Hugh Eayrs

Louis Hémon, *Maria Chapdelaine*, trad. par W. H. Blake

FOREWORD

If the editors of the Modern Library were to survey Canadian fiction, or rather fiction written on Canadian soil, they could find nothing to surpass Louis Hémon's story of French Canada, *Maria Chapdelaine*, in its translation into English by William Hume Blake. First published in 1921, the intervening years, the most productive Canadian letters, have yielded nothing which answers its challenge. This book, originally written by a French émigré to Canada and done into English by a Canadian, still remains Canada's most lasting contribution to English romantic literature.

Its history is interesting. Hémon, a Breton, born in 1880, came to Canada in 1912. He had some reputation in his native France as a journalist in the fields of literature and sport and had published a novel of English life, *Lizzie Blakeston*. (Other works of his were not published until after his death.) Eager to go further afield that his own continent, he seems to have turned, naturally enough, from the old France to the new. Cities held little attraction for him. He quickly made his way to the hinterland of Quebec and spent many months there, at St. Gédéon, Roberval, and, above all, at Peribonka, where he secured the material for the present book.

Those of us who know the stern loveliness of Tadoussac, the Saguenay and the country beyond may picture Hémon as he worked on the farm owned by Samuel Bédard (Chapdelaine in the story). There he found "Maria" and her people.

He wrote the book in Montreal some time afterward and sent it to Paris. He never lived to see it in print, for he was run down and killed by a train in Northern Ontario in the midsummer of 1913. He lies at Chapleau, Ontario, curiously enough a settlement half French Canadian.

Early in 1914 *Le Temps* published *Maria Chapdelaine* serially. It created no stir at the time, nor did its appearance in French in Canada under the imprint of a journeyman printer in Montreal. It was at the suggestion of M. Louvingy de Montigny, the distinguished representative (in Canada) of the French Society "*Les Droits D'auteurs*", that the first small

edition was issued. In 1921, however, the alert French critic, M. Daniel Halévy, revived *Maria Chapdelaine* as the initial number of the famous "*Cahiers Verts*." From that time on its sales mounted at an amazing rate. They rolled up to three-quarters of a million copies in an astonishingly short time. The book is still actively in demand in a number of editions, the most notable of which has, as accompaniment to the exquisite text, the equally exquisite illustrations by Clarence Gagnon, a famous French-Canadian artist.

In February of 1921 William Hume Blake of Toronto and Sir Andrew Macphail of Montreal were impressed by the importance of the work. It had not yet secured a large public in France. They planned a joint translation. They brought this plan for joint translation to me. It was soon evident that they differed in their views as to the method and manner of their common task, and they decided each to go his own way. I elected to go ahead with publishing plans for the Blake translation. It was the Canadian House of Macmillan, with which I have been proud to be associated for so many years, that first gave this translation of *Maria Chapdelaine* to the world. Publication in New York and London by the Macmillan Company soon followed. The Blake translation is now familiar to many hundreds of thousands of readers. Its fame has grown steadily for thirteen years. I am happy that it is now published by my friends Bennett Cerf and Donald Klopfer in the Modern Library, New York and Canada.

What is the charm of *Maria Chapdelaine* and why is its place so secure? We may examine, before we answer that, two objections which from time to time have been raised in Canada and beyond its borders. It is suggested that it is not a complete picture of French Canada and the French-Canadian peasant. It is said that Hémon's depiction is altogether too stark and unrelieved; that while he revealed to the full the dark and melancholy quality of the *habitant*, he neglected almost entirely the lighter side. It is charged that he passed over the irrepressible gaiety, the mercurial swiftness of change from the heavy and brooding to the lightsome and sunny, and above all, the utter joy of living and superb carelessness which are characteristic of French-Canadian family life in rural, better, in backwoods Quebec. ...A great French Canadian, Sir Wilfrid Laurier, felt he knew his countrymen as predominantly happy and contented; they were men and women in love with life and with their way of

living in their own beloved Quebec. He insisted that Hémon had never touched upon this national trait at all. Sir Wilfrid–and there were those who agreed with him–saw *Maria Chapdelaine* as a picture in dull and heavy tones and said so gently; he thought it less than fair. But Louis Hémon himself was, I think, the answer to that.

Here was a Frenchman but lately removed from a country and a setting in highest contrast to the backlands of Quebec. Hémon had lived the life of a Parisian. He came to Quebec seeking and expecting, it is permissible to think, if not another Paris certainly another France not greatly different from the one he knew. He could never hope to find them in Peribonka. The gauntness of that scene, with its thick, abundant forests, its hills stark against the sky, its reluctantly yielding acres, the loneliness for the few men and women, scattered here and there in little bands, struggling to wrest a bare living from a land over which they could never really hope to triumph, the despair which was the very keynote and stuff of that scene–all these must have burned themselves into the mind of the exiled Frenchman. New France! This was how the young man of old France saw it. Everything was opposite to what he had left behind and to what he had anticipated. How capture the gay, how imprison the joyous in this setting of which he himself was part? It must not be forgotten that by experience he was the trained reporter, and his tale, though it was fictional in form, was fundamentally reportorial in character. Observing the darker side, he novelized the darker side. I believe he would have come to know a great deal more of French Canada, if he had lived longer. He might then have given us a more balanced, more rounded picture, though that is debatable. I am not sure that Hémon would have seen Quebec whole.

