

Margaret Laurence's Literary Apprenticeship

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Donez Xiques. 2005. *Margaret Laurence: The Making of a Writer*. Hamilton, ON: Dundurn Press. 408 pp.

CANADIAN writer Margaret Laurence has inspired numerous biographies and critical studies since her death in 1987. Following upon biographer James King's *Life of Margaret Laurence* (1997) and Lyall Powers' *Alien Heart: The Life and Work of Margaret Laurence* (2003), Donez Xiques has published *Margaret Laurence: The Making of a Writer* (2005). This literary biography differs from the preceding two in that it focuses on Laurence's early life and her apprenticeship as a writer up to 1963—the point when she moved from writing texts about Africa to writing fiction set in Canada, the point when she became recognized as a serious writer following the publication of her first Canadian novel, *The Stone Angel* (1964). Xiques distinguishes her biography from preceding ones by claiming in her preface that she has “focused exclusively on telling the remarkable story of Margaret Laurence's efforts to develop her voice as a writer and of her dedication to the craft of writing” (12).¹ In other words, this is intended primarily as a literary biography: the making of a writer.

Xiques asks the crucial question at the outset: “how did this woman, born Peggy Wemyss in the Canadian prairies in 1926 and

raised there during the years of the Great Depression, become such an accomplished professional writer?" (9). She claims that "The making of a writer [...] is a mysterious and complex process" (22), and she aims to trace "the trajectory of Margaret Laurence's apprenticeship" (9) in this ambitious study. She does so, logically enough, by adhering to chronological order. Each chapter title signals a period of Laurence's life, and later chapters include subheadings with dates that provide clear signposts along the road of Laurence's life-journey.

Her first chapter, "Landscape of the Heart," offers a general review of Laurence's childhood from 1926 to 1939 since, Xiques suggests, "those childhood years had a profound impact on the unfolding and development of her literary talent" (23). Because relatively little is known about Laurence's early life, the early chapters of this biography are brief and rather thin in comparison with later chapters. Xiques draws, inevitably, on Laurence's posthumously published work, *Dance on the Earth: A Memoir* (1989), although that text is, as she acknowledges, highly selective.

Called a "blood child" by Sylvia Fraser in her afterword to Laurence's novel *The Fire-Dwellers* (1969), Laurence was orphaned before the age of ten. Like that of her young Canadian heroine, Vanessa MacLeod, of *A Bird in the House* (1970), and her final heroine, Morag Gunn, of *The Diviners* (1974), her childhood consisted of a series of losses: the death of her mother, father, and grandmother. Nonetheless, Xiques eschews sensationalism in her biography. Regarding the death of Laurence's father, Robert Wemyss, war veteran and town lawyer, Xiques records simply that he died of pneumonia. She does not mention the rumor rampant in Neepawa (Peggy's hometown in Manitoba), reported in both King's and Boughton's biographies, that pneumonia followed upon hypothermia after an evening of drinking that ended with Wemyss' spending the night in a snowdrift. She concludes "Landscape of the Heart" insightfully: "[Laurence's] anxious inner world was profoundly insecure; it was a place of pain too deep for words where cataclysmic shifts followed closely upon the sudden eruptions of death" (44).

In her second chapter, "A Bird in the House" (also the title of Laurence's 1970 Canadian collection of short stories set in her mythical microcosm of Manawaka, modeled on Neepawa), Xiques claims that "an examination of *A Bird in the House* may yield important insights into the emotional timbre of Margaret Laurence's own childhood as a strong desire to write gathered momentum

within her” (45). Accordingly, Xiques proceeds to draw parallels between Laurence’s early life and that of Vanessa MacLeod, the narrator of the stories. She concludes her discussion of the collection by claiming that “An examination of *A Bird in the House* may well contribute to a fuller understanding of Laurence’s childhood years than can be gathered solely from her own descriptions in *Dance on the Earth*” (49).

“The Magic of Writing (1938–1940)” focuses on two important subjects: the onset of war as it impacted the sensitive schoolgirl as well as the influence of reading and the appeal of writing. Here, Xiques draws on Laurence’s memoir *Dance on the Earth*, her essay “Books That Mattered To Me,” and interviews with her school teachers such as Wes McAmmond. Xiques observes that many of the novels Peggy Wemyss enjoyed featured orphans (62). At fourteen, Laurence determined, “I have to be a writer” (*Dance* 74).

