the central plank of the anarchist platform, the destruction of capitalism. Goldman is afforded two important public speeches (and, almost *de rigueur*, one song) to expound her views. In each case, it is her personality and not her intellect that attracts attention. Though her second major oration, ending Act One, on the importance of equal rights and conditions for women, is vitally important, Bolt's habitual method of portraying "Emma the adventuress" makes one less impressed with the content of the speech than surprised by the character's sudden ability to speak in such a mature manner (160-1). Like Dr Johnson's notorious observation concerning women preaching—"A woman's preaching is like a dog's walking on his hinder legs. It is not done well; but you are surprised to find it done at all"—the overwhelming impression left by Goldman's most important speech of the entire play is not the basic aptness of its theme but rather the sense that Goldman must have copied it from someone else's writings, so little does it accord with her level of expression elsewhere in the text.

Goldman's allies range from the stereotypically idealistic to the pragmatically pessimistic. Alexander Berkman—"Sasha," whose stated aim is to be "more than anyone else" (132) in his devotion to both the anarchist cause and the satisfaction of his biological appetites—is Goldman's most important ally, not so much for the power he holds but for the importance of the role he plays throughout her life. Johann Most, somewhat older than the others and, at first, a role-model and political mentor, is another ally whose physical desires undermine his public stance. The third man in Goldman's circle is 'Fedya' (the nickname of Berkman's cousin, Modest Stein), a plain-spoken,

pessimistic, pragmatic artist, whose role in the play seems to be that of corrective commentator on romantic extremes. Though Fedya is usually openly critical of his ‘family,’ familial affection informs the tone of his criticisms. They are the cautions of a concerned uncle, with the aesthetic and intellectual welfare of his ‘younger’ relatives at heart. Fedya is also Bolt’s strongest ally in the play, as he is (paradoxically, considering his status as artist and aesthete) the only anti-romantic voice heard for any length in the script, and, in the end, the audience’s guide to reading the playwright’s stance vis-à-vis her protagonist. Rounding out the group is Helen Minkin, whose commitment to anarchy and revolution is always in doubt. Her presence in the play, apart from its provenance in the historical record, seems only to fulfil the need for a female foil, an alternative to Goldman with whom each of the men can interact, each in turn stirring Goldman’s jealousy.

Each of the male supporters displays strong personal feelings for Goldman, and such emotions often conflict with avowed political agendas. Debates ensue over proper “revolutionary ethics” (141). The resultant internal tensions seem to guarantee failure from the start, as each member of the anarchist circle can never manage to separate sexual impulses from political ones, as epitomized by Minkin’s relentless mockery of Goldman’s vocalizations in the heat of passion—sufficiently loud, according to Fedya, that “the neighbourhood overheard” (152-3)—and by Most’s public breakdown over Goldman’s refusal to “choose between” himself and Berkman (168-9). Though sexual relations can be politicized, once again Bolt does very little with the politics of her subject, preferring instead to foreground Goldman’s sense of romantic adventure. In

Bolt's view, Goldman's anarchism seems merely a facet of her romanticism.

At first, it is difficult to determine Bolt's tone. She seems to wish to expose a pretentiousness at the root of anarchism, using stage directions to indicate gaps between appearance and reality:

MOST: Don't cry. Are you crying?

*Of course she isn't crying.*

EMMA: Yes I am. (149)

Similarly, Bolt clearly shows narrow-mindedness on the part of anarchy's primary proponent. Most, unwilling to hear a word in praise of his sexual rival, Berkman, dismisses his comprehension of the worker's struggle as irrelevant: "We are against [the struggle for the eight hour day]. We don't have to understand it" (149). The insistence that anything outside the anarchist platform is so insignificant as to be irrelevant seems to bespeak a will to failure. Most appears to believe that ignorance of one's opposition is superior to comprehension of it—surely not a premise upon which most major battles, military, political, or intellectual are wisely fought.

As the play progresses, the anarchist cause is rarely shown in a positive light. Goldman is repetitive, jingoistic, even occasionally hysterical. Her lament for her inability to bear children, almost certainly a contributing factor to her disposition toward free love, is particularly dramatic, but is criticized by Fedya and Minkin even as Goldman delivers it (165-6). And Goldman is not the only character to display hysterical outbursts of emotion. Unable to convince Goldman that "Love isn't sex. Sex isn't love" (168), Most "*screams and falls at her feet*" in the street, attracting attention from the law

(169). Their alliance falters because of sexual immaturity on the part of both; that immaturity has the effect of sapping any hope for the political benefits which their combined strengths might have brought about.

Efforts to act on anarchist beliefs in the political sphere also fail. Berkman's bomb fizzles (172-3) and his attempted assassination of Frick fails to do much more than send him to prison (178). On trial, he unwisely attempts to serve as his own defence counsel: he is unable satisfactorily to convey his own sense of *attentat*—in part, of course, because “translation is inadequate,” but also, one suspects, because Berkman himself does not yet fully understand the distinction he is attempting to make in his own defence (179, 180). It seems possible that, even before a sympathetic audience who understood his native tongue, Berkman would still be unable to articulate his position clearly.

Yet, as Souchotte insists, Bolt has no desire to condemn Emma Goldman; if anything, Bolt wishes to celebrate Goldman's spirit. Accordingly, despite the many examples of anarchist weakness in the play, there are also moments of strength, points at which the cause of Goldman and her comrades rises above their internecine squabbling. The strongest moments of support for the anarchist cause in the play come when the ideals expressed in the public exhortations of Most and Goldman are juxtaposed with the violent tactics of Frick's thugs. Parks' treatment of Fedya during Most's speech on the mechanistic, soul-denying nature of capitalism, promotes the anarchist cause, via the extreme negative example of its opposition. Despite having had his whip taken away from him by Frick, Parks believes himself justified in using violence to combat “godless,

murdering Bolshevik” propaganda (152). Having challenged the essentially pacifist Fedya to “step over that line” and being met with utter indifference, Parks then uses a *lack* of violent resistance as an excuse for instigating violence himself. Parks crosses his own imaginary demarcation line and, as Most addresses the audience, saying “Capitalism denies your humanity,” hits Fedya on the head “*and beats him down to the ground,*” kicking and punching the play’s most pragmatic voice into blackout (151-2).

Another significant example of Bolt’s ‘backward-compliment style’ is seen during Berkman’s trial. Though Berkman’s self-defence may seem hopelessly naive, the audience must also confront the appearance, if not the fact, of an equal naivete—or willing blindness—on the part of the justice system. When Berkman is tried for the attempt on Frick’s life, his statements to the court are repeated in translation. Bolt uses the historical fact of Berkman’s relatively poor English to dramatize the discrepancy between his presentation of himself to the court (made in the play in English) and the representation made to the court by his translator. Each statement is skewed, oversimplified, or decontextualized by the act of translation (180), all of which suggests that Berkman received nothing like his constitutionally-guaranteed fair trial.

In harmony with common practice, Bolt presents both moderate and extreme resistance to the alternatives proposed by her protagonist. Moderate resistance in *Red Emma* takes the form of spying (140), negotiation in bad faith (167-8), and police action (*passim*), of which the eventual jailing of Berkman following his attempt on the life of Frick is a relatively benign example (178-9). Extreme resistance takes the form of violence, including killing. Frick’s bodyguards and assistants beat and kick members of

the anarchist group during demonstrations. Near the start of the play, we are reminded of the role of the Haymarket riots, and the five deaths there, in awakening Goldman's "political conscience" (135-7). In a bookend relationship to the Haymarket incidents, toward the end of the play, protesters on a walkout at Frick's Homestead Steel Mills are fired upon in panic—the first casualty being a "nine-year-old boy"—prompting an exchange of violence that leaves "seventy-five dead," with casualties recorded on both sides of the conflict (174). While violence involving death should not be glibly dismissed as irrelevant, it must be observed that physical violence and threatened loss of life do next to nothing to change the minds of the anarchists. Each violent opposition is merely greater proof to them of the rightness of their own position. The most destructive opposition the anarchists face is their own immaturity.

For all its weaknesses, the play does challenge its audiences and its critics. Because the revolutionaries are almost all teenagers, a fact made clear early on, the first major challenge to the audience concerns how to 'take' the characters. Their ideals, when we hear them, are provocative and sometimes attractive, but they are always filtered through teenage sexual politics. The infighting in the group, over everything from interpretation of doctrine, "the catechism of the Russian Revolution" (166), to disparagement of each other's intellectual capacities (167), which ultimately descends into the 'playground politics' of name-calling (171), may limit audience sympathy. Each character seems to be motivated by a desire to exploit others for selfish ends, as exemplified by Most's courtship of Goldman (138-9). Goldman professes her desire to "love everything" (144)—an admirable aim, but a naive one, which once again

challenges the audience's perception of the character's seriousness. Goldman is undeniably sincere, but frequently also undeniably "silly" (153). Fedya's incessant truth-telling pessimism—analyzing with blunt precision Most's strategic interest in Goldman, for instance (147)—is another ambiguous value: to audiences who accept the romantic direction of the play, Fedya may seem hopelessly negative; to audiences expecting more political seriousness, Fedya serves as the only corrective to the extravagances of the romantic perspective.

Another level on which audiences are challenged has to do with character consistency. Goldman directly challenges the audiences through her set-piece speeches on the need for the workers to control the means of production (154-5) and on the necessity for gender equality and female independence (160-1). Her awareness of the meaninglessness of words when action has failed shows that her naivete is under siege (156). However, the apparent maturity she reaches on occasion is usually undercut by relapses into romanticism. Fedya's final summary of her character—"You are pure and fine and gullible" (183)—seems entirely fair.

Even the capitalist baron Frick voices some challenges to the audience. Part of the rhetoric of the play is that all sides have their own slogans, their own favourite bits of sentimental self-indulgence, *and* their own views which make a certain degree of sense. Following Goldman's first major speech, Frick confronts her (anonymously) asking for further explanation. During the course of their discussion, Goldman asks his identity. "It doesn't matter who I am if I'm telling you the truth," he responds (155), suggesting a separation of truth and teller which the anarchist group never quite manages to achieve.

Even more ironically, as Act Two opens we see Frick rehearsing in his office for his portrayal of Czar Alexander II for the Philadelphia Light Opera Society's "benefit performance for charity" (163). "Reforms come from above," says Frick, reading from his script (163). Bolt presents a double challenge here: the audience is asked first to recognize a philanthropic strain in "the enemy" and then to recall toward the close of the play the irony of Frick's inability to learn from the character he portrays. Unwilling to initiate reform from above, Frick becomes the victim of an attempted assassination.

Goldman criticizes Helen Minkin early in the play: "You analyze too much. . . . your approach is too intellectual" (145). Though motivated by a specific impulse—Minkin's insistence on trying to understand Goldman's belief in her ability truly to love all the men in her life at once—the criticism reminds both audience and critic that Bolt's intent was not to dramatize the political aspects of Goldman's life, nor to worry excessively about fidelity to biographical detail. The play is more about Goldman's willingness to believe than it is about any specific thing she might believe in.

Still, there is little or no gratuitous invention in the play. As her own stage directions indicate, Bolt made minor alterations to the received facts of her subject's story: the pronunciation of Most's name is altered to make it "*less confusing in English*" (133), and the anarchist flag is red, "*more exciting than the correct black*" (135). Similarly, when dramatic interest is heightened thereby, the specific context of an incident may be changed, as in Goldman's attempt to prostitute herself to raise money for Berkman's assassination plot. Though her biographer records the incident as fact (Falk 33), it did not happen, as Bolt presents it, with Frick as the intended customer (176-7).

Exaggeration also plays a part: Falk records the death toll in the Homestead incident as thirteen—a far different figure from the “seventy-five” named by Frick in Bolt’s text (174). As is common practice, “the dramatist is contemptuous of surface details which stand in the way of a powerful story” (Mitchell 2).

Although Bolt’s choice to dramatize only the earliest aspects of Goldman’s career might logically lead to a presentation of Emma’s coming of age, a theatrical *bildungsroman*, Bolt seems to have eschewed that option also. The fate of the protagonist in *Red Emma* differs from that of so many others examined in English-Canadian historical drama in that this protagonist is nowhere near reaching her fate. This play covers events which are but prelude to a lengthy revolutionary life lived both in public and in private by iconoclastic principles. Emma Goldman finishes Bolt’s play with one of the increasingly ubiquitous songs that pepper English-Canadian historical drama; she is alone, exhausted, apparently having learned nothing from what has occurred, but still—and this, for Bolt, is the important point—optimistic and self-confident (183-84). It is the fact that ‘Red Emma’ does not seem to change as a consequence of her experiences which Bolt presents as a triumph of individual heroism over political rhetoric.

Goldman has the necessary courage to hold firmly to her own sense of herself in the face of frequent ideological disappointment. Her steadfastness might equally be interpreted as wilfulness, or as deliberate naivete. When we consider Candace Falk’s summary of Emma Goldman’s attitudes across the span of her life, we must at least grant the possibility that Bolt, in choosing to portray only the earliest years, has nonetheless

shown all the most important qualities of her protagonist. Falk asserts: “the thought that such frailties” as jealousy, personal anger, and aggression “might be part of the human condition was terrifying to her.” Goldman would often say that “given a choice she would rather do without reality than give up her beautiful ideal” (522). Considered from the perspective of Goldman’s completed life, Bolt’s choice to present only an early fragment of that life is not as quixotic as it at first seems.

*Red Emma* is also an example of the Canadian dramatist’s effective use of non-Canadian history. The Canadian playwright does not treat any of her subject’s Canadian experiences. Though Goldman did spend some time living in Canada, Bolt asks her audiences to confront only events which occurred in the United States. Goldman’s ability to cling to a sense of self in the face of repeated ideological and personal disappointments is a praiseworthy characteristic which, entirely appropriate to the movement Goldman embraces, transcends artificial limitations such as geographical and political borders.

From the relative failures of Davin and Goldman, we turn to a pair of apparently undeniable successes, William Lyon Mackenzie King and Nellie McClung. In Alan Stratton’s *Rexy!* and Diane Grant’s *What Glorious Times They Had: Nellie McClung*, the protagonists demonstrate unconventional behaviour and, to greater or lesser extent, impose their unconventional views on the extant political order of their eras. Our comprehension of McClung, in particular, however, must be affected by the subsequent cultural evolution of her rebelliousness into ‘the norm.’ Mackenzie King’s case is in some ways less important; his iconoclastic peculiarities are more personal than political,

thus have not been adopted as the required norm for participation in politics, unlike McClung's securing of female enfranchisement. Mackenzie King's case, however, supports the assertion that Canadian history plays do not, of necessity, have to be about Canadian history, if only in that the concept of the cult of the personality with respect to political leadership is internationally known and observable.

In virtually all respects, the character of William Lyon Mackenzie King as represented in *Rexy!* seems not to conform to the conventional practices of English-Canadian historical drama in establishing a protagonist. However, on closer examination, a case can be made for considering King as a character still consistent with the norms of the genre despite his elevated position in the chain of command. The relationship of the politician to the electorate is an important reminder to all audiences of where the true centre of normative authority ought to be.

Generally, the protagonist of the English-Canadian history play is an outsider of some sort, set in opposition to the norm. While no one could easily call William Lyon Mackenzie King the norm, he can be seen as an unconventional outsider. Holder of the highest elected political office in Canada for the longest accumulated duration, King is as inside the structure of Canadian normative authority as it is possible to be. Yet King remains unconventional, both in personal beliefs and habits. Furthermore, despite King's success within Canada, he is marginalized and manipulated by Roosevelt in the United States and Churchill in England. Thus King might, without too much levity, be seen as the patron saint or demiurge, of sorts, of the English-Canadian historical play. Responses to King, nationally and internationally, coincidentally parallel many responses to

English-Canadian historical drama.

Again unlike the majority of protagonists in the genre, King does not face opposition from the forces of normative authority. In many respects, of course, he *is* normative authority. King's opposition (again in common with all elected officials) comes from the elected members of other political parties, the media, and, at times, the electorate—as well as, of course, from other national leaders. The basic nature of King's conflict is more obviously in harmony with conflicts faced by other protagonists in the genre. King's greatest conflict is, arguably, one shared by the majority of humanity: the need for comprehension and mastery of self. Stratton foregrounds King's faith in seances, as well as his fascination with instruction through the interpretation of dreams, and his reliance on prostitutes—in the play, the source of one of his most important political decisions (107, 135, 148-53). In the public domain, King's challenge is to hold the diverse elements of Canada together through a national crisis. He faces resistance from his top military men and struggles to find a way to avoid the fissure he knows conscription is sure to drive through the country. Though King's tensions balance between private and public, disturbance in one sphere often prompting action in the other, the nature of his private concerns is decidedly uncommon.

Charisma is, in the case of King as with the others in this chapter, ambivalent. King's loquacity and eccentricity are the foundation of his charisma, yet they alienate as well as attract. Consider by way of example chief British liaison officer, Lord Riverdale's description of King as “an absolute bastard. . . . difficult, dangerous, and maddeningly obtuse” (101). There is a certain naivete in King's easy acceptance of

flattery from figures such as Roosevelt which might also endear him to some audiences while alienating others. Similarly uncertain in effect is his sense of self, which wavers between endearing and annoying (cf. 131). Also, King demonstrates great loyalty, but indiscriminately; his greatest loyalty seems to be to his dog and to his family dead—which group the dog joins during the course of the play. Even his loneliness will be read sympathetically by some and disparagingly by others (148).

King's alternatives are consistently driven by compromise. From full neutrality for Canada in World War Two, King moves through promotion of volunteer service, then conscription for home defence only, all in the hope of holding Canada together as a country by appeasing both the generally isolationist French Canadians and the generally bellicose English-Canadians. Undeniably, his alternatives have an attractive component. With neutrality, no one dies in war; with volunteer service, at least nobody is *forced* to risk life; with conscription for home defence, a contribution to the war effort is seen to be made, but made in a nationalistic vein.

The protagonist's alternatives must be in some sense costly. Full neutrality risks a complete break with Britain, as well as the annoyance of a large portion of the Canadian electorate. As the war progresses, King is even more precariously balanced between the United States and England, all the while trying to preserve Canadian interests. Further, Allied necessities begin to supersede national concerns as setbacks increase pressure for greater Allied commitment. No matter what King decides to do, then, a sizeable body with power of its own to affect the course of Canada's future will be anything from annoyed to violently offended.

King's loneliness has been alluded to. Though obviously not without supporters during his record-setting tenure as Prime Minister, he seems, in Stratton's play, increasingly alienated from everyone—or, at least, everyone still living. In *Rexy!*, the protagonist's support is primarily found in the voices of the dead—King's mother, and his maternal grandfather, William Lyon Mackenzie “the Rebel” (109). Those of King's close supporters who are still ‘on this side,’ are, like his charisma, ambivalent. Stratton uses Joan Patteson as the embodiment of all King's living personal friends: she celebrates King's achievements and involves herself in his spiritualism, but is also the first formally to question King's sanity (142). Roosevelt, too, especially in the earliest scenes of the play, seems to value King as a confidante and political ally, but, as events unfold, it becomes more likely that Roosevelt has merely strategically employed King's vanity for his own interests. The paradox that the most successful politician in national history is also almost entirely alone comes poignantly home.

As is common in plays treating iconoclastic protagonists working within an extant political hierarchy, the protagonist of *Rexy!* faces little that can be considered extreme resistance. Debate, resignations, and propaganda signal opposition to King's strategies. The UK expects support to be given on its own terms, and Churchill and Roosevelt tend to freeze King out of significant Allied conferences on the war effort (153); but there is no violent opposition, certainly nothing of the sort seen peripherally in *Red Emma*. The most demoralizing thing that happens to King through the course of the play is that the Canadian troops overseas are anxious for his visit, but only so that they can mock him (155-6). Even that incident is given a positive spin by King upon his return to Ottawa

(157). Moreover, King is spared the fate that awaits Churchill at the end of the war: King wins the post-war general election in Canada, despite having finally introduced conscription. Once more it seems that entering the political process shelters the iconoclast from the intensity of extreme resistance which some others have faced.

