

And the Voice of the Pig Shall Be Heard in the Land

Mrs. Walter Buchanan, *Piggy*, *The Authoritative Text*, ed. Ursula Hogg-Reave. A Snorton Critical Edition. Galt: Press Porképic; Kiel: L. and f. Verlag, 1996.

Interest in the poetry of Mary Buchanan went into high gear in 1991 with the publication of *Piggy* by the Canadian Poetry Press and now, with the republication of that text in a Snorton Critical Edition, can be expected to pick up momentum faster than a porker barreling downhill. Under the able editorship of Ursula Hogg-Reave, internationally known for her writings on ecdysiological theory and praxis, Snorton has produced an authoritative volume based on the text prepared by its first modern editors, Susan Bailey and D. M. R. Bentley. The Snorton volume includes Bailey and Bentley's Editorial Emendations and Explanatory Notes, as well as previously unpublished correspondence between Mary Buchanan and Charles G.D. Roberts, critical studies by some of Canada's finest scholars, and a revised Biography. One cannot help in such instances but recall Robert Burton's oft-quoted words, "Pigmæi gigantum humeris imposti plusquam ipsi gigantes vident" (*Didacus Stella in Lucan*).¹ The careful and thoughtful analysis this group of scholars has devoted to the text of "Piggy" is proof enough of their true stature in Canadian criticism; without fear of rebuttal I believe they may justifiably be termed real Pigmies.

That this authoritative edition should have come together at all is somewhat amazing when one considers that in 1991 Bailey and Bentley proclaimed "Piggy" a "justly neglected poem"(7), while W.J. Kouth, its first commentator, adjudged it "intellectually immature, lacking in metaphoric subtlety, [and] rhythmically inadequate"(62). Kouth has had the good grace, in his survey of current scholarship on the poem (see "Interim Appraisals: 1991-92," 61-67), to recant his views, and has done further public penance by funding a conference on "Piggy" out of his own sherry bill. Bailey and Bentley have paid for their slight by allowing the entirety of their ill-considered Introduction to the Canadian edition to be reprinted here. Such academic humility is rare indeed, and more than makes up for alleged fiddling of research funds for their ground-breaking study. So, what turned these critics around? Why did

not other critics agree with them as to the poem's merits? How did this supposed sow's ear of a poem become the silk purse of contemporary Canadian criticism?

The answer, ironically, is to be found in Bailey and Bentley's original Introduction, and in the editorial paraphernalia which, no more loudly than the poem itself, proclaims their early verdict unjust. Irony piles on irony when one realizes that Bailey and Bentley obviously misread the evidence that was staring them in the face. They, readers will recall, had concluded that "Piggy" lacked merit simply because it "aroused no comment or controversy on its first appearance in print" and failed to be "singled out for attention by reviewers when it appeared in Mrs. Buchanan's *Country Breezes from Breezy Brae* [c.1915]"(7).² This is hardly to be wondered at: the editors themselves quote the following verses from the literary pages of the *Clarksburg Reflector*: "On the tenth of July in '94/ Clarksburg village will be no more." Can the authorship or intent of these lines be in doubt? The waters of the Beaver River were rising rapidly, and the birth in the village of a child with a pig's tail that same spring could only bode ill. Clarksburg did not disappear as cataclysmically as Mrs. Buchanan's jeremiad predicts, but folks were spooked. Even a hasty perusal of *Country Breezes from Breezy Brae* gives ample evidence that something unpleasant was in the air, and that those who were not dying were getting downwind as quickly as possible. The poems' titles tell the tale: "Good-Bye to Friends and Neighbours," "Farewell to Wm. Mitchell and Family," "Goodbye to Mr. W. Blair and Family," "Goodby to A.S. Hay and Family," and half a dozen others in a similar vein.³ To these we must add the further half dozen or so poems entitled "In Memoriam,____," or "Lines in Memory of _____," and one begins to get the drift. One can only imagine what was going through Mrs. Buchanan's mind when she penned "Farewell to the Organist of Banks Church" and the ever-wistful "'Where are the Young Men Going." In short, by the time *Country Breezes* was published, there was hardly anyone left in the district who could tell the difference (or care) between a volume of verse and the Eaton's catalogue. Undaunted by the lack of a responsive audience, Mrs. Buchanan soldiered on, confident that talent will out, and that she would one day receive her due.

This scholarly edition should establish, once and for all, that Mary Buchanan is an imposing figure in our literary pantheon, possibly the equal of the Sweet Songstress of Saskatchewan, the inimitable Sarah Binks. Some people, I know, will scoff, but when I read *Country Breezes*, Sarah's name comes immediately to mind, especially in such poems as "Toothache," "Love and Insurance," "Befogged in the Straits of Belle Isle," "Housecleaning Time" and, of course, "Piggy." I would

go so far as to predict that in very short time "Piggy" will rank with Sarah's "Hi Sookey, Ho Sookey" as one of the finest examples of *schweinelieder* in our canon. It may be true that Buchanan cannot match Binks for the sheer gadarene energy of her modernism, but it should be remembered that Sarah was a "daughter of the old south," her family having emigrated to Saskatchewan from the Dakotas. Surely it was there that the young Sarah was exposed to flamenco, the bossa nova, the macarena, and the other unusual rhythms that characterize her verse. Even with their more formal restraint, Mrs. Buchanan's poems are no less technically accomplished; I have read any number of them that are guaranteed to bring tears to the eyes of all true lovers of verse.

