



ILLUSTRATING A CLASSIC

maria
CHAPDELAINÉ

National Gallery of Canada Library and Archives

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Maria CHAPDELaine



LANDSCAPE Landscape is central to the novel, which is firmly rooted in rural Quebec and structured according to the cycle of the seasons within a single year. Even Maria's consent to marry "when the men come back from the forest for the sowing" (the final words of the text) indicates a link to the land. Landscape so overwhelms the paintings of Fernand Labelle that he barely acknowledges the human drama, inserting only a few tiny figures within his forests and hills. Clarence Gagnon, more balanced, nevertheless has a very painterly interest in strong late-afternoon winter sunlight, giving his illustrations a mellow warmth that almost works against the text. Jean Paul Lemieux observed: "I found his work high-coloured, I recall, to express such an austere landscape." Without colour, landscape recedes in importance: the line drawings and woodcuts offer less scope for effects of light, and the landscape becomes less precise, more generic.

CHARACTER Some artists, Gagnon and Corneau for example, avoid portraying individual faces, often showing figures from behind or rendering the features by a few simple lines. In effect, the text is left to speak for the characters. Suzor-Coté, on the other hand, sees both major and minor personages in the novel as a series of representative, even moral, types. Not only landscape but even activity is often excluded from these four-square portraits. Jean Paul Lemieux, less judgemental, nevertheless expresses a personal connection to the characters of the novel: "It always seemed to me that I knew Maria, François Paradis, and the others." Other artists, faced with the challenge of representing the inner life of the characters, give it two-dimensional expression: Sylvain Hairy and Wilfred Jones depict Maria's obsessive daydreaming about François Paradis in similar terms, and Tibo portrays Maria's vision of her place in Quebec history and society.

Decoration The rustic subject matter of Maria Chapdelaine has a natural affinity with the woodcut style of illustration, perhaps better described as book decoration in the William Morris tradition. Gérard Cochet, Jean L  b  deff, and Thoreau Macdonald are all examples of this approach, though Cochet imports an emotional involvement with the text into his woodcuts that is absent from the work of the other two. Alexandre Alexeieff is perhaps the most design-oriented illustrator, with decorative lithographed initials introducing every chapter, and page layouts that integrate text and image. These design elements are typical of an *  dition de luxe*, though the popular edition illustrated by Wilfred Jones also shows the simple but effective features of black and grey line drawings spread across double pages. Emeric Timar employs the faces of Eutrope Gagnon and Fran  ois Paradis as alternating vignettes to close the chapters; the final substitution of a skull strikes a macabre note.

Jonathan Franklin, Head of Collections and Database Management, Library

CHECKLIST

1. **Crossing the River Peribonka**

Jean Paul Lemieux retrouve Maria Chapdelaine
text by Jean Paul Lemieux
Montreal: A. Stank  , 1981.
Paintings by Jean Paul Lemieux (1904–1990).

The only item on display that is not a text from the novel, this publication matches images and quotations from Quebec artist Jean Paul Lemieux, whose affinity for wide-open spaces and sombre tones harmonizes with the novel. “It is a work that has always touched me.”

2. **Frontispiece and title page**

Paris: A. Fayard, 1935.
Woodcuts by Jean L  b  deff (1884–1970).

Prints by Russian-born L  b  deff have been described as having the “rough flavour of the soil.” The view of Quebec City locates the story for the non-Canadian reader of this edition published in Paris.

3. **“Ite missa est.”**

Lausanne: Guilde du livre, [undated].
Drawings by Michel Ciry (b. 1919).

The novel’s first words proclaim the end of the mass, and the parishioners file out of the church at Peribonka. Ciry’s penchant for religious subjects is also evident in his paintings. His illustrations are characterized by a quality of mournfulness.

LANDSCAPE

4. **The isolated Chapdelaine farm**

Paris:   ditions Mornay, 1933.
Pochoir plates, after drawings by
Clarence Gagnon (1881–1942).

Pochoir, a form of stencil, was used to reproduce the originals by Canadian painter Clarence Gagnon. This copy is number 27 of only 100 printed on Japon nacre paper. Pictorial landscape values and warm light produce a feeling of harmony and well-being, in spite of the remote setting.

5. **Quebec landscape**

Saint-Laurent, Quebec: Fides, 1994.
Paintings by Fernand Labelle (b. 1934).

Only occasional figures populate Canadian Fernand Labelle’s landscapes, which are bleaker than Gagnon’s, to the point of harshness.

