

## The Sensations of the 1920s: Martha Ostenso's *Wild Geese* and Mazo de la Roche's *Jalna*

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Article abstract

Martha Ostenso's *Wild Geese* and Mazo de la Roche's *Jalna* were both prize-winning, wildly successful novels, in the United States as well as in Canada, but each received a rather different critical response in this country. *Jalna*'s suggestive anti-Americanism and its explicit British loyalism was evidently to be preferred over *Wild Geese*'s more ambiguously North American (as opposed to what was then considered distinctly Canadian) aesthetic. This is despite its easy fit into T.D. MacLulich's classification as a Canadian "Northern" fiction (a tradition which includes Frederick Philip Grove, Ernest Buckler, Sinclair Ross, and others). As well, the intense and often violent eroticism of Ostenso's novel was more difficult for critics of the 1920s to tolerate than was the coy sexiness of *Jalna*. Although little critical attention has been paid to either author in recent years, Ostenso's literary reputation appears to have surpassed de la Roche's.

## The Sensations of the 1920s: Martha Ostenso's *Wild Geese* and Mazo de la Roche's *Jalna*

FAYE HAMMILL

IT IS RELATIVELY RARE FOR A CANADIAN NOVEL to cause a sensation in the North American literary world, but within the space of two years, this success was achieved by both *Wild Geese* (1925) and *Jalna* (1927). Both were awarded highly prestigious American prizes and became instant bestsellers. Martha Ostenso won her prize first, and it was a larger one in financial terms, yet it was Mazo de la Roche's victory that was extravagantly celebrated as marking the coming of age of Canadian literature. The privileging of *Jalna* above *Wild Geese* relates to the particular mores, tastes, and priorities of Canadian readers in the postwar years, while the reversal of this judgment by critics in the later decades of the twentieth century reflects the changing emphases of the Canadian literary establishment. Superficially, the two books have several elements in common. Both concern a large family living on an isolated Canadian farm, and the plots hinge on the arrival of an outsider from the city, who in both cases is called Miss Archer. Each book focuses on the dynamics of relationships within the family rather than on the experience of one particular character, and both authors deploy a blend of realistic and romantic elements in the construction of their narratives. However, the novels are strikingly dissimilar in other respects. The contrasting mythologies and geographies of Canada inscribed in the two texts, and their diverging approaches to narrative realism and to the depiction of sexual desire, are key reasons for the very different responses which de la Roche and Ostenso have evoked at different periods of Canadian history. Their ethnic identities and lifestyles have also significantly influenced the reception of their work.

Nearly identical circumstances precipitated the sudden rise to fame of Mazo de la Roche (1879-1961) and Martha Ostenso (1900-63). Ostenso, a virtually unknown writer, submitted *Wild Geese* to a contest

for the best North American first novel, sponsored by *The Pictorial Review*, the publisher Dodd, Mead, and Company, and the Hollywood studio Famous Players-Lasky. She beat 1,389 competitors to win \$13,500, an unprecedentedly large sum for a literary prize, and her novel was published serially and in volume form as well as being filmed. De la Roche, who was a fairly well established writer in Canada but unknown in the United States, entered *Jalna* for a prize of \$10,000 offered by the American magazine *Atlantic Monthly*. She defeated 1,116 other authors, and *Jalna* was published in instalments and then as a book by Little, Brown & Co.

Discounting Ostenso's success, Mazo de la Roche comments in her autobiography that the prize for *Jalna* led to general "rejoicing that a Canadian (not this Canadian in particular) had achieved distinction in the United States, a country which heretofore could scarcely have shown less interest in Canadian letters." She adds that a Nova Scotian novelist, Thomas Raddall, had written to her, "You cannot imagine what your winning of the *Atlantic Monthly* prize meant to us other Canadian writers. It was as though you opened a door that had been inexorably shut against us" (*Ringing* 189). An array of events was staged in Canadian cities in honour of the author of *Jalna*, including dinners hosted by the Canadian Authors Association, the Toronto Council of Women, and the Arts and Letters Club. At one banquet, Charles G.D. Roberts thanked de la Roche for having "proved beyond a doubt that there actually is something called Canadian literature" (qtd. in Givner 122). Apparently, Martha Ostenso had not succeeded in removing these doubts. In 1933, the eminent critic E.K. Brown paid a somewhat astonishing tribute to de la Roche, ignoring Ostenso:

Any serious reader of Canadian fiction of the past decade will admit that its three masters are Mazo de la Roche, Frederick Philip Grove, and Morley Callaghan. . . . *Jalna* is the most neatly constructed novel ever written by a Canadian, and . . . the grandmother Whiteoak is the most memorable character created by a Canadian artist. (47)

Evidently, de la Roche, Roberts, Raddall, and Brown considered that *Jalna* was genuine Canadian literature and *Wild Geese* was not. There are no possible criteria by which the setting and themes of *Wild Geese* could be judged "less Canadian" than those of *Jalna*, but the situation is complicated by the personal circumstances of the authors.

Mazo de la Roche was born and brought up in Ontario, but Martha Ostenso was from Norway, and emigrated to Minnesota at the age of two.

At fifteen she moved just across the border to Manitoba, where she later attended university and taught in a school. Numerous other authors not born in Canada have been accepted into the national literary canon, and Ostenso's Norwegian birth might actually have increased her appeal for Canadian readers, many of whom were of course immigrants themselves. David Arnason comments,

*Wild Geese* ... has come to be surrounded by a peculiarly Canadian mythology. Its success has come to stand for the success of the outsider. Martha Ostenso, the little immigrant girl, unsophisticated and isolated in the north, somehow writes a powerful novel that beats out hundreds of competitors from across North America to win a fabulous prize. (303)

Ostenso's early residence in the US, however, counted against her. Despite its fawning dependence on American endorsement of Canada's achievements, the Canadian literary establishment of the 1920s was strongly committed to the development of a distinctive national literature, and "distinctive" meant, above all, distinct from the American canon.