The critics whose studies are collected in this volume take a variety of approaches to their subject, but on one thing they appear to be in general agreement—Mary Buchanan was a postmodernist. Two studies are particularly important in this regard, Robert Krouch's "The Fear of Pigs in Early Canadian Poetry: an Erotics of Pork," and Ronné Gonflam's "The Canadian Porkmodern: a Study of English Canadian Poetry." After numerous beginnings and at least one threat never to end, Krouch tells us that Mary Buchanan, "much like Sinclair Ross, Susanna Moodie, Adam Kidd, Isabella Valency Crawford, Johnny Wayne and Frank Shuster [the only names in this esoteric list so far to ring a bell with this reviewer], and Thomas Chandler Haliburton—is a postmodernist poet without knowing it herself "(79). As evidence for this conclusion, he cites the fact that Mary Buchanan was often "bravely effing the ineffable"(81), sometimes almost right under Walter's nose. Longing "to experience what cannot be lived"(81), Mary is compelled to confront the postmodern paradox: "The namelessness is the name, but must be written even to be nameless—but cannot remain nameless if written"(81). Further comment here, I think, would be superfluous. Gonflam's article on the porkmodernism of "Piggy" is equally illuminating, and is to my mind a classic of its type. She begins by demonstrating the self-referential nature of the poem (a major tenet of postmodernism is that a poem must declare itself as a poem, to prevent its being mistaken for something else), and goes on to insist that "Piggy" "really depends on the self-conscious play of oppositional attitudes towards a creature that itself embodies some troubling conflicts about what exactly 'nature' might be up to"(102). Then, in typically contemporary critical fashion, she largely loses sight of the poem, returning to her subject just frequently enough to prevent her argument from fizzling away into the circumambient gas. In this latter context, she is especially illuminating on the poetry of Michael Ondaatje, one of the few postmodern poets other than Atwood to have attempted the *schweinelieder*.

Its truculent tone immediately establishes Rosemary Stuffing's

reading of the poem, "This Pig Which is Not One," as unmistakably feminist. Her theorizing implicitly acknowledges that she has been feloniously anticipated by Irigaray's "This Sex Which Is No Fun" and I suspect there may be further unacknowledged borrowings from Jong's *The Fear of Flying Pigs*, but this is only an intuition. As might be expected from this school of thought, there is much vapourizing about male bourgeois piggery and other offences, both real and imaginative, which does little to illuminate the poem or advance her cause with her Chairman. Her thesis, that "Piggy" constitutes, at least in part, "a devastating indictment of the contradictions inherent in the dominant phallic economy by which patriarchy..."etc., etc., etc., seems to me to be the result of a partial reading of the *œuvre*. There can be no doubt that Mary Buchanan was interested in feminist issues; her poems "Ravenna Women's Institute Fowl Supper," "Women's Institute Convention," and "After the Convention" give ample testimony to this. "Women's Institute Convention" is particularly forceful in addressing the place of modern womanhood: the lines "Our Homes are first, our duty's clear/ We tend and serve our loved ones dear," and later, "We're banded here as women should/ In hopes to get, and give out good," could not be clearer, although I confess to some uncertainty about the terminal adjective in the last line quoted. The members of the Women's Institute were clearly progressive thinkers but, as the following lines from "After the Convention" establish, they were careful to distinguish themselves from the more militant members of their cause in the academies:

They do not boast ancestral names
Nor are they highstrung haughty dames
Nor do they come their horn to toot
Those women of the Institute.

From this evidence alone, it seems clear that Stuffing needs to reread *Country Breezes*, or at least the Buchanan-Roberts correspondence, preferably over a pitcher of beer with Robert Krouch.

Starling Mattress, in "The Struggle for Pork in Real Canadian Poetry: the Example of Mrs. Buchanan," argues that "Piggy" is Mrs. Buchanan's "valiant response to an inferior but highly lauded U.S. poem, the often anthologized 'Richard Corey' by Edwin Arlington Robinson, who was an agent of expansionist U.S. poetry from the time of the so-called Spanish American War until his death during the Great Depression, an event brought on by the glut of bourgeois individualist poems in the boom years following the First World War, which was entered by Canada two years and more before U.S. involvement"(136). Mattress is well-known for his passionate defense of nationalist poets like George Boaring (*The Man in Yellow Gumboots*) and Franck Davey (*The Louis Riel Organmeat and Piano Co.*), and for his opposition to the Black

Mountain lackeys who brought us *Shit* and its deleterious influences on contemporary Canadian poetry. In praising Mrs. Buchanan's "native ability to differentiate the true Canadian consciousness from the U.S Imperialist ethos"(137), Mattress once again nails his colours squarely to the mast: "As for me and my house, we will serve the boar." Given the choice between the false consciousness of the imperialists and the semi-consciousness of the nationalists, he will choose the latter every time.

