

Grove's Vision of Prairie Man

ERIC THOMPSON

What inner vitality I had was spread over a province, yes, over an empire. I could switch my attention from one point of it to another, as though, from the summit of a mountain, I were looking down over hundreds of miles, piercing the distance with telescopic vision which enabled me to see the minutest details no matter how far away they might be. And wherever I looked, in this whole region of the Canadian West, there were figures moving about which were the creations of my brain, at the same time that they were mirrorings of actual conditions. These figures did not all of them command my own sympathies; with some of them I lived in an everlasting conflict; but they shared my blood and my vital strength. I could not have fashioned them had I not seen their side; and, I believe, I have been just to them.¹

THIS passage, from his autobiography, reveals Frederick Philip Grove's Olympian self-confidence in his powers of "telescopic vision" into the lives and destinies of prairie men and women. Elsewhere in the same book — that is, in the "Manhood" chapters of *In Search of Myself* — he speaks of himself as "the cosmopolitan" who "had fitted myself to be the spokesman of a race". For Grove, the pioneer is essentially a "tragic type", whose "whole endeavour is bent upon reshaping and doing away with the very condition in its environment which gives it its economic and historic justification; and when . . . the task is done [he] suddenly realizes that he has been working for a purpose which has defeated [his] end. He cannot, now, settle down to enjoy the fruit of his labour."² In numerous other passages throughout his writings, Grove amplifies his definition of the "type" and speaks of his compulsion to write about the pioneers' fruitless struggle. But it is in his novels, especially his "Prairie Series", that we witness most graphically his "everlasting conflict" with his creations and, in the process, see his vision of prairie man.

Critics of Grove have noted the strongly autobiographical roots of his fiction. Birbalsingh, in his analysis, draws attention

to what he calls "unmistakeably masochistic overtones" in the novels which, he claims, are the result of the author's "urgent psychological need" to try to purge himself of unresolved "subjective dissatisfactions" arising from "the unstable contact between his mixed European inheritance and his unhappy life in Canada."³ The problem with this approach is that the critic is unable to view the fiction *qua* fiction — which it most assuredly was meant to be — and instead creates a morass of murky speculations that have little to do with evaluating Grove's achievement as a serious novelist. Dudek, on the other hand, takes a far more enlightened approach as he seeks to chart the evolution of Grove's art by the imaginative use of the author's own metaphorical construct: the "search" for his own identity.⁴ That the search for Grove's identity as a novelist must begin with the obviously autobiographical writings is still true, even in the post-Spettigue era, for Grove's method of narration is rooted in the self.⁵ Only gradually is he able to create character. He had to have had an experience first — or, at least, intuited it — before transmuting it into fiction through the medium of his imagination. As he himself put it:

There is a fundamental difference between books that are "made" and books that have "grown". . . I am so constituted as to be able to produce books only that have grown. . . . I am the man who looks on; as life flows by, he sees and fashions a few things *which have come to him* and which, slowly, but inevitably, demand artistic formulation.⁶

Thus, *A Search for America* (1927), whatever the facts concerning the dates of its composition, is an example of a book that had "grown" in Grove.⁷ His projection of himself as Phil Brandon was a necessary stage in his artistic development. The question of Brandon's identity is not so much that he *is* Grove but rather that he is a studied reflection of what Grove thought himself to have been during his first years in North America.

The physical and psychological structure of *A Search for America* is inescapable: each of its four books — *The Descent*, *The Relapse*, *The Depths*, *The Level* — is organized to pattern the action and characterization in clearly defined waves of experience, thereby forcing the reader to travel with Phil Brandon down a long, vertiginous slope of discoveries about

himself and the continent. Phil is alternately propelled forward or pushed back in his circuitous journey, either by his own volition or by circumstance. The geographical "circle" he traverses — from Toronto to New York through the mid-western states and finally to the Canadian prairies — is not quite closed; the end of his travels, it appears, is not in sight. Psychologically, too, the path Phil travels is chock full of the snares and delusions which await the innocent who follows his ideals and assumptions so naively. His wandering is essentially unpremeditated, no matter how ardent his dreams about the Ideal America he pursues. It is significant that in his "tramp" across the American hinterland the young Candide carries with him the *New Testament* and *The Odyssey*. These books of wisdom are a source of comfort, and inspiration, for the pilgrim-adventurer. But it becomes painfully evident to him that his journey is a "descent," not only in terms of class but more importantly in dignity and self-esteem. The materialism of the New World shocks and repels him. Yet, after an endless series of disappointments in hobodom, Phil begins to see some virtue in the life of the soil:

