

SVEN DELBLANC'S *KANAANS LAND* (LAND OF CANAAN)

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Kanaans land is the third part of a four-volume cycle of novels which follows the fortunes of Delblanc's maternal grandfather Samuel and his children and grandchildren. The other three are written subjectively and are set in Sweden. The third volume, however, differs slightly in style and greatly in content from the others. It is a much more objective account of the ten years one of Samuel's daughters, her husband and children spent in Canada, from 1926 until 1936.

It is dangerous to try to extrapolate an exact Delblanc biography from a series of novels, but in the case of *Kanaans land* we are on safer ground. Delblanc himself published a supplement to it entitled *Minnen från Kanada (Memories of Canada, 1984)* which shows a close correlation between fact and fiction. I was able to discuss the book with Delblanc, and although he said that 'You can't regard it as some kind of photographic representation of reality' he went on to show how the events and descriptions in the book were mostly based on facts.

Delblanc's father was a irascible, sometimes violent man. He worked as a steward on a Swedish farm but, frustrated by restrictions imposed by society and by having to work for others, he decided to emigrate to Canada, buy a farm and enjoy unrestricted freedom in a new land. His wife was against the whole venture but had to comply with her husband's wishes. In 1926 Siegfried Delblanc, his wife and two young daughters left for Manitoba. Sven Delblanc was born there in 1931. Since the family returned to Sweden in 1936 Sven obviously can't remember much from that period. After the war, however, his father returned to Canada, and in 1947 the sixteen-year old Sven stayed with him from the beginning of May until the end of September. He found that little had changed and that most of the neighbours were still there.

Then in the spring of 1983 he revisited Canada. By this time he was working on his suite of novels and did a lot of research into the factual background to the 1920s and 30s. This complemented his personal memories and family memories of the period.

The land they bought – on a mortgage like most other people there – was in the Swan River valley in Manitoba, with Minitonas their nearest town, Duck Mountain to the south, and Porcupine Forest to the north. The farm was just on the border of

the wheat-producing prairies. Its position in a valley near to a system of lakes protected it from the very worst of the droughts and dust bowls of the real prairie, but it also meant that the families farming there were on a knife edge until the harvest was gathered in, especially before the development of fast-ripening varieties of grain.

Some of their land had been farmed previously, but parts of the farm had never been under the plough, and it was Siegfried Delblanc's dream to break new ground and tame it. One of the book's successful features is the description of a determined settler driving himself and his team of horses to the utmost, furiously slicing through thick roots in virgin soil; and of the satisfaction he derives as he finally drives the end product, a plentiful supply of first-grade wheat, to the grain elevator in Minitonas.

The Delblanc's fictional neighbours constitute a true cross-section of the farming community in that district at the time. There was still a kind of pecking order. Settlers from the British Isles for instance, especially England and Scotland, were highly regarded. Scandinavians were likewise appreciated. Then there were the so-called Galicians from the Ukraine and Poland – apparently no distinction was made by the Canadians. They were often good workers, certainly good breeders, but perhaps just slightly below the salt.

In the novel these are portrayed as the Gourlays and the Hendersons. They are 'so respected that they can appear in their own names in the novel'.¹ Mr. Gourlay was the bank manager in Minitonas and Mr. Henderson's farm was large enough to allow diversification, so they were financial aristocrats. Mr. Henderson came indirectly from Scotland but more immediately from Inniskillen. The Wells (based on a family called Bighams) were from the Midlands.

There was a large Scottish family called Campbell. The prolific McCarthy couple were Irish-méti catholics: Mr. McCarthy was half-Indian. He was very good with horses, he distilled and sold (and drank) his own liquor, he was a great asset as a caller at square dancing, but he was less energetic when it came to tending his farm or repairing his equipment. Then there were the Kowals, an abbreviation of a Polish or Ukrainian name nobody could pronounce or remember. They were even more prolific, and rather indifferent to personal hygiene.