The play is laden with challenges to audience perceptions, both of King and of his historical moment. Ann Saddlemyer, in her introduction to Stratton's *Canada Split*, provides perhaps the most concise reading of the play's method, suggesting that, despite King's "pomposity and pettiness," he is rendered with sympathy, "his private loneliness balanced against his vision of his role as saviour and mediator" (8). Saddlemyer contends that Joan Patteson's role in the play is to "maintain that balance" as well as to provide "an apparently more rational foil to the family ghosts surrounding [King] by treating his eccentricities seriously; thereby encouraging us to find them somehow more endearing than dangerous" (8). The play "recognizes King's efforts to keep the country united, while at the same time clearly revealing the dubious means (and some of the pettier reasons) by which he achieves it" (9). She concludes that, because King "emphasizes Canada's independence and procrastinates in the name of Canadian unity," audiences are "inclined to be indulgent and forgive him" (9). Her brief summary of the play foregrounds succinctly all its major tensions and challenges to contemporary audiences.

King's early views on Hitler, for example, show that he understands the man well, but also (with our benefit of hindsight duly noted) that he is wrong about how best to deal with him (102-3). King consults the spirit of "The Rebel" on the subject of Hitler

and consequently believes that there is nothing to be feared. The idea would be laughable if it were not so terrifying in its misjudgment (100). Similarly, King's aggressively independent stance in response to Britain's expectations of Canadian support (103)—voiced in imperial/colonial terms as far as King is concerned—would likely be entirely admirable if observed in another context or, even more importantly, if examined more carefully in its own context—i.e. spoken long before anyone outside Europe and most inside it had even an inkling of the extent to which Hitler and Nazism would go. Again, hindsight inescapably informs our comprehension of King's views with knowledge that King himself could not possibly have had.

In his debate with Lord Riverdale, King echoes the sentiments of Kate Hayes Simpson: "I won't be assumed" (105). Part of what renders him sympathetic to some audiences is that, despite his adamant declaration of this principle, he is "assumed," and with increasing regularity as World War Two continues. Again, hindsight is flawless: knowing the history of conscription in Canada, as well as the consequences of the decisions King is here dramatized in the process of making, audiences must accept that there is logic in his position—even if that position is not, in itself, supported. The succeeding half century, with its catalogue of increased tensions between French and English in Canada, affects audience evaluation of the rightness (or wrongness) of King's intense efforts to hold both extremes in union by compromising through the middle. King is not only "assumed" by the U.S.A. and the U.K., then, but also by contemporary audiences who know as lived experience aspects of French/English tensions in Canada which King might have found too incredible to believe even had his seances suggested

them.

One challenging aspect, beyond the obvious, of King's seances is the extent to which history influences his decision-making process. Once again, he stands as the harbinger of the evolution of the English-Canadian history play, doing precisely in his personal life what our playwrights have spent at least forty years encouraging Canadians to do more often: re-examine the events of the past and re-consider some options previously not pursued. King's lineage, his reiterated identity as "the Rebel's grandson" (109), is but one way in which, for him, history is actively present. Looking at his grandfather's clock, and observing the hands at 8:10, King sees "the wings of a bomber" and insists to Pearson (over whom actual bombers are currently at work) that we must "learn from the past" and avoid antagonizing Québec with conscription (114).

Consistent with the whole tone of the play, this incident is either laughable or laudable depending upon one's perspective of the whole conscription issue. Similarly, alone in his office once the adoption of conscription has finally been forced on him, King apostrophizes Laurier, lamenting the similarities in their circumstances (160). It is either a moment of historically-informed self-knowledge or a moment of maudlin self-aggrandizement. Stratton allows the possibility of either reaction throughout the play.

One of the ways in which Stratton keeps King's eccentricities from wholly dominating perceptions of his character is by presenting several scenes in which King's political acumen is shown to advantage. King insists that Canadian contributions to Britain's war must be decided in "*our* Parliament and *our* Parliament alone" (104). He attempts in all his dealings throughout the war to steer by this 'ourselves, by our

authority, at our pace' credo, despite reactions such as Riverdale's: "we're looking at the apocalypse and all you can see is a bank balance?" (120). King's entire political life is a balancing act, perched precariously on a wire drawn taut between national independence and legitimate claims on allegiance. Aware though he is that "political controversy is the last thing we need" (123), he is also aware that any step he takes will stir up some form of political controversy.

Balancing the image of King in action as an astute, even shrewd analyst of the complexities of national feeling is his naivete in international affairs. Roosevelt calls King his "lynch pin" (125), flattering King's ego and employing him as a go-between to open talks with Churchill. The audience perceives immediately that Roosevelt and King are engaged in similar political manoeuvring with respect to national interests vis-à-vis international affairs, despite the fact that the United States remains officially neutral at this point. Roosevelt's compliment that King's mind is subtle, "a veritable beaver trap" (127) draws attention, however, to the fact that the Canadian Beaver is walking into a trap made in the U.S.A. When Roosevelt and Churchill meet without King, his reaction is entirely logical. King complains that the other leaders are taking an incredible risk travelling to meet at such a time; he is right, but the audience sees wounded vanity more than it sees astute pragmatism (134-5). King insists that "at the bottom of this whole fiasco is vanity" (135), ironically proving Roosevelt was right in saying that it is "amazing how very bright people can't see what's staring them straight in the face" (124). The play is redolent with similar observations on human folly and on the difficulty of right action. "Appearances are *all*," King insists. "Appearances *are* all." As long as

he *appears* to Canadians to be part of the Allied decision-making process, his political status at home remains high no matter how personally galling being shut out of the process may be (145-46).

Stratton consistently presents King's inconsistency, juxtaposing scenes of erratic and bizarre behaviour with scenes of great seriousness and simple yet profound political insight—occasionally combining the two. King cries to the spirits of his dead mother and his dead dog to teach him “the secret of heroism” (147), a cry immediately followed by a conversation with his dead grandfather concerning how “power corrupts the will” (148). It is a moment of important insight conveyed by suspect means. The dialogue with “The Rebel” is followed directly by King reaching his next important political decision through pillow talk with “*Enid, the whore*” (148-52).

As conscription approaches political inevitability, King impedes its unavoidable introduction by the most democratic of means—calling a plebiscite—once again achieving selfish aims through public policy (157ff). The results of the vote illustrate that King has not been exaggerating the sense of division which he has been struggling against throughout: “English Canada ‘Yes’ four to one; Quebec ‘Non’ four to one” (158). The oppositions evinced by the statistics authenticate some of King's earlier reasoning, making his recalcitrance, intransigence, and manipulative arrogance appear, if not forgivable, at least adequately motivated. King insists that people “don't understand that more is accomplished by preventing bad action than by doing good” (160). That position might be more easily accepted were it not for its echoes of Chamberlain and appeasement.

Even with the results of the plebiscite known, King manages further delays by manipulating Colonel Ralston out of the defence portfolio, employing Ralston's earlier, once refused but cunningly preserved, letter of resignation (115-6, 165-6). King replaces Ralston with McNaughton, himself earlier forced into retirement at the insistence of the British War Office (166). Among McNaughton's conditions for taking on the job include taking "a stiff broom to the entire department" and performing "a review of all defence positions to date" (164). So effectively has King manipulated the old soldier's personal pride that he does not even need to order McNaughton to proceed slowly; McNaughton himself insists on the necessity of taking time to do the review properly.

Ultimately, King exhausts all his delaying tactics. Ironically, when finally forced to face "his personal terror" of alienating Québec (167), King finds that a public admission of failure to his own caucus results not in loss of support over the broken promise but instead in increased support. He is applauded, as Joan Patteson puts it, by "the English because he'd brought in conscription and the French because he'd won so much time" (167-8). Unlike Churchill, King is re-elected in the first post-war vote and, as Patteson again summarizes, it "seemed he could escape from anything" (168).

Interestingly, Stratton does not end the play with King's final election victory. There *are* two things from which King naturally cannot escape: mortality and himself. Facing death, King also faces both the reality of his international position and the essential selfishness that has motivated him for so long. "You kept us united," Patteson says, comforting King in his fear of dying. "I constructed a ruins," King replies, "I turned history into the shape of my mind. . . . In my dream I see God quilting history, and I am a

scrap of material in his hands” (169). King has not been the saviour of Canada, nor the lynch pin of the Allied war effort. He has been a bit player in a large drama, rather than the artist he so desired to be. “I will be remembered like an old photograph in a cardboard box,” King concludes as he prepares to join the spirits of his family. “But I will be remembered” (171). Stratton allows King’s final speech to evoke a mixture of hard reality and fairy tale, to write the man into his country and its history. It is a far more lenient conclusion than easily might have been reached.

The most challenging aspect of King as Stratton presents him, then, is neither his unconventional private life, nor his personal beliefs, but his political insistence that “priorities . . . come before principles” (138). His priorities are usually reasonable but his methods may provoke debate. Inescapably, the impression is that all King’s policy was about his own survival—no matter how beneficial to Canada, or to individual Canadians, any part of that policy might coincidentally have been. Stratton’s play suggests that as it was in King’s own best interests to concern himself with national interests, accordingly much of King’s policy is selfishness wrapped in nationalist packaging. Given that he held the office of Prime Minister longer than any other, his policy was at least a personal success. In conversation with Ralston, King states: “Nothing hurts more than when situations become personal and one’s own position is misinterpreted” (153). One suspects that a wholly honest King could not be hurt by this play.

Even more so than Mackenzie King, Nellie McClung is a figure outside the norm for the English-Canadian historical play. Though Grant’s play does conform to many of

the features of common practice, it is McClung's fate that sets her apart from virtually all the other protagonists in the genre. Put simply, McClung wins. Though King, Smallwood, and Davin win, and frequently, they also lose in crucial respects. Perhaps the worst thing that can be said to have befallen Nellie McClung, either during her successful struggle or in the posthumous evolution of her reputation, is that it took rather longer than it should have to get a statue erected to her memory.

McClung's outsider status is rooted in her gender; she is a woman in a world in which men hold all public authority. To be fair, it should also be observed that McClung is a "social reformer, novelist, and suffragist" (E5). Her political marginality as the play begins is not solely on account of having been born female, though that rhetoric will surface from time to time in the reasoning of normative authority for opposing her views. The authority with which she comes into conflict is the exclusively male world of political rights and action, epitomized by the figures of Manitoba Premier Sir Rodmond Roblin and his parliamentary secretary, P.T. Fletcher, and echoed in every stratum of social order—advertising, publishing, insurance—which automatically classifies McClung and her various companions in revolution as second-rate, less deserving, less intelligent, deluded, or such by reason of being female. The play begins with Roblin reciting the law of the province of Manitoba concerning right of suffrage: "No woman, idiot, lunatic, or criminal shall vote." Immediately, McClung opens her challenge: "People still speak of womanhood as if it were a disease" (E7). The battle lines are clear from the first words of the play.

Among McClung's well-mobilized supporters are E. Cora Hind, Frances Benyon,

and Lillian Benyon Thomas. Later, Adelaide Roblin, wife to the Premier, and opposition leader T.C. Norris become allies, the former at least in spirit. Hind is “an agriculture expert and journalist” (E5) whose no-nonsense approach to everything makes her at once an inspiring figure and a stereotypical one. The Benyon sisters also practice journalism and, as portrayed, bring optimism and enthusiasm to the suffrage fight. Adelaide Roblin’s sympathy to the cause introduces personal tension for her husband, whose claim to represent the best interests of the province in promoting the status quo is undermined by opposition from his own kitchen. Norris, of course, provides the *sine qua non* for success: support from an elected male. McClung and her supporters challenge the government on the gap between enacted legislation and enforcement of its provisions. They throw light on government’s hushed scandals. Most importantly, they agitate for their own right to be included in the political process.

The tone of the play is generally light-hearted, its lightness inviting doubt as to the aptness of titling it “a satire” (E1). Satire is often characterized by bitterness toward its target. This play, largely, lacks such bitterness.<sup>5</sup> It is difficult to determine precisely what Grant understood the play to be satirizing. Certainly it is not McClung herself, nor her efforts. The women of the play do satirize male strategies for refusing them the right of suffrage, particularly in the Mock Parliament scene, but this is satire being used by the characters within the context of the events dramatized, not the play itself being a satire. Arguably, the play might be said to satirize a social order in which the women’s efforts were necessary, but even that possibility is somewhat undermined by devices such as having Roblin join in the final chorus of celebration. Fletcher might be

understood as representing the ‘average’ male and common male assumptions about the role of women; but even though he speaks some of the play’s most gender-biased lines, he fades from importance as the play progresses. Fletcher makes no Ralston-like stand on principle, no Davin-like confrontation of his leader—there is merely a duet followed by a quick exit (E67-8). Perhaps his very ineffectiveness is the satirical target. There is no clear reason for calling the play a satire. I would argue that it is, instead of satire, a celebration of the successful efforts of its historical protagonists, satire being merely one of the devices employed by those protagonists on their path to success.

The charismatic qualities of the suffragists are obvious throughout the play. Cora Hind’s early chat about the quality of bull semen explodes all manner of stereotypes and supposed taboos (E19-20); Lillian Benyon’s enthusiasm is infectious, particularly in the early going (E16-9); and Frances Thomas provides the call to order so regularly needed in all revolutionary contexts—like Fedya in *Red Emma*, Frances serves to anchor the rest of the group, to keep the struggle for change focused on important issues and to remind the others of the necessity of staying organized. Predictably, her role being cautionary, Thomas may seem at times to be a stereotypical nag, but since part of the way in which Grant’s play treats its subject is to accept the reality of many stereotypes and to show how the stereotypical qualities in question can also be quite useful character attributes, when Thomas nags she is usually seen to be doing so with reason.

McClung herself is, as one might expect, more fully developed than are her supporters, and her own individual charisma is the strongest in the play. Her unshakeable belief in her own essential rightness transfers easily to audiences. She is

articulate in defence of her own rationality (E22-3), admirably effective in undercutting Fletcher's sexist propaganda (E64-5), and both provocative and convincing in her public speeches—not only in setting the scene directly at the start of the play (E7), but also later in addressing the convention of insurance men after the discovery that women's documented tendency to hysteria invalidates most insurance policies (E34). Nowhere more than in the Mock Parliament—Lillian Benyon's most important contribution to the battle—is McClung's charisma so clearly seen. Her speech as "The Premier" (E52-4) reveals the gratuitous sexism of ordinary male representation of women by simply discussing men in precisely the same manner.

McClung's alternative appears to most contemporary audiences to be common sense. Equally, however, as the play does make clear, the cost to the current dominant order is immense—not in money but in requiring a complete reconceiving of the way the world works. Previous assumptions concerning 'proper' male and female spheres of influence had to be razed and reconsidered from first principles. Small wonder, then, that Fletcher grasps at straws in trying to advise Roblin, wondering whether or not the suffragists are "withholding their conjugal rights," while Roblin himself "*cannot come to grips with the new political picture*" (E65). The men get drunk, Fletcher managing barely more than monosyllabic interjection while Roblin reminisces about his accomplishments (E67). In this scene, Grant approaches satire. In comparison with the sharply focused efforts of the women, this male wallowing in nostalgia and despair is particularly pathetic.

Resistance to the protagonist is, of course, more extensive than that presented by

the alcoholic moaning of two men in an office in the process of lamenting their incomprehension of the inevitable. As is common in the political action subgrouping of the genre, there is little or no extreme resistance offered. That assertion might be debated, however, on the grounds that it presumes physical resistance to be more extreme than emotional or mental resistance. Part of the challenge that McClung's group faced, a challenge that would be echoed in utterly different circumstances during and after World War One later in the decade, was the difficulty in convincing many people, regardless of gender, of the actuality of emotional wounds. Suffice it to say that the opposition offered the suffragist movement as Grant portrays it is almost exclusively ideological; physical violence does not play a role.

Opponents of the suffrage movement early invoke scriptural precedent—a common device employed in a number of contexts to oppose iconoclastic behaviour (E11).<sup>6</sup> The opposition makes similar use of physiology to promote maintenance of the status quo (E12). A woman's sexual history is used as a device to exclude her from the protection of the law (E17). As noted, Fletcher, more than any other single male figure, scrapes the proverbial bottom of the barrel for methods of resistance to the proposed changes. He reverts to the dismissal of individual claims by disparaging the entirety of the group (E37), accuses McClung of being a paid servant of the opposition party (E64), and finally sinks to disseminating gossip about her 'weakness' as a mother and her "atrocious" and "horrible" fashion sense (E64). Roblin, at least in public, rests his antagonism towards McClung's political agenda on the premise that separate spheres of influence for each gender are "the best traditions of civilized humanity" and that well-

intentioned women wishing to “share in the arduous task of government” are “sacrificing” these traditions and “sell[ing] their birthright” (E65). Though less vile in tone than Fletcher’s campaign muckraking, Roblin’s speech shows him to be no less repressive. He clings to the last to the notion that “the woman who rocks the cradle rules the world” (E65) but cannot seem to see any possibility that a man might share in the rocking of the cradle, or a woman share in the ruling of their own small corner of the world.

The play is reasonably faithful to the received record. Little is exaggerated, and in scenes which are a matter of public record, dialogue is occasionally verbatim. If anything, some elements worthy of satirical treatment are minimized, as, for instance, in the scene describing conditions in the factories (E30-33). As Mary Hallett and Marilyn Davis have demonstrated, conditions there were brutal (110-11). Fidelity to some of McClung’s recorded comments concerning her trip with Roblin through some factories would have noticeably darkened the tone of the scene. In Grant’s text, the scene ends with a song. The song is a lament, true, but, as is so often the case with music used in this genre, the medium cushions the severity of the message delivered. Also in keeping with the general light-heartedness of the play is that Roblin himself joins in the final chorus of the old temperance song “Win Them, Win Them, One By One” (E74). There is no indication of such magnanimity in the historical record. The Manitoba Conservative Party, in opposition and under a new leader, voiced a tepid endorsement of the changes to the Elections Act, but there is nothing like the sense of unity shown by the play’s final scene. Once again, a happy, up-tempo song is employed, which distances

audiences from harsher reality.

The key scenes in the play are those in which the Political Equality League puts its case for female suffrage—first, formally, to a committee of government, then satirically in the form of a play featuring a Women’s Parliament—an echo of Aristophanes’ *Ecclesiazusae* but, predictably given its author(s) and intent, much more favourable to the women involved—that makes its critical points by simple reversal of basic values. These scenes form the literal and philosophical centre of the play, and though they vary slightly from the received record of what actually occurred, they are dramatically *fun* to play—evidence that the playwright’s other roles, director and protagonist, might have strongly influenced the writing of the scene.

The prelude to the Mock Parliament is “The Delegation” scene in which the members of the Political Equality League meet with representatives of Manitoba’s government to discuss the issue of the vote for women. Convinced that they will “be turned down flat,” Lillian Thomas suggests that they use this meeting to research the government’s rhetorical style for the purposes of immediate mockery: “We could put on our own Women’s Parliament right after the delegation—right after Sir Rodmond turns us down. What an opportunity for satire! Think of the publicity” (E43). The notion of turning a sure defeat into a further weapon in the battle is one of several admirable ideas displayed by the women of the league, clearly proving that they have the necessary ability to manage politics. Thus it is that the actual meeting in which the Political Equality League puts its case for the women’s franchise to the government is much shorter than the fallout which follows its failure. It is the only segment of the play which seems

successfully satiric in tone.

Responding to the oft-voiced sentiment that women should not get involved in politics because it “is too corrupt,” McClung challenges the government (and the audience) with the assertion that “the politician who says [politics] is corrupt is admitting one of two things—either that he is a party to the corruption, or that he is unable to prevent it” (E47). To Roblin’s assurance that, as everything else in Canada is modelled on British examples, thus surely suffrage *will* eventually come, there is no response. His belief that “woman suffrage would break up the home” and “throw children into the arms of the servant girls” is even applauded “*vigorously*” by the women (E48). It seems, from the “Delegation” scene, that the Premier’s arguments have convinced the women to surrender the fight. The audience, armed with the knowledge that the women fully expected to be ignored at this meeting, understands the applause that leaves Fletcher “*perplexed*” and Roblin staring: they are not applauding the content of the Premier’s speech, but applauding the platform he has built for their attack.