What were cities and towns? Mere specks on the map. Here was the ground-mass of the nation — the soil from which cities sprang, like strange, weird, sometimes poisonous flowers in the woods. . . . I understood that, before I could say that I had a fair view of America as it is, I should have to mingle with the men who tilled the soil. (pp. 310-11)

Years later, however, Grove confessed his ultimate disillusionment with what he had undergone, especially as a farm-labourer: "I felt an exile. I was an exile. I did not live among people of my own kind; among people who . . . spoke my language; among people who respected my fierce sensibilities; among people who shared a single one of my interests."⁸

Undoubtedly he hoped that in coming to Manitoba in 1912 and embarking on a school-teaching career his life would change. It did, of course, but not as Grove perhaps expected. Many of the sketches and short stories he began to write during the First World War eventually were published and a number of them contained seminal incidents which found their way into his longer narratives.⁹ But the fact is that Grove could not

escape from his experiences among the farming class. Throughout his life in Canada he believed he dwelt in as bitter obscurity as he imagined his neighbours to be in the small farms and villages of the Canadian west. Only with the publication of *Over Prairie Trails* (1922) and *The Turn of the Year* (1923) did he begin to acquire readers and, happily for his state of mind, the sympathy and friendship of professors, publishers and journalists who could help his literary career. With the publication of *Settlers of the Marsh* (1925), a moderate *succès de scandale*, he gained a measure of notoriety as well. During the 1920s he made several cross-country trips to address Canadian Clubs and other groups, partly, one suspects, to justify his chosen themes as a novelist. He also published a collection of essays (*It Needs to be Said*, 1929) in which he sought to define, in lofty terms, the nature of great literature. In one of these he wrote:

True realism always develops a conflict in such a manner that we see all sides, understand all sides, sympathize with all sides taken separately, and yet cannot tell how that conflict can be avoided which, as it unfolds itself, crushes our sensibilities. That is the tragic necessity which we find in all our great works of literary art and which exalts us as it crushes us; that is the "fate" of the Greek tragedy; it is the inexorable quality of life itself. Give it, and you have given an image of life; give it, and you have given art; and you have given it by the true method of all dramatic and narrative art, namely realism.¹⁰

In short, the great artists have always been "realists" because they have learned to see the "tragic" nature of life, and to express it in their art. This was the ideal Grove tried to attain in his own work.

One later essay which illuminates Grove's idea of himself as a novelist is "Peasant Poetry and Fiction from Hesiod to Hémon". In discussing the work of ancient writers he remarks that "they see in rural life, when they deal with it, rather an escape from the heroic life of the market-place and of the city than the normal setting of a majority of mankind . . ." Then, turning his attention to the modern novelists, he notes a reversal of perception and form: "It is this: by-and-large European fiction, as far as it deals with rural life, or in other words with the peasant, is epic; American fiction, dramatic."¹¹ In part, the

difference between the two literatures flows from the differing pace of life; in Europe, Grove maintains, the individual remains tied to the group's destiny, whereas in America an individual makes his own way. Two novelists who illustrate these differences are the Norwegians, Knut Hamsun and Ole Rølvaag. Hamsun champions the rural life of a northern pioneer district of Norway in his *Growth of the Soil* (1917), Grove feels, while Rølvaag gives a grim portrayal of hardship among Norwegian pioneers on the American plains in *Giants in the Earth* (1924-25). Grove admired both authors, and he was probably more directly influenced by their work than by other contemporaries. Rølvaag's conception of the heroic stature of the pioneer paralleled Grove's; both saw the settlement of the foreigner, or the native-born, on the prairies as posing unique and tragic problems for the individual and his family. Hamsun's work, too, left an indelible impression, although Grove later rejected what he called the "romanticism" of *Growth of the Soil* which he felt presented man's fate in a melioristic light very unlike his own tragic conception.

As odd as it seems, then, Grove was drawn irresistibly to the portrayal of a prairie "type" which interested him intensely but for which he felt no great sympathy. For him, the assertion of manhood in the Prairie world is tragic; man is physically and spiritually crushed. Grove is never *merely* a determinist, however. Different as his heroes are — Len Sterner, Niels Lindstedt, Abe Spalding, and John Elliot — each possesses a magnitude of spirit which compels us as readers to admire their fortitude in the face of natural adversity. For our purposes here, the published novels will be studied not so much as finished "wholes" but rather as "parts" of an evolving quest pattern that Grove saw as much in the lives of other men as in his own.¹² Since the order of publication is irrelevant in this regard, it is appropriate to adopt the following format: *The Yoke of Life*, *Settlers of the Marsh*, *Fruits of the Earth*, and *Our Daily Bread*. Thus we can see, in Grove's vision, the path of man's life in terms of the aging process from boyhood to senility and death, but also the consequent movement from innocence to experience.

