

## *Curse of the Red Cross Ring. Earl B. Pilgrim.*

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<sup>5</sup>Gene Long, *Suspended State: Newfoundland Before Canada* (St. John's, Breakwater Books, 1999).

<sup>6</sup>Sean Cadigan, *Hope and Deception in Conception Bay: Merchant-Settler Relations in Newfoundland, 1785-1855* (Toronto, University of Toronto Press, 1995).

<sup>7</sup>Hiller offers an overview of the period in "Newfoundland Confronts Canada, 1867-1949," in E.R. Forbes and D.A. Muise, eds., *The Atlantic Provinces in Confederation* (Toronto, University of Toronto Press, 1993).

<sup>8</sup>Overton has written widely on this period. See, in particular, James Overton, "Economic Crisis and End of Democracy: Politics in Newfoundland During the Great Depression," *Labour/Le Travail* 26 (Fall 1990), and James Overton, "Brown Flour and Beriberi: The Politics of Dietary and Health Reform in Newfoundland in the First Half of the Twentieth Century," *Newfoundland Studies* 14.1 (1998): 1-27.

<sup>9</sup>Here, Overton directs the reader to John Fitzgerald and his review of my book, *Canadians at Last: Canada Integrates Newfoundland as a Province* (Toronto, University of Toronto Press, 1994). See John Fitzgerald, "The Orthodoxy Unchallenged: On Raymond Blake's *Canadians At Last*," *Newfoundland Studies* 11.1 (1995): 127-144.

<sup>10</sup>For a thorough treatment of culture and history in Newfoundland, see Peter Gerald Bannister, "The Politics of Cultural Memory: Themes in the History of Newfoundland and Labrador in Canada, 1972-2003." Research Paper prepared for Royal Commission on Renewing and Strengthening Our Place in Canada, St. John's, 2003.

<sup>11</sup>*Our Place in Canada*. Report of the Royal Commission on Renewing and Strengthening Our Place in Canada, St. John's, 2003, p. vi.

*Curse of the Red Cross Ring*. Earl B. Pilgrim. St. John's, Flanker Press, viii, 334 pp., trade pbk., \$19.95, 2000, ISBN 1-894463-11-0.

## ROBIN McGRATH

"THE SUN LOOKED boldly through its bloodshot eye as it peeked over the boiling ocean, and the breath of the toiling men mixed with the salty spray to give a pinkish hue as they hauled the huge cod trap." Thus begins *Curse of the Red Cross Ring*, and thus it continues for 334 relentless pages. *Curse of the Red Cross Ring* is a best seller, a phenomenon of Newfoundland publishing.

Given the poetry of Mary Dalton and John Steffler, the fiction of Michael Crummey and Patrick Kavanagh, the prose of D.M. Doherty and Carmelita McGrath, it is inarguable that Newfoundland and Labrador writers are finally competing nose-to-nose with some of the best writers in the world. However, according to the sales figures, it is not Dalton, Crummey or even Donna Morrissey that

Newfoundlanders are reading these days. It is Earl B. Pilgrim, author of *Curse of the Red Cross Ring*.

It is easy to be dismissive of *Curse of the Red Cross Ring*. It is unashamedly a pot-boiler, the kind of book that in an earlier time would have been classified as a penny dreadful or a dime novel. It is replete with mystery, adventure, and violence, and stuffed chock-a-block with exemplary action for the moral instruction of the young. With the exception of a few over-the-top villains, all the men are hard-working, moral, and physical giants, "the best kind," with nicknames such as Happy and Jowl and Life. Each girl is her father's favourite daughter, each wife embodies qualities found only in her husband's own saintly mother. Even the dogs and goats and chickens are larger than life.

Donna Morrissey may be credited by the *Globe and Mail* with the use of dialect constructions by an omniscient narrator, but in truth Earl B. Pilgrim got there first. When the narrator of *Curse of the Red Cross Ring* wants to describe a woman who can work like a man, we are told that the protagonist "thought more about her than he did of either man who ever worked for him," rather than that he thought more highly of her than of any man who ever worked for him. Such dialect constructions are used unselfconsciously, consistently and convincingly — there's not a phony linguistic construction in the entire text.

The plot of Pilgrim's best seller seemingly hinges on a simple device — a ring related to the Orange Order. The protagonist, Az Roberts, has been told by his mother that a curse is waiting for any man of their family who joins the Orangemen. No reason is given, nor is any forthcoming. Against her wishes, Az joins anyway and acquires a Red Cross ring. We see him lose the ring while pulling a cod trap, as the book opens, and then through a series of flashbacks and leaps forward, the ring finds its way back to him.

Between the loss and return of the ring, a variety of tragic events occur, none of which have any real connection to the ring, nor is there any but passing mention of the Orange Order. In fact, if the whole business of the cursed ring were eliminated, it would have no effect whatsoever on the actual plot, which is much more interesting.