“Hitler in Manitoba: The High School Years,” the fourth chapter, develops the topics of war and writing further. Xiques discusses the impact of war on the high-school girl, especially the establishment of an RAF Flying School outside Neepawa and the devastating impact of Dieppe on Neepawa families. As Laurence records in her memoir, with the onset of war, “my life changed out of all recognition in 1939, forever” (*Dance* 72). Xiques asserts that the war, followed by the 6 August 1945 American bombing of the Japanese city of Hiroshima, made Peggy Wemyss “a citizen of the world” (65).

The war changed Laurence’s life in other ways. Dances with the RAF at Neepawa’s Arcade led to Peggy Wemyss’s first love—for a British airman named Derek Armstrong, who broke her heart. He turned out to be married, as she later learned—just like Vanessa MacLeod’s airman, Michael, in *A Bird in the House*.

Xiques continues her discussion of Laurence’s writing by drawing on her high-school juvenilia. Laurence edited Viscount Collegiate’s newspaper, *Annals of the Black and Gold*, under the aegis of her English teacher, Mildred Musgrove. She published a short story, “The Case of the Blond Butcher,” in the “Young Authors’ Section” of *The Winnipeg Free Press* in early 1941. Her interest in journalism extended to a summer job at *The Neepawa Press*. She also wrote a novel titled “The Land of Our Fathers” that unfortunately does not survive, although she recalls its title in her memoir as “Pillars of the Nation.”

With “The College Years,” the chapters become more detailed, drawing on less readily available sources, including archives, letters,

and extensive personal interviews. Peggy Wemyss attended United College, now the University of Winnipeg, where she came under the influence of several important professors: Malcolm Ross, later editor-in-chief of the New Canadian Library series, who taught her seventeenth-century nondramatic literature, including, most importantly, Milton; Robert Halstead, who became a longtime friend; Arthur Phelps, who introduced her to modernist writers through his English Club; and Doris Peterson, who taught her modernist poetry, including T.S. Eliot. While at United, Peggy was also much influenced by the Social Gospel—the commandment to “Love your neighbor as yourself”—and by Winnipeg’s Old Left.

Peggy pursued her writing, publishing poems and stories in *VOX*, the United College literary magazine, and *The Manitoban*, the University of Manitoba newspaper.² While in college, she met editor Jack Ludwig and later her lifelong friend Adele Wiseman.

Xiques mentions some stories of Peggy’s college years, such as the incident of some male residents bringing a goat into her dormitory, Sparling Hall, but the biographer does not mention the fact that Peggy was asked to leave the residence after being caught “cavorting with a boy on the fire escape” (Boughton 55). Peggy believed that moving to North Winnipeg after college decided her future in various ways, noting in her memoir that “North Winnipeg in the 1940s decided a lot of my life” (*Dance* 108). While living on Roslyn Road she met Jack Laurence, an RCAF veteran pursuing a degree in civil engineering at the University of Manitoba. She records in her memoir that she decided, “That’s the man I’d like to marry” (*Dance* 102). They did indeed marry in 1947. Xiques notes that both her serious loves—Derek Armstrong and Jack Laurence—were ten years older than Peggy, suggesting they were father figures for her. She opines that Jack resembled Peggy’s father, Robert Wemyss. It is true that they both sported mustaches, fashionable for men in that era.

Chapter Six on Laurence’s brief period as a journalist is perhaps the most detailed section of the book. Peggy Wemyss worked as a journalist from 1947 to 1949, first for *The Westerner*, which she claims she did not realize at the time was a Communist paper, and then for the *Winnipeg Citizen*. She wrote fifteen signed articles for *The Westerner* in 1947, including one about a disastrous train wreck compounded by fire outside Winnipeg, perhaps inspiring the article Morag Gunn writes about the death of Piquette Tonnerre and her children in a fire for the “*Manawaka Banner*” in *The Diviners*.

Laurence’s byline appeared in the premier issue of the *Winnipeg Citizen* on March 1, 1948. She wrote a radio column titled “In the

Air” and book reviews while also covering the labor beat. Laurence reports that she left the *Citizen* in 1948 over the managing editor’s accusation that she was a Communist. Xiques declares that, “[a]lthough Peggy and Jack’s political sympathies were to the Left, Peggy was never a member of the Communist Party” (148). Laurence claims in her memoir, “I was then, and have remained, a Christian Social Democrat” (*Dance* 107). Xiques concludes,

Reading Laurence’s newspaper columns helps to illumine a significant period in her literary development. [. . .] Hours of listening to excellent radio drama constituted an important part of Margaret Laurence’s literary apprenticeship. Listening helped to train her ear to the nuances of language, the effectiveness of dialogue, and the subtle rhythms of the spoken word. (149–50)

During this period, Margaret and Jack Laurence lived in the home of Anne and Bill Ross on Burrows Avenue in Winnipeg’s North End. She was introduced to the Communist Party by Bill Ross, a Party organizer. The Wiseman family also lived nearby: from Adele’s mother Chaika, she learned about Socialism. The myriad influences of North Winnipeg are reflected in her long narrative poem, “North Main Car,” written in 1948 but unpublished until 2001, when it was collected in *Colors of Speech*.