It is interesting to note that Grove wished to publish *The Yoke of Life* (1930) under the title "Adolescence" and that he quarrelled bitterly with the publishers over the matter.¹³ His preferred version indicates much more exactly the theme of his work: the destructive idealism of Len Sterner which leads to his death. But it is clear that its didacticism, improbabilities of plotting, melodramatic descriptions, and psychological absurdities in the characterization of Len and Lydia, make it the weakest of the major works. And yet, *The Yoke of Life* does have narrative power; no scenes in all of Grove are more compelling than Len's discovery that he loves Lydia, or more otherworldly than when he takes her into the wilderness to purify their passion in death. The development of Len's story from his boyhood in the backwoods to his final moments of tragic manhood is as swift as it is inexorable. Grove's handling of setting deftly facilitates this fatal journey. It is true that those critics who are determined to see some masochistic streak in Grove's personality manifesting itself in his fiction, might seek proof for their interpretation by citing the bizarre ending of this novel. But, it is important to remember, Len's quest is to attempt to resolve the conflict between his idealistic nature and the realities of his relationship with Lydia. It is his tragedy, as a youthful seeker, that he cannot.

Len, a lonely, overworked farm-boy with a vivid imagination, lives with his mother and his step-father, Mack Kolm, on a poor homestead in the marshlands. Crawford, the teacher in the district, thinks he sees a "deep, instinctive urgency" (p. 42) for creativity and scholarship in Len and tries to persuade Kolm to release the boy from his chores so that he can further his education. Typically, the farmer sees the matter differently. Kolm's land has had several unsuccessful tenants on it before, each of whom either failed in the fight against the bush while proving-up the property, or failed to pay off liens and other debts made against it. In the harsh world of the new settlement, *both* nature and society oppress the struggling pioneer and he needs all the help he can get. However, reluctantly, Kolm agrees to let

Crawford tutor Len: "The giant's movement was one of despair" (p. 57). Len learns quickly, but even as he does, restlessness dogs his mental landscape. Now, at eighteen, he grows even more solitary: "[threading] the bush at random", he is disturbed by a vague "longing" for someone to share his new knowledge with: "These things flitted past his mind in half-discerned outlines: snatches of thought, feeling, perception. His whole being seemed to float in a sea of unknown things; the world was wide and infinite in his mind" (pp. 65-66).

Grove suggests that Len's awakening to knowledge (like Phil Brandon's) is painful and not understood by him. Then, he makes an incredibly pretentious comparison of Len with "the mythic poets who project into nature the procreations of that awe in which they stand of themselves, in the forms of fabulous concrescences of incongruous parts which they harmonize into imaginable wholes" (p. 68). Not only is this pretentious, it is almost incomprehensible. He is more realistic when he associates the conflicting emotions of the boy's budding-forth with objects and processes in the prairie world: with the "smell of crushed green things in the air" (p. 60) after a devastating hail-storm; with Len's phallic vision of a one-horned deer; and with his sight of the train which transports him forever from the protected world of childhood — "a roaring monster came rolling along, blinding everything with its single evil eye" (p. 97). These passages are effective images in forwarding the novel's sexual theme. The same is true of the touching scene in which Grove evokes the awkwardness of Len and Lydia in the throes of young love. Len's sexual innocence is assaulted further in the lumber camp, a place of grim, desperate men, dirty in clothing and foul in language. His exposure to prostitution causes him to see Lydia in a new light — indeed, as she really is — not tender and innocent, but coquettish and materialistic. Yet, Len refuses to acknowledge the truth of his perception; "He had seen in her what might make him a beast; for that he substituted what might make him a god" (p. 165).

One of the strengths of Grove's characterization is his pursuit of the enigma of the Len-Lydia relationship, abandoning the familiar love-and-intrigue formula for a more realistic portrait.

Grove always felt his heroes had been *revealed* to him, and that he *had* to express what he had seen. For him, Len's quest for self-improvement and spiritual peace is doomed by his sexual naiveté; thus, the latter half of the novel unravels the tragedy of the tormented lovers. Deceived by Lydia, Len is forced once more to forego his plans for his education to help on the farm. A feeling of exile grows within him. He cannot forget Lydia. As soon as he can he leaves the farm and goes to Winnipeg in search of her. In effect he exchanges one form of imprisonment, the farm, for another, the city: "His heart sank within him: intelligences more than human must be directing this chaos if order evolved out of it. He was a grain of sand on a beach over which superior beings walked, crushing and grinding him unconcernedly" (p. 227). But here the novel becomes tedious as Grove wearies us with the back-and-forth movement of Len between city and country, attempting to develop Len's disillusionment. In neither place is he happy, of course, for the family is unable to keep the farm after repeated disasters and the city is seen as cold and parasitic to his hopes. His one goal becomes an obsession, to find Lydia and "redeem himself of what he now called the curse of sex" (p. 275).