The real story of *Curse of the Red Cross Ring*, when stripped of its fetches, tokens and premonitions, and its rather lame curse, is that of an isolated community held to ransom by a single sociopath. The phenomenon was common in the old days, before the roads went through, but it is not unknown today.

Sod Mugford, the villain of *Curse of Red Cross Ring*, is a drunkard and a wife-beater who is clever and hard-working when it suits him, and when he stays off the moonshine. The community of Beaumont tolerates him for the sake of his wife and children, but when his family finally flees to the northern settlement of L'Anse au Pigeon and the protection of Az Roberts, Sod's drinking is unchecked and he goes out of control. He takes a scunner against the new school-teacher, a handsome, brave, good-looking abstainer, and connives with two young fellows to

kill the man. Sod force-feeds the young teacher rat poison and dumps his body in the snow to make it look as if he got drunk and froze to death.

It takes the community about thirty seconds to figure out who murdered the teacher, and how. The accomplices are dispatched — one to a logging camp and one to suicide — leaving only Sod to terrorize his neighbours. Soon, he up and leaves for L'Anse au Pigeon, where, under the benign dictatorship of Uncle Az, he manages to behave himself for a time. However, with the coming of spring, the long arm of the law threatens to reach even this backwater, and Az agrees to let Sod quietly leave. Instead, Sod decides to go to the devil and to take as many men with him as possible.

The end is not so much a conclusion as a slow winding down of the many curses, premonitions, hints, and speculations that fueled the book. There is a cursory return to the theme of the Orange Order in the last page, by way of an amusing anecdote that ties the past to the present generation, and a reminder that this is “a true story” with only some of the names changed to protect the privacy of the people involved. Clearly, however, this is fiction. The events may have happened, there may have been people who loosely resembled the characters in the book, but the inner thoughts, motivations and feelings of these historic figures are pure speculation, conveyed by a semi-omniscient narrator.

So who is the narrator, and who is his target audience? The narrator is Earl B. Pilgrim, storyteller extraordinaire, who has taken in all the yarns and cuffers of a lifetime and strung them together into a ripping good tale that will not appeal much to those weaned on *Paradise Lost* or *Anatomy of Melancholy* but will be just the ticket for the rest of us.

In many ways *Curse of the Red Cross Ring* is not just one story but a series of stories. Each character — and there are dozens — is introduced with his or her own little context, his or her own story. These stories are strung together to make a book, but could just as easily have been shuffled around and fitted into any of Pilgrim's other novels.

Pilgrim works straight out of the oral tradition of storytelling that is still predominant among the older generation of Newfoundlanders. The end product is not great literature, but it is great storytelling and is typical of what writers such as Patrick Kavanagh and Wayne Johnston have built their far better books on. Without the Earl Pilgrims of this province, there would be no Patrick Kavanaghs or Wayne Johnstons, no Michael Crummseys or Donna Morrisseys. It is unlikely that a thesis in English Literature will ever be written about Pilgrim's work, but it would be a fitting and rewarding subject for a study in Folklore. In the meantime, a reader could do worse than pick up a copy and see what a large proportion of the non-reading community finds so fascinating.

Pilgrim has sold 30,000 copies in three years, almost every single copy sold in Newfoundland. According to the publisher, Coles reports that it has sold twice the

sales of Michael Crummey and Kevin Major put together. Pilgrim's next book will have a print run of 10,000, twice the national average for major publishers.

Obviously, Pilgrim's books entertain, but there is more to them than that. Consider the problem of the Patrick's Cove arsonist that was aired recently on CBC. A recluse has gone missing, houses have been burned down, residents have been driven from their homes, and even the police are at a loss as to what to do. One very disturbed and damaged individual has been fingered by everyone on the Cape Shore as the person responsible, but nobody will do it on the record. If they do, he might spend a week or two in the lockup, or in the mental hospital, but sooner rather than later he'd be out and back in Patrick's Cove with a box of matches and a very bitter grudge.

In the old days, a sociopath in a small community might have gone off the end of a wharf one evening, or through the ice one winter night. But if he had a young family or made himself useful in some way, chances are the people would be doing exactly what they're doing now in Patrick's Cove, which is watching their backs and doing nothing.

Pilgrim's *Curse of the Red Cross Ring* is a vivid, accurate, detailed description of how social justice and control were exerted back in the days when visits from distant authorities were few and far between. What *Curse of the Red Cross Ring* lacks in literary merit, it more than makes up for in authenticity. Nobody could ever suppose this book was the product of a Norman Duncan or an Annie Proulx. These writers might be able to cobble together an Az Roberts or a Sod Mugford, but Pilgrim recreates whole communities of true Newfoundlanders, with all their faults and foibles.