The premise of the ‘play-within-a-play’ is simple: “for the next short while, positions in society will be reversed. The women will have the vote and the men will have to beg for it” (E49). McClung’s announcement is immediately followed by Thomas’ reading of the revised definition of the electorate: “No idiot, lunatic, criminal or man shall vote” (E49-50). Reversing the order, saving the worst for last as it were, merely serves to stress the absurdity of the grammatically equal yoking of severe exceptions to the rule of human intelligence with the simplest biological division of the race. The women immediately begin with a round of gossip about fashion and other

women's behaviour—conspicuous so far by its general absence. Once again, stereotypical expectations are foregrounded to be mocked. As debate ensues, the documented inadequacies of the male of the species are raised. The “well-known fact” of the intractability of the male child as compared to the female suggests a similar difficulty in “training men in parliamentary procedures.” Their “minor biological difference,” it is averred, should not prevent them from participation, but that assertion is countered by reference to the corruption men would wreak on the “finer sensibilities” of women were their “cigar smoke. . . . brandy glasses. . . . [and] spittoons” to become common in hallowed halls “echoing with ribald laughter.” Also of concern is “the suggestive nature of male attire—the coloured waist-coats, the embroidered suspenders, the bay rum behind the ears, the waxed ends of moustaches and the tight trousers” (E50-1). The most important objection is raised by Thomas in her role as a government member: “My husband doesn't want the vote. He's the power behind the throne. That's good enough for him” (E52). The application of all these objections to men serves to highlight how irrelevant each actually is; that similar things have all been said by men earlier in the play also helps focus the criticism of male strategies for exclusion and control.

The scene is completed by the arrival of a “delegate” seeking “‘*Votes For Men*’” (E52). McClung, as Premier, “compliment[s] the delegation on its splendid gentlemanly appearance,” accompanied by a “*wolf whistle*” from all the women in council (E52). Her speech following is a direct parody of that given by Roblin in the previous scene, raising precisely the same sort of meaningless objections in the same rhetorical style,

culminating in the observation that “politics is an unsettling business, and unsettled men mean unsettled bills, broken furniture, broken vows and divorce” (E54). What the parody most obviously achieves is the timely reminder that everyone, regardless of gender, has the potential for failure—or for success. As a final humorous aftershock, we see the reviews of the performance the next morning as read by Adelaide Roblin, who senses her husband’s discomfort but cannot refrain from saying “we might get the vote after all,” prompting her husband’s anguished reaction: “What do you mean, ‘we’?” (E55).

This ‘epilogue’ to the Women’s Parliament demonstrates the extent to which Roblin is out of touch with the mood of his electorate. From the moment the Premier’s own wife is seen to be more sympathetic to McClung’s position than to her husband’s (he who has often claimed his wife’s complete support and satisfaction with the status quo), the play relentlessly moves towards an affirmative ending: “Today, January 27, 1916, the Elections Act of Manitoba has been amended to extend the franchise to women,” announces new Premier T.C. Norris as the play closes (E73). McClung and her allies, alone of all the iconoclastic individuals and groups here considered, achieve their radical aims, see their outsider position redefined as belonging inside normative authority. Even Laura Secord, the most conventionally successful protagonist of those thus far addressed, does not succeed on the same terms as McClung and her group. Secord’s intent was fundamentally conservative. Though she challenges stereotypical expectations concerning what women can achieve, Secord’s goal is not the rewriting of common social practice.

It is the nature of the struggle and the size of the group to which the protagonist belongs which make the resolution of the conflict in this text so different from the norm. Though Nellie McClung is an individual she is not fighting an individual cause, nor a minority cause. Nor is she pioneering when considered in an international context. As Roblin indicates in his much-mocked speech, women's suffrage agitation was by no means limited to Manitoba. McClung had the odds in her favour far more than did the Donnellys, the Beothuk, or even the male politicians considered elsewhere in this chapter. McClung's constituency and her historical moment combined with her undeniable individual strengths and efforts to ensure victory. Grant's play belongs in this analysis, however, despite its ex-centricity in relation to common practice, precisely because it dramatizes a conflict between alternatives that existed at an historical moment in Canada. Every clash of alternatives dramatized in English-Canadian historical plays carried with it in its own time at least the seeds of possibility that the radical alternative might succeed. That the alternative does succeed in this case should only invite closer examination of the possibilities inherent in the alternatives that, in so many other examples, do not succeed.

The final pairing for this chapter addresses two different views of the same figure. From the musical revue, with its multiple roles played by a handful of actors punctuated by song and dance, to the monologue, the increasingly popular one-person performance piece, the same characteristics of the protagonist emerge. The treatment afforded Joseph R. (Joey) Smallwood in Rising Tide's collective *Joey* (1981, 1996) and Tom Cahill's monologue *The Only Living Father* (1991, 1997) brings to light the most

important aspect of any evaluation of political success: the judgment of posterity.

J.R. Smallwood conforms in all respects to the proposed paradigm. Smallwood was an exemplary outsider for most of his life—arguably even while at the peak of his success and personal power. Born in a rural outpost but raised in a small city, Smallwood was always too ‘townie’ for some and too ‘bayman’ for others. Even during his schooldays, Smallwood was an outsider, the only boy with a local address to board at his school. In early adulthood, Smallwood was a nomad, embracing socialism in the midst of a fundamentally conservative political climate, like Goldman moving to New York to be closer to the centre of political evolutionary and revolutionary thought, and like Davin a regionalist before the word was in common usage. His history before becoming the first Premier of Newfoundland is a staggering record of mediocrity and failure, untimely alignment with the ‘wrong’ political forces, and exclusion—even from the centre of the causes to which he initially devoted his efforts. Somehow, this quintessential outsider happened, like McClung, to be in a position at the right historical moment to use his one undeniable and indefatigable asset, his persuasive loquaciousness, to vault himself from obscurity into political fame and a degree of political success.

The authority to which Smallwood always saw himself opposed was the condition of privilege. One theme uniting the whole of Smallwood’s public career is his belief in improving the ordinary living conditions of the “toiling masses” (Rising Tide 242). The extent to which a small handful of influential businessmen controlled both government and money in Newfoundland is well documented. Smallwood’s derisive references to “the twenty-one millionaires” (Rising Tide 251) and the “twenty-nine dictators” (Rising

Tide 251, Cahill 281, Noel 254) during the National Convention on the future of government in Newfoundland (1946-48) are situation-specific, but simultaneously give a fair picture of the minuscule size of Newfoundland's administrative elite from the first days of settlement. The foundation of Smallwood's eventual success was that he appealed, by a combination of high recognition factor from his early days as a radio journalist and entertainer and his evidently sincere willingness to pay attention to their problems, to a majority of Newfoundland voters, some of whom had been so marginalized and disenfranchised from the political process that they were unaware a process existed.

The central conflict of Smallwood's career was the debate over Newfoundland's political future in which he fought successfully to have confederation with Canada added to the list of options Newfoundlanders would consider in their first democratic vote after sixteen years of Commission of Government. Though both Rising Tide's *Joey* (1981, 1996) and Tom Cahill's *The Only Living Father* (1991, 1997) deal at length with Smallwood's twenty years as Premier, all that happens in those years is consequence to this moment of crisis. As in much Shakespearean drama, the crisis point of Smallwood's life, hence of these plays as well, occurs in the middle. The political situation is unique both in Canadian history and in the dramatic literature which examines it: there was *no* established government. Smallwood did not face an ensconced, opposed government or official opposition party; the foundation of the debate was not merely who should govern, but *how* government itself should be carried out. None of the protagonists who chose to work within the system to promote their iconoclastic views had such an

opportunity to define the precise nature of what that system would be.<sup>7</sup>

Smallwood's alternative, then, unlike many of those proposed by the sundry protagonists of English-Canadian historical drama, is proposed not as an alternative to an existing system, but as one of the ways in which a political vacuum might be filled. His struggle, at first, is merely to get his alternative put before the electorate (Noel 254). That Smallwood was able to take confederation from absence to (slim) majority acceptance in the space of four years is his greatest personal triumph. The question of whether or not the personal triumph was also a public triumph is the foundation of the plays which examine the Smallwood story. As the second half of each play dramatizes, once Smallwood had achieved his goal of confederation—especially the advantage of membership in the Canadian social safety net (*Rising Tide* 247, 254)—subsequent alternatives, such as “develop or perish” (Cahill 289), freedom from the fishery as the sole natural resource sustaining the provincial economy, and, eventually, too late, reorganizing and restructuring that fishery for its own protection and survival (Cahill 290), fail, most of them miserably.

The key component of Smallwood's success, the dominant feature of his personality, was a charisma that convinced voters of his sincere interest in their well-being. Indeed, as some of the more troublesome initiatives of the Smallwood government came into effect in the 1960s, there was a wave of feeling, stated overtly in *Joey*, that Smallwood himself must be unaware of popular disapproval: “Joey don't know about this” (274). As people began to discover that they were ‘small fish’—so small as to slip through the mesh of the social safety net—they clung desperately to the belief that

Joey was still not only in command of the ship but also constantly mending the damage. It took several years before a majority of the electorate began to first suspect, then accept, then finally get angry about the fact that the policies they abhorred were Joey's creations. Smallwood's charisma, reminiscent of Davin's in many respects, took him far further.

The most important component of that charisma was Smallwood's loquacity, the "gift of gab" evoked in the opening scenes of both plays (Cahill 261; *Rising Tide* 239). As Noel suggests, Smallwood was a master of self-presentation, particularly using the medium of radio, and his voice was already well-known to Newfoundlanders before he began to use it in political campaigning (251). His *Barrelman* shows, in the 1930s, used stories sent in by listeners, edited and mixed by Smallwood, then read "with much flair and a natural sense of dramatic timing" in a manner guaranteed "to rekindle the battered national pride of Newfoundlanders" (Noel 251). *Rising Tide* dramatizes a moment of house to house visitation on the campaign trail in which Smallwood is recognized with enthusiasm by the woman of the house, who has been listening to him "on the radio with the Convention" and with even greater enthusiasm by the man once he realizes it is the famous *Barrelman* here in his own kitchen (254). As the National Convention was broadcast around the island, thousands were open to considering Smallwood's political ideas simply because they knew and loved the trick of that voice.

Among the supporting components of Smallwood's charm, particularly as he is dramatized, are a capacity both for mild self-deflation and for self-aggrandizement, a sense of order and organization skills, a confidence that translates easily to others, an

apparent belief in the worth of every individual, a youthful radicalism tempered to pragmatism by experience, and, ultimately, self-knowledge.

The fact of his birth on Christmas Eve was a source of humour for Smallwood (*Rising Tide* 239, *Cahill* 261), and occasionally for his critics. Smallwood's capacity for self-aggrandizement is displayed immediately by Cahill: "Some enemies later suggested that being born on the same day as another distinguished personage 1900 years earlier made me think I was Him. Anyway, I ended up in the same business He did, trying to save the world. Or at least my part of it" (261). Equally important, however, is Smallwood's ability to recognize his own self-inflation, and, sometimes, to work against it. Examining his potential for attracting support, he wonders who would support "a crypto-communist, left wing radical pig farmer" (*Cahill* 278). This characteristic of self-inflation leavened with self-deflation became both a target for satire and a defence against it as his career progressed. Having alienated all his closest initial supporters, he contemplates apology to Greg Power: "I've finally realized I'm not Joey the revolutionary, the people's leader, the little fellow from Gambo any more. It's Joey the little tinpot dictator" (*Cahill* 295). That *Rising Tide* also dramatizes a failed attempt at reconciliation with Power suggests that the basis of this essentially private moment has its roots in fact. Both plays suggest that Smallwood's inability to commit to action based on any seriously reconsidered vision of himself is at the root of his eventual failure.

Smallwood's capacity for organization is clearly demonstrated in both plays. The history of his efforts to unionize railway and pulp and paper workers long before the confederation debate (*Cahill* 268-9) sets the ground for his insistence that, in order for

the confederation campaign to succeed, he must “organize and control every last detail” of the campaign, “be a dictator, or . . . the one and only strategist, tactician, coordinator” (Cahill 283). As is so often the case with those iconoclasts who choose political involvement as the means to make their ideas heard, Smallwood’s strengths can and do become weaknesses. Though the unified approach of the pro-confederation campaign may well have been the main factor ensuring its success, Smallwood found himself unable to govern by any means other than those by which he had first organized his party.

One effect of Smallwood’s self-confidence was to inspire similar confidence in himself (and in themselves) on the part of his supporters. An even more important aspect of his self-confidence was its capacity for steamrolling any opposition. From his early acquaintance with Gregory Power (*Rising Tide* 249-50; Cahill 282) and Harold Horwood (Cahill 282) through to the end of his career, Smallwood often drew support simply because he believed he could and he did not mind fostering confidence based on surface impression, even when that impression might be unfounded. *Rising Tide* dramatizes Smallwood being challenged by Power on the subject of the terms of union with Canada:

**JOEY:** Mr. Power, I have the Terms of Union right here in my breast pocket.

**GREG:** You do not.

**JOEY:** Well, they don’t know that. (249)

Cahill, usually a little kinder to Smallwood, portrays a more brutal example of his steamroller confidence and manipulation of impressions. Entering the last round of campaigning before the final referendum, Smallwood begins to act on the principle that

“anything goes this time”:

Greg, the Responsibles are trying to dump Peter Cashin, so let’s help ‘em along. Spread the word he’s drinking again. I know, I know, but spread it anyway.

*(He reacts to the startled looks on the faces of the committee, and roars out to the front of the table.)*

Irving, we need money. Get a list of everyone you think who’s interested in becoming a senator or a judge. The charge is \$20,000 an appointment! Firm! (285)

Smallwood’s relentless insistence on having supporters immediately obey orders becomes a notorious characteristic, resulting in a common perception that his cabinet ministers were utterly incapable of acting on their own or of reacting against a Smallwood ‘suggestion.’ Rising Tide presents the following brief moment from the mid-1960s:

**JOEY:** Rossi, did you fart?

**ROSSI:** No, sir. *(Short pause)* Do you want me to? (276)

It is simultaneously crudely funny and reasonably accurate as regards perception of the individual integrity of Smallwood’s ministers.

During the National Convention, Smallwood’s insistence that he “never opened [his] mouth without speaking to the people, [his] masters who sent [him] here” (Rising Tide 251) wins him a great deal of popular support. “I speak to the people through you, “ Smallwood says to the Convention, “therefore you are the most honoured men in this

country today” (251). Repeated appeal to his status as grass-roots man of the people, use of the very outsider status that had once plagued him in his youth at school, creates a picture of Smallwood in the minds of the electorate as a new kind of politician. As with the way in which his confidence sways party workers and government members, so his ability to market this image of himself convincingly swayed the electorate for two decades.

The attractiveness of Smallwood’s alternative was evident, but always, too, were its drawbacks clear. The confederation debate divided the population of Newfoundland and, fifty years after the fact, the issue remains contentious. Perhaps the single most important factor which made Smallwood’s confederation alternative attractive to Newfoundlanders was also the only factor not directly attributable to Smallwood’s packaging of its appeal. As S.J.R. Noel indicates, American military use of its granted territory in Newfoundland during the Second World War had introduced to Newfoundlanders “a tantalizing taste of a standard of living they could not really afford” (263). The economic boom of the war years, coupled with the novel proximity of American cultural assumptions and norms, made many believe that alliance in some form or another with the rest of North America was the only “realistic economic alternative” (Noel 260). As there was never serious question of union with the United States, Canada became, almost by default, the only viable choice.

What Smallwood did effectively manipulate to gain support was the extant social safety net of the Canadian Federal government. *Joey* demonstrates Smallwood’s characteristic employment of the social safety net while on the campaign trail:

Sir, madam, I'm sick . . . and do you know what I'm sick of? I'm sick of poverty, I'm sick of disease. And do you know the one way out of it? Sir, how many children do you have? Five, five times seven is thirty-five times twelve is four-hundred-and-twenty. How much did you make fishing last year? Fifty dollars? Sir, your children could bring you in four-hundred-and-twenty dollars a year. And, of course, if there are any old people around, there is the old age pension, and if you can't find work, if there's no work to be had, there's the Unemployment Insurance. (254)

This scene illustrates more than just Smallwood's use of Canada's financial attractions. Though one of the plays under discussion here is a monologue, this is not that play. Smallwood's confidence is evident in his speaking style, as is his habit of controlling these campaign interviews. If the answer to any question is crucial to his purpose, Smallwood knows that answer before asking the question—evidenced above by his not waiting to hear how many children the man has. Again, via this rather simple device, Smallwood convinced many of his absolute sincere interest in their welfare. It was as though he was a friend; he already knew so much about them.

Cahill's monologue presents similar evidence:

How many children do you have there madam, eh? Yes, you—How many children? Eight, you say? You have eight children, all under sixteen? And do you have trouble keeping them in boots and shoes and clothes for school? Yes, indeed, don't we all! Then, let me tell you something madam. Three weeks after the twenty-second of July coming, if you vote

for Confederation, three weeks after that date, you'll receive a cheque in the mail from the government of Canada, for five dollars for each of these eight children. And five times eight is forty, so you'll receive a cheque for forty dollars. And you'll get that money every month of every year for every child until the child passes sixteen. (286)

Typical of Smallwood's effective style here is an interjection such as "don't we all" which positions him as one with the people he addresses. His repetitive, accumulative rhetorical habit is also noticeable. Finally, observe that in both excerpts Smallwood takes no chances: he does the math himself.

Smallwood faces the usual mixture of tensions. Somewhat uncommon, though, is the extent to which private life is excised from Smallwood's character as his public life becomes more successful. No matter how well Davin was doing, there was always an element of his ongoing relationship with Kate Hayes Simpson informing the play; similarly, behind every victorious public moment for King stood the oddities of his private life. Bolt's interest in Goldman is such as to almost erase her *public* life from the foreground of her play. Even in McClung's story, elements of her private life inform her earliest efforts. Perhaps because Smallwood, alone of all those here considered, was still alive during the writing of these plays and, for at least some of *Rising Tide's* performances, actually in the audience, the dramatists used less of their subject's private life than is common practice. Another possible explanation, however, one suggested by a number of treatments of Smallwood across several genres, is that there was very little private life to dramatize, that Smallwood became so much a public figure as to be almost

without an existence outside the public eye.

Cahill treats Smallwood's family background briefly, alluding to his father's alcoholism and his family's early poverty (262). His time at school is similarly treated (264-5). Smallwood's own reputation as a somewhat flaky business failure associated with previous and corrupt public administrations before his own rise to power hovers over the first half of each play. Cahill also shows how Smallwood remained to the end dogged by allegations of government corruption (291). *Rising Tide* adds to the private foundation of the public image his early interest in Lillian Zahn during his time in New York (242-3), including what he learns from Zahn about a sense of 'his' people, one's own place in a national heritage. Beyond these primarily early, formative details, there is next to no private Smallwood to be seen in either script. His marriage, for example, warrants but a paragraph from Cahill (269), and is not mentioned at all by *Rising Tide*.

As is conventional for the iconoclast within the system, Smallwood faces no extreme opposition. The standard devices of politics, reputable and less so, are, of course, brought to bear against him, both in the fight for confederation and during his time as Premier; but, as he was a master of all such oppositional techniques himself, there is never any sense that Smallwood faces concerted resistance that is somehow unfair to him or more powerful than he is. As mentioned, the resistance that Smallwood first faced was that confederation was not initially an option in the national consideration of viable alternatives for the political and economic life of post-war Newfoundland. The initial vote of the Convention, 29-16 *against* including confederation as an option on the upcoming ballot merely provided Smallwood with the ammunition he needed to

campaign against the old practice of vesting the welfare of Newfoundland's future in the hands of a small elite (Rising Tide 251-3; Cahill 281). As Cahill, in particular, makes clear (285ff), Smallwood's reaction to resistance was always to increase the pressure and the rewards involved—by any means necessary—until his side won.