The identification of Ostenso with America would have been reinforced, in the eyes of Canadians, by her decision to return to the States after the publication of *Wild Geese*. Arnason describes the lifestyle she shared with her partner and literary collaborator, the Canadian author Douglas Durkin:

The success of *Wild Geese* catapulted Ostenso and Durkin into the twenties world of movie stars and literary heroes. Durkin's sister, ... an opera singer, ... drew Durkin and Ostenso into the glittering world of New York society. ... They went to Hollywood. They toured Europe. In 1933, they built an elegant cottage on a lake at Brainerd, Minnesota. At the height of the depression, they paid \$30,000 to have it built. ... The family still has a photograph from a magazine showing an elegant Martha Ostenso in a leopard-skin jumpsuit, balancing a cocktail in front of a huge fireplace at their cottage. (303)

Such undisguised flashiness, pursuit of fame, and complicity with American consumerism would not have endeared Ostenso to Canadians. A resistance to the influence of America on Canadian literature is discernible in several novels of this period, including *Jalna* and L.M. Montgomery's *Emily Climbs* (1925). In these books, young Canadian writers consider

moving to New York for career purposes, but this is represented as a potential disloyalty to their home country.

Mazo de la Roche made more effort than Ostenso to preserve her identity as a loyal Canadian, although she too used the profits from her writing to travel to Europe. During the 1930s, she lived in England for periods of months and sometimes years, attempting to recreate in her domestic life precisely the Old World idyll depicted in her fiction. In 1937 de la Roche bought a huge Elizabethan mansion near Windsor, and, as her biographer Joan Givner comments, “She apparently saw the purchase as something of a defection from her native land, for she warned her Toronto publisher not to let the news get out” (179). Her reputation did not, in fact, suffer from her residence outside Canada to the extent that Ostenso’s did. The crucial difference is that Ostenso went to America and held cocktail parties for film stars, while de la Roche went to England and held tea parties for minor aristocrats. Loyalism and anti-Americanism were such strong forces in 1920s Canada that the latter could be condoned in a Canadian author while the former could not.

The primary appeal of *Jalna*, indeed, is its nostalgia for an imagined English manorial lifestyle, recreated in the house, Jalna, which has been the Whiteoak family home for decades:

A small army of men was employed to make the semblance of an English park in the forest, and to build a house that should overshadow all others in the county. . . . It was a square house of dark red brick, with a wide stone porch, a deep basement where the kitchens and servants’ quarters were situated, an immense drawing-room, a library . . . a dining room, and [nine] . . . bedrooms. The wainscoting and doors were of walnut. From five fireplaces the smoke ascended through picturesque chimneys that rose among the treetops. (24-25)

The house, and the novel, embody an aspiration to an upper-class English lifestyle. In his article on de la Roche’s little-known 1932 book *Lark Ascending*, Douglas Daymond uncovers the commercial dimension of de la Roche’s attachment to Old World culture. He says of the heroine of *Lark Ascending*, an American who moves to Europe and runs an antique shop, “Like de la Roche, who had returned to England in 1932 intending to make her home there, she is exhilarated by her new life and, like de la Roche who continued to expand the saga of the Whiteoak family, she maintains her lifestyle by selling symbols of a dying tradition with which she now herself identifies” (177). According to Dennis Duffy, de la Roche’s conservative, Loyalist ideology is the primary reason for the

incredible popularity of *Jalna* and its fifteen sequels: “discourse in *Jalna* rests on a bedrock of familial and imperial certainties. ... If there exists an Upper Canadian dream, it is found in the pages of these chronicles” (“De la Roche” 182). Its value system, he argues in a different article, is founded on “the family’s ... corporate fidelity to the house and its tradition ... amid a world that has lost sight of the old rules” (“Heart” 67). *Jalna* represents the dream of maintaining tradition in the face of modernity, war, and change, and of achieving prosperity as a reward for hard work and loyalty.

“Modernity” in the world of *Jalna* is invariably associated with America, and the novels’ resistance to American values, initially subtly expressed, becomes more blatant as the series progresses. When Eden Whiteoak visits New York, the narrator draws attention to the unfamiliarity of the modern, urban style which he encounters there: “Eden had never seen a table so glittering with exquisite glass and slender, shapely cutlery. His mind flew for an instant to the dinner table at *Jalna* with its huge platters and cumbersome old English plate” (109-10). The introduction of the word “English” in this characterization of *Jalna* underlines, once again, de la Roche’s Loyalism: she distinguishes America from Canada in terms of the latter’s continuing affinity with the imperial centre. Eden finds New York literary society seductive and exciting, but the narrator clearly indicates its inauthenticity and pretentiousness:

“Mr Whiteoak,” said the lady, in a richly cultivated voice. “I want to tell you how deeply I appreciate your poetry. You show a delicate sensitiveness that is crystal-like in its implications.” She fixed him with her clear gray eyes, and added: “And such an acute realization of the poignant transiency of beauty.” Having spoken, she conveyed an exquisite silver spoon filled with exquisite clear soup unflinchingly to her lips. (110)

In New York, Eden falls for Alayne Archer, a modern American woman, with a career in publishing and a city apartment. When she comes to *Jalna* as Eden’s wife, she feels she is stepping back in time:

*Jalna* looked very mellow in the golden sunlight, draped in its mantle of reddening Virginia creeper and surrounded by freshly clipped lawns. One of Wake’s rabbits was hopping about, and Renny’s two clumber spaniels were stretched on the steps. A pear tree near the house had dropped its fruit on the grass, where it lay richly yellow, giving to the eyes of a town-dweller an air of negligent well-being to

the scene. Alayne thought that Jalna had something of the appearance of an old manorial farmhouse, set among its lawns and orchards. (139)

This deliberate construction of a “scene” emphasizes Alayne’s perception that she is entering another world, one which has a slightly fantastical quality, yet also reproduces the familiar images of European art and literature.