“New Territory,” the seventh chapter, covers the Laurences’ travels from Canada to Africa via England. Being transitional, this section is logically subdivided into sections with separate headings. “London to Africa: 1949–1950” details their six-month sojourn in London, where they both found jobs that allowed them to enjoy the theatre, concerts, books, and ballets that the metropolis had to offer. One highlight of their European stay was a trip to Paris. Peggy continued writing, submitting a poem titled “Let My Voice Live” that was narrated by an old woman and signed “Meg—A Canadian in England” (154).

The Laurences set sail in December 1949 to a new continent, a new decade, and a new life. This chapter draws heavily on Laurence’s travel memoir, *The Prophet’s Camel Bell* (1963). Sailing from Rotterdam on the *Tigre*, they paused in Genoa and visited the Staglieno cemetery, where Margaret saw the marble angels that inspired *The Stone Angel*.

“East Africa: 1950–1952” describes the Laurences’ year-and-a-half sojourn in the British Protectorate of Somaliland, where Jack was hired by the Department of Public Works to build *ballehs*, or

reservoirs, in the Haud desert—a sojourn that forms the focus of *The Prophet's Camel Bell*. There Laurence found a new literary pursuit—the translation of Somali folk literature that she later termed “a labour of love” (173) and that formed the basis of her first published book, *A Tree for Poverty: Somali Poetry and Prose* (1954). Xiques concludes, “The complex and challenging process of shaping satisfactory translations sharpened Peggy’s literary skills” (173).

The eighth chapter, “Heart of a Stranger,” is similarly subdivided, the first section labeled “The Gold Coast, 1952–1956.” While Jack was involved in building a port at Tema (now in Ghana), Margaret was writing the Ghanaian stories later collected in *The Tomorrow-Tamer and Other Stories* (1963). Their sojourn in the Gold Coast—to become Ghana in 1967 under the rule of Nkrumah—was punctuated by a trip to London for the birth of their first child, Jocelyn, in 1952 and by a trip to Canada in 1954, where they spent time with Margaret’s “Mum” in Victoria and Adele Wiseman’s family in Winnipeg. Adele’s correspondence with Margaret, later edited by John Lennox and Ruth Panofsky, was one of Laurence’s lifelines during this period when she was beset by the conflicts between mothering and writing as well as the problems of being a memsahib, a role she loathed. While Adele published her first novel, *The Sacrifice*, to considerable acclaim in 1956, Margaret completed her first novel, *This Side Jordan* (1960). This novel, set in the Gold Coast, later won the Beta Sigma Phi first novel award. Laurence left Africa in 1957, ending what she called “my seven years’ love affair with a continent,” when she was summoned home to Canada by the terminal illness of her beloved “Mum.”

“Stolen Time,” the ninth chapter, chronicles Laurence’s five years on the west coast of Canada, 1957–1962. These were turbulent years for the Laurences, beginning with Margaret’s deathbed watch in Victoria, which she later characterized as one of the most anguished periods of her life. Living with her demanding Aunt Ruby, caring for her dying mother and her two young children, waiting for Jack to return from Africa, and trying to write, she records, “I felt like my life had changed irrevocably. The fun was over. I was thirty-one” (*Dance* 113). One of the sources of comforts was Jack’s mother, Elsie Laurence, herself a published writer, who encouraged Margaret, even typing part of *This Side Jordan*.

Following the death of Margaret’s mother, the Laurences settled in Vancouver, where Jack found work as an engineer. Margaret busied herself with multiple tasks. She marked papers for University of British Columbia professor Gordon Elliott, who became a great

friend. She taught Sunday school at a Unitarian church, for which she wrote her first children's book, *A Christmas Birthday Story*, in 1959, although it was not published until 1980. She wrote nineteen book reviews for the *Vancouver Sun* and published short stories in the Canadian periodical *Prism* and in Macmillan's annual collection of *Winter's Tales*, later collecting them in *The Tomorrow-Tamer and Other Stories*. Each publication introduced her to literary figures who became important in her writing life: Canadian novelist Ethel Wilson wrote to Margaret to congratulate her on her African story, and Alan Maclean, whose family home in Buckinghamshire she subsequently purchased, was the Macmillan editor who accepted her stories for *Winter's Tales*.