Such ruthless insistence that “anything goes” (Cahill 285), that, if necessary, a “holy war” will be fought (Rising Tide 258), is one of the most significant challenges presented by both plays. To audiences familiar with the events portrayed, there are personal and familial considerations affecting their evaluation; to a ‘disinterested’ audience, Smallwood's strategies may call into question all ‘successful’ politics. As observed, particularly in consideration of the Donnellys and the First Nations peoples, audiences are presented with a picture of their current stability and common sense assumptions as having been founded upon highly questionable behaviour. Nellie McClung's observation concerning corruption in politics quoted above is not so shocking in its concept as in the extent to which her summary seems to apply to our political history. Certainly, it is one major contention of both these treatments of Smallwood that he became that which he initially opposed. Both plays bring us to question the extent to which ideals are sacrificed in the pursuit of the power needed to put those ideals into public practice.

Other aspects of the plays are equally controversial, presenting to audiences aspects of history that interrogate our sense of who we are in the present. Among the challenges that Rising Tide develops in *Joey* is a critique of the simplistic yearning for the ‘good old days when we had our independence’—a motif still sounded daily in

Newfoundland. Audiences are reminded that the much-vaunted independence of Newfoundland in the years before confederation may have been ideal rhetorically but brought little benefit to daily living. Having lost another imperfectly constructed boat, found maggots in the flour, and run out of well water, Eli Morgan—throughout *Joey* the epitome of the struggling fisherman—says: “There you go, no flour, no boat, no water, no fish. Thank God we’re independent, best kind of life” (254). Another character, unnamed and representative of thousands, reviews his options at his father’s graveside before the vote:

Dad, I wish you were here now. You had twelve youngsters and I can never remember goin’ hungry. I got five and it kills me to see them without enough food in their stomachs. I know it’s our birthright. There was your grandfather and your father and you. I don’t want to be the first to say that I’m not a Newfoundlander, but I can’t see my youngsters go hungry. (258)

The involvement of the Roman Catholic church in opposing confederation also comes in for criticism as “Father” visits the home of Eli and Mary Morgan, surprising them in the act of debating confederation. His impromptu sermon concludes: “I feel that the placing of the Confederation issue on the ballot at this time is nothing short of a political crime against the freedom loving people of this small island of ours” (257). His status as priest already makes this statement far more than one man’s expression of political opinion, but when the Priest continues by reminding Eli of his need to be “heading up the line” for weekend confession, he clearly abuses his position. Equally

challenging to audiences who understand the implication of the line is Eli's speech directly the Priest has left:

**ELI:** Mary, you could have shown a little respect talking about the baby bonus when he came in here.

**MARY:** And how, in the name of God, did I know the man was coming in at the door?

**ELI:** Couldn't you smell him comin'? I could. (257)

The stance of the playwrights vis-à-vis the integrity of the Roman Catholic church could not be clearer.

After confederation, challenges remain. *Joey's* second act begins with a parodic "confederation: before and after" scene (261-3) which humourously balances reminders of the significant changes in basic health care and education brought about by alliance with Canada with the intellectual redefinition of the Newfoundlander as Canadian:

**JEFF:** Well, b'ys, how does is feel to be Canadian?

**BRIAN:** Don't feel like nothin', b'y. (261)

Though the amenities of daily life have, in many respects, changed, the sense of self has not. Ironically, loss of Newfoundland identity was one of the more significant fearmongering planks of the anti-confederate platform during the referendum debate (253, 260). Post-confederation, Newfoundland identity becomes, if anything, stronger—sometimes as the butt of humour that would be called racist if it did not usually involve white people mocking other white people—and many facets of the political process change only to the extent that the same general practices are continued

under new names.

Cahill's *The Only Living Father* confirms this perception, going into more specific detail in certain aspects, most notably the purchasing of support through promises of post-confederation patronage (285-6) and Smallwood's own willingness to reveal the extent of his use of patronage as a means of consolidating his own power. Faced with dissent among supporters at his assumption that he will be Premier, Smallwood "threatened to blow the lid off the whole campaign strategy. Tell how they'd all sold out to Confederation, for a price" (288), showing once more how well he understood public image. He knew that the average voter would be more offended by the person who took the money than by the person who offered it.

The plays present several reasons for Smallwood's eventual defeat, not least of which is, as with Davin, that the electorate eventually tires of virtually every politician who prolongs a successful career. In *Joey*, while pursuing a dizzying variety of industrial projects designed to lessen Newfoundland's dependence on the fishery as its only industry, Smallwood surrounds himself with a cabinet and advisers who are a collection of yes-men, dunces and criminals. Rossi's obsequiousness has already been documented. Fictional representatives Les and Teddy—who cannot count without using their fingers—fill posts such as Finance and Education (266-8). Outside cabinet, Smallwood turns to Valdmanis (*Rising Tide* 268-71; Cahill 290) and Planta (Cahill 292), both of whom let him down completely. All projects fail. Even Churchill Falls, which Smallwood unveils with a flourish of 'nationalist' pride, backfires by succeeding. "This is a selfish project we are opening today at Churchill Falls," Smallwood intones. "It's entirely, completely,

selfish. This is our land. This is our river. This is our waterfall. It's Newfoundland first, Québec second, the rest of the world last" (Rising Tide 277). Despite the campaign-like rhetoric involved in the opening speech, this solitary representative of Smallwood's mega-projects which actually survives primarily benefits Québec, owing to financial arrangements made with Québec to develop the project in the first place. "Once the construction jobs petered out," Cahill's Smallwood says, "we were in the same old rut, garnering a miserable pittance from our greatest natural resource while someone else raked in the profits" (294-5).

Gradually, Smallwood alienates all his initial support, dispensing with the services of anyone who has the nerve to challenge him. His handling of the IWA strike in 1959 provokes the resignation of his last original partner, Greg Power, and is a crucial turning point. Smallwood, who in his early years had organized unions and embraced socialist politics, after weeks of official silence finally intervenes in a labour dispute between loggers, represented by the IWA, and the logging companies, AND and Bowater's. Ostensibly he does not want to break unions as such but to "free the loggers of Newfoundland from this foreign union tyranny." He proposes "to give the loggers a union of their own" (Rising Tide 272). The effect is much the same. As Richard Gwyn succinctly summarizes it, any intervention on Smallwood's part would support management and smash the strike (199).

Power confronts Smallwood the morning after Smallwood dissolved the IWA in a radio address to the province. First quoting limericks in the style of the early pro-Confederation campaign (though decidedly anti-Smallwood in tone) and then directly

challenging Smallwood's position on the loggers' strike, Power tenders his resignation in tones which were unthinkable ten years before, but inescapable thereafter:

**GREG:** It's not just the strike, Joe. The whole thing has gone sour. Years ago, I nearly died. I did not beat tuberculosis in order to help yes-men and half-witted cabinet ministers, and fly-by-night promoters, looking for handouts. Taste it Joe, it's sour. . . . Let's get it all back, Joe. Go on the radio tonight. Tell them you made a mistake. Give them one week to ratify a contract. If they can't reach an agreement then bring the government in to arbitrate.

**JOEY:** That strike had to be stopped. It's like a new religion, IWAism. They come out of their midnight camp meetings with their eyes shining for Landon Ladd, the way they shine for me, Greg.

**GREG:** Well you said it, Joe. You care more for yourself than you do for them, the ones who elected you, Joe, because you did care for them. And the truth is the more you glorify yourself, the faster they'll sprint to the Landon Ladds or anyone else who puts their interests foremost. (273)

Smallwood insists that he remains in control, but he has become, beyond doubt, captain of a sinking ship. Smallwood would continue to win elections for more than a decade, but he was never again thought of as "the same old Joey Smallwood" (272) that he had been for the loggers *before* the strikebreaking broadcast. Instead he became, as confederation itself had been for many, the least bad of several generally distasteful alternatives.

An important component of continued support for Smallwood is that, no matter what went wrong with his post-confederation administration, he had, in general, improved conditions in Newfoundland. Whether those conditions would have improved without him, without confederation, is unknowable. A significant portion of his continued success was attributable directly to the fact that he had been in office and been seen to be the direct cause of much good. When Murray Lander, representing the bureaucracy of Ottawa, challenges representative fisherman Eli Morgan on the subject of resettlement, economic depression, and the sad history of Newfoundland politics, the fisherman's bitter response is also a corrective one: "You're too young to remember the hard times, but I'm not. . . . Newfoundland wasn't the only place in trouble them times. The entire world was in trouble. Don't tell me it was only us who failed" (274). The natural and political forces that once caused Newfoundland to be settled as it was underwent significant change once the nature of the fishery that had been the island's original foundation changed. Those changes were, in turn, provoked by changes in international trade and technology (cf. Noel).

Resettlement as a matter of official policy may well have been a mistake, but resettlement as the only viable economic response was inevitable. As *Rising Tide* develops it, the resettlement issue is simultaneously Smallwood's final betrayal of those who elected him and the moment when he realizes his own fixedness in history. Initial reaction to resettlement as official policy on the parts of many Newfoundlanders was that it must be something Canada was demanding, without Smallwood's knowledge:

**ELI:** Joey don't know about this! I guarantee you that. He would never

walk into this house, and tell me to me face, “Eli, you leave your home now, and move to one of me growth centres, ‘cause if you don’t, b’y, I’ll cut you off. There’ll be no schools, no doctors, no mail, no nothing.” He wouldn’t do it. This Confederation now is really something, isn’t it? More money than we ever dreamed of and too poor to stay where we are. (275)

Immediately following Eli’s lament comes Smallwood’s moment of comprehension:

**JOEY:** Why would anyone want to go on living there? Why ought they live there? They must disappear. Will they blame me? Will they think that I have failed them? Some will stay. Some will fight to stay, for them it will be a great victory, yet it may be an empty victory. If all the laws of God and nature point to the disappearance of something and something comes along and delays that, isn’t that an empty victory? (275)

Like King before him, Smallwood must confront “how silly we are not to know when the time has come to go” (Cahill 300). His comprehension of the plight of the isolated outharbour dweller, and the inevitability of the collapse of that way of life, does not extend to comprehension of his own precarious hold on political power. Like the fishermen he forced to move, Smallwood too was, in his later stages, fighting and winning empty victories, and eventually forced to move out of public life.

The turning tide is captured in the appearance of a new generation. Just as exposure to American lifestyles had informed the dreams of a number of Newfoundlanders in the 1940s, influencing the vote for confederation, so exposure to the

rest of Canada informed their children in the 1960s about just how large a gap could exist between standards of living inside one country. Eli's son, Pat, discusses his parents' resettlement with his father's friend, Captain Joe:

**CAPTAIN JOE:** I'm glad they took Joey's money for resettling!

**PAT:** I wish some of that Joey's money would go into makin' the fishery work.

**CAPTAIN JOE:** Thought you were goin' to make it work by yerself. So don't go sayin' nothin' bad about Joey.

**PAT:** I'm not. I wish they'd start thinkin' about us, the ones makin' a livin' in Newfoundland. Spendin' all that money on hospitals, school and universities. We're supposed to have that. We're a part of Canada. What about puttin' money into the people—just don't make sense—there's gotta be another way.

**CAPTAIN JOE:** Well if there is another way, Joey'll find it. He found Confederation for us when times were bad.

**PAT:** Times are bad now and all Joey can do is talk about the things we got. Look around. Mom and Dad leavin'. There's nothin' to show in Round Harbour for Confederation, for anythin'.

**CAPTAIN JOE:** Times are bad now? Twenty years ago your mother and father would have had to starve to death here. Now they got the choice to go, and get paid for it. No one begged you to come back and complain.

**PAT:** Yes, Captain Joe, I've been to Canada. I've seen what they got. If

we're a part of Canada we should at least have the same things they got.

The same chances. The chance to work in your own home. (279)

The problem is that they are both right. Captain Joe's defence of Smallwood typifies the responses of many of his generation, just as Pat Morgan's criticisms represent the concerns of the first generation to grow up Canadian. It was worse; it could be better.

The stance of the plays vis-à-vis their protagonist is perhaps best called one of corrective forgiveness, or skeptical endorsement. Though neither avoids the very real problems Smallwood poses to posterity (Cahill *does* downplay such things as resettlement and the IWA strike), neither is utterly condemnatory. The tone is reminiscent of the way in which one swaps stories among friends, all faults and foibles shown, no punches pulled, secure in the stability of the relationship. Crucial to the understanding of both plays is the overt sentiment voiced by Smallwood in *Joey*: "I can't imagine [what's in store for me tonight] could be too mean. . . . It's only a play" (237, 241).

Cahill's monologue employs distancing irony, develops the history of the man as inextricable from the history of his place, and allows Smallwood to defend himself. *The Only Living Father* ends with Smallwood's self-evaluation: "I think I was a successful politician, at least. . . . Unfortunately, like most politicians, I'll probably be remembered for my mistakes. Not for the bridges I built, the hospitals I opened, or the hope I put in a hundred thousand hearts" (300-1). The approach throughout is best characterized as letting the man speak for himself, as he always did, and letting the audience judge for themselves, without editorializing on the part of the playwright.

Rising Tide opens with a similarly self-aware irony, but moves toward a double conclusion: Smallwood as summarized from outside, and then in his own voice. Captain Joe, a voice of reason throughout the play, speaks the first summary: "I'll tell you what we had," he says, referring to pre-Confederation days, "we had our name. I'm a Newfoundlander, so I got the right to die before my time. Pride—foolish, foolish pride. And Joey Smallwood saved us from that and that's somethin' you'll never have to know" (280). Soon after, 'Joey' rises from the audience and interrupts the conclusion of the play just as he directed its opening: "I'm not dead yet. I'm not dead yet. I did this and I did that. I made this blunder and I made that blunder. (*To the audience*) But I don't mind. Because I will be remembered. Others will be remembered by historians but I'll be remembered by the masses, by the ragged-arsed artillery" (283). Joey demands a verse of the "Ode to Newfoundland" to conclude the performance. David Fox, now playing 'himself' responds: "Come on. (*Laughing.*) It's a pretty corny ending for a play" (283). Joey does what he always did: takes it to the people for a vote. And, show after show, audiences responded as they could safely be scripted to respond, even, perhaps especially, when Smallwood himself was in that audience. The "Ode to Newfoundland," written by ruling-class Britons, laden with imagery evoking the struggles and challenges, as well as the blessings, of life on the island, closes the show with repetition of its entirely appropriate final line: "God guard thee, Newfoundland" (284). The example of Joey Smallwood leaves the audience singing, but perhaps also wondering who will guard the guards.

As Smallwood's movement from socialist to liberal suggests, success for the

iconoclast who chooses to attempt change from within the structures of normative authority is often dependent on the degree to which one is prepared to compromise one's original goals. Richard Gwyn, writing specifically of Smallwood, says that "once in power, every one-time revolutionary is bound, sooner or later, to be challenged by an individual or movement as radical as he once was and is no more"(199). In many respects, Smallwood is the 'typical' figure. 'Joey,' from his cognomen on down, is the epitome of the iconoclast attempting redefinition from within. The degree to which he succeeded makes the extent of his failure closer to tragedy than was Davin's, though Davin undeniably had the more bitter end. Even more significantly, for the purposes of this study, Smallwood's case (as will that of Bethune in the final chapter) stands as a model for what historical drama offers its audiences: a means of exploring the extent to which our own daily judgments of success and failure, right and wrong, strength and weakness, and so many other polarized values, are constructed by the exigencies of the time in which we live, by our own inescapable situatedness in history.

Consideration of iconoclasm explored within the common structures of authority yields no single incontrovertible theme. Davin and Goldman failed; King and McClung succeeded; Smallwood did both, sometimes simultaneously, in a way that only retrospect, informed by subsequent developments, can clearly demonstrate. Undeniably, those rebellious figures who chose to rebel within the system tended to achieve more than those whose actions were frequently opposed to the wills of unyielding governments. Also, as is seen in the case of Goldman, the further one deviates from the 'norm' the less one is likely to succeed. At the same time, there is sufficient success for

the figures who pursue action through political means to prevent these plays from seeming to carry a wholly conformist message. The historical subjects of the plays considered in this chapter differ widely from each other in their goals, situations, and degrees of success. One thing which does unite these figures is an attitude which all of them seem to share. Its clearest statement is attributed to McClung and, of all of them, only she seems to have practiced the approach to the wholly successful achievement of desired goals. Regardless of the relative degree of success each achieved, the approach to public life was the same: "Never retract, never explain. Get the thing done and let them howl" (Grant E74).

## Chapter Five

### The Iconoclast as Icon

“Canada has always been a cool climate for heroes,” Northrop Frye observed in the mid-1970s, in a summary of developments in English-Canadian literature over the years 1960-75 (3: 329) . The heroes to whom he refers (semi-anonymously) are Prime Ministers such as Trudeau, Pearson, and Diefenbaker. If Canada is cool to the heroics of its Prime Ministers, it must seem positively frigid to those who are outside conventional centres of power. Citing George Woodcock’s vision of the “Canadian poet as a counter-culture hero,” Frye develops a contrasting vision, a distinctly Canadian counter-culture which defines the poet as “anti-hero.” Frye continues: “It may be the end of the century before any real coherence will emerge from our cultural pattern” (3: 329). Now at the end of the century, we can see that a more coherent cultural pattern presents itself. Canadian literature has steadily grown to value what Linda Hutcheon, writing of fiction, calls the “ex-centric” (3) and “different” (ix), and what Neil Carson, writing of historical drama, calls “the defeated, the impractical visionary, the defenders of lost causes, the failures” (224).

Canada tends to embrace that which best conserves a sense of social continuity and stability. Frye describes Canada as embracing the “[Edmund] Burke sense of society as a continuum.” This embrace is “consistent with the pragmatic and conservative outlook of Canadians” (2: 341). Such an outlook is typified by “gentleness and reasonableness,” all its passions being “held in check by something meditative” (2: 358).

Unlike the more individualistic “life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness” inscribed directly as “self-evident” truth in the constitution of the United States, nothing, argues Frye, “has ever been self-evident in Canada” (3: 323).

One major project of much contemporary English-Canadian historical drama is to make some Canadian cultural truths, if not self-evident, then at least more easily comprehensible in their historical context. The contemporary English-Canadian history play is, then, often practicing a form of discourse analysis. The principal discourse under analysis is that of sanity and its relation to social order. Repeatedly, the iconoclastic protagonists of contemporary English-Canadian drama are labelled with some variant of the word “crazy” for espousing their alternative perspectives. Raman Selden and Peter Widdowson, in summarizing Michel Foucault’s work on discourses of sanity and social order, suggest that “the rules and procedures which determine what is considered normal or rational successfully silence what they exclude” (159). Further, “individuals working within particular discursive practices cannot think or speak without obeying the unspoken ‘archive’ of rules and constraints; otherwise they risk being condemned to madness or silence” (159). The subject of the English-Canadian historical play is, with increasing frequency, precisely those individuals who did not obey “the unspoken ‘archive,’” who were “condemned to madness [and/]or silence” by their communities, and who were deemed failures in their own eras.

Selden and Widdowson also suggest that “what is possible to say will change from one era to another”; in Canadian historical drama, it is not so much “what is possible to say” which has changed, but rather about whom it is possible to say such

things. The conventions employed to render sympathetic the individual visionary against or within the impercipient mass differ little in contemporary Canadian historical drama from those conventions used by Shakespeare, for example, to render Henry V. What differs, as Neil Carson has suggested, is that the sympathetic “hero” of much contemporary Canadian drama is the loser, or failure, the insane dreamer in his or her historical context, while the unsympathetic mass is embodied by representatives of such social stabilizers as the Church, the military, and the government (224).

Examining developments in the drama, Carson argues that what distinguishes many contemporary Canadian history plays from their predecessors is “a mood of questioning and inconclusiveness” (213). It is a mood distrustful of any discourse claiming definitive answers to any of Canada's most troubling questions. It is Carson's view that these plays provide evidence of “a continuing search on the part of our playwrights for a distinctively Canadian myth” (213). I argue that any such singular myth is antithetical to the pluralizing impulse of contemporary cultural development. What Canadian historical drama suggests to its current audience is that there should be no single distinctively Canadian myth, and that most of the visionaries and rebels chronicled (and, I believe, celebrated) in these plays meet defeat precisely because they rejected notions of a collective Canadian myth by presenting themselves as individuals outside community norms.