Another similar passage describes tea on the lawn, presented as if it were a painting. We are told that, “Alayne’s eye missed no detail of the scene before her,” and she notices in particular the “unreal splendor” of the colours of the grass and sky. The scene is suggestive of a colonial imitation of upper-class Victorian or Edwardian England: there is a shrubbery and a kitchen-garden in the background, the butler has brought “cucumber sandwiches,” and the grandmother, Adeline, is wearing a “purple velvet tea gown.” The Whiteoaks combine old-fashioned formality of manner — the men stand up “courteously” when Alayne arrives — with a relaxed languor suggestive of a leisured, moneyed family: “Grandmother dozed ... Nicholas was stretched, half-recumbent, playing idly with the ears of Nip ... on the grass sprawled bare-kneed Wake with a pair of rabbits” (160). In reality, however, this is no leisure-class family — the younger generation of men work long hours on the farm to support their children and elderly relations, and there are not so many servants that the women are exempt from domestic chores. They are rewarded for their labours by prosperity, which enables the ritual enactments of aristocratic fantasies such as the harmonious tea party. Yet the interest of de la Roche’s narrative depends on a soap-opera-style succession of money problems and amorous tangles, which lead to conflict and deceit. Alayne and Eden, the characters with experience of the American city, are the catalysts for most of these conflicts.

Daniel Bratton, de la Roche’s most recent biographer, makes an illuminating comment about Alayne: “Mazo’s presentation of Alayne ... points to the ambivalence in Loyalist attitudes towards Americans, for on the one hand Alayne is a sophisticated outsider in conflict with Jalna’s natural, instinctive ways; yet on the other she demonstrates an intellectuality and urbanity that make the domain of the Whiteoaks appear provincial and even crude by comparison” (142-43). Alayne has a further importance in terms of the gradual change she undergoes at Jalna. Despite her initial identification with modern sophistication, she is revealed to have a certain natural sympathy for quite opposite values,

something which increases under the influence of her new Canadian home. Before she met Eden, we learn, Alayne had helped her father research a history of the American Revolution, and her "admiration had been aroused for those dogged Loyalists who had left their homes and journeyed northward into Canada to suffer cold and privation for the sake of an idea. It was glorious, she thought." Her father's reaction is to laugh, and call her "his little Britisher; and she had laughed, too, but she did not altogether like it, for she was proud of being American. Still, one could see the other person's side of a question" (116). This flexibility makes it easier for Alayne to be assimilated to the Whiteoaks' traditional way of life. It is not, however, her husband who effects this transformation. Eden is too lazy to assist with any of the farm work, and wishes to move permanently to New York to pursue his writing career. Of all the family, he is the least committed to Canada, and to agrarian life. Alayne's discovery of his shallow, selfish personality occurs early in their married life, and quite a different man succeeds him in her affections: his brother, Renny. Contemptuous of poetry, Renny sees Eden's career plans as a betrayal of family tradition: "I don't altogether like it. None of us have ever done anything like that" (29). Renny, absorbed in agricultural life, is heir to the estate and the primary representative of the Whiteoak values. The transferral of Alayne's love from Eden to Renny represents her conversion to those values, and therefore also the victory of Canadian Loyalist tradition over the forces of American modernity and materialism. This, it seems, was a Canadian mythology which the 1920s readership endorsed wholeheartedly.

The mythology embodied in *Wild Geese* is entirely different. In his essay on the Canadian tradition in fiction, T.D. Maclulich offers a useful classification of Ostenso's novel in relation to the national literature. Adapting Leslie Fiedler's analysis of American writing, Maclulich divides Canadian novels into "Westerns," "Easterns," "Northerns," and "Southern," placing *Wild Geese* in the category of the "Northern":

The Northern is the novel of passion denied and sentiment repressed in the name of reason and social custom. ... In Canada the Northern is one of the major forms of literary expression. ... [It] usually shows a human dwelling place, often a farmhouse or a small town, that is dwarfed by a hostile environment ... [and] studies the meeting between sensitive individuals and a puritanical society that inhibits emotional and intellectual development. ... The household at the centre of many Northern is presided over by a patriarchal figure,

joyless and forbidding, whose authority is reinforced by a punitive divinity and by a severe environment. (197)

Maclulich's list of Canadian Northerns includes novels by Sinclair Ross, Hugh MacLennan, Frederick Philip Grove, Robert Stead, Margaret Laurence, Ernest Buckler, Percy Janes, and Matt Cohen. With the exception of Grove and Stead, these writers began their careers much later than Ostenso. Grove's first Canadian novel, *Settlers of the Marsh*, appeared in the same year as *Wild Geese*, and therefore only Robert Stead preceded Ostenso in the Northern tradition posited by Maclulich. The striking novelty, in 1925, of the psychological themes and bleak landscapes of *Wild Geese* may be one reason why Canadians reacted less enthusiastically to this novel than to the less disturbing *Jalna*.

Ostenson's novel perfectly exemplifies the mythology of the Northern, as described by Maclulich. The farmhouse is ruled by Caleb Gare, a tyrannical, jealous, and vindictive patriarch, given to reading aloud ominous passages from the Old Testament to his cowering family. He is eventually punished for his fanatical possessiveness about his land by being literally swallowed by it when he drowns in a bog. The land demonstrates an active hostility: "something seemed to be tugging at his feet. . . . the strength in the earth was irresistible . . . the insidious force in the earth drew him deeper" (298-99). Numerous critics have read the novel purely in terms of the opposition between man and nature, but Daniel Lenoski and M.G. Hesse have separately argued that this is an oversimplification, and that such readings miss the novel's idealism and vision of hope (Lenoski 279, Hesse 48). Lenoski points out that the land is truly hostile only to those characters who seek to exploit it, such as Caleb, whereas the heroine, Judith, enjoys an "organic" relationship with her surroundings (289). The domination of Caleb, however, ensures that the bleak atmosphere of *Wild Geese* makes a far greater impression on most readers than do the elements of hope and idealism in the text. Taking an opposite approach, Mazo de la Roche reverses all the tendencies of the Northern. *Jalna* is presided over by a woman, Adeline Whiteoak, who is mischievous, forgetful, and comic, and emotional development and self-expression are certainly not inhibited among the Whiteoaks. The environment is never hostile, but rather flowery, verdant, and warm, and its impact on the characters is negligible. Ostenson's sustained evocation of the prairie landscape, climate, and wildlife finds no parallel in de la Roche's books: the world of *Jalna* is almost entirely contained within the boundaries of the family estate, and a sense of place is evoked through association with somewhere else — England.

