

At Odds: Reviewers and Readers of the *Jalna* Novels

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Article abstract

Although Mazo de la Roche was criticized by reviewers, the author enjoyed an enduring and gratifying relationship with her innumerable readers. The immediate attempt to place de la Roche's novel in the canon of "great works" was due largely to two factors. First, since the novel had won a substantial sum for an unfamiliar author, it had to be perceived as excellent. Second, since the award had been offered by the *Atlantic Monthly*, the status of the magazine was reflected in its choice of winner. Notions of literary value, as well as ideological assumptions, held respectively by reviewers and readers diverged over time and resulted in the gradual shift in de la Roche's literary standing. In reconstructing the historical moment of *Jalna*, the paradox of professional marginalization and popular success emerges, despite an early acceptance by both high and popular cultures. For de la Roche's readers, the conservatism of her novels evoked a past — albeit a largely imaginary one — that they found particularly appealing. Her reviewers, on the other hand, were frustrated by a series of novels that embraced an increasingly obsolete ideology.

At Odds: Reviewers and Readers of the *Jalna* Novels

RUTH PANOFSKY

“STRONG WINE, THIS BOOK, ‘JALNA’! Its flavor pervades the very marrow of our bones,” proclaimed Laura Benet in the *New York Evening Post* of 8 October 1927. When it was first published, Mazo de la Roche’s *Jalna* was hailed as a significant contribution to high culture and was read as a serious work of literature. Literary reviewers in the United States, Canada, and Britain praised the author’s overt and self-conscious manipulation of the traditional, linear plot, and commended the novel’s artistry and the fullness of its characterizations. Moreover, they anticipated future works of a similar quality by the author.

With the appearance of the fourth of the sixteen novels in the *Jalna* series, de la Roche fell out of favour with reviewers. Between 1933 and 1960 her reputation declined significantly. The *Jalna* novels were subject to increasingly vituperative criticism from reviewers who could not abide their melodramatic plots or the unconventional sexual practices of a highly atypical family. Once regarded as a fine and skilled writer whose characters fired her readers’ imaginations, de la Roche was increasingly characterized as the creator of individuals who lacked credibility and interest.

Although she was criticized by reviewers, the author enjoyed an enduring and gratifying relationship with her innumerable readers, whose desire to know more of the Whiteoak family matched her own compelling need to continue the story of their lives. Neither her commitment nor that of her audience to the *Jalna* series diminished during de la Roche’s life. Rather, the Whiteoaks retained their hold on the author’s imagination, and international sales remained steady and impressive. The novels were translated into numerous languages, which further confirmed their broad appeal.

This paper builds on two earlier studies of de la Roche’s professional career in which I analyze the composition and publication of *Jalna*,

as well as relationships with her several publishers, in which she is always astute and self-assured.¹ Here I consider the reception of her award-winning novel, the circumstances that led to the decline of de la Roche's status as a serious writer, her growing appeal as a popular author, and the reasons for the change in her reputation. I argue that notions of literary value — as well as ideological assumptions — held respectively by reviewers and readers diverged over time and resulted in the gradual shift in de la Roche's literary standing. In reconstructing the historical moment of *Jalna*, the paradox of professional marginalization and popular success emerges, despite an early acceptance by both high and popular cultures.

Reviewers

On 1 July 1926, in her friend Dorothy Livesay's autograph book,² Mazo de la Roche set down the following prophetic lines:

Between two gentle ports
I plunge my errant name,
And so, with graceless dagger thrust,
Conspire to capture fame.³ (Livesay, Autograph)

Implicit in these lines were the probable hopes that de la Roche harboured for her now renowned work, *Jalna* — which she had begun writing one year earlier, in the summer of 1925. More importantly, the verse reveals a writer who deliberately and “graceless[ly]” courted fame. Whatever her aspirations for her novel, however, de la Roche could not have anticipated the extent of her actual success — both literary and economic — once her “errant name” had “capture[d] fame.”

