

University of Nebraska - Lincoln

DigitalCommons@University of Nebraska - Lincoln

---

Great Plains Quarterly

Great Plains Studies, Center for

---

Summer 1999

## Review of *The Life of Margaret Laurence* By James King

Walter E. Swayze

*University of Winnipeg*

Follow this and additional works at: <https://digitalcommons.unl.edu/greatplainsquarterly>



Part of the [Other International and Area Studies Commons](#)

---

Swayze, Walter E., "Review of *The Life of Margaret Laurence* By James King" (1999). *Great Plains Quarterly*. 1587.

<https://digitalcommons.unl.edu/greatplainsquarterly/1587>

This Article is brought to you for free and open access by the Great Plains Studies, Center for at DigitalCommons@University of Nebraska - Lincoln. It has been accepted for inclusion in Great Plains Quarterly by an authorized administrator of DigitalCommons@University of Nebraska - Lincoln.

## BOOK REVIEWS

*The Life of Margaret Laurence.* By James King. Toronto: Alfred A. Knopf Canada, 1997. Illustrations, acknowledgments, preface, appendix, sources, endnotes, index. xxi + 457 pp. \$34.95 cloth, \$21.00 paper.

Advance publicity for James King's biography of the best-loved author in the history of Canadian literature aroused hostility among many readers who had been eager for the book to appear. With its emphasis on the revelation of Laurence's suicide and on her marital stresses, her sexual drive, and her drinking, the promotional campaign recalled the conclusion of William Watson's brilliant essay "The Punishment of Genius" (1890): "Such is the lot of the modern man of genius; living, he may escape the poisoned arrow; but dead, he is a banquet for the ghoul."

The book itself proves to be less sensational than its promotion. Part of King's problem is that Laurence's earlier biographers (Clara Thomas, Joan Hind-Smith, Patricia Morley) and others had avoided discussing a friend's private problems and failings while writing honestly about the achievements of someone they loved and admired deeply. When Don Bailey broke ranks in 1989, even readers and reviewers who had not known Laurence personally were offended by what they saw as a breach of taste.

Taste is not universal and timeless. The line between the right of access to information and the right to privacy is drawn in different places in different decades, in different media, and for different subjects. King had never met Laurence except through her books,

which he had read perceptively and admired intensely. He was given access to hundreds, if not thousands, of pages of private letters and journals unavailable to or unused by earlier biographers, and he interviewed her family, friends, and associates some years after her death. He approached her life the way he had approached the lives of other literary notables—William Blake, Herbert Read, and Virginia Woolf—with industry, care, precision, the urge to understand, and sympathetic detachment. In doing so, he has brought a new perspective to Laurence biography for readers who did not know a generous but sternly private Margaret Laurence in person.

From jacket design to unobtrusive and concise—but usually adequate—documentation, from well-spaced, readable type to generous provision of appropriate photographs placed in text exactly where relevant, this is an attractive volume. The writing is clear and concise; analyses of problems, relationships, and books, are often pithy, epigrammatic, even brilliant.

Editing has been careful, but errors and omissions do exist. *Raeburn* (10) is *Reaburn*. Neither of Sylvanus Stall's books (33) has *Married* in the title. The "stanza" from Landor's "On His Seventy-Fifth Birthday" (128) is the entire poem. "Professor Carl Halstead" (53) should be "Professor Robert N. Hallstead." Carl, with the single "l," was Dean of Collegiate, with whom Peggy probably had little to do. Bob, with double "l," was Professor of English, and he and his wife Anne and their sons were Peggy's close friends. (King is not alone in this confusion. Laurence's classmate Lois

Wilson makes the same slip in her memoir *Turning the World Upside Down*, and Jocelyn Laurence, in editing *Dance on the Earth*, perhaps relying on Wilson, let the spelling of Bob's name with a single "l" persist.)

King states that Margaret received her first honorary degree in 1970, from McMaster University. In October 1966 Margaret joined the company of Arthur M. Lower, Arthur L. Phelps, Watson Kirkconnell and other distinguished males when she was the first woman and the youngest person to be made an honorary United College Fellow—the highest academic honor her Alma Mater could confer on a non-theologian until it became the University of Winnipeg in 1967. (An honorary D.D. would hardly have been appropriate in 1966.) This honor came several months before her first Governor General's Award.

A day or so after the ceremony, Bob and Anne Hallstead persuaded Margaret to let them drive her to Neepawa, her first return to her home town in years, where in visiting the old Simpson house she had the epiphany that Vanessa MacLeod undergoes at the end of "Jericho's Brick Battlements," an experience that integrates the whole *A Bird in the House* collection in Vanessa's (and Margaret's) coming to terms in a new way not only with her grandfather, but with herself and her own mortality.

There are brilliant touches in this book, such as the economical, tactful, and convincing treatment of the supposition that Margaret had Métis or Indian blood (11). There are also annoying phrases implying that Margaret ought to have had total recall and constant archival verification of her memories and hence was being "deliberately evasive" or "self-consciously fictional" in her memoirs and informal private letters.

King's volume is a milestone in Margaret Laurence biography, and an amazingly good one. With all the evidence increasingly available in published editions of correspondence, and all the other evidence that King has unearthed and shared, there is no turning back. This new perspective challenges the familiar

portrait. By highlighting newly revealed facts, true as they may be, about marital difficulties and personal problems of a heroic life unknown to most readers of Laurence's works (and not all these "facts" are worth sharing with anyone), the book inevitably distorts her portrait. Although King makes several brief but powerful statements to the contrary, anyone reading the index entries on pages 451-52 might think that in her life Laurence had little but failures, frustrations, disasters, disappointments.

Those who knew Margaret Laurence personally knew the Margaret of "My Final Hour" and her convocation addresses; the Margaret of the honestly triumphant, though also sometimes tragic, conclusions of her novels, the almost unbearable impact of Christie Logan's funeral, the searing conviction of the short film *A Writer in the Nuclear Age*; the Margaret of pages 221-22 of *Dance on the Earth* and the final two paragraphs of King's biography.

King's successors now have the freedom to build on his work and to try to draw a more justly proportioned portrait.

WALTER E. SWAYZE  
Department of English, Emeritus  
University of Winnipeg