The geography of *Wild Geese* is intensely local and specific, even though it also has symbolic and Gothic dimensions. It does not, however, differ markedly from the Minnesotan scenery of Ostenso's later novels. This is hardly surprising given the proximity and physical similarity of the two areas, but it reduces the quality of distinctive "Canadianness" which was so highly prized by nationalist critics. One example of the realization of setting in *Wild Geese* concerns a journey undertaken by Mark Jordan, son of Caleb Gare's wife, together with a young boy who has just lost his father. They are transporting the coffin for burial:

So the two of them rode on the seat of the wagon over the twenty miles to the Catholic mission that lay to the south. ... A great stretch of [the road] lay through timber, where the air was mellow with the scent of drying leaves. Cranberry bushes hung in red cascades along the trail, and the thorn apple trees were heavy with clusters of waxy fruit, already tinged with pink. The day was still save for sudden little gusts of wind that lifted a whirl of dry leaves now and then in the road before them. ... The afternoon led them through marsh country, flat and dun-coloured with drying reeds ...; the heat became intense and the way led on without shade. Once they saw a giant hawk swoop down over the marsh and keep low to the earth until it rose suddenly almost straight into the air. Then it vanished against the sky with some little animal fast in its claws. (257)

This creates an atmosphere which connects with the storyline. The relentless heat and the cruelty attributed to the hawk echo the relentless cruelty of Caleb Gare, who has forced Mark to drive the coffin twenty miles by refusing to allow the dead man to be buried in the Protestant graveyard. The loneliness of the empty prairie echoes the loneliness Mark experiences, sitting beside the silent child. But the passage also provides a precise, detailed picture of the Manitoba landscape. Distances, directions, species of tree, bush, and bird, colours, and climactic conditions are all specified. In *Jalna*, the occasional descriptive pieces are almost all connected with a romantic plot development. When, for example, Piers Whiteoak, goes to meet his girlfriend Pheasant, the scene is set in some detail:

The path wandered then down into the ravine; ... wound up the opposite steep, curved through a noble wood; and at last, by a stile, was wedded to another path. ... Down in the ravine it was almost night, ... except for the luminous shine of the silver birches that seemed to be lighted by some secret beam within. ... The trees were

lively with the twittering of birds seeking their nests, their lovemaking over for the day. (53)

The landscape here is simply a pretty backdrop to the love story, and the details are designed, not to evoke a particular part of Canada, but purely to enhance the romantic atmosphere. The amorous feelings of Piers and Pheasant are displaced onto the inwardly lighted trees, the “lovemaking” birds, and the “wedded” paths. The setting of *Jalna* is an unspecified and vaguely described part of Ontario, and it is also a fantasy land, whereas Ostenson creates a fully realized, precisely located prairie landscape. Yet it was de la Roche who received a congratulatory letter from the prime minister, Mackenzie King, praising her for setting her novel in Canada and thereby familiarizing readers abroad with her home country (qtd. in Givner 122). In the interwar years, readers and critics were apparently much more ready to endorse de la Roche’s idyllic, civilized eastern Canada than Ostenson’s harsher, more concrete Midwestern version.

The depiction of sexuality in the two novels parallels the depiction of landscape. *Jalna* explores (in two instances) the attraction between a Whiteoak son and his brother’s wife, but while the inclusion of these affairs is deliberately sensational, they do not — except in the characters’ imaginations — progress beyond kissing. There is certainly no illicit (or explicit) sex. This is about as exciting as it gets between Alayne and Renny:

“My darling!” His arms were about her. . . . He kissed her quickly, hotly. “There, I said I wouldn’t kiss you again, but I have — just for good-bye.”

She felt that she was sinking, fainting in his arms. A swirl of smoke, perfumed by pine boughs, enveloped them. A rushing, panting sound came from the heart of the fire. The violins sang together.

“Again,” she breathed, clinging to him. “Again.”

“No,” he said, through his teeth. “Not again.” He put her from him. (346)

Here, as in all similar passages, de la Roche displaces the human body from the scene, transfers Renny and Alayne’s desires onto inanimate objects (the fire and the violins), and conceals the encounter with smoke, darkness, and metaphor. She also contains her characters’ sexuality by requiring immediate renunciation and repentance from them, thus providing titillation without disrupting traditional moral frameworks.

*Wild Geese*, by contrast, is permeated with a far more explicit eroticism that never leads to repentance. All the sexualized passages focus on

the heroine Judith Gare, and the most intensely physical scene is the one in which she wrestles with her lover, Sven:

Sven crushed the girl's limbs between his own ... her clothing torn away. Her panting body heaved against his as they lay full length on the ground locked in furious embrace. Judith buried her nails in the flesh over his breast, beat her knees into his loins, set her teeth in the more tender skin over the veins in his wrists. ... Sven's breath fell in hot gusts on Judith's face. Suddenly her hand, that was fastened like steel on his throat, relaxed and fell away. ... Sven ... was trembling.

"Judie," he muttered, "Judie — look at me."

Judith raised her eyelids slowly.

"Kiss me — now," she said in a breath. (103)

The Canadian critics of the 1920s could tolerate the coy sexiness of *Jalna*, but the intense and often violent eroticism of *Wild Geese* was of a different order. Sexual mores in general were, on the whole, far more conservative in Canada than America during the interwar years, and this inevitably affected the public's response to these two novels. The plot of *Wild Geese* hinges on two extra-marital liaisons: Caleb Gare's wife had an illegitimate child before she married, a fact which is the source of Caleb's power over her. His daughter, Judith, engages in a sexual relationship with a man whom her father has forbidden her to see, and it results in an illegitimate pregnancy. This disruption of family values is severely exacerbated by Judith's extremely violent retaliation against her father when he tries to punish her. The secondary heroine, Lind Archer, represents a more conventional image of femininity, but is nevertheless complicit with Judith's defiance of her father's authority, and neither woman is finally punished. In the *Jalna* books, by contrast, transgressive behaviour is always limited by the larger force of clan loyalty. The potentially adulterous relationships remain unconsummated until they can be legalized through divorce and remarriage, and the disobedient and lecherous Eden is eventually disposed of through tuberculosis.