On 11 April 1927 de la Roche's life was changed irrevocably. On that date the first *Atlantic Monthly* prize of \$10,000 US was awarded officially to the author for *Jalna*, chosen as winner among 1117 novels submitted to the contest (Givner 120). Although she had already published a collection of short stories, two novels, and two plays⁴ — one of which had earned her two awards — de la Roche was a relatively unknown writer in 1927. At the late age of 48, *Jalna* was the break she had been waiting for — but she could not have foretold that it would mark the turning point in her life, nor could she have fathomed the extraordinary good fortune it would bring her.

News of the award spread rapidly through the press, and de la Roche's reputation was created overnight. That reputation was shaped more by reviewers' excited response to her winning of the *Atlantic Monthly* prize than it was founded on their evaluation of *Jalna's* strengths. Since the

success of *Jalna* was in large part American, I cite American critic Jane Tompkins who aptly points out that “the machinery of publishing and reviewing” is one means by

which an author is brought to the attention of his audience. The social and economic processes that govern the dissemination of a literary work are no more accidental to its reputation, and indeed to its very nature, as that will be perceived by an audience, than are the cultural conceptions ... within which the work is read. The conditions of dissemination interpret the work for its readers ... in that they flow from and support widely-held — if unspoken — assumptions about the methods of distribution proper to a serious (or non-serious) work. (23)

The winning of a large monetary award, offered by a prestigious literary magazine with a record for publishing the work of highly respected writers, lent an aura of grandeur to *Jalna*.⁵ Moreover, that a little-known Canadian author was being feted by an established American magazine enhanced the press’s perception of *Jalna*, both in Canada and the United States, as truly a great work. The fact that a Canadian had competed on an international scale and had won a coveted American prize was important to reviewers, accounted largely for the effusive response to *Jalna*, and provided the cultural context for the overwhelming praise of the novel in North America.

In a profile of de la Roche in the *Boston Evening Transcript*, Dorothy Foster Gilman articulated the characteristic response of American reviewers to *Jalna* when it first appeared in book form:

The rewards of literature are not to be taken lightly when they come. ... We use the word literature advisedly. For “*Jalna*” is literature, exactly as ... “*Tess of the D’Urbervilles*” [*sic*] may be so designated. ... tragic truths about human strength and human weakness may be found in each of these ... novels. ([1])

The need to regard *Jalna* as serious literature, and the immediate attempt to place de la Roche’s novel in the canon of “great works,” were due largely to two factors. First, since the novel had won a substantial sum of money for an unfamiliar author, it had to be perceived as excellent. Second, since the award had been offered by the *Atlantic Monthly*, the status of the magazine was reflected in its choice of winner. Winning the *Atlantic* competition was a privilege since it meant that the author had “arrived.”

The boosting of *Jalna* as a serious work was all the more enthusiastic since two important factors worked against that perception. *Jalna* was

a series of tableaux rather than a traditional, plot-driven novel, and de la Roche was an obscure Canadian, not an established American author. Gilman goes on to make this point explicit:

Canada acclaimed her with a banquet, with a beautiful gift of silver, with applause and cheers and an ovation no less sincere for being entirely lacking in literary form. A Canadian girl by industry and patience had walked into the sacred offices of the *Atlantic Monthly* in the State of Massachusetts and carried away a prize. ([1])

In fact, the contest judges may have been predisposed to awarding the prize to de la Roche since she and Ellery Sedgwick, the editor of the *Atlantic Monthly*, had been friends and correspondents for thirteen years. Sedgwick had encouraged the author throughout her long years of apprenticeship and had published two of her early stories in his magazine.⁶ In light of the *Atlantic Monthly's* prior connection with de la Roche, which the magazine deliberately suppressed when the prize was announced, its own enthusiastic marketing of *Jalna* as a great literary work may have been a hidden attempt to defend its winning choice.

