

by David Deaton

Dance on the Earth
by Margaret Laurence
(McClelland & Stewart, 298 pp.)

To hear the wise and compassionate voice of Margaret Laurence reawakens the sadness of her passing in 1987. Her memoir comes to us posthumously. She perished before she could publish.

Jocelyn Laurence, her daughter, has done a skillful job of editing from rough drafts and tapes. *Dance on the Earth* has not only the dimensions of a full-scale autobiography, it contains a generous sampling of articles, addresses, poems and letters. We needn't wait for further posthumous collections. This is it.

It seems an impertinence to summarize a life, especially a life as well known and well lived as Margaret Laurence's.

Canada's greatest novelist was born in Neepawa, Manitoba in 1926 and grew up just as the depression had reduced most families to hardscrabble poverty. The description of her prairie youth is a poignant chronicle of disorder and early sorrow.

First her mother died (age 34), when Margaret was four. Her father died five years later, leaving her and her younger brother to be raised by their loving stepmother/aunt. "Given all the deaths in my family, I think it is remarkable I'm as steady as I am," Laurence remarks.

The bereavement of childhood gives way to the achievement of college when Laurence recounts her days at the University of Winnipeg. It was as editor of the college newspaper that she became joyously aware of her literary vocation and passionately committed to social justice.

She married shortly after graduating. Her husband was an engineer ten years older than herself with whom she was initially happy. Two children followed, Jocelyn and David.

With Jack Laurence accepting overseas engineering assignments, the family lived in some exotic places. Particularly vivid is the time spent in Africa during the 1950s, when British colonies were struggling for independence.

Not long after, Margaret Laurence embarked on a similar course. Though her husband cared for her, he could not appreciate or even accept her literary strivings.

Their marriage broke up in 1962, in part over what is now her most famous novel:

When I wrote the first draft of *The Stone Angel*, Jack wanted to read it. I didn't want him to. I think I knew his response would be pivotal in our marriage. I didn't want anybody except a publisher to read it. It was a novel into which I had invested my life, my heart, and my spirit. I allowed Jack

to read it in the end and he didn't like it much, but for me it was the most important book I had written, a book on which I had to stake the rest of my life.

She did. Margaret Laurence settled in England, children in tow, and spent the next decade forging the greatest fictional achievement of this or any age.

One after another of the Manawaka novels poured out: *The Stone Angel* (1964), *A Jest of God* (1966), *The Fire-Dwellers* (1969), *A Bird in the House* (1970), finally *The Diviners* (1974).

Laurence moved back to Canada in the early 70s, to a little town near Peterborough. She held several writer-in-residencies (Trent, Western, U of T) and championed any number of admirable causes.

But her glorious stream of fiction was over. Those expecting another Manawaka masterpiece were greeted instead with *Six Darn Cows* (1979). Her last three books were all children's stories. She published nothing after 1980.

A mere chronology, however, does not do justice to the life of Margaret Laurence. There is always her unparalleled fiction to account for.

Perhaps the greatest revelation of *Dance On the Earth* is Laurence's assertion that she felt literally inspired when writing her books. It is almost comical how she describes the process each time with the same wide-eyed wonder:

The Stone Angel: "The novel poured forth. It was as if the old woman was actually there, telling me her life story, and it was my responsibility to put it down as faithfully as I could."

A Jest of God: "I remember sitting down in my study one morning, the kids safely off to school, opening a notebook and beginning, as I always have, as though taking down dictation."

The Diviners: "I felt as though I had been waiting for it, and it had been waiting for me. I couldn't write it fast enough."

But that is all we do learn about these magical creations. Those expecting a literary memoir will also be disappointed. Laurence gives more pages to how she came to occupy any of her particular homes than to how she composed any of her books.

We are not surprised. If one thing is made terribly clear in her memoir, it is that Margaret Laurence was a devoted parent. The "life dance of pain and love" that underlies her life is that of motherhood.

Dance On the Earth might have been more pointedly titled *How We Coped*. The first hundred pages consciously

honour the three great mother-figures in her life. A chapter is named for each of them.