Much of *Wild Geese's* sensuality is either autoerotic or homoerotic, which makes the novel most unconventional when viewed in the context of mainstream interwar Canadian writing. In its most autoerotic scene, Judith goes alone to the woods and lies naked on the ground, an episode which for C. Susan Wiesenthal suggests a comparison with Willa Cather's *O Pioneers!* Both authors, she argues, depict "a type of autoerotic ... relationship of the heroine with a part of her hermaphroditic sexual self which has been displaced onto the 'Other' of the land" (53). Lying on the

forest floor, Judith thinks of Lind Archer, as she does in all the scenes relating to her sexual awakening. The novel repeatedly emphasizes the physical attraction between Lind and Judith:

Judith came up to Lind in the loft and sat down on the bed, watching the Teacher wash her face and neck and long smooth arms with a fragrant soap. Lind turned and surprised a peculiar look in the girl's eyes. Judith grew red ...

"It makes my mouth water to watch you do that," she said. "It's so — oh, I don't know what it is — just as if somebody's stroking my skin."

"Why don't you use this soap, Judith? ... Next time you expect to meet Sven —" Lind lowered her voice and smiled roguishly at Jude — "let me fix you all up, will you? Nice smelling powder and a tiny drop of perfume in your hair. He'll die of delight ..."

Judith chuckled and ran her hands over her round breasts. ... Lind looked at her, stretched full length across the bed. What a beautiful, challenging body she had! With a terrible beginning of consciousness, like a splendid she-animal, nearly grown.

"Let me comb your hair, Lind, will you?" Jude asked.

The Teacher sat down on the floor beside the bed and Judith loosened the long skeins of bronze hair that fell all about her shoulders. Judith loved to run her fingers through it, and to gather it up in a shining coil above the white nape of Lind's neck. (196-97)

Here Judith's attention is on her relationship with Lind, whereas Lind, conscious of her attraction to Judith, is nevertheless forcing matters back into a conventional, heterosexual plot, in which the "fixing up" is for Sven's benefit.

The suggestion of lesbian attraction would have been more shocking to 1920s Canadian sensibilities than the heterosexual, though extramarital, desire depicted in *Jalna*. (This is somewhat ironic since it is de la Roche, and not Ostensio, who was in later decades considered likely to have been a lesbian.) In the small towns of 1920s North America, as Lillian Faderman points out, "heterosexuals often never even knew that homosexuals existed" (63). In the cities of America, by contrast, the 1920s was a period of intense attention to homosexual issues, but it was by no means a period of tolerance. Faderman notes:

Although there was considerable interest in unconventional sexuality among sophisticates of the 1920s, the official voice was not remarkably different from that of earlier eras and lesbianism ... was

greeted with outrage by the guardians of morality, who were nowhere near ready to accept such autonomous sexuality in women. (66)

The gay culture developing during this period in New York was vigorously combated by the state. Police raids closed down lesbian and gay restaurants in Greenwich village, and also Broadway plays depicting homosexuality, including *The Captive* and *The Drag*. Legislation was used against publishers and filmmakers to suppress homosexual references, though this of course only increased public interest in the subject. In Canada, the development of a noteworthy gay culture and literature came much later.<sup>1</sup> There is a discernible tradition in Canadian fiction of eroticized same-sex relationships, but the novels concerned, including among others John Richardson's *Wacousta* (1832), Louis Hémon's *Maria Chapdelaine* (1916), and Grove's *Settlers of the Marsh*, were not read in a homosexual framework until the 1980s. Rather surprisingly, Grove himself described *Wild Geese* as "trash," commenting in a letter to Austin M. Bothwell, "The petty 'sexiness' of many passages makes a mature person smile. One cannot avoid the suspicion that that sort of thing was sprinkled in as a spice or with an eye on the 'movies.' In fact, how could a young girl know anything of the fierce antagonisms that discharge themselves in sex?" (26). My speculation is that his somewhat defensive reaction to *Wild Geese* may stem from an awareness of its affinities with his own work and perhaps also from a perception of its homoerotic undertones. Interestingly, *Settlers of the Marsh* was itself banned from public libraries for its treatment of sex (Grove 29), which took the form of a triangulated relationship between two women and one man. Like *Wild Geese*, it was considered too frank for public taste in the 1920s, and these novels only gradually won recognition as the earliest works of prairie realism.

The perceived frankness of *Wild Geese* was one factor which led it to be classed as objectionably realistic by Canadians. The critical discourse of the period revealed a marked tendency to equate "realism" with explicitness about sex. In a 1924 article, Mrs. Glynn-Ward, a British Columbian novelist, referred with disgust to "modern sex-writers," claiming, "There has come over the literature of the day the foetid breath of decadence. They call it Realism. They call it Truth. They call it anything but what it is: a pandering to the morbidly unwholesome in human nature" (qtd. in Bobak 90). This sounds like an extreme example, but Mrs. Glynn-Ward spoke for a large constituency within the Canadian population.<sup>2</sup> Arguably, though, Ostenso's method should be classed as natu-

ralistic rather than realistic. The period associated with naturalism in America is usually 1893-1914, but literary developments often occurred later in Canada, and Ostenso and Grove were the first Canadian writers to show the influence of naturalism.<sup>3</sup> Although the major US naturalists, Theodore Dreiser, Stephen Crane, and Frank Harris, focus on urban rather than rural environments, many other aspects of their work are similar to Ostenso's and Grove's. There is a shared preoccupation with the experience of ethnically marked immigrants, and a shared reaction against the exclusively middle-class subject matter of the nineteenth-century realists. Jude Davies argues that American naturalists "were sceptical towards ... the notions of bourgeois individualism that characterised realist novels about middle-class life. Most naturalists demonstrated a concern with the animal or irrational motivations for human behaviour, sometimes manifested in connection with sexuality and violence." This certainly applies to *Wild Geese*, though only to the parts of the story connected with Judith. The plot revolving around Lind Archer provides a counterpoint, since it is constructed as a more conventional romance, so that the novel looks backwards to traditional genres as well as forward to new literary methods.