With the announcement of the award, de la Roche and Caroline Clement, her cousin and lifelong companion, relinquished their privacy to constant interruptions by messengers bearing congratulatory notes, telephone calls from reporters seeking interviews, and receptions. The *Atlantic Monthly's* publicity department asked de la Roche to complete a questionnaire designed to elicit a composite portrait of the novelist. The information provided by de la Roche and Clement — whose collaboration resulted in a largely false and idiosyncratic profile — became part of the legend that soon developed around the author. Her disingenuous claim to an ancestor who was guillotined in the French Revolution was one detail especially appreciated by the magazine's publicists.⁷

Interviewers visited the writer at her city flat and at Trail Cottage in Clarkson. In Toronto she was feted at a number of grand celebrations. The city held a banquet in her honour. At Casa Loma, a castle in the centre of the city, 280 women gathered to celebrate de la Roche's achievement. Most significant, however, was the Toronto banquet of the Arts and Letters Club where Edward Weeks, de la Roche's Boston editor who quickly became a valued friend, presented her with the \$10,000 cheque from the *Atlantic Monthly*. The activity surrounding the announcement of the prize continued unabated — until de la Roche and Clement were sufficiently exhausted and the magazine had satisfied its need to boost *Jalna* and promote its author.

In the early days of *Jalna*, American acceptance was all that Canadian reviewers needed to revere the novel and elevate de la Roche to the status of literary icon. As the reviewer for the Toronto *Globe* attested,

there can be no question in this case of the prize being awarded on the basis of anything but pure literary merit, The Atlantic Monthly having long jealously guarded a reputation for accepting manuscript material with no other consideration in view. There is, in fact, a conviction among established authors on this continent that an acceptance by The Atlantic Monthly is a higher honor than an acceptance from most of the popular magazines which pay higher prices per word for manuscript. (“A Bystander” 5)

This view was echoed throughout the Canadian press, which was acutely aware that American endorsement of de la Roche and her work would win readers in her own country. Like the American tributes, this piece affirmed the literary quality of *Jalna* and dismissed the notion that it was the product of the popular author who wrote for profit. Ironically, for years de la Roche herself had struggled to become a popular writer by submitting numerous stories to literary magazines, often facing rejection and financial difficulty. With *Jalna* she finally achieved both success and fame.

What Tompkins says of criticism applies equally to American and Canadian literature: “It is important to recognize that criticism creates American literature in its own image because American literature gives the American people a conception of themselves and of their history” (199). By placing *Jalna* within the purview of high culture, reviewers imposed a conceptual bias on the novel and those that would follow in the series, “that mass distribution of literature and aesthetic quality were mutually exclusive” (Hohendahl 181). In all likelihood, de la Roche and her reviewers were at odds from the moment *Jalna* was published — which may account, in part, for her intense dislike of publicity throughout her life. With the appearance of each of the later *Jalna* novels, the author and her reviewers moved increasingly apart and, by the end of her career, they were at cross-purposes.

The triumph of *Jalna* was a new experience for de la Roche and at first she was unsure in her instant fame. She had been seeking success in the popular market and had lamented earlier to her friend Katherine Hale, “If I could only write novels that the public would like as well as the critics! Especially the U.S. public which is what counts” (Pierce Collection 2001b B033.F004). Now, having gained both recognition and readers, de la Roche found that her commitment to “the public” was shaken

briefly, undermined perhaps by the media's fervent determination to inscribe *Jalna* in the annals of great fiction.

In an interview conducted shortly after the announcement of the *Atlantic* award, de la Roche publicly eschewed any connection with the popular press and represented herself as a serious writer who had been familiar with Dickens and Scott from an early age:

I don't read magazines. Not the popular ones. At least I don't read many.... I haven't had one in my hands for five years.