Len, then, is one of those "rigid," "tragic types" of which Grove spoke in his autobiography; and *The Yoke of Life* is perhaps the most relentlessly naturalistic of his Canadian novels.¹⁴ Wasted by "fever" the young man is finally reunited with his *femme fatale* who, somewhat inexplicably, pities him and nurses him back to health. Now Len is determined to rid them both of the hurt and falsity that has plagued their lives. The journey into the wilderness is his solution. Lydia, improbably, agrees to Len's plan for purgation and soon, in the wide, silent expanses of a lake, surrounded by ancient hills and forest, they search deeply into the mysteries of themselves. Grove paints a steadily more deathly landscape, made all the more so by the utter silence that hangs heavily between the lovers. Their last tryst strains the imagination, for it seems clear Grove finds it difficult to sustain the illusion. At last they speak to each other: Lydia confesses she prostituted herself in the city in order to buy food for Len when he was ill. Redemption, or at least relief, now

seems possible, but it is not to be. In the last pages of the novel the voice of fate drums higher and higher, encapsulated in large flat rocks which beat their concave-convex sides together in the rising wind. The final rite of death is at hand: solemnly the lovers prepare themselves, launch their boat into the stormy lake, clasp together in an ecstatic embrace, and are drowned as their boat breaks up on the rocks. The yoke of life is lifted off; death offers respite, if not release.

The symbolism of Len's journey is unremittingly both spiritual and sexual; the same is true of Niels Lindstedt's in *Settlers of the Marsh* (1925).¹⁵ Whereas, however, Len's quest ends tragically in death, the path Neils is forced to follow ends in renewed life. His is no easier journey to self-understanding but Niels lives *through* his tragedy and emerges victorious from the ordeal.

Elsewhere Grove tells us that Niel's prototype "reached far back into the past, to a summer day when . . . in Nebraska or South Dakota, I had had a swim with a young Swede who, for some reason or other, confided to me that, up to the day of his recent marriage, he had not know the essential difference between male and female."¹⁶ Here, again, two familiar aspects of Grove's tragic art may be seen: the long maturation period from "revelation" to expression; and the naiveté of the protagonist from which stem his many woes. The central line of the plot is of Niels's search for sexual satisfaction and the nobility of love. His rebuff by Ellen, his fatal "fall" into the relationship with Clara, his blind-rage killing of Clara followed by the prison sentence, and his return to a changed, more loving Ellen and the consequent happy ending — this is the basic pattern of the narrative. Sex — Niels's ignorance of it, Ellen's fear of it, Clara's gross sensuality and its disastrous consequences — is, as in *The Yoke of Life*, the destroyer of human happiness. Man, born in sin and fear, must seek to conquer the vicissitudes of his dumb, brutal existence through learning to understand his own nature and to control his instincts. The internal struggle is echoed by nature as the elements coerce and chasten him on every hand, making life on the land precarious at best. Always, however, Grove's

humanistic meaning is clear: it is man's responsibility to exercise his intelligence and compassion as the only real means to his temporal salvation.

The opening pages are a paradigm of the novel as a whole. We first see Niels in a winter landscape, stumbling across the open prairie, in search of work and shelter. On and on he plods through the snow and biting wind, turned away rudely from the door of a farmer from whom he asks directions, but at last reaching the Amundsen farm where he finds a welcome. His first days in the settlement are enhanced by the sombre beauty of Amundsen's daughter, Ellen, and by the seductive Clara Vogel. But of more immediate interest to him are the differences between the land of his birth and the land he has emigrated to:

In this country there was a way out for him who was young and strong. In Sweden it had seem to him as if his and everybody's fate had been fixed from all eternity. He could not win out because he had to overcome, not only his own property, but that of all his ancestors to boot

. . . .
In this country, life and success did not, as they had always seemed to do in Sweden, demand some mysterious powers inherent in the individual. It was merely a question of persevering and hewing straight to the line. Life was simplified (pp. 39, 45).

Once more, a hero in the Phil Brandon mould is compelled to "work out" for others in the New World until he can build his own dreams. But Neils is willing, strong and able, and without fear of succeeding in a material sense.

However, he is troubled by what he regards as "sinful" dreams of Ellen whom he wishes to marry and bear his children. The allure of Clara Vogel also disturbs him: "She looked very lovely, he thought, but she looked like sin. She was incomprehensible to him" (p. 54). In the midst of his growing torment Niels is conscious of the urgent atmosphere of the new land — "The short, ardent summer and the long, violent winter had captivated him: there was something heady in the quick pulse of the seasons" (p. 55) — which seems to mock his efforts to shape his future coherently.