Many literary historians of Canada have pointed to the persistence of romance in the national literature well past the period when it had given way to realism and then modernism in America and Europe. As E.L. Bobak remarks, "the dominant form of fiction during the twenties continued to be the rural romance, escapist literature which ignored the contemporary social situation" (85). Her examples of such novels may sound like children's titles, but in fact appealed to readers of all ages:

A McClelland & Stewart advertisement for its current list, placed in the January 1920 issue of the *Canadian Bookman* ... included Lucy Maud Montgomery's *Rainbow Valley*; Marshall Saunders' *Golden Dickey*, described as "the story of a valiant little canary"; Grace McLeod Rogers' *Joan at Halfway*, "a charming romance of a sunshine girl"; W.A. Fraser's *Bulldog Carney*, whose title speaks for itself; ... [and] Robert Watson's *The Girl of O.K. Valley* ... "a romance of charm of atmosphere and vigor of action, ... distinguished by refinement of style and sentiment and touched by warm humanity." (87)

*Wild Geese* could certainly not be assimilated to this list. Such sentimental romances could never have contained Ostenso's bold combination of themes: illegitimate sexual relationships, jealousy, cruelty, and the violent overthrowing of patriarchal authority; and neither would they have been

set in such an unbeautiful and finally malevolent landscape. These aspects of the novel probably disqualified it from being consecrated (to use Pierre Bourdieu's term) by the influential men of the Canadian literary world, many of whom were committed to a literature which would have an inspiring moral role in the development of the Canadian national identity and disseminate an attractive image of Canada to the outside world. By contrast, *Jalna*, although representing an important move away from sticky sentiment towards a greater honesty about human relationships, also contains large measures of "sunshine," "charm of atmosphere," and "warm humanity." In striking this balance, de la Roche achieved a remarkable feat: she convinced the literary establishment that Canadian literature had reached new levels of maturity, but also won over thousands of readers by appealing to popular tastes.

In Canada, as Bobak points out, readers refused "to believe that social discontent and human distress are suitable subject matter for the novel" (87). There was, to be sure, a significant minority of progressive writers and critics who welcomed the first Canadian efforts at social realism and naturalism as a sign of the growing maturity of the national literature, but the more general response was a marked hostility. E.D. Blodgett, in *Five-Part Invention: A History of Literary History in Canada*, quotes from 1930s literary critics' "warnings that the new literature of realism is 'corruption'" and characterizes this position as "'normal' for the time" (80). American taste in this period was significantly broader than Canadian. US bestsellers and Pulitzer prize-winners of the twenties encompassed a wide variety of styles, subjects, and settings, and ranged from war novels (*All Quiet on the Western Front*) and adventure stories (*Beau Geste*) to realist fictions of New York high society (Edith Wharton), small-town America (Sinclair Lewis), or African-American life (*Scarlet Sister Mary*). There was a large audience for regional fiction of all descriptions, evidenced by the high US sales of such varied writers as Edna Ferber, Willa Cather, Hugh Walpole, and Booth Tarkington. American literary critics initially evinced a certain amount of distaste for the subject matter of naturalist writing and for its supposedly reductive philosophy, and a few texts, including Dreiser's *The Genius* (1915) were suppressed because of their sexual content. Naturalism had gained more acceptance by the 1920s, however, and puritanism was in general rather less in evidence in American than Canadian literary discourse. In the US, novels with sexually transgressive heroines such as *The Constant Nymph*, *Gentlemen Prefer Blondes*, and *The Age of Innocence* became bestsellers. It is, then, not difficult to understand how such different novels as *Wild Geese* and *Jalna*

could find publishers, readerships, and critical approval in 1920s America.

During the middle decades of the twentieth century, the values embodied by the Whiteoaks books still had considerable purchase in Canada. The literary histories published at this period tended to omit Ostenso, but the more “Tory” accounts include de la Roche, who often fitted their desired narrative of Canadian nation. An example is Desmond Pacey’s influential *Writing in Canada: A Short History of English-Canadian Literature* (1952), of which E.D. Blodgett writes,

Haliburton, Kirby Leacock, and de la Roche provide an armature of conservative values in Pacey’s history, and in his conclusion these values are integrated with other English middle-class values that appear to lead inevitably to a vision of national, that is, English-Canadian unity. Those writers who fit the national theme are celebrated for their attacks upon the rising commercialism . . . usually associated with Canada’s proximity to the United States. (101)

This is perhaps the salient explanation for the continued acknowledgement of de la Roche, and the total ignoring of Ostenso, by mid-twentieth-century literary historians. De la Roche could be made to “fit the national theme,” a theme which was construed differently by different critics, but which invariably involved assertion of Canada’s distinctiveness from the States. Ostenso, whose novel demonstrates no interest in resisting American influence, and whose later fiction inscribes a geography of Minnesota which does not diverge markedly from the fictionalized Canadian landscape of *Wild Geese*, was not so amenable to the nation-building project of Canadian critics.<sup>4</sup>

In subsequent decades, changing conceptions of the relation between literature and nation, and also of the nature and value of literary genres, led to significant changes in critical assessments of *Jalna* and *Wild Geese*. The set of ideas and images identified as the “Northern” became very pervasive in Canadian culture, and writing that engaged with the power and impact of the Canadian landscape began to be identified as central to the national literature. Cultural nationalists no longer wished Canada to be represented abroad by the Ontario of *Jalna* and the equally idyllic Prince Edward Island of the nation’s other worldwide bestseller, *Anne of Green Gables* (1908). Critics in the 1970s and 1980s also came to appreciate Ostenso’s pioneering narrative techniques,<sup>5</sup> and literary histories in this period constructed a rising plot for English-Canadian literature, with realism as its goal: in 1983, Joy Kuropatwa characterized *Wild Geese* as

“a major development in the Canadian movement towards realism” (626). De la Roche’s reputation, by the same token, fell rather into disrepute, to the dismay of critics such as Desmond Pacey, who notes in his introduction to the 1970 New Canadian Library edition of de la Roche’s early novel *Delight*, “It is her romanticism, I believe, that has made her such an embarrassment to Canadian critics [who] ... chose to chide her for her failure to be realistic and refused to accept her on her own terms as skilful romantic artist” (x). Douglas Daymond, however, adopts a quite opposite strategy in an effort to defend de la Roche, writing in his introduction to a collection of her short fiction published in 1977,

