

Reviews of Recent Island Literature

A Little Island Princess and The Oyster and the Mermaid by Emily Laviolette. Femwood, Prince Edward Island, Elaine Harrison & Associates, 1974-75. 86 pp. \$3.00 (each) paperback.

Not since L.M. Montgomery has an Island writer depicted the magic world of childhood as effectively as Emily Laviolette in these two short books. The style is simple and direct, childlike yet wise, a unity of innocence and experience.

The strength of the nine stories that comprise *The Oyster and the Mermaid* lies precisely in their artlessness. The plots are sometimes rambling and uncertain, yet they contain many delightful surprises, unexpected happenings that would be quite out of place in the deliberately thought out story-lines of more experienced writers. The brief descriptive passages are alive with concrete detail and a wide-eyed sense of wonder that such things as sunflowers, periwinkles, greedy oysters, and golden-haired mermaids exist in this

world.

Elaine Harrison deserves a great deal of credit. She encouraged Mrs. Laviolette to write these stories down, and then went to the trouble and expense of publishing and distributing both books.

Mrs. Laviolette died a year ago this past summer, a few days after the publication of *The Oyster and the Mermaid*.

Harry Baglole

A History of Mount Stewart by F.L. Pigot. Charlottetown, published privately by the author, 1975. 128 pp. \$5.00 paperback.

Frank Pigot's research leaves few stones unturned. In fact, this little book might serve as a model for others who wish to chronicle the history of a small Island community. It is an exhaustive study embracing all facets of the history of Mount Stewart from the time of earliest settlement. It also contains some excellent interpretive insights.

A History of Mount Stewart is more than an account of a village. Pigot astutely deals with the whole Hillsborough River seeing it as a commercial waterway cutting deep into the heart of the province.

Especially valuable to Island historiography is the splendid chapter on economic life. In it Pigot speaks with authority about Mount Stewart's rise in the mid-nineteenth century as a ship-building centre and service town for a prosperous agricultural and fishing community. The decline of Mount

Stewart is similarly well-documented.

Unfortunately, Mr. Pigot's book suffers badly from inadequate editing and an unattractive physical appearance. Still, in this writer's opinion it is the most impressive local history yet written on Prince Edward Island. Among general readers, residents of Mount Stewart will find this study particularly interesting. Serious students of Island history will soon discover its reliability.

Robert A. Rankin

The Night Before Summer by Milton B. Friedman. Charlottetown, Tudor Press, 1976. 128 pp. \$1.95 paperback.

The contrast between *Anne of Green Gables* and *The Night Before Summer* is symptomatic of what has been happening to the North Shore of Prince Edward Island in this past generation. The former is a sensitive expression of a way of life and gains much of its enduring strength from its roots in rural Island society. The latter is a relentlessly mediocre comic-book-style romance written by an itinerant summer resident from the United

States. Although tirelessly promoted by its author, its flash-in-the-pan notoriety (7,000 copies purportedly sold in five weeks) is primarily the result of the fuss obilgingly stirred up by local citizenry over the use of a few four letter words and a lesbian aunt. *The Night Before Summer* could have been written by any North American high school graduate using Rayburn's *Geographical Names of Prince Edward Island* as reference.

A few quotations will suffice to give the flavour:

"Oh! Sweetie . . . I think Edith is

kind of fruity herself. . . ."

He laid (sic) on top of her and felt the sun-warmed softness of her body.

"I like the summer people," Aletha said, looking at Maurice. "They add a little class to the island."

Rumour has it that Mr. Friedman is busily at work on a sequel. A suggested title — *The Mourning After*.

Harry Baglole

The Island Means Minago by Milton Acorn. Toronto, New Canada Publications, 1975. 122 pp. \$3.95 paperback.

A hard knot am I
like a den of snakes tangled.

Milton Acorn, the winner of a Governor General's Medal for Poetry, is Prince Edward Island's most eminent living poet. However, this latest book is less an anthology of sensitive poetry than a jingoistic interpretation of Island history. Many selections have appeared in previous volumes and a goodly number of others ("Tom Thomson's Photo," "Mister Trotsky," etc.) have little or nothing to do with

"Minago" — Micmac for "the Island."

Completely out of historical context, Acorn has imposed early twentieth-century Marxist ideology upon a small British colonial society of the 1830's and 1840's. His use of terms like "counter-revolutionaries" and "liberated areas" is, of course, pure nonsense; moreover, the oppressiveness of the legendary tenant-landlord relationship on the Island is exaggerated.

Quite apart from the political or historical character of *Minago*, the violence and anger of the author's recent poetry is somewhat disagreeable. Acorn sees rebellion in everything — the Acadiens at Malpeque, the hummingbird, his own blood cells, even the colours red and green. There is no

longer any solitude or contentment in his poetry. This should come as no surprise, however, since the poet prides himself in his ferociousness: "My soul's no wind-balanced gull. It's a wolverine."

The Island Means Minago does not measure up to Acorn's earlier published works. A few poems, among them "Rent Collection," "Callum," and "John Dhru Macintosh Stands Up In Church," are fresh and profound; yet too much of this volume is trite, strangled by the poet's political views. It is too bad Mr. Acorn now finds it necessary to seize poetry by the throat.

Robert A. Rankin

The Brothers Dewar and the Family Farm: New Perth — A History by Lloyd George Dewar, Summerside, Prince Edward Island, published privately by the author, 1975. 160 pp. \$5.00 paperback.

As the title suggests, this publication is primarily a history of the author's own family, from their arrival aboard the *Clarendon* in 1808 until the present day. It is secondly an account of the small Scottish community in Kings County where the Dewars settled and where their descendants still live. The reader will quickly discover that this book is a study by a man who feels a

responsibility to sing the praises of the family farm tradition on Prince Edward Island.

It is wished to give the history of a family farm, the one on which I was born . . . This would seem like a timely effort in an era when agriculture is in the throes of an upheaval which threatens the very existence of the small rural holding . . .

Mr. Dewar's biographical sketches of ancestors are often burdened with detailed information that only a Dewar could ever wish to know. Although somewhat unorthodox, accompanying

genealogical charts are quite straightforward. A chapter entitled "A Short History of New Perth" comes inappropriately at the end of the book and intriguing ideas concerning the introduction of modern technology to traditional farming practices are mentioned only in passing.

Those who have completed a history of their family will know the work and relentless inquiring which are the ingredients of this book. *The Brothers Dewar* will be read by the Dewars, their relatives and friends, as well as by avid collectors of Islandia.

Robert A. Rankin

Tell Me the Tales by Walter Shaw. Charlottetown, Square Deal Publications, 1975. 166 pp. \$4.50 paperback.

Walter Shaw, whose involvement with politics spanned thirty-six years, was Premier of Prince Edward Island from 1959-1966. Although his narrative deals mainly with the Scottish community of St. Catherine's, the conditions and life styles portrayed can be applied to most of the Island during

the pioneer era.

In his introduction Shaw is explicit about the scope of his book:

This tale does not attempt to deal with broad political, industrial or economic developments . . . but rather with lesser activities, the home life, smaller community affairs, the romance of the period, the early church, the school; and those humbler but equally significant events

that characterized the heritage passed into our keeping.

Shaw's appreciation of the rural beauty of Prince Edward Island and its slow-paced way of life should please Island devotees. To those uninitiated into Island tradition and lore, *Tell Me the Tales* will provide some insight into the origins of Island society.

Deirdre Kessler