Thus Grove weaves together the passions of youthful ambition and desire. And Niels's emotions, once aroused, are mercurial, almost uncontrollable; in this, he resembles the other heroes. Stunned by Ellen's rejection of his proposal of marriage, he broods savagely. Ellen loves Niels but has decided not to marry at all because of a childhood trauma which troubles her still. She tells him of overhearing her mother's agonized appeals to her father to stop having intercourse with her so that she would no longer have to be the murderess of unwanted children. In this, Ellen's mother resembles other Grove women, such as Ruth in *Fruits of the Earth*, and Martha in *Our Daily Bread*, who suffer under the domination of their husbands. Ellen has vowed that no man should have such power over her body and spirit. Desolate, Niels turns to Clara Vogel, marrying her within months. But while he prospers as a farmer, he realizes too late his wife is a stranger to him. In the circumlocution required by the standards of Canadian public morality in the mid-twenties, Groves describes Niels's submission to Clara's sexuality:

Distasteful though they were, he satisfied her strange, urgent, erratic desires. Often she awakened him in the middle of the night, in the early morning hours, just before daylight; often she robbed him of his sleep in the evening, keeping him up until midnight and later. She herself slept much in the daytime. He bore up under the additional fatigue. . . . (p.126)

Ironically, Neils's predicament resembles that of Ellen's mother. Tied to a loveless marriage he comes to the bitter conclusion, "He did not want children out of this woman!" (p. 138). The seasons pass, as if by inertia.

The closing pages of the novel are inevitable. His tragic fate has trapped Niels in a situation which can only be resolved by violence, given the single-minded passions of Grove's characters. Clara's confession of infidelity precipitates Neils's anger, he kills her, and surrenders himself to the authorities. After ten years in prison Niels emerges into society again and, hesitantly, makes his way to the farm in the bush country he had settled years before. Once more loneliness possesses him,

but this time only briefly. In portraying Niels's reconciliation with the faithful Ellen, Grove notes the conquest of his "passion" by his mature understanding of love.

Happiness almost ancient and a sense of infinite sorrow which was new were mixed in the mute abandonment of his feelings in which he sat there. The sorrow was at the lapse of time; the old, never ending sorrow that was is no more; the happiness, at the bridging of the gulf of years, accomplished without words, without explanations . . . (pp. 212-13)

Compared to the catastrophic ending of *The Yoke of Life*, this repose testifies to the author's hope that the tragedy he saw in life was not always all-conquering.

But, certainly, there is an unevenness in Grove's farm fiction. In this pair of novels he comes very close to sheer melodrama, both in plotting and characterization. What saves them, as works of realism, is ultimately the seriousness they convey about the grinding despair life deals out for some men and women in a rugged country. Grove had witnessed this despair, in the gravel ridge and marsh land of Manitoba. Pervading his stories, of course, is an uncomfortably morbid sexuality which blights the lives of his young pioneers. In his portrayals of his older protagonists in *Fruits of the Earth* and *Our Daily Bread*, similar obsessions are found. In *A Search for America* Phil seems to echo Grove's own philosophy when he says "We come indeed from Hell and climb to Heaven; the Golden Age stands at the never-attainable end of history, not at Man's origins" (p. 382). The same post-Darwinian view of man's struggle to overcome his animality and to attain spiritual ideals lies behind Grove's characterization of all his heroes. But, for Abe Spalding and John Elliot, pioneers of true prairie instead of bush country, the struggle is not so much determined by sexual misfortunes as by their failure to realize, and to correct, their human errors.

Fruits of the Earth (1933) continues the theme of the aging process and of man's discovery of the protean powers both within and without himself which determine destiny.¹⁷ Abe Spalding is a man of enormous willpower whose tragedy is his incapacity to alter events until it is too late. Indeed, Abe really resembles John Elliot more than Len Sterner or Niels Lindstedt; like Elliot he is

patriarchal, the natural leader of the district which bears his name. His struggle is that of a mature man rather than a naive or inexperienced young man. In a letter to Desmond Pacey Grove wrote of his purpose in the novel: "What I wished to bring out in the book is the slow decay of a great potentiality. The cards are stacked against Spalding, of course. He is slowly being bent into taking the 'slings and arrows' personally."¹⁸ In fact, Abe is a Promethean figure, arrogant and domineering, a member of what his creator called "a race of giants" — pioneers — who are strong and capable but doomed to be conquered by their own overweening pride, the prairie landscape, and the growth of settlement.