Together with Martha Ostenso, Robert Stead, Frederick Philip Grove, Raymond Knister, and Morley Callaghan, de la Roche contributed to the development of realism in Canadian fiction during the early decades of this century. In her short stories as well as in novels such as *Possession* (1923) and *Delight* (1926), she challenged prevailing fashions in Canadian writing and her work was almost immediately identified with “the new realism”. (16)

Daymond tries to dignify de la Roche by associating her with the respected canon of Canadian realists, to which — we note — Martha Ostenso now unequivocally belongs: indeed, she heads the list. This reinvention of de la Roche as a radical, challenging writer may be rather improbable, but it is true that there is a greater measure of realism in her first books than in her most popular work. *Possession* and *Delight* focus entirely on working-class characters in a small-town setting, forming a marked contrast with the genteel, wealthy protagonists of *Jalna* in their isolated manor house. The disagreement among critics as to the nature of de la Roche’s fiction results from the fact that she blends romance, melodrama, and realism in different proportions in all her writing, so that it is impossible to align the body of her work with any one literary model.

The reviews of *Possession* and *Delight*, although very positive in Britain and America, were in Canada rather mixed (Pacey viii), and to the author’s disappointment they failed to reach a large audience. She wrote to her friend Katharine Hale, “If only I could write novels that the public would like as well as the critics! Especially the US public which is what counts” (qtd. in Panofsky 61). It has frequently been suggested that the lukewarm response to her first two novels led de la Roche to alter her techniques in order to cater to Canadian readers’ taste for melodramatic tales of socially privileged characters. Dennis Duffy, for example, remarked in 1983, “A course that might have earned de la Roche a place

alongside a rural realist and romanticist like Martha Ostenso was shunted aside by the remarkable success of *Jalna* ("De la Roche" 181). Like Daymond's comment, Duffy's reveals the growing tendency to affirm Ostenso's canonical status while constructing de la Roche's career in terms of early promise diverted in an unlucky direction. Taking a similar approach, Dorothy Livesay recalled in a brief memoir of her friend,

I was deeply moved by Mazo's first publication, *Possession*. Already as a devotee of Frederick Philip Grove and Martha Ostenso, I felt that realism was the necessary ingredient for developing a Canadian literature. Mazo, I believed, had the power within her to write the great Canadian novel which would forego sentimental romance and would be concerned with the way ordinary people really lived. (12)

Livesay goes on to report on the aftermath of the *Atlantic Monthly* prize: "Alas, I remember how the publishers then harried Mazo. They did not want her to write of the down-and-outs, the characters she knew that reminded her of Dickens, those disinherited whom she had described in *Possession* and *Delight*" (13). Instead, of course, they wanted her to capitalize on the success of *Jalna* by producing more in the same vein. Livesay's piece was written in 1979, a period in which Canadians were more than ever preoccupied with the development of a literature that would accurately reflect the contours of their particular landscapes and national life. It is not surprising that, at this time, she would emphasize the realism and distinctively Canadian qualities of de la Roche's fiction. In retrospect, she considers that de la Roche failed to write the great Canadian novel, but *Jalna* was initially hailed as precisely that. It was reviewed in enthusiastic terms in all the Canadian journals, including the highbrow ones, and, as Ruth Panofsky argues, *Jalna* was considered "a significant contribution to high culture" (57).

Its high standing among critics was not, however, maintained for long. De la Roche wrote fifteen sequels between 1929 and 1958, and as they succeeded one another, their soap-opera quality became increasingly apparent. Gradually their Loyalist conservatism also grew unfashionable. The disparaging reviews of the later *Jalna* books did not deter de la Roche's faithful readers, but they certainly affected her status in the Canadian literary canon, and from about 1933 onwards, her reputation was in continual decline (Panofsky 57). By 1960 the *Times Literary Supplement* had concluded, "The *Jalna* marathon has, indeed, moved outside the range of literary criteria."<sup>6</sup> In commercial terms, however, de la Roche was one of the most successful English-language novelists of the twentieth

century: the Jalna series sold more than nine million copies, in 193 English-language and ninety-two foreign editions (Daymond, Introduction 15). Ostenso too was very productive and commanded a large audience. She published fourteen further novels and short-story collections between 1926 and 1958, many of them in collaboration with Douglas Durkin, generating enough income to sustain a luxurious lifestyle and support her extended family. Many of her books went through several editions in the US, Canada, UK, and Australia, and forty-five foreign-language editions were published in Scandinavian and eastern European countries. The short stories she regularly published in *McCall's*, *Cosmopolitan*, and other magazines increased her audience further, as issues of these periodicals might number a million copies (Buckley 71). Yet she never achieved true celebrity status. There is not one biography or full-length critical study of Ostenso, whereas de la Roche's worldwide fame has generated several books,<sup>7</sup> and her unorthodox lifestyle and deliberately misleading autobiographical writing continue to intrigue readers and biographers.

Unfortunately, de la Roche's celebrity has resulted in a critical habit of denigrating her writing on the basis of assumptions about her personal life. George Hendrick, for example, writes in his 1970 study,

Miss de la Roche (as did other writers concocting fiction primarily for housewives) created larger-than-life characters with exaggerated passions. . . . It would be much too simple, however, — and unfair — to think that Miss de la Roche wrote to exploit deliberately her public's hunger for the merely salacious. From her early childhood, Miss de la Roche dwelt in a Playland which supplied her with overwrought fictional material and kept her an emotional adolescent all her life. . . . Almost instinctively, it appears, she gave her audience what it wanted. (5, 7)

Hendrick is here making assumptions based on his knowledge that his subject never married and chose instead to live with her cousin Caroline Clement, with whom she created a fantasy world (akin to the Brontës' Gondal), which they referred to as "the Play" and sustained throughout their adult lives. Hendrick's reference to emotional adolescence ostensibly points to this behaviour, but it is also a tacit comment on de la Roche's failure to enter the adult order of heterosexuality and maternity. Note his unnecessarily frequent use of the title "Miss," a belittling emphasis on the author's marital status. In order to sustain his vision of her as innocent and childlike, however, Hendrick has to represent her choice to include some rather risqué scenes as "instinctive" — whereas in fact it was

probably a deliberate commercial strategy, as numerous other critics have argued.