Frye, discussing his theory of the garrison mentality, writes that “it can only tolerate the conservative idealism of its ruling class, which for Canada means the moral and propertied middle class” (2: 350). “The real terror,” writes Frye,

comes when the individual feels himself becoming an individual, pulling away from the group, losing the sense of driving power that the group gives him, aware of a conflict within himself far subtler than the struggle of morality against evil. It is much easier to multiply garrisons, and when that happens, something anti-cultural comes into Canadian life, a dominating herd-mind in which nothing original can grow. (2: 343)

The subjects of recent Canadian drama have been, almost exclusively, individuals who have resisted herd-mind tendencies at their various social levels, the sort of individual who, according to playwright Ken Mitchell, one of the foremost practitioners of the genre, defies “the Canadian blandness which normally prevails” (“Between the Lines” 271).

Several plays demonstrate the arrival of this iconoclast/rebel as the new icon of English-Canadian historical drama. Beginning with the almost ‘anonymous’ subject, we will once again see demonstrated the key components of what I argue is paradigmatic for the contemporary English-Canadian historical play. Mitchell’s treatment of the historical Tom Sukanen in the fictionalized figure of Jaanus Karkulainen in *The Shipbuilder* (1984, 1990), furnishes the starting point. From Sukanen/Karkulainen, we will examine three international cases as considered by English-Canadian dramatists: American folk legend Lizzie Borden (as developed in Sharon Pollock’s *Blood Relations* [1981]), Chinese dissident and playwright Wu Han (as presented in Ken Mitchell’s *The Great Cultural Revolution* [1980]), and American poet and propagandist Ezra Pound (as examined by Timothy Findley in *The Trials of Ezra Pound* [1994]). Finally, we will unite national and

international in consideration of the ‘iconoclast’s iconoclast,’ Norman Bethune, as he appears in Rod Langley’s full-cast script *Bethune* and in Mitchell’s monologue *Gone the Burning Sun*. Opposition to the protagonists in all these plays is almost invariably voiced in discourses of insanity and sacrilege, ranging from visceral, unconsidered reactions on the part of neighbours to actual legal efforts to have individuals declared insane.

Mitchell’s Jaanus Karkulainen is a Finnish boatwright who assembles an ocean-going ship—in the middle of Saskatchewan. Karkulainen, like his historical model Tom Sukanen, firmly believes to the last that he can get the ship to open water and sail it to Finland. The play is included in this study, despite its choice to fictionalize its protagonist, both because of its definite historical antecedents and because ‘Karkulainen’ is such a classic example of the type. Immigrant, loner, visionary, physically outside his community and mentally even more distanced, Karkulainen refuses to be assimilated. Such a refusal, in essence, is the soul’s first principle for all these diverse rebellious and iconoclastic figures of English Canada’s dramatic history.

Karkulainen, immediately Anglicized as Johnny Crook by his community, lives underground and builds a periscope to survey his territory. Brother Jukka (Yuki) and his wife Betsy come to visit, Betsy already afraid of the huge man, considering him “like the very devil” (26). When Karkulainen refuses to attend Sunday service—asking “Is God found only in your puny church?” (29)—his rejection of what his neighbours understand as religion (and, in Foucault’s terms, sanity) is clearly stated. Almost immediately, brother Jukka cautions him that, in Canada, “more social responsibility” is expected (29).

Before the end of the scene, Karkulainen has been warned about his public image and has been told he is talking “like a fool” (32). All the basic components of exclusion from the norms of the community are in place, and, for his part, Karkulainen is perfectly willing to remain unassimilated (27).

Karkulainen has his share of charisma, though he differs from many of those under study here in that he has no public agenda. He is not agitating for anything except the individual’s right to pursue his own vision, regardless of community disapprobation. Karkulainen is not even quite kin to the Donnellys in that, although like them he merely wants to be left alone to live life on his own terms, Karkulainen never engages in the kinds of violent self-defence that earn the Donnellys, fairly or otherwise, their notoriety. Karkulainen is the strong, silent type—a living stereotype in many respects—who has amazing mechanical aptitude and engineering skills, tremendous confidence, and, above all, a clear sense of self. In this country, known for its debates concerning identity, perhaps self-knowledge and certainty concerning identity is a social sin. In *The Shipbuilder*, at any rate, Karkulainen’s self-concept is sufficient to cast him in opposition to his community.

Mitchell develops Karkulainen as an outsider, someone toward whom the Church orders sympathetic understanding, but also someone who would “have vexed the Lord himself” (33). He is called a “devil” (33), “weird” (39), “crackpot” (42), and “crazy” (43). Meanwhile, his closest, perhaps only, friend in the community, Larry Bender, begins to embrace Karkulainen’s anti-social approach. At first, Bender seems to support Karkulainen because he benefits from the Finn’s mechanical knowledge. Later, it

becomes apparent that Karkulainen's charisma has at least partly won Bender's emotional faith. Told that Jaanus is crazy to be walking back to the U.S. in search of his child, who is to be sent to a foster home, Bender responds that the walk is "no crazier'n wearin' out his knees in church" (43), once more voicing an overt challenge to dominant religious norms. Bender's comprehension of Karkulainen's journey as an act of faith is a recognition that the majority of the community cannot reach.

Still refusing to acknowledge the name Johnny Crook, Karkulainen is three times arrested for trying to reclaim his orphaned child, first from foster homes, then from a reformatory. Karkulainen is jailed and subsequently deported. Returning to Saskatchewan, he begins to build his iron steamship, telling Bender that the ocean is a mystery "deeper than God" (50). His diction is, again, in overt opposition to community norms.

Soon, Jaanus is called that "crazy hermit" (55). He refuses to drink with the rest of the town's men—not "normal" behaviour (57). Repeatedly, alcohol consumption is a sign of normalcy in the English-Canadian history play, while sobriety or teetotalism signals aberration.<sup>1</sup> Hence the tavern speculation about Karkulainen's building project arises from a setting as sane as the Church. That speculation includes the idea that Karkulainen is building "a Bolshevik Orthodox Church" (57). Politics, another form of institutionalized religion, of a certain ilk, is thus added to the mix of elements which combines relentlessly to label Karkulainen "other."

As the play progresses, Jaanus is "mad," "crazy," "hated," "mocked"—and utterly unapologetic. Described as "out of his mind" for thinking he is building "Noah's Ark,"

Karkulainen, in the eyes of his community, is irrevocably insane and irreligious—he is “mocking God,” says sister-in-law Betsy (65, 66). In a line characteristic of the genre, Bender quietly reminds those musing irreverently about Noah that the situation *has* “happened before” (68). The reminder that an iconoclast’s behaviour often has biblical or political precedent has been a frequent feature of the English-Canadian historical play since Riel’s case was compared both to that of Hamlet and Jesus Christ in Coulter’s *Riel*.

The townspeople, with increasing frequency, call Karkulainen mad, themselves using increasingly vulgar language both about and to the man. Like the riotous, drunken soldiers restoring order to Fort Garry at the end of Act One of *Riel*, the townspeople of *The Shipbuilder* demonstrate increasing disorderliness in their efforts to promote order. The use of vulgar or obscene language by representatives of order is another common device of the contemporary English-Canadian historical play, one which might, with due sense of irony, be labelled the “stop the goddamn swearing” discourse. Put less irreverently, the voices which represent religion and social stability in these plays tend to become increasingly strident—uncontrolled, impolite, offensive, and cruel—frequently employing the very strategies and rhetorics which their words ostensibly criticize or condemn.

Another common component of these plays is a speech by an apologist/friend of the protagonist which reminds the opposing forces (and, of course, the audience) that similar acts of ostensible insanity in the past are now revered as acts of visionaries. Bender compares Karkulainen to Columbus setting sail for the Indies, and to Sir John A. Macdonald building a railway across the Rockies (79-80). The plea (again, a rhetorical

convention of the genre) is ignored, and, by the end of the play, essentially innocuous actions performed by a man pushed to his limits are read as dangerous, violent, mad (87-9). Inevitably, or so it seems when it happens, Karkulainen is institutionalized against his will, locked away as a danger to the community.

The text is generally neutral toward Karkulainen himself. There is admiration for the scope of his vision, mingled with regret for its inevitable failure. The play neither mocks nor praises Karkulainen; it is, instead, a celebration of the fact that such stories exist. *The Shipbuilder*, building quiet sympathy for its protagonist as antagonistic antipathy grows in his community, situates itself squarely within the increasingly traditional criticism of unquestioned tradition that is now the dominant of the English-Canadian history play.

From a ship in the middle of Saskatchewan, we turn to an axe in Massachusetts. Sharon Pollock's *Blood Relations* examines the story of Lizzie Borden from an unusual perspective, doubly stressing thereby Borden's outsider status vis-à-vis her community. As Diane Bessai puts it, "history knows that Lizzie was acquitted, but the questions of the case have been a continual source of fascination to writers since" (9). Pollock's play is both a flashback and a play-within-a-play, and the double distancing effect—both in time and person as Lizzie herself directs her "actress friend" in the reconstruction of her story—reposits the questions of Lizzie's case to the audience, provoking reconsideration of the role of audience in all cases of judgment, whether legal or social.

Like Mitchell's Karkulainen, Pollock's Lizzie Borden is circumscribed to a large extent by what Bessai calls "the politics of the family" (8). Borden is "an oppressed

Victorian spinster,” but her portrait is complicated “in the complexities of personality and the ambiguities of fact.” Lizzie, Bessai argues, “is the product and victim of the materialistic bourgeois social conventionality of her day that gives no breathing space either to individuality or eccentricity;” and Pollock’s play shows not so much whether or not she did commit the murders as “why she might well have done so” (9). That recognition naturally challenges audiences to recognize their sympathy for Lizzie Borden in her circumstances, and at least to imagine the possibility that, confronted with similar pressures, we might follow a similar course. *Blood Relations* dramatizes a common theme—asking its audience not for judgment but for careful examination of how anyone can possibly find grounds upon or from which to pass judgment on any other person.

The action of *Blood Relations* occurs in 1902, ten years after the incidents for which Borden stood trial and was acquitted (13). Everything on stage will be a recapitulation through the imaginations of Miss Lizzie, “who will play BRIDGET, the Irish maid” and The Actress, “who will play LIZZIE BORDEN” (13). From the start, a double distancing is clear: we are removed in time from the events dramatized and we are seeing them not only represented through memory but performed in character. The action opens with The Actress rehearsing lines, a fact not immediately clear until she flubs one and comes rudely out of character in acknowledging the error. This device, too, reminds the audience immediately of levels of representation, of performers both performing the roles of other performers, and performing a play based on historical figures and events. The impossibility of getting to the unmediated truth of the past is dramatically presented here, as even the one person who was ‘there’ is now ten years

removed from there and with a vested interest in controlling how her current status is perceived.

In the first scene, The Actress reports hearing children outside her theatre chanting the familiar rhyme: “Lizzie Borden took an ax / Gave her mother forty whacks, / When the job was nicely done / She gave her father forty-one” (16). She did not stop the children, nor point out that Lizzie had been acquitted, but merely “shut the window” (17). It is a significant gesture. Miss Lizzie’s comment—“a noble gesture on my behalf” (17)—indicates her own awareness that her position remains one of notoriety, despite formal acquittal. As their dialogue continues, The Actress mentions news reports of the trial, and, as they dance, leads Miss Lizzie toward the overwhelming question which still haunts Lizzie Borden: “Lizzie . . . did you?” (18).

Mocking Miss Lizzie’s sister, Emma, and her own burning curiosity to know “the truth,” The Actress tries to explain to Miss Lizzie why it matters: “I think . . . that you’re aware there is a certain fascination in the ambiguity. . . . You always paint the background but leave the rest to my imagination. Did Lizzie Borden take an axe? . . . If you didn’t I should be disappointed . . . and if you did I should be horrified” (20). The Actress’s dilemma is the audience’s dilemma: what is our fascination for cases such as Lizzie Borden’s? What does our fascination for such cases tell us about ourselves? It is for that reason that Pollock’s choice to have Miss Lizzie *not* portray herself in the retelling of the story is so important. The play is not about Lizzie Borden, but about what audiences make of her.

Reviewing the details of her case is “a game,” so Miss Lizzie says, a challenge to

have her repeat her own story one more time in the hopes that some hitherto unrevealed detail will slip out, which The Actress will “dine out on” (20). There is no altruism in this compulsion to know the truth; it is a quest for potential profit. Agreed on exactly what The Actress’s motives are, they begin the “game” of “paint[ing] the background” again, The Actress performing Miss Lizzie’s role while Miss Lizzie plays her servant. The audience now sees the Lizzie Borden story represented and is invited to evaluate its facts. Pollock also tricks the audience, whether they like it or not, into evaluating its own evaluation: emotions, suspicions, leaping to conclusions—all the things we are, as audiences, prone to doing in receiving the facts of anyone’s story. Because the play is a performance of the case, the audience becomes jury; because Miss Lizzie is not acting her own role, the jury in this case is on trial equally with the defendant.

Pollock’s stage directions clearly indicate that Lizzie enjoys guiding The Actress into performing her. The Actress enters “*a trifle tentative in the role of Lizzie*” (23) and slowly settles into her role. Lizzie (now performing the servant girl, Bridget) “*laughs*” and “*enjoys the Actress Lizzie’s comments as she guides her into her role*” (24). When ‘Lizzie’ gets small details wrong, ‘Bridget’ corrects her with “*a subtle shake of the head*” (24), and, as ‘Lizzie’ warms to the role and insults ‘her’ mother, ‘Bridget’ is “*loving it*” and encouraging more. At first, all indications point to the performance being clearly under Miss Lizzie’s direction.

However, as the play unfolds there is less direction from Miss Lizzie. Occasional scene transitions are managed while Miss Lizzie, in her own persona, recollects her past (28-9, 31, 36, 43-4, 49, 59). But the increasingly long scenes between these breaks make

it more difficult for audiences to remember that the Lizzie we are seeing in the story is not Miss Lizzie. Equally, we observe the role of gossip and hearsay, the extent to which any community's life is informed by the stories it spreads within and about itself.

Romances, scandals, intrigues, business propositions—all are the stuff of daily exchange, and all are embroidered with varieties of truth, making any actual discernment of the facts in any case nigh impossible.

Having laid the foundation of community comprehension through gossip, the play begins to quote from the court record, juxtapositioning varying views of the historical data with the dramatic reality that an agreed interpretation of the facts has already been entered as public record. The key line from the speech for The Defence once again takes the events of the play out of history and challenges audiences directly: "If this gentlewoman is capable of such an act—I say to you—look to your daughters—if this gentlewoman is capable of such an act, which of us can lie abed at night, hear a step upon the stairs, a rustle in the hall, a creak outside the door. . . . Which of you can plump you pillow, nudge your wife, close your eyes, and sleep?" (36). No one can. We are part of 'Lizzie's' world, and she is partly what we make her. Though The Defence is employing conventional rhetoric—woman as 'the weaker sex'—and attempting to sway the jury toward thinking that such an act is impossible, contemporary audiences must see the reverse. Such a thing is at least possible from any source.

'Lizzie' points directly to her perception of her own problem in her conversation with her father: "I'm supposed to be a mirror. I'm supposed to reflect what you want to see, but everyone wants something different. If no one looks in the mirror, I'm not even

there. I don't exist!" (39). Perception is all-important. While Lizzie's statement has an element of passionate exaggeration, symbolically it is true; what we see as we look at Lizzie Borden is a mirror of what we are; and we *want* to see something, to understand something of ourselves from every scenario of this sort, every tabloid-selling upheaval that weekly 'shocks' us. Note also that this anguished line is delivered by 'Lizzie'—i.e. by The Actress, the person playing the role and not the person who lived the role. The Actress, too, is looking into the mirror of Lizzie in search of something she can use to understand herself.

'Bridget' advises 'Lizzie' that the best way to revenge herself on her parents is to "smile and get round them" (43), to take subtle revenges and enjoy secret laughter while letting them live secure in the knowledge of their own superiority. The moment is marked by what seems to be a power struggle as 'Lizzie' wavers sufficiently to draw 'Bridget' out of character to contradict her. Pollock leads audiences towards recognizing the role played by hindsight in the evaluation of any mystery. We can all see it coming after whatever *it* is has long been and gone. As the act ends, a combination of arranged romance, financial exclusion, and threatened violence have painted 'Lizzie' into a stifling corner. It is at this point that The Actress becomes 'psychiatrist.' Again, the audience is voyeur; we are always watching.

In her own character, Miss Lizzie confronts her childhood moment of learning that "what you do on a farm with things that are different [is] kill them" (49). The growing perception that someone must be destroyed by the accumulating private tension aggravates Lizzie's sense of her own outsider status. With her parents' plan to transfer

ownership of the farm well underway, her birds killed by her father in a fit of rage, and her sister angry with her, 'Lizzie' feels utterly alienated. Her actions become strained and tense. As Pollock puts it in stage directions, "*Lizzie is trying to fulfill other people's expectations of 'normal'*" (55). The audience is part of that normalizing presence; we are making her what we want her to be.

Before 'Lizzie' reaches her crisis point, she must argue her own position to a logical conclusion. This she does by debating with Dr Patrick the sanctity of life. She relentlessly probes with questions concerning ethics in impossible situations, moral judgments concerning priority for treatment, and similar "games" (61). The doctor's reluctance to make a definitive statement goads 'Lizzie' into her own clear vision: self-preservation dominates all (62). She decides that "not all life is precious" (63) and makes plans to act on her decision.

Following her step-mother upstairs, Lizzie makes conversation: "If I were to kill someone, I would come up behind them very slowly and quietly. . . . They would be too frightened to turn around even if they heard me. They would be so afraid they'd see what they feared" (64). The script is very clear: there is no sound to indicate that the killing happens. It is a mental comprehension, not a physical one. Similarly, though we see 'Lizzie' raise the hatchet to strike her father, just "*as the hatchet is about to start its descent, there is a blackout. Children's voices are heard singing*" the familiar rhyme (67). Pollock takes the audience to the point of each killing, but insists by betraying no sight, no sound, no evidence of violence, that if the killing happens, it is performed in the minds of the audience. We must complete the message, interpret the signifying system.

The play concludes with a return to the present. The Actress, having played ‘Lizzie’ to the point of the second murder, stands above the now empty chair with “*the sound of slow measured heavy breathing which is growing into a wordless sound of hysteria*” escaping her (68). The stress remains, as it has throughout, not on what Miss Lizzie has done but on what audiences across time make of her. It is The Actress who is at the peak of hysteria. The noise they have made in their re-enactment has awakened Miss Lizzie’s sister Emma, forcing a final confrontation (within the bounds of this play) over the same ground.

Emma chastises Miss Lizzie for doing things which “*inspire talk*” (68). Her relationship with that “actress who’s come up from Boston” (68) is adding to Miss Lizzie’s already colourful reputation. “People need so little in the way of inspiration,” Miss Lizzie responds; “And Miss Cornelia’s classes didn’t cover ‘Etiquette for Acquitted Persons’” (69). The absurdity of the position is clear. Miss Lizzie, though acquitted, cannot live a normal life in her community. No matter what she does, she will be looked at askance. Emma could leave Miss Lizzie behind, if only she knew with certainty. Her inevitable “Lizzie, did you?” sets the stage for the final confrontation of the audience’s role in judgment.

For the first time allowing Emma to see the hatchet with which they have been performing their reconstruction, Miss Lizzie asks: “Did you never stop and think that if I did, then you were guilty too?” (69). As Emma wavers under the onslaught of Lizzie’s accusations—“I was like a puppet, your puppet” (70)—The Actress intervenes and restores calm:

THE ACTRESS: *Lizzie. She takes the hatchet from Miss Lizzie. Lizzie, you did.*

MISS LIZZIE: *I didn't. The Actress looks to the hatchet—then to the audience. You did. (70)*

The Actress's glance trained on the audience during the last line makes the intention unmistakable. Audiences attend various stories of Lizzie Borden to see how she might have been guilty after all. We don't go to see her acquittal; we go to see her kill. What we learn about our reaction to Lizzie Borden's on-stage duality in Pollock's play is more important than what we learn about Borden herself. Though we are not all part of her family, we are all part of some family, and family politics plays some role in the way we understand and react to the world.

