

The Danforth Review

A Witness to Life
by Terence M. Green
Forge Books, 2000

Reviewed by Harold Hoefle

The title of Terence M. Green's third novel, **A Witness to Life**, worried me – a bit too portentous – as did the straight-up avowals of sentiment in the opening lines: "It breaks my heart to see her lying there, worn out, dying. But she is so happy to see me...It has been so long, so very long. And I have searched so far." I soon realized, however, that my own ironic sensibility had to readjust itself to Green's project here, to the carefully modulated emotion in this portrait of a man, his city, and his times.

On page one we learn that Martin John Radey, the man visiting his daughter and telling us his tale, is dead, and has been dead for thirty-four years. No longer the Irish Catholic worker living in Protestant Toronto from 1887 to 1950, Martin has become a revenant, a starling "in a flock of dead souls." Now possessed of "piercing avian eyes," his incurious human heart replaced "by one beating wildly with wonder," Martin's thoughts turn increasingly poetic and metaphysical.

Green's novel proceeds to alternate between the living Martin-narrator and the one who soars over the past as he tries to fathom the nature of life, of death. Interestingly enough, this interspersed bird-chapter technique appears in Pigeon Irish, a 1932 novel by Irish writer Francis Stuart. In Green's novel, the writing-style is lean, uncluttered – monkish in its spareness. And it is the Trappist monk Thomas Merton – note the Martin/Merton affinity – whose quoted lines become the epigraphs heading the novel's short starling chapters.

For example: "We must always walk in darkness. We must travel in silence. We must fly by night." These words aptly describe Martin's life and after-life. For Martin, the last and thirteenth child of Irish immigrants, appears to us as a son, a grandson, a worker, a husband, a father and Torontonian living in the time of world war, a local epidemic, and economic hardship. He is a splintered self, adrift and "knowing I was letting everyone down." He knows he must overcome his contingent approach to life – "enjoying the moment, unable to see the future, as always" – and sees, too, how a lack of curiosity will cripple every kind of love.

He notes the disappointment that lines the facial expression of Maggie, his feminist wife, when she hears his lack of interest in politics and, specifically, the plight of women. Ironically, when Martin visits his mute grandmother he can confess his doubts and inability to intuit the pain of others, or even share his own.

While Martin is the novel's obvious protagonist, Toronto becomes his mirror-image. Green details Martin's favourite hats and cigars; we also learn about the births, possessions, weddings, illnesses, and deaths of people dear to him. Similarly, we learn the name and address of Queen Street shops, the effects of typhoid and Prohibition and the Depression, and of the fires that occasionally ravage the city. This inventory of the personal and the urban recalls Joyce's itemizing of the public and private world of Dubliners in *Ulysses*, a work Green perhaps deliberately invokes in Martin's one-time, yes-laden stream-of-consciousness.

Like Joyce, Green is trying to record the inner and outer life of a man and his place. And it is fire, that natural destroyer and creator and celebrator – as in the candles on Martin's birthday cake – which becomes the symbolic link between Martin and Toronto. When twenty downtown acres burn down, Martin reflects: "In the destruction we sense a new beginning, a chance to transform our world, ourselves...I am changed." These are the words of an unmarried twenty-four-year-old man; soon he will realize how difficult change is.

Terence Green has written of family before, notably in his second novel, **Shadow of Ashland**, which was lauded in "The New York Times." Green, who taught high school English in Toronto, still lives with his family in the city. **A Witness to Life** now joins the tradition of great Toronto novels, settling beside, among others, Morley Callaghan's works, Hugh Garner's **Cabbagetown**, Wyndham Lewis' **Self-Condemed**, Margaret Atwood's **Cat's Eye**, and Michael Ondaatje's **In the Skin of a Lion**. Green's latest novel does not wither in this company.