Jane Toskins does not tell us where New Philology is—somewhere in Oceana, I suspect—but her contribution, "A New Philological Approach to Mrs. Walter Buchanan's *Piggy*" demonstrates the value of comparative approaches taken by post-colonial theorists. If a young scholar from some little colony no one has ever heard of can toss off references to "Aegina," "Alcmene," and "Ganymede" as if they were part of her own literary heritage, can we be surprised if she can make connections between "Piggy" and Paris of Troy? Her conclusion that "Piggy" is "a *tour de force* of epic literature"(132) seems to follow naturally, but we must remember that finding lost epics—Canadian, Australian, or New Philological—is what post-colonial theory does. I. S. MacLarden, in "'A Pig's a Pig for a' That': The Scottish Lineage of *Piggy*," is on surer ground; using historical and comparative linguistic principles to examine the text of *Country Breezes from Breezy Brae*, MacLarden posits that Mrs. Buchanan may have been of Scottish ancestry. From this he is able to establish a strong case for the influence of the family tartan pattern on her verse forms; this places her solidly within "the Presbyterian tradition of dissent"(123) with antinomian leanings, "for only a believer that moral lapses result from God's occasionally withholding grace could permit herself to go before the reading public with a poem of this nature"(123).

The finest and undoubtedly most lasting contribution to this present collection of essays is Séamus O'Toole's "MMB: the Galway Years." O'Toole has imbibed deeply from the Pierian spring; indeed, his indefatigable researches into the true identity of Mary Buchanan compelled him to spend his entire sabbatical year in Ireland, going from one font of knowledge to another, day after day, often staying late into the evening, returning to his quarters only when he could not absorb another drop. His discovery that Mary Buchanan was really Mary Maura Butler is the most amazing bit of literary detective work since Brian Troughorn discovered that Standish O'Grady was really Standish O'Grady Bennett or the more startling discovery by Douglas Spaggetti that Frederick Philip Grove was, in actuality, Felix Philip Grove. We return again to that perennial Canadian question, "Shakespeare, or Bacon?" This is heady brew indeed, but what one might expect from a scholar with O'Toole's thirst. The most undemonstrative and sober

critics are bound to find O'Toole's conclusions astonishing.

Space does not permit me to comment at length on each of the critical articles contained in this volume, but I can assure readers that each of them is as intellectually sound as those that have claimed my attention. The Derridean cognitive dissonance of Stephane Éscobigh's "An Editorial Tortière," which allows and even encourages the commentator to speak of something different from his announced topic, provides the kind of insights into *Piggy* that only this kind of criticism can deliver. Elizabeth Thompsow's "Friends and Larders: The Farmer's Dilemma" provides as unusual a dimension to the "ethics of caring" as Stan Fondle's report on the Uniloo Conference on *Piggy*, "The Small World of *Piggy*," testifies to the more common academic "ethics of indifference." And every academic reader, I am sure, can share in Eric McCorker's experiences of teaching texts one has not had the time or inclination to read, and appreciates his advice to be well-refreshed before attempting Menardian reconstructions of poems known only by rumor.

No reviewer worth his salt and sinecure can praise a volume as unreservedly as I have done so far without finding something not to his liking; one must, after all, appear to have done one's homework; one must insist that a reviewer is not a lickspittle. It is in that spirit that I offer the following cavils. First of all, I find it deplorable that a volume pretending to such completeness has no section entitled "Recipes," especially now that the barbeque season is upon us. Secondly, Bailey and Bentley (or maybe just one of them) gloss the term "crubeen" as being of Anglo-Irish origin and designating "the foot of an animal, especially a cooked pig's foot"(30). No less an authority than Porges Luis Borges has determined conclusively that "crubeen" is actually a corruption of the Samoyedic-Guarani word "mulroney," indicating a pig's trotter. Given the context of Joyce's usage, Bailey and Bentley's confusion is understandable.

In summary, then, *Piggy, The Authoritative Text* is an excellent volume, attractively bound in pink covers. There can be no doubt about our collective critical fortunes so long as there are poems like "Piggy" to be rediscovered, or critics willing to comment on them.

Notes

1. Robert Burton, *The Anatomy of Melancholy* (1621). Certain modern commentators have rendered these lines as "Buy large hog bellies if you want to see the future." While this reading is in

keeping with the spirit of Burton's advice to his melancholy age, it seems to me to lack the precision of the original which, I'm sure my readers will agree, is best left untranslated. [\[back\]](#)

2. Mrs. Walter [Mary] Buchanan, *Country Breezes from Breezy Brae* (Thornbury, Ontario: Beaver Valley Publishing Co., Limited, [c.1915]). [\[back\]](#)
3. *Country Breezes from Breezy Brae* is, unfortunately, unpiginated. [\[back\]](#)

A.J.M. Zchmidt