... I am not sure that reading what other people are writing all of the time is conducive to clear and original thought. I am not convinced that my creative work would be as much mine, and that my mind would be as free to write what I want to write if it were filled with the stories which are the products of other brains. (Muir 33)

In all likelihood, this statement was influenced by the broad coverage of *Jalna* as an important novel. Initially, de la Roche may have been cowed by a press that acknowledged only select works. Moreover, having achieved the success she had long coveted, she was careful to present herself as a professional. Soon, however, she would reassess and confirm her position as an author whose primary connection was with her audience rather than her reviewers.

A sampling of the first reviews of *Jalna* in the United States, Canada, and Britain will substantiate my claim that the novel was read almost universally as a serious work. The *New York Times Book Review* described *Jalna's*

spacious canvas. Miss de la Roche has filled it well. She paints with brilliance and a remarkably certain craftsmanship. She knows how to tell a story[,] ... exactly how she wants to handle her material and it never gets beyond her control. ("The Mad" 6)

In *Canadian Bookman*, Raymond Knister praised *Jalna*: "there is such an energy of conception and such a brilliance of style that Miss de la Roche's next book will be awaited with the greatest curiosity in all quarters" (54). Similarly, the *Times Literary Supplement* noted the

breadth of composition and vitality about this novel. The canvas is a crowded one, but the author handles her characters with skill and precision, so that they are all sharply defined individuals and all interesting. ("Fiction" 912)

Reviews such as these were representative of the countless notices the novel received. Throughout the press, *Jalna* was elevated to high literary status and was applauded for having won the *Atlantic Monthly* prize. The novel was described in effusive language which emphasized that it was a work of consequence. Ironically, this well-intentioned praise fostered the tremendous popularity of the *Jalna* novels which helped remove them from the arena of official high culture since, as one reader aptly noted, to many popularity was an “insult” (“Mazo de la Roche of *Jalna*”).

With popularity came wealth, and this resulted in a paradox. For wealth, acquired by appealing to a mass readership, further confirmed the reviewers’ view that a book was popular rather than serious. As St. John Ervine, a fellow writer and friend, exclaimed in a letter to de la Roche, “you have committed the unpardonable sin of being a success.... how do you expect to be forgiven for that? ... don’t bother your head about ... [reviewers]. Your readers are all right. They want you” (de la Roche, Letter). De la Roche considered her colleague’s “good advice” (de la Roche, Letter) and eventually made the choice to side with her readers. Moreover, as Joan Givner, de la Roche’s biographer, has pointed out,

it was only through the Whiteoak family that Mazo could express fully her own vision, with all its quirks. Nor did she need much prodding from fans and publishers to resume the Whiteoak saga; after each excursion into new territory, she swung back thankfully to *Jalna*. (187)

The first two novels in the series established de la Roche’s reputation as the creator of a bold and vividly realized family. Initially, popular opinion echoed the critical regard for her “imaginative genius, rare power, and ... remarkable ability” (G[ilman] [1]). Soon, however, the author’s standing among reviewers began to diminish. By the time *Finch’s Fortune*, the third of the *Jalna* novels, appeared in 1931, reviewers had begun to tire of this “competent and readable story” (Robbins 88), and when *The Master of Jalna* appeared in 1933, many were certain that “by no means [had they] heard the last of this squabbling, lively family” (“New Novels” 648).

In the eyes of the press, each subsequent *Jalna* novel fell further into the realm of popular fiction. By the time the sixteenth volume appeared, reviewers were prepared to dismiss the series altogether. *Morning at Jalna*, published in 1960, elicited the following response from the *Times Literary Supplement*, entitled “Such Darling Dodos”:

There is nothing to make one squeamish about ... [this] instalment of the Whiteoak family saga — unless one cares about literature. The

sands have run a little dry, perhaps, to send us back to the Civil War generation....

