

THE NEW CANADIAN HERO

Canadian literature has a new hero. His birth is announced in **The New Hero: Essays in Comparative Quebec/Canadian Literature** by Ronald Sutherland (Macmillan of Canada, 1977). The old one, Sutherland tells us, was a nonconformist who felt his losses were his own fault. He was not only a loser but a determined loser. The new hero is a nonconformist who wins. Sutherland first found him emerging four or five years ago in the works of Sinclair Ross, Adele Wiseman and André Langevin.

The Ross example is persuasive. In Ross's first novel, *As for Me and My House*, published in 1941, Philip Bentley, a clergyman who did not believe in his ministry, was presented by his wife, the narrator, as a man frozen by irresolution. Finally, he seduced a foolish virgin, became a father, brooded awhile and then left for a new, dreary life as a shopkeeper. Ross's hero in *Sawbones Memorial*, published in 1974, is the new breed, a country doctor named Hunter who defies small-town strictures through a long and industrious life—drinking and womanizing, performing euthanasia where needed, shielding a man who has committed a semi-justified homicide, and triumphantly contributing to the support, education and career of the son no one else (except the charwoman mother) knows is his. As Sutherland points out, there have always been Doctor Hunters in Canadian fiction, but they have always been outcasts. This one is a winner.

Margaret Atwood defined the Canadian hero as a survivor; but as Sutherland points out, survivors are found all over the literary map—Huck Finn, Jane Eyre, Leopold Bloom and almost everybody in *War and Peace*. Sutherland defends his definitions persuasively. He says the hero/loser was fashioned by both the Calvinistic puritanism of the English-speaking Protestants and the equally dour Jansenism of the French-speaking (and Irish) Catholics. In both literary traditions, the nonconformist was like the unrepentant thief who turned his face away from salvation. Jansenism has lost its grip on Quebec, and Calvinism has faded, somewhat less dramatically, in the English-speaking provinces. So, Sutherland proposes, Canadians are free to have a new hero, the happy, successful rebel.

Sutherland may have spotted a trend, but it is not yet a revolution. New heroes lurk in the hills, no doubt, making occasional dashes into print, but there is hardback evidence that the old determined losers are with us still.

The Common Touch by T. A. Keenleyside (Doubleday Canada, 1977) is about Canadian diplomats in the Third World; and the hero is essentially a loser, though this may not have been the author's intent. Mr. Keenleyside used to be a member of the external affairs department himself, and the novel, as he notes in the introduction, reflects his own discouraging experiences.

The setting is a composite country in Southeast Asia called Bukara, and the protagonist is a composite foreign service officer named Rutherford. Rutherford is a careful nonconformist (he sends the ambassador a memo everytime he bends a rule) who wishes to do good rather than well. He is defeated at almost every turn by his conforming peers and superiors and even betrayed by his wife. But—and this may be the first crude, impulsive rush of a new hero coming out of the bush—in the last chapter he publicly browbeats the Canadian prime minister who happens to be passing through Bukara, quits his job and joins the mildly radical new Bukarian government as a special advisor. The last line of the novel has a carefully heroic quality all its own: "He drove out of the embassy parking lot, stopping momentarily to hand a coin to a beggar near the gate."

The hero of **Shrewsbury** by Jamie Brown (Clarke, Irwin, 1977) is a cup of stronger tea. Gould Moncrieff is a nonconformist and a fairly persistent loser. Mr. Brown is a better writer than Mr. Keenleyside; and Gould, the last of a once powerful clan, is much more human, though no more endearing. He is oppressed through most of the narrative by irresistible, alien, mindless, soulless institutions: labour unions that could destroy his family's factories, colleges staffed by cynics and attended by aimless young rebels, politicians without coherent purpose and American fast-food chains without good burgers. He is supported, though that is too strong a word, by a foolish father, an autocratic grandmother, a narrow-minded uncle and a beautiful girl cousin who has troubles similar to his own.

Gould is an unbeautiful loser for the first 212 pages of the 228-page book. And then, by an executive decision of the author, he becomes a winner. His sudden triumphs are fortuitous (he discovers that the thirty-two walnut trees on his father's burnt-out farm are each worth \$4,000) and skimmed over without details: ". . . months of study followed. Seasons of utterly fanatical dedication to a single idea. Weeks of early morn-