Like Karkulainen, Lizzie Borden has no real public agenda. Her wish is to be left to live life on her own terms, a wish that, like Karkulainen's, cannot be granted, whether she is truly innocent or guilty. Borden's private life has become irrevocably part of the public record, and she will live (as she continues to, on stage and in film) under the scrutiny of audiences who want to know how she did it. Though her sense of self, her independence, her willingness to be unconventional (as her friendship with The Actress suggests), and her apparent clear-headedness might win audiences to see her favourably, Borden will never be brought back 'inside' the dominant mode of her society. Criticism cannot determine the extent to which dramatizations of Borden's story waver from "the known facts" because several of the most crucial facts remain unknown. To audiences and neighbours alike, Lizzie Borden remains an uncomfortable figure, one who

challenges us to examine carefully the steps by which we reach judgment of others.

Lizzie Borden and Jaanus Karkulainen are limited threats to their respective communities. They are objects of gossip and scandal, and they provoke much uncertainty in their neighbours, but neither is perceived as likely to go on a murderous rampage, begin killing on a whim. Lizzie's violence (if it ever actually happened) is clearly attributed to highly specific family circumstances, and Karkulainen is a physical threat only to himself. The danger each represents to the community is a threat to the community's idea of self, perhaps best phrased in a common cliché: this sort of thing cannot happen here. *The Shipbuilder* and *Blood Relations* dramatize the inadequacies of community response when such a thing does happen here. The plays challenge audiences to examine their own reactions to the protagonists and their unusual situations. From the community threat, we turn to two figures characterized as national threats, whose actions were deemed harmful to the best interests of their respective nations.

Ezra Pound, in Timothy Findley's *The Trials of Ezra Pound*<sup>2</sup> and Wu Han, in Ken Mitchell's *The Great Cultural Revolution*, seem, on the surface, to be diametrically opposed. Pound is all but a card-carrying member of a party antithetical to the freedom of art, while Wu is anomalous in his own ethos by *not* being a Party member (Mitchell 173). Pound is aggressively self-promoting, rambunctious, egotistical, and vain; Wu is self-effacing, quiet, apparently committed to the greater good, almost shy. Yet both believe that 'the system' as it stands is in need of a corrective, and both choose a public means of making such a corrective statement. Both also, in consequence, find themselves in dire trouble with authority—accused of treason to the state. Finally, both

men are united in their belief in the role and power of art.

Pound, an expatriate American already estranged from his native land, considered it, in the words he applied to his semi-autobiographical creation, Hugh Selwyn Mauberley, “a half savage country, out of date” (219 l.6). Unlike his many peers, however, who generally restricted their criticism of the U.S.A. to their literary works (cp. Henry Miller’s *The Air-Conditioned Nightmare*), Pound, ostensibly for the money but, on the evidence, also because he believed in much of what he was saying, engaged in propaganda broadcasts from Italy during the Second World War. Following the war, Pound was imprisoned in Italy by the American forces, and returned to the U.S.A. to face hearings “to establish whether or not [he] was mentally fit to stand trial for treason” (Findley 7). Findley attempts to explore Pound’s mindscape during this trial, combining excerpts from transcripts of his propaganda broadcasts with fragments from the trial and inventing an internal mental life for the man who, in the historical record, spoke only one sentence at the hearings (7).

Findley’s attempt to bring Pound’s mind on stage is securely within Ken Mitchell’s guidelines for invention in the historical play; *The Trials of Ezra Pound* are those which happen in his mind, his ““inner story”” as Mitchell calls it (2). The play presents a challenge to audiences and criticism alike in that great care must be taken to separate the majority of what Pound ‘says’ from the setting against which it is uttered. As Findley indicates from the beginning, and reiterates through the course of the script, most of what Pound ‘says’ occurs only in his mind. Findley employs the device of having a witness chair, usually empty and spotlighted, to signify, in entirely appropriate

reverse symbolism, the physical presence of Pound. The absent Pound wanders about the set, occasionally “broadcasting” in passages drawn directly from transcripts of his Italian propaganda broadcasts, commenting disparagingly on various figures presenting evidence at the hearings and, frequently, engaging in dialogue with his memory. Thus audiences are challenged throughout the play to keep two worlds separate, two worlds which co-exist on stage and can only be signalled by changes in lighting. The difficulty in keeping details and persons separate is deliberate.

Normative authority for Pound is embodied in doctors, the legal system, and representatives of government. Often, these are men with ‘literal’ minds—as is evidenced in Dr Muncie’s early dialogue with William Carlos Williams (13)—men for whom Pound would have little patience even if there were no other complications. That his sanity is to be evaluated by these men is supremely galling to Pound’s sizeable ego. “All you have to do” to make Ezra Pound deliver a single coherent statement, says prosecuting counsel Matlack, is “recall [his] attention to the subject under discussion” (39). The audience is aware that such simplistic reasoning would not be adequate with Pound in ordinary conversation, let alone in psychiatric evaluation or pre-trial competency hearings. Similarly ranged against him is the Press, some members of which, and not without cause, are particularly enraged by his anti-Semitism (55).

Pound’s charisma resembles that of many iconoclastic protagonists in the English-Canadian history play in that what is most attractive about him for some is equally annoying to others. He “*revels in eccentric voices*” (13) and is prone to making every statement a performance. His intelligence is undeniable as are his

accomplishments in poetry, both of his own and in translation as well as in the editorial assistance he provided for others (25). Still, as Williams insists early on, Pound is “not on trial because of his poetry” (17). His “hatred of bureaucrats” (25) will endear him to some, as will his ready wit (30), his utter delight in rule-breaking (36), and his enormous self-confidence (38). Yet each of these characteristics is also likely to annoy anyone whose role it is to maintain order or encourage the vast majority of people to live their lives without a too deep questioning of the rules by which they live.

Findley does not shirk from presenting Pound’s unattractive features. Though Findley wants his audience carefully to consider the contradicting values voiced through the course of the text, he does not gratuitously weight one side or the other. Thus Pound’s confidence is also seen as “grandiosity” (38), his “discursiveness” mere babbling (57). For contemporary audiences, quite apart from the question of treason and allegiance to fascism, Pound’s treatment of women is also bound to alienate. Just as his damn-the-dumb approach to intellectual worth will grate on less elitist sympathies (38), so his ruthless treatment of Dorothy (31-33), as well as his demand “I want a woman!” (51)—a demand which Dorothy meets by bringing in Sheri Martinelli (66)—and the whole manner of his balancing loyalty to Dorothy and to Olga Rudge (53) is almost certain to render him unsympathetic, at least to anyone who places any importance at all on marital fidelity. Finally, Findley quotes directly from Pound’s wartime broadcasts. These are repulsive. Their anti-Semitism is extreme, and their general tone is mockingly superior. Hindsight cannot help but affect audience response to his public statements.

Thus the alternative that Pound proposes, of Confucianism as key to world peace

(37, 74-5), is not only rendered difficult for audiences to examine on its own merits by the general, intense incoherence of the messenger, but also by the aggressive or obnoxious components of the messenger. In this, he is unusual within the terms of common practice. There is no real sense that the alternative proposed by the protagonist here has either a hope of succeeding or a great deal to attract others to its cause. Pound claims profound insight into the rightness of Confucianism, a comprehension he believes he could not have reached without being so closely involved with a system such as Mussolini's—under siege and sinking (75)—but he never manages to articulate clearly and precisely what his alternative understanding is. In his lengthiest speeches, as Findley dramatizes his mind, Pound struggles to express his understanding, but cannot escape the paradox that Confucianism, whether better or not, is opposed to the current dominant in the U.S.A., hence still, by that highly restrictive definition of the concept, treasonous.

It is important to consider the historical moment being dramatized. It is 1945-46, and the U.S.A. is beginning prosecution of war crimes. The U.S.A. has just successfully intervened, for the second time within thirty years, in a major international conflict—on both occasions proving to be the decisive factor in the eventual outcome of the hostilities. To be opposed to the values of the U.S.A. at this point in history was almost to confess oneself before the court of public opinion as being at the very least ignorant, if not actually insane. In the succeeding decade, the U.S.A. would grow so obsessed with internal security and fear of ideological enemies that it would hold regular hearings before the House Un-American Activities Committee, ruining the careers and/or lives of a variety of individuals because of their ostensibly dubious political alliances of earlier

years. In some respects, it is remarkable that Pound was afforded the luxury of the hearing here dramatized. As Findley is careful to point out, Pound's British counterpart, William Joyce (Lord Haw-Haw) has already been convicted and sentenced to hang (55-56). No matter what his alternative might be, Pound is, in a colloquial sense, "crazy" to expect anything other than the treatment he receives at this historical moment.

The appearance of an insanity defence should recall the situation of Riel, who likewise faced being branded as either lunatic or traitor. And Pound, like Riel, cannot be found "right." The only consensus which can be reached concerns whether he is wrong *with* self-awareness or wrong without that responsibility. As with Riel, the obvious intelligence and expressive capability of the individual demands that audiences recognize the presence of self-awareness. Is it possible that the whole of social normative order might be skewed while a single, annoyingly eccentric individual in opposition to it be, if not necessarily "right" on all counts, at least worthy of serious consideration? That is the question posed regularly throughout the genre, though nowhere so obviously as in these two bookend cases. The cost for contemporary audiences of considering the protagonists' alternatives, then, is even greater than it was for the representatives of authority in each protagonist's own time. We have lived for decades by the principles upheld by the punishment of each individual. What would it mean to our current sense of self to reconceive Pound or Riel as neither insane nor treasonous?

Pound's defence is condensed into a small fragment of the play. Nonetheless, Findley imagines a great deal more running through Pound's mind than Pound actually said in his own defense during the hearing—reported by Findley to be only "I never did

believe in Fascism" (7). Pound insists he "was not sending Axis propaganda," but his own: "Doesn't anyone remember? Before every broadcast, there was a statement read . . . : On the principle of free expression on the part of those qualified to have an opinion, Doctor Ezra Pound has been granted the freedom of the microphone twice a week." Pound's defence is that he was never speaking for anyone but himself in his broadcasts, and that he was not "against [his] country" but "against the conspiracy in [his] country to bring [his] country down." He insists that his anti-Roosevelt, anti-Jewish stance is pro-American.<sup>3</sup> "The alternative," Pound says, "is the annihilation of everything decent the United States of America ever stood for." He finishes with a claim that "Confucius is the only basis on which a world order can work" but he is unable to say how this "only working model" might "serve in the present situation" (73-74). The audience cannot be sure whether or not Pound is, strictly speaking, sane. We can be sure, however, that, rightly or wrongly, he conceives his broadcasts as loyal opposition to the extant government and order on behalf of the ideals of his country and not as treasonous opposition to those ideals.

Findley's play is filled with uncertainties and questions. From the start, when Pound remembers a moment shared with Williams which actually occurred a decade before they met, we are forced to question the reliability of Pound's memory (14). Later, when Pound calls Muncie a liar, the audience may recall the earlier incident with Williams and once more question the reliability of Pound's recall (33). Though Williams insists that Pound is not on trial for his poetry, the play continues to question the extent to which the artist can be separated from the art.<sup>4</sup> Audiences must also attempt to decide

whether racism is treason; Pound is clearly a racist, but is that treasonous? Pound makes much of his willing surrender to the arriving American forces (27); but does his surrender in any way affect his case? The defence claims that the accusation of treason is sufficient shock to cause memory loss; the prosecution suggests that serious accusation should provoke a sharpening of memory in one's own defence. Beyond all those questions lies yet another: what is the relationship between memory and intelligence? Is intelligence anything more than having rapid access to a copious, reliable memory?

Of major importance to any comprehensive sense of Pound is the recognition of how much praise he has hitherto received for going outside the bounds of the permissible. Who decides the point at which genius goes "out of bounds" (38)? Crucial to the defence case—that Pound is not competent to stand trial—is the idea that his conversation is incoherent. What is intellectual coherence? (40). When Pound urged Eliot to remove conventional coherence pointers from *The Waste Land*, he was a genius. At what point does *il miglior fabbro* become a babbling fool? Is it because of what he has contributed to literature that he must be saved? Dr Overholser, for one, seems to believe that Pound's life must be saved at all costs (56, 60). Pound, in a characteristic fit of self-promotion, asserts that "the whole of 20<sup>th</sup> century literature" is his (38). Findley's play asks us not to question his sense of self-importance but to question whether or not Pound's literary status matters.

Perhaps at the root of the problem is Pound's feeling for the poet's compulsion "to speak" and "to say" (37). Waxing wroth on "poor old Possum—all caught up in the naming of his gawd" (37), Pound links "God" with "universal order" through Confucius.

It is “the naming of things” that is the problem, Pound asserts, sounding, ironically enough, like no one quite so much as A.M. Klein.<sup>5</sup> Pound sees himself in the most ancient tradition of the poet as proxy to comprehending “God” or “universal order.” On that level, poetry and politics get confused. As Findley has Pound himself muse, “it’s very difficult to write a *Paradiso* when all the indications are that you ought to write an apocalypse” (76). For such answers as there might be, we return to William Carlos Williams, whom Findley employs throughout to focus the profound questions.

It was Williams who first asserted that Pound is not on trial for his poetry (17). Similarly, it is Williams who suggests that Pound “was always old in his mind. The way the prophets were old. Born old” (45). Williams says that “we cannot put people on trial because of their opinions” (62)—a particularly challenging point for the politically-correct 1990s—but also reminds us that “it’s easy to forget [that Pound] made his choices,” that none of what he did was forced upon him (66). Crucially, it is Williams with whom Pound connects in his mind following his “outburst” (73-5). Dorothy, his lawyer, Cornell, and Sheri Martinelli all speak before Williams, but it is only Williams who draws a response.

Williams has none of the apparent awe and respect for Pound that the others in the play seem to project. Williams gets through to Pound by calling him a “poor dumb cluck” and exhorting him to “instead of sounding off on [his] pathetic little ego-tooter . . . use what is left of [his] head and try to think a little while” (75). A few moments later, out of the swirl of voices around Pound, Williams speaks once more: “I have to say this to you. It has to be said: No one forgives you for what you did. No one. You might

as well realize, Ez, there is a point in all controversy beyond which a man's life, his last card, is necessarily forfeit. A man accepts that, Ez, and goes on—his eyes open. But when the showdown comes, he loses his life" (76). It is on that note that Williams' involvement seems to end: Pound made his choices and should not expect forgiveness. However, as the courtroom scene is re-established and we move from inside Pound's mind back to the hearings, there is one final exchange. Pound is declared "of unsound mind" and there will be no trial:

WILLIAMS: Well, Ez, there you are.

EZRA: Yes. Here I am. Declared insane—and unforgiven for what I have done.

WILLIAMS: Yes. But, Ezra, everyone forgives you for what you are. (77)

Pound ends the play musing on how to "confess wrong without losing rightness," naming himself "Ezra Pound. Custodian" in his final speech (78). Again, one is reminded of Juvenal's query: *quis custodiet ipsos custodes?* Even the best-intentioned keepers need keepers, but *how* we are to judge who and what is fit remains beyond the scope of any play to state with certainty.

Wu Han, protagonist of Ken Mitchell's *The Great Cultural Revolution*, is also set at odds against the dominant norms of his country. He voices, through his art, a challenge to reconsider current directions. And for his challenge, he is broken. Of many ironies in the play, one of the most interesting is the way in which, despite the obvious differences in methodology employed by the agents of normative authority, opposition to the dominant norms of government meets with much the same result whether the

government is American or Communist Chinese.

As Mitchell suggests, comprehension of Wu Han's actions in the play requires more specific awareness of recent Chinese history than many audiences ordinarily might be expected to possess. Wu Han brings to the consideration of the English-Canadian history play a new variant; we have seen before the play-within-a-play device, but never the history-play-within-a-history-play. "Wu Han was a highly regarded bureaucrat, and uncharacteristically for a vice-mayor of Beijing, not a Communist Party member. He was also a widely-published Professor of History at Beijing University" (Mitchell 173). His first foray into play writing was "a Beijing opera" entitled *Hai Rui's Dismissal* (1960), which examined the fall from grace of "a historical figure of the Ming period who has appeared in many plays and stories in China. He became known as a righteous public servant who defended the common people and would not be bullied by the Ming emperor, his one-time friend. In literature, he personifies Confucian principles of honour, decency, and justice" (173-75). Mitchell goes on to compare him to Norman Bethune. Thus Hai Rui serves as an interesting figure at this point in the study for several reasons. His moral resemblance to Bethune is worth bearing in mind, as is his personification of Confucian principles which would surely have appealed to Ezra Pound.

Mitchell was moved, as he expresses it, by the concept of "the playwright as tragic hero—doomed by his own faith in the power of the word" (175). He quotes Wu Han on the subject of the play that got him into so much trouble in China:

Dare to think, dare to speak, dare to do has been the new style since the

Great Leap Forward. I wrote a drama. Thus I belong to the ranks of those who dare. If I did not dare, then I simply could not do anything successfully. . . . As for the magnitude of the achievement, or whether it is a success or failure, that is another thing. The historical development of a human society is also simply the history of people who dare to think, dare to speak, and dare to do. (qtd. in Mitchell 175)

Wu's explanation of his own belief is interestingly similar to that of Pound. Though proceeding in very different manners, both believed themselves to be acting in accordance with, and not in opposition to, the revolutionary principles that had defined their respective countries. In Wu Han's preface to *Hai Rui's Dismissal* he hopes his "friends in the field of history. . . . will all come forward and write a new historical drama" (qtd. in Mitchell 174). The play is conceived as a work of agitational art to provoke more art, more consideration of the issues involved. Mitchell's agenda with respect to Canada is thus clarified: "Drama has become politically irrelevant, ideas virtually banned. Too many of our playwrights have become political eunuchs" (175).

Within Mitchell's play, Wu Han stages *Hai Rui's Dismissal* as a protest against increasing repression in China; this, for Mitchell, is the act of the ultimate hero, one who truly does believe the pen is mightier than the sword. It is also an invention on Mitchell's part; as he freely admits, "Wu Han would not have had time in July, 1966, to produce his over-publicized play as a defense against the growing criticism (as *The Great Cultural Revolution* hypothesizes)" (175). For Mitchell, the dramatic advantages of the play-within-a-play device supersede the need for precise historical accuracy—

particularly as the play itself *did* spark the onrush of events which filled China through the 1960s. This manipulation of the historical record is evidence once again that the concern of the historical playwright is less with presentation of “what was” than with exploration of how “what was” can help us comprehend “what is.” Mitchell draws direct lines of historical influence from Wu Han’s play to events in Beijing in the early 1990s. By extension, civil unrest, debates over the role and extent of the powers of government, though set in China, have obvious resonances in what is so far only ‘referendum-torn’ Canada. The stage for *The Great Cultural Revolution* is a crash course in Chinese sloganeering: “Overlooking all . . . is a huge portrait of Chairman Mao Zedong, like an icon. There are posters stuck up all over, which proclaim in large bold characters: “Long Live Chairman Mao!” “Carry Forward the Proletarian Revolution” “Art Must Serve the People.” A couple of cruder, new posters, state: “Bombard the Party Headquarters!” “Attack the Four Olds!” “Let Politics Take Command!” (180). It is a rare play which makes its ideological battleground so clear without so much as a line spoken.

As is conventional, the outsider protagonist has supporters, but in this play they are already under siege. Most of the actors slated to read Wu Han’s play are late arriving at the hall because of unrest and violence in the streets. The play begins with the very real possibility that the play within it will never begin—even that some actors may be killed merely for being discovered to be on their way to participate. Emotional stakes for the contemporary audience—who are likely, at most, worried about the possibility of a parking ticket as a potential consequence of coming to the theatre—are immediately

raised.