The chapter called "Margaret" relates how a struggling single mother managed to raise her children to responsible adulthood with precious little support. We are given an idea of just how much Margaret Laurence had to sacrifice to pursue her vocation:

Loneliness was an almost constant part of my life, but I had always been a lonely person. ... I severely missed having a mate, someone to talk things over with and to share worries with. There were times when I would have settled merely for a sexual relationship. ... The fact that a woman has children and is a devoted artist in no way lessens her sexual and adult emotional needs. However, my priorities were clear: the kids and the work, the work



Margaret Laurence in 1964

and the kids.

As for which of these two priorities came first, one has only to look at the fifty family photographs included in this volume.

Margaret Laurence fit her writing in when she could. The muse spoke to her only after her children had been taken care of:

The children were always infinitely more important. I could never work when one of the kids was sick. Real people are more important than writing. Life is always more important than Art.

"This," Laurence notes, "may be a major difference between women writers who are mothers and men writers who are fathers. I certainly don't mean this as a diatribe against male writers, but many women writers have known the pain of being asked to choose between their children and their writing. For us, there is no choice."

Margaret Laurence did not have a bitter bone in her body, but her anger and indignation comes

through in such observations. Her feminism, clearly, was not theoretical. A lifetime of male deprecation can be inferred from one line describing her aunt: "She was an intelligent woman who couldn't pretend to be otherwise. It was a problem for her."

But Margaret Laurence was determined to be gracious unto death. She even has generous words for her lot of a husband. The only people she lashes out at are anonymous war-mongers:

I hate the men who make wars. I hate the old statesmen, the old politicians, the old military men, who talk of "megadeaths" and "acceptable losses." I hate them with all my heart and soul and voice.

But even her hatred is the concealed concern of motherhood. "I dare to speak because I care" she affirms in one of her moving

appeals for peace. Elsewhere she explains:

Some people have wondered why I have become so voluble in my protests against the nuclear arms race. It is because, by an extension of the imagination, all children are mine. All the children, beloved by their mothers and fathers, belong to all of us.

In the end, however, having such an imagination might have been a curse for Margaret Laurence. It pained her terribly to know what kind of world her children had inherited.

Margaret Laurence lived into an era when global crisis had reduced her art to a triviality and her children's future to a question mark. She gamely asserts, even on her deathbed:

I continue to believe, all evidence to the contrary, that it is not too late to save our only home, the planet earth, and that it is not too late, even at this very late date, to learn to live on and with the

earth, in harmony with all creatures.

But in other moments the evidence is too much for her. Anyone who feels obliged to assert, "The struggle is not lost," knows deep down that it is. What despair lies in her admission that:

Although I keep on, although I yell and roar, I suppose in my heart I sometimes believe it may well be too late. It is unconscionable. I feel so angry, so helpless. The whole earth ruined so that a few people can make something they call money. What a travesty. What a tragedy.

Even noble people, heroic individuals, can despair. It is no great secret that Margaret Laurence drank heavily in her later years. Her chain-smoking was legendary. For all of her autobiography's "celebration of life," it seems as though she did everything in her power to shorten her own.

Margaret Laurence died (of lung cancer) when she was only sixty. Her creative life had ended a good ten years earlier. She had expended herself as a writer, and even, perhaps, as a mother.

Our last heart-rending impression of her comes in the preface by her daughter, Jocelyn:

When I came up to Peterborough to take her home from the hospital for a few hours, she was sitting in a chair and for the few seconds before she realized I was there, she looked tiny and lost and discouraged, a small child in a world she couldn't cope with and didn't really understand.

A mother's final indignity! To be no longer able to cope!

Margaret Laurence insists in her memoir that she was a fortunate woman and, indeed, she was, if just to have been so prophetically gifted. But she could not have been a very happy woman. Dear heart and stoical Scot that she was, she sooner died than admitted it.

That leaves readers of *Dance On the Earth* (a title that grows increasingly ironic) to read between the lines. Margaret Laurence did not fully address the shadows in her life. Who can? All we can do is respect her reticence, honour her memory, and wait for the biographies to come out.