Apart from the Delblanc family themselves, a hard-working intelligent family, the Scandinavians are represented by Nelson Lund, a Dane with livery stables, by Finns, who worked at large forest clearings in North Manitoba and had a reputation as very good lumberjacks, and by an Icelandic family. Most of the Icelanders lived at Gimli on the western shores of Lake Winnipeg. The Icelandic character Vigdis is based on an Icelander so much larger than life that Delblanc felt obliged to tone her down in his novel to make her credible. The real Vigdis had the Icelander's knack of reciting long sections from memory, and could quote the whole of Tegner's *Frithiofs saga* by

heart. Enough of the real Vigdis remains in the novel to illustrate the remarkable Icelandic spirit that overcame great hardships.

There are very few references to the original inhabitants. Maria when alone at home was frightened by an Indian, a short lean man in jeans and old torn jacket, and black streaky hair hanging down to his shoulders under a broad-brimmed hat. He was trembling, and perspiration stood out on his forehead. He offered Maria a joint of raw venison and she gave him a loaf of bread. When her husband heard about the encounter he 'laughed at her fear: redskins around here were harmless. Most of them lived a half-doped life on a reservation north of Swan River or wandered around towns or railway settlements, a dying breed. TB and drink were slowly driving them to their grave... For the people of the valley they were a source of irritation or guilty conscience. Most people chose not to see them or think about them.'²

(When Delblanc was in Manitoba in 1983 he saw Indians everywhere. 'The Cree tribe have a large reservation north of Swan River. Medicine now cures smallpox and TB, but their weakness for firewater remains... Cree Indians dressed like everybody else. The only ones now wearing coloured embroidered headbands are white intellectuals, hippies and gurus'.³)

Two other characters appear from time to time throughout the novel: Mutt and Jeff. There must be a Mutt and Jeff in most societies. These two were war veterans who never quite managed to re-adjust to the valley after having been out in the big wide world. In the book they fought in World War I but Delblanc told me that they were based on veterans of World War II he had met in 1947.

The book mentions the church and the school. Swan River had a small Catholic church where the McCarthys and the Kowals could praise their Lord. 'We seldom get there, sighed Mrs McCarthy. Apart from the Kowals you mostly have to push through crowds of metis in the church, and that's a bit much for an Irishman.'⁴ Mrs Wells was a good Anglican and Mr Guthrie and his charming wife would give her a lift to Swan River church. The Campbells and Hendersons were Presbyterians and went to a service if a guest preacher turned up. Otherwise there were mainly Ukrainians in the district and they had onion-roofed wooden churches in every section of the Swan River municipality.

There weren't many Scandinavians in the valley and Maria was excited to hear that there was a Danish church in Swan River. She spruced up her family on the first opportunity that arose to go to church, only to find that it had been taken over by the German Lutheran church, and she could hardly understand a word of the service.

Much more central to the community was the school at West Favell. It served as a school, for Presbyterian services, for parties and 'bees', harvest festivals, concerts

and even amateur dramatics. On his 1983 visit Delblanc learned that the school had closed about twenty years previously, i.e. before 1963 and the district 'had thereby lost its centre'.⁵

Amusing touches in the book often concern the Delblancs' language experiences. The mother Maria had been a teacher and had some pretensions to education. She brings with her an English textbook which is all about Mrs Brown of the Home Counties inviting Lady Whately and the Colonel and his wife to tea – which doesn't really help her much in Swan Valley. Her real English primer turns out to be Eaton's mail order catalogue. 'Here was a simple language dealing with frying pans, longjohns and dried fruit. Here one was blissfully far from Oxford and Westminster Abbey.'⁶ (When I mentioned this passage to Delblanc his response was immediate – 'Oh, Eaton's catalogue – plenty of pictures, wonderful descriptions of everything from threshing machines down to pins, ladies' clothing – it was the Holy Bible'.)