Many young and romantic readers will be thrilled by the oddly hysterical formality which is the author's dialogue style ... and reassured by the domesticity of the narrative. The *Jalna* marathon has, indeed, moved outside the range of literary criteria. (477)

That *Jalna* was no longer regarded as "literature" is the most significant detail of this review. By 1960 the series had played itself out with reviewers who valued finely drawn characters, a believable storyline, a unique and appropriate plot, in addition to a distinguished style and a concern with the timeless and universal themes of great works of art. Moreover, reviewers eschewed the novels' conservatism, which valued the ancestral past, a class society, and the family unit above all else. *Jalna* had become an ordeal, a "marathon" of worn traditions that held little appeal for reviewers.

By 1960 de la Roche was an elderly and accomplished writer who had long ago come to understand that "it is the Audience that matters, not the reviews nor the complimentary letters from famous people" (Dumbrille Papers 2059 B001.F024), and that "reviews mean much less than most authors think" (Dumbrille Papers 2059 B001.F008.I26). In *Part Two: Reflections on the Sequel*, Paul Budra and Betty A. Schellenberg identify

an audience's desire to re-experience in some way a memorable story, an author's response to that desire, and the inevitably changed conditions which make it impossible to achieve a precise repetition of the experience ... [as] germane to the sequel phenomenon ... [which tends] to serve the interests of consolidation and conservation. (5, 12)

Nonetheless, the press's rejection of her work took its toll, as de la Roche revealed in her autobiography, *Ringing the Changes*. Although she masked her disappointment in a general comment, she was alluding to her own experience when she described

reviews in which the critic commends a novelist for not attempting to repeat former successes, and then goes on to say what an inferior thing his new novel is. If a novelist is prolific he is criticized for that, yet in all other creative forms — music, sculpture, painting — the artist may pour out his creations without blame. (242)

No doubt, in her later years de la Roche would have relished recognition from the literary establishment for her achievement as creator of the immensely successful *Jalna* novels, which spanned a remarkable thirty-three years. Since that was not likely, however, she sought it instead in the del-

uge of letters she received throughout her long life from readers who wished to share their enjoyment of the series with the author.

Readers

In her autobiography, de la Roche described the symbiotic connection between herself and her audience:

I could not deny the demands of readers who wanted to know more of ... [the Whiteoak] family. Still less could I deny the urge within myself to write of them. ... the novelist, like the actor, must remember his audience. Without an audience, where is he? Like the actor, an audience is what he requires — first, last and all the time... Looking back, it seems to me that the life of the novelist is the best of all and I would never choose any other. (242)

The letters de la Roche received charted the close bond she sustained with her readers. Unlike her reviewers, her audience did not judge the *Jalna* novels according to the criteria of serious versus popular literature. As a Canadian, de la Roche did not alienate American, British, or international readers, who had access to the novels in translation; rather, they enjoyed the representation of her native country. And, contrary to those who would disparage the series as women's fiction, men and women alike — as the archives reveal — took tremendous pleasure in the *Jalna* books.

The de la Roche Papers, held at the Thomas Fisher Rare Book Library, University of Toronto, comprise ten boxes of correspondence, much of which is fan mail. The *Jalna* novels generated a vast correspondence and today they continue to satisfy readers throughout the world. It is not surprising, therefore, that Edward Weeks attributed much of the success of the *Atlantic Monthly* Press/Little, Brown imprint to the series: “With Nordhoff and Hall, the novels by Mazo de la Roche and James Hilton, and *Drums Along the Mohawk* by Walter D. Edmonds, we did uncommonly well in fiction” (299).

De la Roche received thousands of letters from all over the world, in countless languages, from individuals with varying levels of education. As Lovat Dickson, her editor at Macmillan of London, explained: “Mazo had an absolutely enormous ... [fan mail] as I saw later when I joined Macmillan and saw the flow of letters going through. She liked those sort of tributes. Mazo had tapped a particularly rich vein of literary ore” (“Mazo de la Roche of *Jalna*”).⁸ One such letter, by Mary Gardner, four handwritten pages in length and dated June 1927, was sent while *Jalna*

was appearing as a serial in the *Atlantic Monthly*; it had not been published yet in book form. Gardner writes that as

a 1925 graduate of Radcliffe College, where I am still studying as a Ph.D. aspirant, I support myself by writing and reading aloud for a semi-blind, aged, retired professor of the Harvard Law School. To my confessed relief, the Professor has little taste for novels generally, and *Jalna*, the first installment of which we started rather by accident in the *Atlantic*, is the first novel I have read or even started to read to him for a long time.