Ostenso has not been accused either of immature writing or of pandering to audience demands. Although her literary career was lucrative, she is rarely viewed as a mercenary writer, which may be partly because she did not write books in series. Sequels are almost universally viewed as a sign of capitulation to market pressures, as the critical contempt for the later volumes in the *Jalna* series, the *Anne of Green Gables* series, or the *Little House on the Prairie* series amply demonstrates. These books, it is assumed, are based on a formula which can be reproduced, and therefore their literary value decreases. The gradual canonization of Ostenso results from a perception of the uniqueness of her individual books, and especially of *Wild Geese*. As Bourdieu argues, the representatives of high culture “attempt to distinguish the artist and the intellectual from other commoners by positing the unique products of ‘creative genius’ against interchangeable products, utterly and completely reducible to their commodity value” (114). He suggests that this is achieved through a privileging of form: “Affirming the primacy of the saying over the thing said, sacrificing the ‘subject’ to the manner in which it is treated, ... all this comes down to an affirmation of the specificity and irreplaceability of the product and the producer” (117). This is certainly the case in the appreciative critical assessments of Ostenso offered in a number of journal articles dating from the 1970s and early 1980s, the period of Canadian cultural nationalism. These articles focus on the achievement of her style and her innovative blending of gothic, myth, and archetype with realistic and naturalistic techniques.<sup>8</sup> During the same period, de la Roche’s work was likewise the subject of several articles in academic Canadian studies journals, and most of these concentrate on her less well-known books (*Possession, Delight, Lark Ascending, Explorers of the Dawn, The Thunder of New Wings*).<sup>9</sup> These are claimed to be of greater literary value than her Whiteoaks series, a gesture that probably reflects an embarrassment about the popular, commercial nature of the *Jalna* books, and a desire to claim de la Roche as a “serious” Canadian writer.

In more recent years, there has been virtually no new critical analysis of either author,<sup>10</sup> and very little attention of any kind paid to de la Roche. Ostenso’s canonical status has, however, been affirmed to some extent, through the inclusion of *Wild Geese* on school and university literature syllabuses, and the publication in 1991 of *Martha Ostenso and Her Works* by Stan Atherton, a forty-three-page student guide in the ECW

Press Canadian Author Series. Ostenso has also been appropriated by a variety of locally based interest groups, which construct her identity in different ways according to their individual priorities. Biographical or bibliographical pages on Ostenso appear on the websites of the Norwegian-American Historical Association, which characterizes her as a Norwegian-American immigrant novelist; the Government of Manitoba, which includes her in an historical overview of Manitoba women writers; and the Minnesota Author Biographies Project. *Wild Geese* was also adapted as a Canadian television film in 2000.<sup>11</sup>

The early reception of *Wild Geese* and *Jalna* was, then, influenced by the Loyalist, anti-American ideologies of 1920s Canada, as well as by the restrictive sexual mores of the era, and the associated distrust of realist writing. In later decades, different factors came into play. The landscapes and themes of *Wild Geese* began to be identified as more “typically Canadian,” while the conservative idealism and English style of *Jalna*, previously seen as expressive of the Canadian dream, became obsolete. The new value placed on literary realism led to debate about the genre and narrative method of both novels, but ultimately resulted in the privileging of *Wild Geese*. In the future, it is entirely possible that increasing interest in serial narrative, popular fiction, and literary celebrity will tip the balance back in de la Roche’s direction.

## NOTES

<sup>1</sup> See Goldie 238. On American “lesbian chic” in the 1920s, see Faderman 62-92. Lesbian poet Elsa Gidlow’s move from Montreal to New York in 1920 is indicative of the near impossibility of openly living and writing as a homosexual in interwar Canada (even in Montreal, soon to become known as Sin City for its widespread prostitution and drinking culture).

<sup>2</sup> This fact is lamented by Douglas Bush, in his 1922 article “A Plea for Original Sin.” Canada, he contends, is “too prudish” (589) to produce good literature: “A very large proportion of the reading public is invincibly, stolidly moral” (589), and the resulting literature is so poor that “No one reads a Canadian novel unless by mistake” (590).

<sup>3</sup> For further comments on Ostenso and naturalism see Baum and Buckley. For an account of Grove’s naturalism, and affinities with Dreiser, see Gammel.

<sup>4</sup> Ostenso’s Canadian background significantly influenced two of her later novels, *The Dark Dawn* (1926) and *Prologue to Love* (1931), both set in British Columbia, but she chose a Minnesota setting for many of her other books.

<sup>5</sup> They still, though, made rather fruitless attempts to categorize *Wild Geese* as either realist or romantic. To cite just two examples: Hesse concludes that, “Despite the emphasis on dreams in *Wild Geese* \* Ostenso \* is ultimately a realist” (52). Lenoski writes, “as well as having realist antecedents, realistic detail, *Wild Geese* is certainly a romance novel of the [mythic] type” (284).

<sup>6</sup> *The Times Literary Supplement* (29 July 1960): 447. Quoted in Hendrick 77. See Hendrick 99-106 for a detailed account of the reviews of de la Roche's various books.

<sup>7</sup> For books on de la Roche, see Bratton, Givner, Hambleton (two), Hendrick, North, Weeks.

<sup>8</sup> For full-length articles, see Atherton ("Ostenso Revisited") Baum, Buckley, Hesse, Keith, Lawrence, Lenoski, Thomas. See also brief comments on Ostenso in the following discussions, dating from the same period: Bobak, Fraser, Hedenstrom, Harrison, McMullen, Northey, and Ricou. For earlier discussions of *Wild Geese*, see Mullins.

<sup>9</sup> See Daymond (five essays), Doig, Fellows, Snell.

<sup>10</sup> I except Ruth Panofsky's excellent analysis of readers' and reviewers' responses to the Jalna books and Brian Johnson's intriguing reading of *Wild Geese*.

<sup>11</sup> Adapted by Suzette Couture, starring Sam Shepard, directed by Jeremy Podeswa, screened on CTV 4 March 2001.

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