Meanwhile, she was trying to write her Somali novel, at the same time editing her Somali journal for *The Prophet's Camel Bell*, composing her Ghanaian stories, writing *The Stone Angel*, and caring for her two young children. She describes the conflicts in her memoir: "I [. . .] felt like I was attempting an impossible juggling act" (157). She acknowledges to Adele Wiseman on 1 December 1957, "I hit the bottle pretty hard" (Lennox 102), and on 19 February 1958, admits her greatest "inner demon" was losing her temper with her children (238). The conflicts of this era in Laurence's life, lived under the threat of nuclear war, are reflected in her Vancouver novel, *The Fire-Dwellers*. The problems of her heroine, Stacey Cameron MacAindra, probably reflect some of Laurence's during this period.

When Jack planned to take up a position in East Pakistan, Margaret, who felt she could no longer be a memsahib and was concerned about the children's schooling, elected to take the children to England. This trial separation may have been influenced by her acquaintance with Barbadian novelist, George Lamming, in Vancouver. Xiques refutes James King's claim in *The Life of Margaret Laurence* (1997) that Laurence was having an affair with Lamming and followed him to London (287). Hagar Shipley, protagonist of *The Stone Angel*, was perhaps as great an influence as Lamming in the Laurences' decision to separate because Jack read the novel in draft and did not like it. Laurence writes to Adele Wiseman on 29 August 1962 that this trial separation "will be the opportunity to terminate a kind of delayed adolescence, at the advanced age of 36, and it is really now or never" (148)—rather like Morag Gunn, who outgrows her older, professor husband in Laurence's last Manawaka novel, *The Diviners*. Although Laurence's marriage was teetering, her writing career was taking off. She published her first novel, *This Side Jordan*, in 1960; her first collection of short stories, *The*

Tomorrow-Tamer and Other Stories, in 1963; her first memoir, *The Prophet's Camel Bell*, also in 1963, and her first Canadian novel, *The Stone Angel*, in 1964—four books in just four years. Knopf, in an unprecedented maneuver, published three of the four books on the same day in 1964.

The tenth and final chapter, “Uncertain Alchemy,” subtitled “England 1962–1963,” chronicles the first two years of Laurence’s decade in England. Drawn by her familiarity with London, its literary ambience, and its anonymity, Laurence rented a flat on Heath Hurst Road near Keats’s house. With her children, she explored London’s manifold sights. Far from Canada and separated from her husband of fifteen years, she began to revisit her childhood by writing the stories that were later collected in *A Bird in the House*. Here ends what Xiques calls “her literary apprenticeship” (311). Xiques includes in this final chapter a detailed discussion of some of the stories in *The Tomorrow-Tamer and Other Stories*. One feels, however, that this discussion should have appeared earlier—either in the discussion of Laurence’s life in the Gold Coast, which provided the inspiration for the stories, or in the discussion of her life in Vancouver, when she was composing the stories.

Despite one’s feeling the need for a concluding chapter, the last paragraphs of this final chapter do serve to conclude the text, as Xiques writes, “The unfolding of Margaret Laurence’s own early story—her literary apprenticeship and her emergence as a writer—makes the account of her literary beginnings as compelling and vivid a story as any in the world of her own fiction” (311). These are not the last words of the book, however. *Margaret Laurence: The Making of a Writer* includes three stories as appendices: “Mrs. Cathcart, In and Out of Purdah,” “A Fable—For the Whaling Fleets” (also included in the appendices to Laurence’s memoir), and the haunting tale, “A Queen in Thebes,” two of which are not readily available.

The fruit of fifteen years of assiduous research, as evidenced by its 1038 endnotes, *Margaret Laurence: The Making of a Writer* is as much a labor of love as Margaret Laurence’s first book. The only disappointment for the reader is that it ends too soon.

Notes

1. Unless otherwise indicated, all parenthetical citations are to *Margaret Laurence: The Making of a Writer*.

2. Laurence's juvenilia are published in *Embryo Words: Margaret Laurence's Early Writings* and in *Colors of Speech: Margaret Laurence's Early Writings*.

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