... the joy and exuberance of *discovering* such a masterpiece is second only to your own joy in *creating* it.

In her letter, Gardner views *Jalna* as a serious work with the potential to earn its author “heaps” of money. Unlike her reviewers, de la Roche’s readers did not devalue the *Jalna* novels because they were popular and lucrative.

Gardner also includes an evaluation of *Jalna* that few reviewers matched for its fresh insight:

you seem to hold, with such effortless mastery, the reins of so many varying modes: regular modern “realism” in old Mrs. Whiteoak; delicate and tender sentiment in Piers’s and Eden’s romances; subtle satire in Meg; perfectly marvellous Mark Twain feeling for *genus Boy* in Wakefield; of Renny and Finch I expect great things yet to come. There is a delicacy and subtlety of keen perception and sympathetic human understanding throughout it all.

Gardner goes on to proclaim herself “enough of a feminist to exult in the thought that *Jalna* was written by a woman, thus enabling it to stand as a monumental substantiation of the claim of women’s superiority in the field of the novel” (de la Roche Papers, Box 15). A skilled reader, Gardner extols the female author and her work; as one professional woman writing to another, she takes pride in de la Roche’s achievement. Her optimism aligns her with most of the author’s early reviewers. Ironically, although each consecutive novel drew less favourable reviews, the number of *Jalna* readers continued to increase.

Among the fan mail included in the de la Roche Papers, Mary Gardner’s letter is striking for its intellectual expression alone. In her enthusiastic and sympathetic response to *Jalna*, Gardner spoke for the majority of the novel’s mass readership. The first of the *Jalna* novels won de la Roche immediate acclaim among readers, most of whom remained her

loyal followers throughout the series. In fact, their devotion inspired and convinced her to continue writing.

Some early readers took a patriotic pride in *Jalna*. On 24 September 1927, Lulu Jeffries wrote to de la Roche from Sussex, New Brunswick: "Your book is a great Canadian novel." Others read the work with such interest that they felt compelled to correct inaccuracies that had crept into the narrative. A. J. M. Goote, for example, read a copy of the *Atlantic Monthly* at the YMCA in Shanghai, China, and he wrote to the author on 8 August 1927 to say that she had confused Dutch and German (de la Roche Papers, Box 15).

A letter, dated 25 September 1929 and signed "An Ordinary American Family," claimed "'The Whiteoaks of Jalna' has just passed thru our family like an epidemic of measles, before one of us was through with it the next one was down with it." Masy Dowlin from Philadelphia, having just read *Whiteoaks of Jalna*, wrote to de la Roche on 18 September 1929 as if she were an intimate friend:

I wish you would give us some more of those interesting, irresistible irrepressible Whiteoaks of Jalna, please.

They remind me of the years when we were a crowd of eight, fox hunting, shooting.... Now we have shot up to seed. Please save the Whiteoaks from a like fate. (de la Roche Papers, Box 15)

Today we read irony into Dowlin's nostalgia, but in 1929 she wrote in earnest. For so many readers, the *Jalna* novels exemplified a grand past that had been lost. To a large degree, that past existed in their minds alone, and was partly the reason for the series' enduring hold on their imaginations.

The response to the *Jalna* novels remained constant throughout their duration, and the Whiteoaks soon achieved legendary status among readers. As late as 26 May 1960, Robert Poczik was "anxiously await[ing] the next novel in the series and [we] hope and trust that we shall hear much more from the Whiteoaks in the future." Powerful evidence of the lasting impression left by de la Roche's work is available in the following letter by Dorothy Hart, who wrote from Edmonton on 21 February 1960:

For many years I have wanted to write you a letter and tell you how much my husband and I enjoyed your "Jalna" books. We started reading them about twenty-five years ago....