A critique of Abe's situation is made in Sirois's article on Grove and "Ringuet" (the French-Canadian novelist), where Abe, the hero of a chronicle of a new community, is compared with Eucharist Moison, the farmer-hero of a story of a traditional society. Both novelists were concerned with the abandonment of agrarian ideals in an age which saw the growth of industrial and technological values. Sirois comments on the difference between the older, romanticized treatment of rural life (*romans du terroir*) and the realism of *Fruits of the Earth* and *Thirty Acres* (1940): "Les romanciers du terroir étaient jusqu'ici assez optimistes, assez idéalistes, sur le destin des hommes; nous deux romanciers s'engagent à contre-courant et en proposent une vision tragique. Celui que l'on croyait un maître est en réalité un esclave." But whereas Ringuet's hero has not made any decisions of his own accord, submitting to his fate, Grove's hero clearly struggles to assert himself: "Abe Spalding qui avait démissionné un temps, décide lui, d'accepter consciemment son sort, et aussi de lutter contre lui. Prométhée enchaîné, il ne se rendra pas aux dieux."¹⁹

Abe is an imposing figure, tall, broad-shouldered, deep-chested, and "impulsive, bearing down obstacles by sheer impetuosity" (p. 19). Mentally, too, he is formidable: "Well, he would conquer this wilderness; he would change it; he would set his own seal upon it! . . . Yet, as he looked about, he was strangely impressed with this treeless prairie under the afternoon sun . . . It seemed suddenly a peculiar country,

mysteriously endowed with a power of testing temper and character" (pp. 22-23). Quickly, then, Grove establishes the ambitious nature of Abe and the challenge before him. He also initiates other aspects of Abe's personal life, early in the novel; his relationship with his wife, Ruth, whom he has recently married, and his attitude to his neighbours. We see him with Ruth shortly after they have sown their first crop: "They went to the field where the wheat stood knee-high being in the shot-blade; and for two hours they went about pulling weeds. . . . As always, Abe worked like a whirlwind; Ruth languidly, she being pregnant. Abe kept slapping neck and hands, for mosquitoes were bad. Ruth laughed, immune" (p. 32). These are happy days for them, happy and busy and full of hope. Not seen on the horizon of their lives are the years of disappointment and sorrow. In portraying Abe's attitude to his neighbours Grove displays a lively flair for dialogue as he presents Abe's lordly views. He wants more settlers in the district because he needs roads, cross-ditches, and other improvements; but he has no use for "no-account" farmers. Yet, despite his ability to get things done for himself and the district, Abe's headlong rush to succeed leaves him isolated from his family and others, and exposed to the calamities which ensue.

In the last half of the novel Abe becomes conscious of his separateness from the prairie and the community. Increasingly, he comes to see himself as a "mere interloper." In 1918, with the War just over, he discovers, almost accidentally, evidence of erosion in the walls of the grand house he had built barely five years before: "The weathering process would go on and on; and what would come of it? . . . The moment a work of man was finished, nature set to work to take it down again. A queer thought, that. And so with everything, with his machines, his fields, his pool; they were all on the way of being levelled to the soil again" (p. 137). In the things of nature itself, including the trees which he has planted as windbreaks, he sees the remorseless hand of change:

They would age and decay and die; already some showed black knots of disease; others, their bark having burst, grew huge buttresses resembling proud flesh. They would die and decay; unless they reseeded themselves as they seemed to do; then they would spread and conquer his fields and the prairie, converting it into a forest-clad plain. . . .

Even the prairie was engaged in a process which would do away with it. Abe looked at the ditches running full of muddy flood; and his mind lost itself in the mysteries of cosmic change. (p. 134)

Men, too, exact a toll on Abe's dreams of permanence and independence. More out of stubbornness than anything else, he opposes a consolidation scheme; ruefully, he stands aside while his side loses the fight. But the inroads of democracy in Spalding District are — like the encroaching prairie — a further erosion of his proud spirit. His relationship with his family is most estranged of all: the most tragic incident involves the death of his youngest son, Charlie, in an accident Abe feels he could have prevented; his other children, feeling unappreciated at home, leave the farm to live in town against their father's wishes; and Ruth, grown corpulent and worn-down over the years, has ceased to be intimate with him. Finally, it is Ruth, more than anyone or anything else, who symbolizes the failure of Abe to achieve his goals. She is perhaps the best characterized of all Grove heroines, as tough and resilient in her own way as Abe is in his. Appropriately, it is to her that Abe must at last turn for forgiveness when he confesses his failings as a man, husband, father, and settler.

Perhaps because it was the last of his Prairie novels *Fruits of the Earth* is the best written of the group. It is well-structured and composed in a workman-like prose which is especially appropriate in the portrayal of a rough-diamond character such as Abe. Most of all, the novel displays Grove's mature wisdom about the effect of actual conditions of life in a pioneering world on the lives of his characters. His reflections on the seeming indifference of the prairie landscape to the struggle for survival are expressed with honest exactitude and quiet stoicism. There is none of the desperate fatalism which mars the earlier novels. Instead, Abe's tragedy is presented in a highly realistic manner throughout the novel.