It was in the creation of his characters rather than of his locale that his painting was in these duller tones. That was so because his own reflections and impressions, being the man he was, would more naturally touch his people than his places. His scenes are done with an amazing fidelity, with simplicity and even *naïveté*.

A second objection has been raised. I discuss it here, though this edition is in English, because the point is germane. It has been said that his idiom in *Maria Chapdelaine* was faulty, that his recording of the French-Canadian language, in many respects quite another thing from Parisian French, was not accurate. The reply to that is a note by Blake which is

by me as I write.

"His characters suggest rather than speak the vernacular. Had he allowed them the full scope of their native speech and intonation, those equipped only with modern French would often find themselves at a loss. The doubter can test his eye and ear upon a book such as *Maria Calumet.* Some disparage this old tongue (French Canadian) as a *patois* with as much or as little justice as a Londoner might so treat English dialects. You will find that those who know their own language best are the readiest to admit that this is French in the backbone, though archaic and sprinkled with English, and are amazed, not at the changes and corruptions it has suffered, but at the essential purity it has maintained. They will also be aware that the dialect is yet alive in that corner of France whence these peasants came, where the man from Quebec would still find himself at home. It is interesting also to note that excellent French words like *patates* and *fiable* (trust-worthy) linger in Quebec though they have oddly drifted out of the main current of the mother tongue. For convenience, of necessity indeed, a number of English words have been absorbed and not a few examples will be found in *Maria Chapdelaine*... Hémon did not think it wise to put the undiluted dialect into the mouths of his peasant-folk.

These things said, what is the charm of the book? For me it lies, first, in the fact that it is an incomparable picture of Quebec and its people. Second, that Blake by his translation helped to make it so. If one were to ask those who come to Canada and cross the country from ocean to ocean what impression remains unforgettable, the great majority would speak of the sights and sounds and scenes of Quebec. There is nothing quite like it on this continent. Here is a people neighbourly to the United States, neighbourly to fellow-Canadians in the Maritime Provinces on the one side and Ontario on the other, but remaining in viewpoint and outlook, as they remain in language, separate and apart. Hémon saw that, and made it the central theme of this story. Maria's love and its tragedy was incidental. The story caught up, with all its differences, this new France and laid it against the face of his own beloved France across the seas. He saw that in essentials it fitted. He found in the men and women of Quebec the same devotion to duty, to God and to their own way of worshipping God, the same curious almost fatalistic shrug of the shoulder to whatever may

come, the same regard for the traditional, often merely because it was traditional, the same sure, even blind faith in themselves, and underneath all a staunch pride in the conviction that their roots were not here but in that older mother–France. Consider Hémon's words in the last chapter: *"Autour de nous des étrangers sont venus, qu'il plaît d'appeler des barbares; ils ont pris presque tout le pouvoir; ils ont acquis presque tout l'argent; mais au pays de Québec rien n'a changé. Rien ne changera, parce que nous sommes un témoignage... Et nous sommes maintenus, peut-être afin que dans plusieurs siècles encore le monde se tourne vers nous et dise : Ces gens sont d'une race qui ne sait pas mourir... Nous sommes un témoignage."*

It is as though this Frenchman of France had found another France, so different in so many ways that the difference almost hurt him and yet so basically the same that he could offer it as guarantee of new blood for the old veins. *Maria Chapdelaine* was the sing and token of that guarantee.

I have spoken of Blake's part as translator. It was a labour of love to him to do this book into English. I have always wished Hémon could have seen it. There was no one in Canada quite so equipped to do it. Blake knew and loved French Canada and its people, and they loved him. He was a familiar figure for many years at Pointe au Pic. His family home was there and I think he knew every man, woman and child in the countryside. At fifty he was still "M'sieu' Willie" to them. One of my cherished memories is a long week-end at Lac Gravel near by, with him, Mr. Taft, who had laid down the cares of the Presidency, and Sir Lomer Gouin, a great figure in Quebec life. I remember that we sat in front of a roaring fire, after a long day's fishing, while Blake read his translation to us. He was anxious that English-speaking Canada first, and after that the world, should have this picture of the Province which was his second home... He was so wise in his method of rendering Hémon's prose into our tongue; the dotted "i" and the crossed "t" meant far less than his capture of the living spirit of Hémon's words. The simplicity and beauty and grace of the original was complemented and supplemented by the dress which Blake gave it. The result was a perfect little cameo... It will live.

FOREWORD

Source : Hugh Eayrs, «Foreword», in Louis Hémon, *Maria Chapdelaine. A Tale of the Lake St. John Country*, translated and with an Introduction by W. H. Blake with a Foreword by Hugh Eayrs, Toronto, The Macmillan Company of Canada, 1934, p.xix-xx.