When our first son was born it seemed only natural that we name him Renny....

Renny is now going on fourteen and wanted to know the origin

of his name and the only explanation I could give was to buy him the book, “Young Renny.” (de la Roche Papers, Box 23)

Readers responded to exactly those aspects of *Jalna* that reviewers found offensive. Each novel in the series promised to renew their acquaintance with an already familiar world, peopled by characters they had met previously, whose private circumstances did not alter dramatically from story to story, and who survived the vagaries of plot time after time.

Tompkins states,

a novel’s impact on the culture at large depends not on its escape from the formulaic and derivative, but on its tapping into a storehouse of commonly held assumptions, reproducing what is already there in a typical and familiar form. (xvi)

Eschewing culturally sanctioned distinctions between serious and popular literature, and arguing instead for literary value as fundamentally mutable and diverse (Smith 12), Tompkins and Barbara Herrnstein Smith — along with other structuralist and post-structuralist theorists — see literary texts “as doing a kind of cultural work within a specific historical situation” (Tompkins 200). Literary value resides in plot and character, which provide “society with a means of thinking about itself, defining certain aspects of social reality which the authors and their readers shared, dramatizing its conflicts, and recommending solutions” (Tompkins 200). It is this notion of cultural significance that Tompkins finally substitutes for the value-laden, elitist assumptions that inform traditional categories of “serious” and “popular” literature. To the oft-implied, rarely posed question, “but are these [popular] works really any *good*?” (Tompkins 186-87), Tompkins and Smith respond with an analysis of how literary value, indeed all

forms of evaluation, whether overt or covert, verbal or inarticulate, and whether performed by the common reader, professional reviewer, big-time bookseller, or small-town librarian, have functions and effects that are significant in the production and maintenance or destruction of literary value, both reflecting and contributing to the various economies in relation to which a work acquires value. (Smith 25)

With Tompkins and Smith, I argue for the cultural “value” of *Jalna*, palpable in the series’ “commonly held assumptions” (Tompkins xvi), which were strongly conservative in ideology. In fact, readers were engaged by the same conservatism in the novels that reviewers came to despise. The conservative position, as described by sociologist Patricia

Marchak, “characterized pre-Confederation and 19th century Canadian society, gradually diminishing as an effective and popular ideology over the 20th century” (13). For de la Roche’s readers, the conservatism of her novels evoked a past — albeit a largely imaginary one — that they found particularly appealing. Her reviewers, on the other hand, were frustrated by a series of novels that embraced an increasingly obsolete ideology.

For Marchak, conservatism is distinguished by its view of society “as an organic whole within which individuals have assigned places.” She adds that “true conservatives should be concerned with the collective moral fabric as well as the permanence of a dominant class,” and that

conservatism gives a high positive value to class inequalities: they are necessary because society requires leadership, and well established leaders look after less well established workers. Conservatism thus values a “natural” hierarchy, paternalistic relations between capital and labour. (13)

The family unit and the estate assumed primary importance over the needs of individual members of the Whiteoak household, whose loyalty to *Jalna* nonetheless endured throughout the series. An established hierarchy within the family ensured that each person knew his or her place — despite fleeting transgressions — and that the more vulnerable members were looked after and protected by their stronger counterparts. Adeline and Renny Whiteoak regularly behaved as mater- and pater-familias, guarding the welfare of their charges and overseeing the moral climate, such as it was, of *Jalna*. Moreover, the Whiteoaks participated in a class society: they occupied the privileged upper class and employed servants who tended to their everyday needs. In turn, the working class was granted security and sustenance by its employers.