Abe, at least, may take comfort in the forgiveness of his wife; for John Elliot, even this surcease is denied. *Our Daily Bread* (1928)²⁰ is based on an ageless, but potent theme — "And his

sons walked not in his ways" (I Samuel, 8:3) — but in later years Grove was inclined to dismiss his work:

The theme was one which did not demand a very profound disturbance of the emotional constitution of the characters; instead, it demanded a careful, nice balancing of the forces, conservatory and initiatory, which actuated them. I felt that here was an opportunity of writing a "pleasant book", in Shaw's sense of the word. Perhaps it was for that reason that the novel, when completed, seemed to me a work of slighter import than my other books.²¹

Retrospectively, we are led to believe, Elliot's struggle had not moved the author as much as those of his younger heroes. An atmosphere of resigned pathos surrounds the dreams and actions of the old farmer who is past middle age when the novel begins and over seventy when he dies at the end. And, the novel is far from being flawless. Grove does not achieve concentration in developing his theme, nor a "nice balancing" of the competing "forces" amongst his characters. There are too many thinly-sketched incidents which detract from the power and ironies implicit in the main plot. So, by dismissing the novel as of "slighter import" than his others, Grove was seeking possibly to disguise his disappointment with a book which, had it appeared at the time and in the manner he *wished*, would have been a key work in his "Prairie Series."

Throughout his life John Elliot has hewed closely to the example set for him by his own father, to cherish the virtues of earning one's daily bread and raising a large family. When in middle age these dreams have been fulfilled and he has become prosperous, they are replaced "slowly and imperceptibly, by a new dream: that of seeing his children settled about him as the children of the patriarchs of Israel were settled about their fathers" (p. 7). The futility of this dream being fulfilled is only slowly realized by the aging man; most of his children have grown up, moved off the family farm and begun lives of their own. Since he has placed his faith in self-reliance and Providence, he cannot understand why his seed should differ from their parental nature and be indifferent to his values. That stubborn faith is shaken by the onset of death and hardship in the family: Martha, John's wife, dies of cancer of the uterus (she believed her illness was God's curse on the marriage), and a

series of ruined careers, sicknesses, and broken marriages sows further unhappiness. Observing this "chaos" Elliot yet clings to his fading dream.

His conservative nature had always before blinded him to his children's response to his action. Autocrat that he was, he had always "justified every action, at the stern tribunal of his puritanical conscience, by a reference to the ultimate welfare of his family" (p. 188). Now, lonely and bowed by a life-time of toil, he is desirous of their company. He begins a series of visits to their households and, systematically, alienates them by petty demands and reproofs. Gradually he comes to realize that his dream will never be fulfilled, yet he desperately yearns that there might at least be a reunion of the surviving members of the family: "He wanted a child of his simply to open his arms for him, to enfold him in love, as a mother enfolds her child. He wanted a refuge from life" (p. 305). Even these hopes are blasted. In "exile," with no comfort to be had from his family, the old man, now infirm and growing senile, walks one hundred miles across the prairie back to his farm and the scene of his earlier triumphs. The farmhouse is deserted, in decay, and soiled by "dust and chaff." There, heart-broken, he dies, surrounded at last by his wayward family:

When all those of his children who were in the house had assembled, they looked mutely down on his stern, cold face; and in most of them a feeling rose to the surface that with him the last link had been broken which so far had held the many divergent forces at work within the family together as a sheaf. Henceforth, their eyes would be focussed on their own, individual futures. (p. 390)

"The last link had been broken." The cycle of man's journey from birth to death, and from innocence to experience, is complete.

Our Daily Bread is an apt novel with which to complete this discussion of Grove's vision of prairie man. In it, although with less concentration and power, are found the several themes which fascinated him: the destructive power of sexuality; the indifference of nature to the human struggle; the driving energy of man's dream of knowing, of shaping, and of controlling his destiny; and the remorseless force of fate which mocks or obliterates, and turns to tragedy, man's hopes to endure and prevail.

There is a profound sadness in the lives of Grove's heroes. It is the sadness of lonely men. It is the sadness of a landscape, a landscape which has bred them, inspired them, and defeated them. And it is the sadness Grove encountered in his own life. His "search" for the meaning of life had compelled him to seek the truth in the prairie world. The truth he found there *was* sad. Still, as the premier novelist of prairie realism, his observation and integrity of expression shows a strength of vision which is unique and, at its best, magnificent in scope.

