

perception, frequently bores and often repeats conventional wisdom on the whys and wherefores of legislative action or electoral politics.

The analytical content is sparse, though not entirely absent. The final two chapters provide limited but interesting observations on federal-provincial relations. Dr. Eager argues that the voters have felt defensive toward Quebec in the past decade because the East lumps the West together with Ontario as "English Canada." She states "it is debatable whether frustration ran deeper at being regarded as a satellite of Ontario or at being unfairly castigated, as the West felt, for hostility toward Quebec." The argument, I think, is worth stating for it is one that undoubtedly influenced Western responses to the federal government over the constitution.

To my mind what is singly missing in this scholarly compendium of facts is a sense of intellectual puzzlement. The book reads as an encyclopaedia: this occurred; that is the undoubted explanation for it; then the next event occurred. There is no profound implications here, no serious intellectual challenges, no controversy that might fascinate the mind. Yet Saskatchewan presents exciting challenges to both the theorist and the practical politician. Morton, Lipset, Zakuta, Young, and Richardson have for example offered original analyses and arguments. Eager's contribution is valuable for those who wish to engage further in those debates, but its value is in its detail, not in its analytical insight.

Patricia Marchak

Department of Anthropology and Sociology
University of British Columbia

The River Horsemen, by David Williams. Toronto: Anansi, 1981. 224 pp., \$9.95, paper.

"Suddenly I understood everything in life which had perplexed my life. The powers of destruction were here among us. We were living in the end times and didn't see it" (p. 140). These words of one of the principal characters in *The River Horsemen* provide a major insight into David Williams' disturbing but powerful novel. The novel is indeed set in apocalyptic times—Saskatchewan in 1937. However, the "four horsemen" alluded to by the title and preface are a rather unlikely lot; two Indians, a Ukrainian youth, and a fundamentalist preacher who are travelling upriver from Lacjardin to Saskatoon by tractor, car, canoe, and train.

While use of the journey as a narrative device is certainly a well-worn (or time-honoured) convention, Williams' narrative technique is far from conventional. He makes strong demands on his readers, forcing them to reconstruct the plot from the inner monologues of the

four principal characters. In addition to receiving conflicting or complementary impressions of the same events from different points of view and frequent allusions to events not previously described, readers must sort out the relative significance of memories, dreams, nightmares, present thoughts, and realities. These demands on the reader, however, are brilliantly conceived because they are in keeping with both theme and characterization. The major characters themselves, to a greater or lesser extent, inhabit inner worlds where there is no clear demarcation between dream and reality.

Among them, these four characters are suffering from the loss of gods and loved ones, and are obsessed with fear of failure, dreams, death, insanity, and spiritual and sexual impotency. Young Nick, the Ukrainian boy, is journeying to Saskatoon to carry word of his father's death to his mentally-ill, tubercular mother. He is assisted by an old Indian, Fine-day, and a lapsed revivalist preacher, Jack Caan, both of whom are suffering from disillusionment with life brought on in part by marriage break-ups resulting from failure to produce longed-for offspring. The fourth major character, Many-birds, is a demonic ex-convict, obsessed with sex. His purpose in travelling to Saskatoon is to pursue his former lover, the wife of a Ukrainian barber who viciously shaved off all the young Indian's hair.

The "scalping" of Many-birds by a white-man provides a good example of the complexity of symbolism which Williams employs. "But I still think those white guys are only half of my goddam troubles. There's got to be something bigger up there that's dead against Indians. Thunder Bird, are you scalped now too, that you don't have the Power to look out for us?" (p. 121). Thwarted though he is by the loss of his hair and Jack Caan's watchful eye, the bald-headed Many-birds still represents unmitigated lust to the extent he can almost be considered a human phallic symbol, although a somewhat ironic or ineffectual one, since he really does not manage to live up to his name.

A far more sympathetic Indian character is Fine-day, a recluse for twenty years, living with dreams, memories, and the dread of death since losing his son to tuberculosis and his wife to Many-birds' father. There is a fine quality of nobility and sensitivity in the old man, who discovers resources within himself which he has long since forgotten as he resurrects himself to help young Nick. He realizes "It's this feeling of hope that won't let me alone . . . that would maybe let me live in the dream if I learned not to insist on it" (p. 143). Fine-day is more than the Noble Savage representing a better and lost way of life; he is Everyman struggling on in the human predicament, retaining compassion though buffeted by life. Williams does a remarkable job of writing in four distinct styles to represent the inner monologues of each of the principal characters. It is in the chapters devoted to Fine-day, however, that his writing becomes most lyrical.

In the chapters devoted to the thoughts of Jack Caan the language reverberates with biblical allusions and symbolism. Though on occasion Jack's fundamentalist rhetoric becomes somewhat tedious, in general it rings true—as one might expect from a writer of Williams' background and skill. Though the use of rough language and the portrayal of a back-sliding minister will no doubt elicit charges of blasphemy from fundamentalists, as did William's earlier novel, *The Burning Wood*, Williams seems to answer these charges through the words of Caan: "I looked through the door at his face set in such self-righteousness. Then I turned my back on a man who sought only the face of respectability." (p. 141). While Jack Caan's binge of profligate behavior seems sharply out of character and rather insufficiently prepared for, he does fulfill the unexpected, unnatural tendency of characters bearing his initials to perform the ultimate heroic gesture in a most dramatic and pathetically unrewarding situation.

The River Horsemen is a major accomplishment of a writer growing in skill and power. In technique, style, and vision, it is considerably more complex than *The Burning Wood*. The earlier novel, however, showed evidence of a talent for humour, exuberance, and fast-paced action—qualities which are less frequently employed in the present, rather grim, intellectually and spiritually probing novel. While in tone *The River Horsemen* is rather dark and sinister, it is certainly not totally pessimistic. Man is depicted as being capable of rising from failure and disillusionment to perform acts of altruism. And *Horsemen* is not without its lighter moments. While some readers may prefer the ribald descriptions of young Nick "saluting" the flag or Highway Mary washing the windshield, I prefer the delightfully humorous and sensitive portrayal of Fine-day, the wizened child of nature, tremulously coming to grips with the machine age by driving a tractor.

Together, *The Burning Wood* and *The River Horsemen* illustrate Williams' strength and versatility as a novelist. He sets enormous imaginative tasks for himself in exploring the fundamental nature of religious, moral, physical, and creative experience, and as the following excerpt illustrates, he does so wholistically in a concrete regional setting:

The words of the story seemed suddenly to engulf the room in light, and I was there with Crystal around that blessed manger. My very bowels twitched out to entwine with hers, and then the child was ours, and the glory of the Lord shone round about. And the shepherds who arrived were come to White Fox, Saskatchewan, and a multitude of the heavenly host sang round about the house, and praised God in the sparkling cold of twenty-five below. (p. 35).

David Williams is following a great tradition in exploring epic questions through a regional setting. And he certainly has a congenial literary landscape. After all, why crate Yoknapatawpha when you have Saskatchewan?

John E. Oster
Department of Secondary Education
University of Alberta