Zhou Suchen, an old man who begins as a janitor but is pressed into service as an actor in the play, launches the first complaint against the current 'revolution.' "I can't follow what's happening any more," he says. "The university is *covered* with posters and none of them make any sense! . . . What a lot of whining from the babies," he continues, having quoted some of those "new posters" from the walls of the set (183). The climate of surrounding destruction and fanaticism is made clear as, one by one, actors arrive, reporting on the chaos of the streets through which they have come (183-9). There is also no room for doubt in the minds of the audience: Chang Zongwen states clearly that "if they find us doing this play, we'll be more than criticized!" (184). Though "Professor Wu's revolutionary reputation is unblemished," nonetheless "Shanghai's waging an all-out attack on [his] play" (186). Zhou is right: nothing makes sense.

Wu Han enters in the midst of this debate among the acting company over whether it is even sane to continue as planned. Immediately, the charisma necessary to the protagonist of the English-Canadian history play is evident. He is modest, unassuming, quiet and, above all, though with nominally the most to lose of all there present, calm (189). He immediately explains the situation: "My critics aren't attacking its dramatic shortcomings, but its politics. It is 'historically inaccurate.' It 'betrays the class struggle.' . . . I may be an amateur in the theatre, but I know something about history. As to politics, well — we will let the audience decide" (189-90). His position is clear: "it is a revolutionary drama, which 'serves the people'" (190). How can a mere play be so publically important? And surely, it is vital to understand the importance of

the play as a cultural statement. When Wu is told that “an army platoon has been assigned” to protect the company his reaction is immediate: “This changes everything. Our whole point was in waging a cultural struggle! A violent confrontation means *defeat!*” (191). In certain key respects, his battle is thus lost before *Hai Rui's Dismissal* begins.

Wu Han insists that the play is not ‘about’ any one person. It “is not a defense of Peng Dehuai! It is a defense of criticism. What are these people afraid of? They find conspiracy behind every metaphor! There are a hundred situations which could parallel this story—and all of them, or *none* of them might be true. That is the power of art! And that is why we must present this play!” (192). The similarities between the reasoning processes of Wu and Pound are clear, though it should be stressed that Pound’s propaganda broadcasts and Wu’s play belong to different orders of communication. Nonetheless, Wu’s play is clearly understood as a political statement in defence of the right to criticize current practices of normative authority, which is also how Pound conceived his personal propaganda.

When it is pointed out that the play does not “conform to the [Party] line,” Wu Han responds with a defence of drama that is at the heart of this entire study: “Well, the Party line has been known to change. And perhaps it will change if people actually *see* this play, and explore the issues” (193). Seldom is the didactic role of the history play so overtly stated. Though some of the actors would prefer to wait for the Party line to change before staging the play, others insist on proceeding as planned. In the ensuing debate, the complexity of defining revolutionary action is foregrounded:

**Wu Han:** Comrades - in a time of confusion, we fall back on our principles—the discipline of the Revolution, and the discipline of our art. Chairman Mao’s directives on the Cultural Revolution have not been very clear. People don’t know which action is revolutionary, which is counter-revolutionary. . . . The Red Guards believe they are revolutionary, because they are rebelling against authority. But in the history of the Chinese people, their out-bursts are a few seconds of passing hysteria.

**Bi:** Contradiction! Chairman Mao calls the Red Guards his disciples, and he is the living symbol of the revolution.

**Wu Han:** Perhaps. But the Chairman also said, “Contradiction is the backbone of revolution.”

**Hu:** What’s this got to do with the performance?

**Wu Han:** What we need—in a time of anarchy—is principled action!

And my drama is the portrayal of such a man... (194-5)

The portrayal of principled action can be an object lesson to people in times of trouble. There is no simpler statement of the credo that has sustained English-Canadian historical drama since *Riel*. Significantly for my line of argument, it occurs in a play which has nothing to do with Canadian history and which has not been previously considered in studies of the genre.

Wu Han completes his defence of the necessity of mounting the play with the assertion that “there is no distinction between politics and art” (195). He repeats the old slogan, “Art must serve the people!” (195). Once again, his views are largely in harmony

with the common practice of historical drama in the latter half of the twentieth century in English Canada. Even those plays which have not presented a specifically political agenda assume a didactic function.

Of course all of this rhetoric might be dismissed as the private invention of a prominent English-Canadian historical playwright; hence small wonder it sounds like common practice in English-Canadian historical theatre. Mitchell has admitted the romantic lure of the subject for himself, being who and what he is, where and when he is. But the text of *Hai Rui's Dismissal* itself is not Mitchell's invention, and its reading within *The Great Cultural Revolution* confirms in practice much of the theory voiced by Wu Han in defending the necessity of its production.

Once the play-within-a-play begins, there are but few reminders that a show is being rehearsed. Wu Han suggests once that "the peasants could be a bit more forceful," then calls for the next scene (203). Generally, however, *Hai Rui's Dismissal* is permitted to play without interrupting comment and thus speak for itself. As the play progresses, the justice system is shown to be corrupt, open to influence by the elite, and unconcerned with the plight of the ordinary peasants (204-13). It is threatened by the appointment of something "worse" than "a tyrant . . . an honest official" (213)—Hai Rui. Lulled into the unfolding action of Wu Han's play, the audience is then rudely awakened by the bursting in of the Red Guards and Wu Han's arrest (214).

The play contains, according to the Red Guards, "so-called ideas" which are "anti-Marxist" (218). To Wu Han's moderate surprise, his accusers have actually read his play. To their criticism that "the ideas stink of Confucius," he responds: "That was

once considered a compliment” (219). The shifting definition of ‘correct thought’ plagues all involved. Wu Han insists “only that Hai Rui was a man who refused to submit to tyranny” and that “people of any age, feudal or modern, can learn from his example” (219). The question of what the Chinese proletariat will learn is, for him, the “central question” of the whole affair.

“Do you believe,” he asks, “that people can learn from history?” (220). While much debate follows the question, there can be only one answer. All disagreement arises over what is to be considered useful learning, and, of course, who gets to define that which is ‘useful.’ Whether it be “what serves the great Chinese revolution” (221) or what informs Canadians about the climate of ideas in the world, the historical play fulfills an important function. Its importance may be limited by both the size of its audience and the willingness of that audience to learn from what they see, but the function remains nonetheless. Canadians do not have to fight armed state police for the right to portray their history on stage. If nothing else comes from consideration of *The Great Cultural Revolution*, that message itself is significant. This play exists and was performed in Canada without anyone being arrested or executed. Surely that is a lesson of sufficient importance to a Canadian audience to warrant including this play, which is not ‘about them,’ in a consideration of English-Canadian historical drama.

Following lengthy debate of the revolutionary ethics of the play, the theatre, the Red Guard, and the revolution itself, Wu Han makes his most radical suggestion: that the Red Guard not only see the rest of the play performed but even participate in the reading as a way of determining its worth—or worthlessness. Involvement is the key point. As

Lin Hulan, leader of the Red Guard states, “you have heard the charges. You must *think* about them, as you analyze the play” (232). With the possible exception of the moments discussed above—the conclusions of *Almighty Voice and his Wife* and *On the Rim of the Curve*—there is no more explicit statement in the genre of the responsibility of the audience.

That overt, direct, explicit statement of everything is part of why it is important to consider *The Great Cultural Revolution* in this context. All this explicit drawing of ideological lines is just ‘not Canadian.’ Arguably, that is precisely the point. Mitchell’s play allows an escape from Canadian traditions into a different cultural model from which, if we do as ordered by the Red Guard, we can draw important lessons about our Canadian-ness.

As the Red Guard representatives observe the remainder of the play, further ideological battles bubble. Wu Han remains charismatic to audiences in his insistence that history cannot be changed to be made more palatable to the dictates of the present (234-5). If there are things in our past of which we are presently ashamed, it does us no good to pretend they never existed. In character as Hai Rui, Wu Han delivers a telling line: “all it takes is one individual to resist. To act according to the truth” (238). The line escapes the notice of the Red Guard; one hopes it is absorbed by audiences.

Wu Han’s destiny is written as much by dramatic exigency as by the history dramatized. He is, after all, performing the role of one true official dismissed for his inflexible adherence to truth. His challenge to each member of the audience is to be that one individual who resists the mass when the mass is not acting “according to the truth.”

It is a personal statement and one which raises profound concerns in a land ostensibly characterized by desire for peace, order and good government. One's path to "the truth" must be individual, just as "right action" must be both individually defined and performed. In Wu Han's words, spoken in response to one of the final objections raised to the play by the Red Guards, "every man, no matter what his class, is responsible for his own actions" (258). Though the line may haunt him personally, it will not do so because he has failed to live by it. "Without questioning authority," he insists, once more in character, "there is no civilization! . . . . If Hai Rui compromised—his body might live—but his spirit would die" (270, 272). Like his character, Wu Han refuses to compromise. The play ends with the dissolution of his company, Wu Han's arrest, and the stage being swept once more by Zhou, ironically observing that it will all be "much different when the Revolution's won" (280).

Mitchell sees in Wu Han a figure for whom right action was far more important than self-preservation. His challenge to Canadian audiences in particular is to force confrontation of our own polite stereotypes, to examine what we allow and accept because 'that's the way it goes.'

Pound and Wu both stand outside the norms of what is allowed to be said in their respective cultures. In saying the 'unspeakable,' each, in his way, perceives himself as a kind of custodian of values he thinks worth preserving, even if the current dominant does not agree. In that respect, though neither is Canadian, each is an exemplar of the kind of figure the contemporary English-Canadian historical play has been reconsidering since *Riel*, and each illustrates the characteristic components of the genre.

The characteristic components of the English-Canadian historical play, however, are not themselves an unbreakable canon of regulation and limits. The case of Norman Bethune, as dramatized by both Mitchell and Rod Langley, confirms that rebellious acts and challenges to dominant community norms may include challenges to the characteristic rhetoric of the genre in which they are inscribed. Bethune is such an iconoclast that his dramatization transgresses some of the common boundaries of the iconoclast play. But though Bethune's quarrels are primarily with bureaucracy, and not with forces of either religion or civic community, the forces representing the conventional order opposed to Bethune continue to be shown as both excessive and hypocritical.

In *Gone the Burning Sun*, Mitchell develops Bethune through monologue. Mitchell shows us only Bethune's considered reactions to the various forces arrayed in opposition against him, thereby almost guaranteeing audience sympathy for the protagonist. The power of his antagonists is, if anything, increased by their invisibility to the audience; if we could see what Bethune sees, perhaps we would be less inclined to take the apologist/loyal friend role in which Mitchell casts us. For Mitchell, Bethune is *the* "iconoclast who became an icon" (124), the model of the type. Bethune, son of an evangelist, later (in Mitchell's words) "a secular saint in China" (126), was, by his upbringing and nature, surrounded by the normatizing impulses of church and society, yet simultaneously rebellious and headstrong, influenced by heritage and upbringing as much in one direction as in the other (Mitchell 127). Thus Bethune, in part because of his childhood (Langley 35-6), already stands outside religion as a guarantor of sanity.

Foucauldian terms do not strictly apply in Bethune's case, however. No matter which political system Bethune serves, someone within that system eventually finds Bethune's personal vision to be beyond conventional bounds of sanity. It is significant that, in Langley's play, the director of Montreal's Royal Victoria Hospital calls Bethune's embrace of communism "his final apostasy [sic]" (80). Bethune's overt rejection of religious motivations merely allows politics to fill the role often played by the Church. Particularly for Bethune, and, arguably in general, there is little practical distance between politics and official religion in their strategies of normalizing and containment, their rhetorics of sanity and stability.<sup>6</sup>

Mitchell's play opens with Bethune coming out of his own prescribed radical surgery and celebrating its success. "To hell with the rules," Bethune shouts, and it remains his credo throughout the play (133). In fact Bethune's preferred method of surgery, "Fast operation, fast treatment" (137), and his shears which "go through the rib-cage like butter" (Langley 66) epitomize his character. Greeting interns at the Royal Vic, Bethune calls the hospital "no better than some waterfront abortion den when you look at the statistics. Riddled with bureaucracy and rotten with incompetence." He concludes that "more patients die in the Royal Vic from the cautious fumbling of old men than they do from TB in the slums of Verdun" (Mitchell 137). His is not an approach designed to conform to any "archive of regulation and limits."

Bethune's fluid monologue reveals that the high mortality rate for his patients has been called murder by some, though he defends his record on the grounds that every patient he treats is considered terminal and beyond treatment in the first place (137).

Discussing his use of maggots in treating infected tissue, Bethune challenges his interns: “The despised vermin of this world can be valuable, gentlemen, if you allow yourself to think in extremes” (138). It is thinking in extremes which characterizes Bethune, and that is precisely what his peers and superiors object to about him. His methods are called “dangerous lunacy” by the other Royal Vic doctors (142); Bethune responds by calling the other doctors “the gout-gang” (142). “Look out for Bethune,” he intones, quoting his detractors, “A bomb—looking for a place to explode” (143).

Bethune gives a magnificent description of himself and then undercuts its sweeping rhetoric with an ironic exit line, the character’s speech itself constituting a model of his own incessant destabilizing of norms: “In a world already terrified of change, I preach *revolution!* The principle of life! I am an agitator—a disturber of the excrement— impatient—frightening! I am the creative spirit, liberating the soul of men! . . . Barney, where can a guy take a leak?” (145). The deflation achieved through the final line is significant, for always, within Bethune’s perception of self as artist, revolutionary, and creative spirit, there is a recognition of all that is destructive, of self and others, all that is wasted in his life, by his own decisions and by the opposition of others. Of all the figures portrayed in the plays considered in this study, Bethune is perhaps the most Socratic in his self-knowledge.

On a speaking tour following his forced removal from the Spanish Civil War, Bethune voices his ‘unspeakable’ challenge to the forces he perceives to be in opposition to him, the challenge which throws the Socratic “know thyself” into the faces of the Church, government, and media:

We're all being lied to by the politicians and the newspapers. They're blinding people to the real danger—and all I'm doing is trying to open their eyes. The papers say Bethune's a communist. Well, who knows? I do believe in the force of history. I try to fight oppression. To see justice served. If that's communism—this country is full of communists. Millions of them. If it's red to be Christian—I'm proud to be red. You see, you can't talk about salvation, without talking revolution. The *idea* of salvation is revolutionary. (153-54)

Ironically, Bethune's political leanings are toward what so many unimpressed leaders and neighbours in these plays have insisted is characteristically Canadian: a sense of community, an opposition to individualism. As Mitchell presents him, Bethune is a constant reminder to the establishment of the bankruptcy of their own discursive practices. Hence, again with irony duly noted, we see Bethune as an individual, someone who, by his insistence on community, is in some respect alienated from every community in which he resides.

Langley's Bethune, in dialogue, conveys a sense of self that is at once less iconoclastic than Mitchell's Bethune and more typical of the terms of exclusion usually applied to the protagonist of English-Canadian historical drama. His wife calls him a hypocrite for criticizing the rich while enjoying their privileges when he gets the chance (19). Later, she is the first in the play to call him "mad" (38). A doctor treating Bethune's first bout of TB calls the mural he has painted while in confinement "questionable" because it has included projected dates of death for himself and all his

fellow patients on the ward (51). He is also “a wag,” “persistent,” and “persuasive”—all characterizations delivered “grimly” by his superior, Doctor McKenna (52-3). A former colleague describes him as “a Saint Catherine's wheel” (63). After some time at the Royal Vic, Bethune is tagged for dismissal by the Director and his committee; this time the words describing Bethune are “poseur,” “immoral,” “a poor example,” “dangerous,” and, worst of all, “an iconoclast” (73). His theories are “too radical” (75), even for his most solid supporter in Montreal, and the question of his politics is raised. His disruptive behaviour is criticized, and it is clear that Bethune has taken no steps to ingratiate himself with the more conservative elements of his environment.

But what differentiates Bethune from everyone with whom he clashes is not his “unpardonable rudeness,” his “eternal questioning of everything,” nor his “embarrassing political manoeuvres” (99). It is his attitude toward death, epitomized in the mural he paints before he undergoes his own first radical pneumothorax surgery: life is a little play, soon over. Dr. Archibald (at the Royal Vic) calls Bethune dangerous because he has “a vision of truth, keen and narrow,” but he doesn't “know what that vision is” (99). However, it is clear from both plays that Bethune does possess a radical knowledge of his vision; as Mitchell phrases it, “Only in the face of death does life have any meaning” (152). What makes Bethune an iconoclast in every situation is his acceptance of death. Bethune has no problems with the Hippocratic first principle of doing no harm; he merely differs from virtually all his colleagues and political masters in defining what constitutes harm. For Bethune, it is always better to risk death for a chance of cure than to accept a longer life with no chance of cure. It is that understanding of the physician's

role, more than any aggressive component of his political or social character, which sets Bethune at odds with everyone. It is the zealous enthusiasm of his character, set in sharp contrast to those surrounding him—whose safer, more prudent courses appear in that contrast to be hopelessly ineffectual—that lifts Bethune to that paradoxical status in English-Canadian historical drama which, with Louis Riel, he shares: that of the iconoclast become icon.

## Conclusion

### A Tradition of Cautious Rebellion

It should now be clear that there is a tradition for the writing of the English-Canadian historical play, no matter how obscure that tradition might for many years have been. From the earliest efforts in the genre, many of the basic methods and structures of dramatic research and construction have been consistently employed. This consistency seems to be largely coincidental, the product of individuals independently choosing a perceived effective method of development as opposed to consciously attempting to follow a national tradition or cultural model. In fact, the very thought of adherence to any centralized or prescribed system would likely be abhorrent to the majority of dramatists working in the field. The English-Canadian historical playwright, for at least the last fifty years of the twentieth-century, has perceived himself or herself as rebelling against grand narratives and singular views through the very act of examining, via drama, historical individuals whose lives were characterized by opposition to the dominant norms and structures of their various eras, and who were usually restricted, punished, or even destroyed by the forces to which they proposed alternatives. Ironically, that rebellious impulse, the drive to preserve or reclaim the memory of iconoclastic figures once considered failures by many of their peers and immediate successors, is acted upon, tacitly at least, with a great degree of conformity. Current practice in English-Canadian historical drama follows a model that has remained virtually unchanged for fifty years.

The most significant implications of current practice in English-Canadian historical drama are threefold. First, audiences are encouraged to examine who stands to

gain (and what they stand to gain) from the classification of certain individuals as “insane,” “sacrilegious,” “iconoclastic,” or “dangerous.” Second, Canadian audiences, and Canada in general, could benefit from examining more carefully the ideas of those who do not overtly subscribe to the Canadian public norms of “peace, order, and good government.” Third, it is not too late to consider, in Berger’s words, those “better alternatives not taken in the past,” the strategies dramatized in the plays which, in their own times, met with rejection.

Contemporary English-Canadian historical drama generally suggests that social altruism is not the driving force behind the establishment and propagation of classifications such as those named above. There is usually something to be gained, frequently power of one sort or another, almost equally often financial profit, by the person or agency most active in propagating the convenient label. These plays suggest that the outsider, as defined by the current centre of power, whatever that current norm may be, often has historical precedent, or is valued in other cultures for precisely the same reasons he or she is regarded with suspicion in our own. Accordingly, so the plays also suggest, it is advisable, perhaps essential, for Canadians to avoid repeating the mistakes of our individual and collective pasts. We cannot avoid repeating our errors until we confront our pasts directly and open our minds to the possibilities of alternative strategies once rejected as unsound, or socially destructive.

The individuals who embraced earlier roads not taken may have been excluded and personally silenced; but the alternatives themselves remain in the public domain. With the advantage of hindsight, the awareness of the consequences of previously chosen

paths, contemporary Canadians, seeking to improve conditions as they are, or simply to understand those conditions more fully, can only benefit from considering alternatives once rejected. Though it may as easily be found that, on consideration, some alternatives remain outside the realm of possibility, at least we will comprehend our current situation actively rather than passively accepting whatever we find ourselves living through as inevitable and inescapable. The most significant accomplishment of the contemporary English-Canadian historical playwright is to foreground and dramatize the possibilities still extant in the visions of certain of our historical iconoclasts. These plays remind us of untapped potential.