NOTES

- ¹Frederick Philip Grove, *In Search of Myself*, Toronto: Macmillan, 1946, p. 262.
- ²*Ibid.*, pp. 226-27.
- ³Frank Birbalsingh, "Grove and Existentialism", *Canadian Literature* 43 (Winter, 1970), p. 73.
- ⁴Louis Dudek, "The Literary Significance of Grove's Search", in *The Grove Symposium*, ed. John Nause, Ottawa: University of Ottawa Press, 1974, pp. 89-99.
- ⁵The appearance of Douglas O. Spettigue's *F.P.G.: The European Years* (Ottawa: Oberon, 1973) was a watershed in Grove criticism. Spettigue's laborious literary-detective work proved conclusively that Grove (Felix Paul Greve) fabricated his early life in Europe and that the "autobiographical" writings, *In Search of Myself* and *A Search for America*, are unreliable or misleading as to the facts. Nevertheless, although Spettigue's findings have forced a re-evaluation of Grove's life and work, the *real* Grove — in a spiritual sense — will always remain the man he thought or believed himself to have been. As Grove says: "This is the story of a writer; and a writer's concern is everlastingly with his soul." (*In Search of Myself*, p. 155).
- ⁶*In Search of Myself*, p. 421.
- ⁷Grove, *A Search for America*, Toronto: McClelland & Stewart, 1971. References are to the New Canadian Library edition.
- ⁸*In Search of Myself*, p. 235.
- ⁹Among the short stories which have obvious affinities with the novels are "The First Day of an Immigrant" (*Settlers of the Marsh*) and "The Marsh Fire" and "Snow" (*Fruits of the Earth*). Grove's stories were collected by Desmond Pacey and published as *Tales from the Margin* (Toronto: McGraw-Hill Ryerson, 1971).
- ¹⁰Grove, "Realism in Literature", *It Needs to be Said*, Toronto: Macmillan, 1929, pp. 75-6.
- ¹¹Grove, "Peasant Poetry and Fiction from Hesiod to Hémon", in *Transactions of the Royal Society of Canada* 11, 1944, p. 89.
- ¹²For discussions of Grove's unpublished novels, see: Bruce Nesbitt, "The Seasons: Grove's unfinished novel", *Canadian Literature* 18 (Autumn, 1963), 47-51; and Peter Noel-Bentley, "The Position of the Unpublished

Jane Athinson and *The Weatherhead Fortunes*, in *The Grove Symposium*, 13-33. In contemplating his "Prairie Series" Grove might have thought of it as two groups of novels — the first concerned with the experiences of immigrants and their children (The "Pioneers" mss. — "The White Range Line House" and "Settlers of the Marsh" — out of which *Settlers of the Marsh* emerged; and *The Yoke of Life*), and the second concerned with the experiences of the native-born and their off-spring ("The Weatherhead Fortunes" and "Jane Athinson" mss.' *Our Daily Bread*; and *Fruits of the Earth*). In such a large format, *A Search for America*, the sketches and his short stories might well have found a place as well.

¹³Grove, *The Yoke of Life*, New York: Richard R. Smith, 1930. References are to this edition.

¹⁴For a discussion of Grove's German novels, *Mauremeister Ihles Haus* (1905-6) and *Fanny Eisler* (1906), which he published under the name of Felix Greve and which are written in the style of German Naturalism, see A. W. Riley, "The German Novels of Frederick Philip Grove, in *The Grove Symposium*, 55-66.

¹⁵Grove, *Settlers of the Marsh*, Toronto: McClelland & Stewart, 1965. References are to the New Canadian Library edition.

¹⁶In *Search of Myself*, ip. 372.

¹⁷Grove, *Fruits of the Earth*, Toronto: McClelland & Stewart, 1965. References are to the New Canadian Library edition.

¹⁸Desmond Pacey, "Frederick Philip Grove; a group of letters", *Canadian Literature* 11 (Winter, 1962), p. 31.

¹⁹Antoine Sirois, "Grove et Ringuet; témoins d'une époque", *Canadian Literature* 49 (Summer, 1971) pp. 25, 27.

²⁰Grove, *Our Daily Bread*, Toronto: McClelland & Stewart, 1975. References are to the New Canadian Library edition.

²¹In *Search of Myself*, pp. 440-41. The reference to Shaw is of interest. Grove may have been thinking of the dramatist's definition of "pleasant" with respect to his plays, those "dealing, less with the crimes of society, and more with its romantic follies and with the struggles of individuals against those follies. . . ." ("Preface" to *Plays Unpleasant*, 1898; in Penguin ed., 1948, p. xxv). Elliot's struggles against the "follies" of his family may be foolish and fruitless, but they are hardly "pleasant."