Maria was the slowest to learn English for obvious reasons. Young children seem to pick up a language in a matter of weeks. Karin, newly arrived in Canada, went to play with the Kowal children and returned home saying 'Nuff', as in 'Nuff pangkej'. By the time of the social gathering to celebrate the great harvest the children and their father were completely at home in English. The children spoke English to each other at home. The young son, i.e. Delblanc, born in 1931 'spoke English like the Canadian citizen he was.'⁷ (In the 4th volume it mentions that he spoke to himself in a mixture of Swedish and English.)

The hard-working Delblanc family enjoyed several good years, despite the dangers of early hard frosts, late springs and unreliable rainfall. Their good years culminated in the legendary bumper crop of 1928. Then came the Depression, followed by drought for several years, and one year a plague of grasshoppers and a series of bitterly cold winters. By 1934 the family's reserves were exhausted and when Maria received a small legacy she used some of it to buy single tickets back to Europe. The father was extremely reluctant to leave but gave in. He never settled in Sweden and by 1946 was heading for Manitoba again.

Maria was the least enthusiastic member of the family as far as Canada was concerned, and the book is often seen through her eyes. Added to that the one hundred or so pages devoted to the Depression and droughts give a harrowing account of the hardships endured. When the family fell victim to an outbreak of typhoid Maria was too ill to suckle her newborn baby and the child died of starvation. Maria was determined to prevent such a disaster from striking again. When Sven was due she got to a maternity hospital. Dr Nagel's fee was \$10, and six days at the hospital cost \$18 dollars, more than Maria owned in all the world. She finally pacified Dr Nagel with three plump chickens and two dozen eggs.

Even so, what emerges is an affectionate picture of the people and life of Swan River. There are endearing descriptions of the trips to the small town of Minitonas, with its aesthetically pleasing coffee shop owned by a Chinaman (whose son, incidentally, became a well-to-do doctor) and its general dealers. There are fine descriptions, too, of neighbours' visits, their quilting bees etc., but above all of the great gathering at the school on the last Saturday in August to celebrate the bumper harvest of 1928.

Maria remained too Swedish, she wanted to return to Europe, but even she recognised the goodness of most of her neighbours. Delblanc said 'She is a schoolteacher with some education, she tends at first to regard the ladies with condescension – but after a while she becomes aware that they are good at heart, they are steadfast, they help her... She starts to ponder the question: "Maybe there is something the matter with me?".'

Similarly, we see how people from various European countries and cultures live in greater harmony than they ever managed to do in Europe. One rather fine remark comes from Mrs Ruben, the Jewish wife of the Minitonas store-keeper. A feud had been raging between two families, and Mutt and Jeff stirred things up in Ruben's store. One member of a feuding family had gone too far and someone finally said in a burst of anger 'People like that ought to be lynched'. Mrs Ruben said firmly 'We don't lynch people in this country.'⁸ When I asked Delblanc about this he said it was an actual event that he remembered clearly, and added 'Well, I felt a bit Canadian then'.

As I mentioned, Delblanc was in Manitoba until 1935, then in 1947 when things had not changed much. When he returned in 1983, on the other hand, most of his erstwhile neighbours had moved, or expanded their farms, gone over to specialist farming, or quite simply moved to a city. In a sense, therefore, the book encapsulates a slice of Canadian history, a few brief years from the 1920s to the 1940s. There is no sentimentality in the novel and certainly no romanticisation of the conditions, but I find it a moving picture. The settlers were, as Delblanc said to me 'nice people, brave, no self-pity in the rough times'. In fact, when he talked to them in 1947 about the Depression and droughts he found that they disliked being reminded of the 'Black Years'. They shrugged them off with a 'Well, we had a couple of tough years but then we went on to prosper'.

It is an engaging picture of the part of Canada that Delblanc in many ways still regards as part of himself.

NOTES

1. *Minnen från Kanada*, 8. My translation.
2. *Kanaans land* (Bonniens, 1985), 32. The translations are my own.

3. *Minnen från Kanada*, 23.
4. *Kanaans land*, 143.
5. *Minnen från Kanada*, 22.
6. *Kanaans land*, 131.
7. *ibid.*, 341.
8. *ibid.*, 189.