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Lorraine McMullen

*Ernest Thompson Seton and His Works*

ECW Press, Toronto, 1989. 54 pages.

Ernest Thompson Seton wrote many of his fictional stories during the evolving years of conservation and wildlife preservation in Canada. During this same period, the demand for a unique literature to promote national consciousness fostered a new genre in Canadian fiction; the animal as tragic hero. To people whose urban lives were removed from the rigours of homesteading, wilderness tales provided romantic images and nostalgic yearnings. Seton's literary works portray animals as sympathetic creatures who suffer as a result of short-sighted and destructive human policies. In *Ernest Thompson Seton and His Works*, Lorraine McMullen takes a thoughtful look at several of his most compelling narratives.

In the early 1900's, few competent naturalists lived and worked in Canada. Having spend four or five years on the Manitoba prairie, Seton sketched and catalogued many species and wrote extensively about his experiences. Critics, unconvinced by Seton's psychological approach to animal behavior, charged him with anthropomorphism and 'nature-faking'. When challenged to publish his facts, Seton worked feverishly on his scientific illustrations and eventually returned his fictional stories to favor.

In her critical overview, McMullen often refers to the writings of Sir Charles G.D. Roberts', another Canadian author of animal fiction. While a basic biography of Seton is provided, more background information about Roberts' life is needed to support the implied comparisons. McMullen's overall treatment of Seton borders on admiration. consequently, she does not write in a gender neutral style and so perpetuates the myth of "man's" importance in literature, history and science. For example, McMullen tells of an orphaned animal "taken as a pet by a cowboy... learning to cope with harrasement by men and dogs, eventually escaping... and teaching his offspring what he has learned. Thus, unwittingly, man teaches animals how to defend themselves against him." This exclusive use of the male pronoun was acceptable in the past but is no longer appropriate for modern writers.

Sprinkled throughout her book, are excerpts of Seton's stories accompanied by brief discussions of various plots and characters. It would be more enjoyable, however, to read one of Seton's books in its entirety, such as "Wild Animals I Have Known", then scan McMullen's review for her interpretation. She does include an excellent bibliography of primary and secondary sources from which to

choose. The subject matter is interesting because after an enormous burst of popularity, the animal fiction genre virtually disappeared in 1920. As well, Seton was a flamboyant character whose life was fraught with many controversies.

McMullen alludes to "an imaginative, creative writer whose diction and anecdotal style show his artistry." Seton's real skills, however, are not prosaic. His talent for illustration was unsurpassed at the time and his timely messages of co-existence with nature influenced the actions of several political figures.

In many ways, he was caught between two worlds, never fully able to reconcile both the art and science within himself. Seton's fiction reveals a Canada when wilderness was accessible, literature fresh, and biological science at a turning point. Historically speaking, they are worth a second glance.

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