De la Roche’s readers relished a similar sense of security offered by the powerful conservatism at work in the sixteen *Jalna* novels. They were engaged by the series’ promise of family as a source of support and protection from the larger world, one that recalled the past and roused their imaginations, as did the novels’ titillating sexual scenes. More importantly, a fiction series that spanned many years and several generations offered its audience a measure of assurance that was reinforced by the insular culture of the *Jalna* books. Published throughout the Depression, the Second World War, and the post-war period, the novels were a constant in the day-to-day lives of individuals who participated in an uncertain and difficult period of the twentieth century. As Dennis Duffy confirms,

The series epitomizes the colonial mentality in its unswerving allegiance to British institutions and mores, and conveys the Loyalist myth of a Canada redeemed by British allegiance — and the myth of a humane, harmless gentry.... Yet Jalna, the house, remains the great good place.... Whether or not Jalna's Ontario ever existed is of less interest than the tightness with which de la Roche entwined strong colonial and familial values. (285)

Daniel L. Bratton, de la Roche's most recent biographer, also acknowledges the novels' "hidebound colonialism and arrogant dismissal of egalitarian ideals" but admits to "surrendering to the power of her characters, to the magic she evokes in creating a place" (17).

The unequivocal support of readers resulted in the unprecedented popularity of the *Jalna* series. As Caroline Clement explained to their mutual friend, Dorothy Dumbrille, the year that de la Roche died: "[I] now am trying to overtake the numerous letters — which grow and grow. Some of them — from complete strangers — are very moving in their genuine feeling. I think that Mazo's public really and truly loved her" (Dumbrille Papers 2059 B001.F008.I36).

Despite reviewers' disapproval of her work, the evidence shows that "Mazo's public" admired the *Jalna* novels and was saddened by de la Roche's death, which brought the series to a close. By that time, the author and her readers had shared a long and satisfying connection. For *Jalna* followers, literary value had little to do with the relative artistic merits of serious versus popular literature. Instead, they perceived value in a series of novels that sustained their interest over a long period, "not because of its departure from the ordinary and conventional, but through its embrace of what ... [was] most widely shared" (Tompkins xvi). De la Roche well understood and felt her readers' need for continuity and stability during the middle of the twentieth century; she sought them in her own life and offered them to her audience in the form of the Whiteoaks of Jalna, who made their appearance regularly between 1927 and 1960. Despite reviewers' reservations, *Jalna* succeeded because the author and her audience were united in their shared notions of literary value and in their conservatism — and because de la Roche gave her readers precisely what they wanted.⁹

NOTES

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¹ See Panofsky, "Go My Own Way?" and "Don't Let Me Do It!"

² The Livesays were friends and neighbours when de la Roche lived at Trail Cottage in Clarkson, Ontario. See Livesay, "Foreword: Remembering Mazo."

³ I am indebted to Laura McLauchlan for having brought this autograph to my attention.

⁴ See Mazo de la Roche, *Explorers of the Dawn* (New York: Knopf, 1922; London: Cassell, 1924); *Possession* (New York, London, Toronto: Macmillan, 1923); *Delight* (New York, Toronto: Macmillan, 1926); *Low Life: A Comedy in One Act* (Toronto: Macmillan, 1925); and *Come True* (Toronto: Macmillan, 1927).

⁵ For example, the *Atlantic Monthly* of July 1927, which included the third instalment of *Jalna*, ran Hemingway's "Fifty Grand" as lead story (see pp. 1-15).

⁶ See Mazo de la Roche, "Buried Treasure," *Atlantic Monthly* 116 (Aug. 1915): 192-204; and "Explorers of the Dawn," *Atlantic Monthly* 124 (Oct. 1919): 532-40.

⁷ See Joan Givner's biography of de la Roche (126-27) for a full description of the *Atlantic Monthly* questionnaire.

⁸ Givner has noted that de la Roche counted the royal family "among her most loyal fans" (148-49).

⁹ A study of the career of Lucy Maud Montgomery, a contemporary of de la Roche's who also enjoyed great success, is available in Gerson's "'Dragged at Anne's Chariot Wheels'": See also Budra and Schellenberg. (144-59)

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