There remains a final irony. It seems that (with the possible exception of the very first such figure, Laura Secord) the protagonist of the English-Canadian history play who comes closest to achieving his or her iconoclastic aims is that person who joins the established political process and who attempts to achieve radical aims by the approved method of political debate and legislative redefinition of norms. In other words, whether consciously, unconsciously or inevitably—perhaps as dictated by the history they dramatize—English-Canadian playwrights, though they may encourage audiences to consider alternatives excluded from the norm in the past, encourage pursuit of those reconsidered alternatives (and their potential improvements for our collective future) via the most conventional of means: through democratic political involvement. Though asking audiences to reconsider radical alternatives previously rejected, the plays seem to promote conservative methods of performing such reconsideration. In that way, these plays, conceived by so many of their authors as challenges to Canadian stereotypes, are

themselves “traditionally” Canadian. They encourage revolutionary thinking, but urge that revolutionary action be effected from within the current system of normative authority. Perhaps it is this apparent contradiction, this peaceful and ordered call to careful and ‘proper’ revolution, to which criticism of the English-Canadian history play has been, without ever precisely voicing it in such terms, so long negatively responding.

## Endnotes

### Introduction:

#### Toward a Paradigm for English-Canadian Historical Drama

<sup>1</sup> Partly because of their very nature, brief overviews of any body of literature are prone to making sweeping generalizations and reductive, over-simplified evaluative statements. The point of any overview, of course, is not detailed, sustained analysis, but a picture in broad strokes which enables the reader to situate the self vaguely—to find a sort of ‘you are here’ sticker on a given national literary map. Just as a map of Canada will yield less specific detail than a map of any single Canadian town might, so the general survey of Canadian literature will, of necessity, omit much that would be considered in more specifically-focused studies of individual plays or movements.

<sup>2</sup> David Lowenthal’s *The Past is a Foreign Country* (1985), a study undertaken over several decades incorporating data from both factual and fictional sources, provides a helpful consideration of the complexity underlying such an apparently simple concept as ‘the past.’

<sup>3</sup> Memory is also deviously dualistic. “On the whole,” so Lowenthal justly observes, “we place unjustified confidence in our own memories, seldom questioning their reliability. But we realize that *other* people generally remember less than they think, imagine part of what they believe they remember, and reshape the past to accord with present self-images” (200-01). This duality, far from encouraging us as it should to examine our own premises and certainties more frequently, often pushes us instead

toward automatic assumption of our own rightness. Such assumptions are a frequent subject for critical investigation in contemporary historical drama.

<sup>4</sup> This study is, of course, subject to the same assumptions and restrictions.

<sup>5</sup> Consider, for example, a 1902 encyclopedia entry which speaks disparagingly of the potential for success of the experiments currently being made by the Wright Brothers, a 1960 dictionary of popular music which treats rock'n'roll as a temporary aberration already on the verge of vanishing, or, on an even larger scale, the name given for so long to World War One : "The War to End All Wars."

<sup>6</sup> For the "renovation"/"invention" concept, I am indebted to John Barth's essay "The Literature of Replenishment" (193-206) in his collection *The Friday Book*.

<sup>7</sup> Among other Canadian-based American firsts which indicate the extent to which American companies toured Canada in the early decades of the twentieth century is the fact that Groucho Marx first saw Charlie Chaplin performing when both were touring in Winnipeg.

<sup>8</sup> The number of professional theatre companies working in English Canada alone increased tenfold during the years of 1965-75.

<sup>9</sup> B.C.-based playwright and performer Colleen Subasic, in an informal interview (29 June 1997), suggested that her next project would involve an examination of her family's Croatian roots and involvement in local politics, which, in the context of the contemporary re-orientation of the former Yugoslavia, has obvious Canadian overtones with respect to the enduring Québec question. Subasic's project is simultaneously highly personal and international, addressing an audience of one (herself) in certain aspects

while simultaneously exploring an “ideological relationship between audience and subject matter”(Filewod 8) through the parallels, historical and potential, between the former Yugoslavia and the current Canada with respect to subdividing a once confederated country.

<sup>10</sup> I am indebted to Susan Hanson-Broten for the term “documusical.”

<sup>11</sup> So careful is Perkins to make sure this point is clear that he states it most effectively in his abstract. Later expanded commentary on the idea is never as economical or precise as the statement used in the (unpaginated) abstract.

<sup>12</sup> *What Glorious Times They Had — Nellie McClung* is an unusual text with regards to authorship, falling somewhere between the work of an individual hand and the status of a true collective play. As described in the text, “Diane Grant began research” for the play, “wrote a scenario of chronological events, and worked with the cast, scene by scene, improvising and writing” (E3). Grant also appeared in the original production. To this is added, “The cast members conducted their own research into their characters and provided new material and ideas” (E3). It sounds as though the process of creating the play is merely the now commonplace one of workshopping over a lengthy period, the playwright testing and revising the script with the help of actors and directors. Still, though most of the plays addressed in this study likely followed at least similar paths to completion, this one is unconventional in stressing so overtly the role of others beyond the principal author. To avoid the awkwardness of constructions such as “Grant *et al*’s play,” I have employed Grant’s name throughout to designate authorship, here attempting to give a more full account of the authorship of the play.

<sup>13</sup> Findley's play is the only one of several English-Canadian historical plays addressing historical material directly related and limited to events during World War II that this study will address. Conspicuous by their absence are the several examinations in English-Canadian historical drama of the figure of Adolf Hitler. There is a sizeable body of work in English-Canadian theatre concerning both Hitler and, on the larger scale, Canada's involvement in World War II. It was felt, however, that, although these plays generally conform to the proposed paradigm of the English-Canadian historical play, their subject is an extreme aberration in human history. The figure of Hitler, in short, is laden with so much emotional, intellectual, and theoretical baggage that it was felt analysis of English Canada's treatment of this particular world figure would impede rather than advance the general thesis.

## Chapter One

### The Foundations of Common Practice

<sup>1</sup> In George Bowering's 1980 novel, *Burning Water*, George Vancouver's fictional death bears no relation to the facts of his historical demise. The novel has long been for me the epitome of the "fast and loose" approach to the use of historical materials in literature. I can think of no English-Canadian historical play which strays so far from the received historical record in its resolution of the protagonist's struggle.

<sup>2</sup> Curzon's preface precedes even the prefatory pages numbered with roman numerals, and is unpaginated.

<sup>3</sup> Obliquely, in his preface to *Sunshine Sketches of a Little Town* and throughout the more sharply satiric tales in *Arcadian Adventures with the Idle Rich*.

<sup>4</sup> In an interview with Donald Cameron, collected in *Conversations with Canadian Novelists-1* (34-35).

<sup>5</sup> Through narrative commentary on a character's situation in *Lives of Short Duration* (258).

<sup>6</sup> Although, arguably, Tecumseh's agenda has nothing to do with the preservation of Canadian autonomy, at least he was an ally and not an enemy, no matter what his political motivation.

<sup>7</sup> Margaret Atwood, for instance, uses Susanna Moodie to link the pioneer era with Atwood's own, as a symbol of Canadian national ambivalence. Cf. *The Journals of Susanna Moodie* (61-2).

<sup>8</sup> John Barth, through a character in *LETTERS*, describes the "Stock Liberal" as a "perfect skeptic," who "believes that many injustices which can't be remedied may yet be mitigated, and that many things famously fragile—Reason, Tolerance, Law, Democracy, Humanism—are nonetheless precious and infinitely preferable to their contraries" (88). The description reminds one of the position espoused by many representatives of normative authority in the English-Canadian history play—despite the apparent clash in nomenclature between Barth's description of such a belief system as "Stock Liberal" and this study's frequent claim that the position is "small-c conservative." The quality of life may be improved, but not through sweeping alteration to any of the various frameworks of normative authority which currently exist.

<sup>9</sup> For a literary antecedent, cf. Coleridge's Geraldine in "Christabel."

<sup>10</sup> Hindsight somewhat undermines Davies here. Though it is his intent that the three women should successfully "yield not to temptation," it was clear even in the era in which Davies wrote that Messrs. Traill and Moodie were not merely playing second fiddle to their wives but not even playing in the same ensemble.

<sup>11</sup> Art Spiegelman's protagonist in *Maus II* observes during a session of psychoanalysis that "Samuel Beckett once said: 'Every word is like an unnecessary stain on silence and nothingness.'" After a reflective pause, the character adds "On the other hand, he SAID it" (45). The passage points with precision to the dilemma faced by anyone attempting to use a medium to criticize itself: it is possible, even likely, that by using the formal conventions and rhetorical strategies of a medium one is simultaneously attempting to critique, the critique will be missed, or misinterpreted. A more complex demonstration of the conundrum can be found in virtually anything Jacques Derrida has ever written using the structures of philosophy to deconstruct philosophy.

<sup>12</sup> As Davies himself has described Cantwell as "Byronic," perhaps it is worth recalling one of the regularly-defined aspects of the "Byronic hero": he has "a metaphysical significance. . . . from the sin he has committed he derives freedom. . . . [and] he knows the mere conventionality and groundlessness of moral codes" (David Perkins 782). In short, Byron's heroes often seemed to suggest that society needs its rejects and iconoclasts, its marginalized "loyal opposition," in order that the majority might understand more clearly what it is that they are by seeing clearly what it is that they are not.

<sup>13</sup> Frances Stewart's moderating role may also be evidence of Davies himself yielding to temptation. Michael Peterman suggests that "In giving prominence to Frances Stewart over the more famous literary pioneers, Susanna Moodie and Catharine Parr Traill, Davies no doubt delighted in ruffling local feathers. Historically, however, his chosen emphasis has special validity" as the Stewarts, more so than either the Moodies or the Traills, were instrumental in the development of Peterborough itself (56). The play, written "for the celebration of the city of Peterborough's centennial" (56), is at once an occasional or very specifically regional play and a national one. While the Peterborough provenance satisfies local needs, in choosing the 1837 setting, "during Canada's only (and minor) rebellion, Davies gave [the play] both a national and a local significance" (57).

<sup>14</sup> Mr Stewart's letter is interesting for another reason. It illustrates the need for the didactic component of the drama so often voiced by contemporary historical playwrights. The letter erroneously names Saskatchewan as the centre of Riel's efforts. Even in "setting the record straight" about the question of treason, the writer "bends" the historical record.

## Chapter Two

### Them Donnellys

<sup>1</sup> Mrs Donnelly is sometimes called "Johanna," sometimes "Julia," sometimes "Judith." For consistency, I have called her "Mrs Donnelly" throughout.

<sup>2</sup> In brief, the ‘Whitefoot’ society was a secret organization, originating in Tipperary, Ireland, devoted to opposition of British landlords. James Noonan’s glossary to *The Donnellys* includes the phrase “members and descendants” (298) of this secret society. It is the trans-generational and trans-Atlantic survival of the political prejudices involved that causes the bulk of the initial problems faced by the Donnellys. The principal problem for men like William Donnelly, who were, for whatever reason, unwilling to subscribe to the Whitefoot cause, was that Whitefoot allegiance was all or nothing. Neutrality was not permitted. If an individual did not actively embrace the cause, that individual became automatically an active enemy, meriting the same violent opposition as any more active enemy would.

<sup>3</sup> Reaney is insistent that the play be perceived as tragedy. In the Aristotelian sense of tragedy, the tragic protagonist is responsible for his own fate, though the tragic flaw may not be ordinarily or immediately perceived as a ‘weakness’ in character.

<sup>4</sup> Even Trent University Library holds no copy of the play according to its on-line catalogue.

<sup>5</sup> Though the names of the magistrates and certain of the neighbours differ from text to text, Father Connolly is so named in each version.

### Chapter Three

#### Our Home and Native Land

<sup>1</sup> Cf. Peter Such, *Riverrun*, a novel treating the last stages of confrontation between the Beothuk and the settlers.

<sup>2</sup> Cf. Richard Budgetel, “The Beothuks and the Newfoundland Mind.”

<sup>3</sup> Such condensing has been common practice in the history play since the earliest efforts in the genre in modern English. Cf. Marlowe’s *Edward II* for example. The dramatist erases time lapses between significant events, and, if necessary, invents individual characters to present ideas or beliefs which had no single clear exponent in the historical record.

<sup>4</sup> The description is justified by the 2<sup>nd</sup> Furrier’s reference to a “stink worse’n old ewe” (15) from which can be inferred a degree of ‘hands-on’ experience.

<sup>5</sup> Manzione observes that one of many pressures on the NWMP in the earliest days was that there was no road west of Winnipeg. Walsh, amongst others, depended on keeping American transport routes open and friendly for the acquisition of basic supplies (51). This pressure to maintain friendly relations with the United States is underdeveloped in *Walsh*.

<sup>6</sup> Once again, Shakespeare’s *Julius Caesar* seems to inform the play. One is reminded of Marc Antony’s funeral oration for Caesar during which, in part by repeating eight times variations on the assertion that Brutus and Cassius are “honourable men,” he stirs the crowd to “mutiny” against the conspirators who have assassinated Caesar (3.2.78-234).

<sup>7</sup> In a formal memo to the Minister of the Interior, dated 28 February 1879, Sir John A. Macdonald stated directly that the Sioux must be returned to the United States (cited in Manzione 132, from the National Archives of Canada).

<sup>8</sup> For instance, the review of Michael Groberman, published in the *Ottawa Citizen* in response to the premiere performance of the play at the Great Canadian Theatre Company in Ottawa.

<sup>9</sup> In Stoppard's *Rosencrantz and Guildenstern Are Dead* (1967), the Player, describing a moment when an actor, sentenced to death, was actually executed as part of the play, summarizes the way audiences perceive: "Audiences know what to expect, and that is all that they are prepared to believe in" (64). Stoppard's challenge to his audience to examine their own perceptions and preconceptions seems to inform many of the plays that followed shortly after his.

<sup>10</sup> The unconventional ellipsis here results from the speech being quoted overlapping with another, here omitted; there is nothing omitted from the line itself.

<sup>11</sup> The issue of contemporary exploitation through prostitution is dealt with more overtly in Carol Bolt's *Gabe*. Bolt investigates present conditions through comparison with the past, dramatizing by juxtapositioning historical models with contemporary characters the current state of some of Riel's Metis. Tension between the contemporary Metis and their historical models exists throughout the play, sometimes expressed in the distance between their respective circumstances (90-1) and sometimes in the similarity of their 'success' rate (111). The modern-day Gabe and Louis seem to live for jail, beer, sex, and comic books (87). There is no extreme resistance in this play; no one is hanged for treason. But all alternatives are varieties of jail (93). A job in high steel is a job, simultaneously accepting yet another stereotype (118). In one of the bitterest lines in the play, the antagonist, the generally dim-witted Henry—epitome of 'white trash'—reminds

them that comic books are also drawn by white men (94). Even avenues of escapism, especially liquor and violence, are avenues back into the same traps. This condition is particularly limiting for the female characters of the play, particularly Von, who claims to use her sexuality as a means to freedom of personal expression but who is really as imprisoned by her licentiousness as her male counterparts are by their comic books.

## Chapter Four

### Iconoclasm Compromised

<sup>1</sup> This difference in level of perceived success for the iconoclastic protagonist is the only significant variation from otherwise consistent common practice as argued in this study. Another less significant but nonetheless interesting variation will also be seen in this chapter: to the best of my ability to determine, of all the protagonists considered in the plays examined throughout this study, only one has actually been in the audience to see himself portrayed on stage. Joey Smallwood attended the Rising Tide remounting of *Joey* which was recorded for national broadcast on the CBC (St. John's, NF, 28-29 June 1982). He may have attended other productions as well, but re that particular one I can speak with certainty as I was also in attendance. In an informal interview which I conducted shortly thereafter, in October of 1982, Smallwood was gracious and humorous on the subjects of having his life so presented and of being part of the audience observing the performance, but was generally much more interested in critiquing policies of the then-current Peckford (P.C.) government concerning Hibernia and offshore resources development. Publicly, at least, for this "only living subject" of

English Canadian historical drama to have seen himself portrayed, the issues addressed by this study were non-issues. It should be noted as well that, as the interview was conducted 15 years before I knew I would be writing on the subject, my questions were not specifically directed towards eliciting responses from Smallwood concerning the specific questions here under study. I mention the interview only for its parallel: as Smallwood was the only protagonist of the English-Canadian historical plays considered herein to see himself represented, so he is the only such figure with whom I was actually able to converse at all upon the subject of how a person in his position might react to seeing 'himself' performed.

<sup>2</sup> Davin's real-life situation also has parallels in Sara Jeannette Duncan's *The Imperialist*.

<sup>3</sup> Seeing the Riel trial from the outside, including through actual observations written by Davin at the time, provides an interesting resonance with the plays of Coulter (34ff). For Davin, the trial is the "highest expression of civilization" in the North West, no matter what its outcome (34-5). His insistence that Riel merits both "admiration" and "sympathy" (36) is another reminder both of the influence of Coulter's plays on the rhetorical positions contemporary drama can assume vis-à-vis public affairs, and of the fact that, in Riel's own time, opinion was sharply divided concerning his situation and the merits of his claims.

<sup>4</sup> Mitchell observes: "Only history could defend this kind of truth, for as drama it would be dismissed as melodramatic contrivance" (8).

<sup>5</sup> Perhaps it may be possible to consider the play as a Horatian satire; it is certainly not Juvenalian.

<sup>6</sup> The role of religion as an agent of normative authority, a way of defining what is 'normal' and 'natural' for a community, will be examined at greater length in the final chapter.

<sup>7</sup> The story of how matters got to be in this unique state is infinitely complicated and beyond the scope of this study. Nonetheless, to understand how Smallwood is treated by contemporary dramatists, some awareness of the forces which led to his emergence as Premier of Newfoundland is helpful. As virtually every public action taken by Smallwood through the course of his years in office was directly influenced by his own awareness of the events preceding his rise to power, so comprehension of both the methods and motivations of contemporary drama in critiquing Smallwood's public actions demands some awareness of his precedents. Of the available studies, Richard Gwyn on Smallwood himself and S.J.R. Noel on the history of twentieth-century politics in Newfoundland are particularly useful. Neither is up-to-date on the post-Smallwood period, the developments in reconsideration of Smallwood's role which have been ongoing in the years since his departure from the Premier's office, but in detail concerning the conditions under which he came to power and the influences upon his judgments once in power they are invaluable.

## Chapter Five

## The Iconoclast as Icon

<sup>1</sup> Consider, for example, Nellie McClung and her supporters in *What Glorious Times They Had*. Temperance themes abound and keep close company with the fight for female suffrage. Many of the songs employed in the play derive from actual WCTU publications.

<sup>2</sup> Timothy Findley's *The Trials of Ezra Pound* resembles Carol Bolt's *Red Emma* in that it deliberately focuses on one very small fragment of a very full life. The fundamental difference is that, whereas Bolt chooses the earliest stages of her protagonist's career, Findley is dramatizing a late stage in his protagonist's life. This difference allows Findley to employ flashback and allusion in a way that is not open to Bolt. The consequence is a more rounded presentation of the protagonist within a similar restricted time span.

<sup>3</sup> Fifty years later, one can find with a few clicks of the mouse books such as Robert B. Stinnett's *Day of Deceit: The Truth about FDR and Pearl Harbor* available at mainstream American bookstores. Would Stinnett have been accused of treason had he been able to write so critically of Roosevelt in 1945?

<sup>4</sup> Michael North's *The Political Aesthetic of Yeats, Eliot, and Pound* treats the subject at length.

<sup>5</sup> I am thinking specifically here of Klein's lines about "the nth Adam taking a green inventory / in world but scarcely uttered, naming, praising" ("Portrait of the Poet As Landscape" ll.135-36), as well as the general thematic resonances concerning the

cultural position of the poet in the first half of the twentieth century as seen in both the Klein poem and Pound's "Hugh Selwyn Mauberley."

<sup>6</sup> Try reading Mao Zedong on the steps to becoming a good communist, substituting "Christian" for "communist" and "church" for "party." There will be few points that strike the average reader as somehow "wrong." Cf. Bethune on salvation and revolution (*Gone with the Wind* 153-4).

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