6. **Clearing the forest**

Paris:   ditions du Polygone, 1927.
Lithographs by Alexandre Alexeieff (1901–1982).

The backbreaking work of clearing trees for habitation and farming is belied by Alexeieff’s whimsical image; he was also involved in cartoon animation. Note the decorative initial.

7. **Maria and Fran  ois Paradis gather blueberries**

Bruxelles:   dition du Houblon, [1943].
Drawings by Emeric Timar (1898 – c. 1950).

The high-coloured style of this Hungarian artist, derived from his association with Jacques Villon, is in keeping with this brief and idyllic seasonal interlude.

8. **Maria's obsession with François**

Paris: Société nouvelle des Éditions G.P., 1960.
Drawings by Sylvain Hairy.

The artist gives two-dimensional expression to the inner life of the character, a device also used by other illustrators. Landscape plays little part in these rather crowded illustrations.

9. **François stumbles, lost, through the endless forest.**

Paris: Éditions Mornay, 1933.
Pochoir plates, after drawings by
Clarence Gagnon (1881–1942).

One of the few instances where the narrative obliges Gagnon to portray the landscape as other than benign. This copy is number 1188 of 1900 printed on Blanc de Rives paper, from the same edition as *The isolated Chapdelaine farm* (see no. 4).

10. **Maria performs 1,000 Ave Marias for the safe return of François.**

Paris: Rombaldi, [1939].
Drawings by Eugène Corneau (1894–1976).

Corneau's work is similar to that of Gagnon, but he provides only five images in contrast to Gagnon's fifty-four. This example is typical of his *intimiste* lamp-lit domestic interiors.

11. **The local curé instructs Maria to forget François.**

New York: Macmillan, 1928.
Drawings by Wilfred J. Jones (b. 1888).

Jones's economical line illustrations, somewhat stereotyped in approach, focus on the narrative. This commercial edition enjoyed successful sales in the United States.

CHARACTER

12. **Edwige Légaré**

13. **Lorenzo Surprenant**

Montreal: Éditions La Frégate, 1969.
Charcoal drawings by Marc Aurèle de Foy
Suzor-Coté (1869–1937).

Canadian painter Suzor-Coté illustrated the popular 1916 first edition of the novel; the images were reprinted to a higher standard in this later unbound edition. Contrast the son of the soil with the assimilated New Englander, both men originating from the same parish in rural Quebec.

14. **The city and the wilderness**

Paris: Édition d'Art H. Piazza, 1932.
Drawings by Jean Droit (1884–1961).

Droit's graphic style reflects his designs for posters created between the wars. This striking image expresses the same theme as Suzor-Coté's two portraits.

15. **The daily round of tasks: life according to Eutrope Gagnon**

Toronto: Macmillan, 1938.
Woodcuts by Thoreau Macdonald (1901–1989).

Son of Group of Seven member J.E.H. MacDonald, this artist worked in the decorative woodcut tradition well suited to a novel of country life. The cat adds a domestic note, mitigating the rigour of the subject.

16. **Maria tells her suitor, Eutrope, that she cannot give him an answer.**

Paris: Nelson, 1939.
Drawings by Jean Routier.

Routier's mannered illustrations have a flavour of Art Deco—an urban style applied to a rural setting.

17. **Maria's mother on her deathbed**

Paris: La Renaissance du livre, 1922.
Woodcuts by Gérard Paul Cochet (1888–1969).

Cochet was a founder-member of the Salon de la Jeune Gravure Contemporaine in Paris. Working in the same tradition as Lébédéff (see no. 2) and Macdonald (see no. 15), he nevertheless injects a more emotional tone.

18. **Maria's father reminisces about the time when her mother chased bears away from the farm.**

Paris: Nelson, 1946.
Drawings by Derambure.

The artist selects a dramatic incident from the narrative, in a style reminiscent of movie posters. The first film version of *Maria Chapdelaine* was made in 1934.

19. **Maria's vision of the continuity of Quebec culture and her place within it**

Montreal: Tundra Books, 1989.
Drawings by Gilles Tibo (Thibault) (b. 1951).

Quebec artist Tibo alone tries to express the crucial spiritual insight of the novel. But can it be represented in graphic terms?

20. **Maria accepts Eutrope Gagnon and the authentic simple life**

Montreal: Éditions La Frégate, 1969.
Charcoal drawings by Marc Aurèle de Foy
Suzor-Coté (1869–1937).

Suzor-Coté romanticizes the novel's ending. Opinions have differed over the novel's presentation of Maria's predicament and her eventual choice.

Louis Hémon's novel *Maria Chapdelaine* was first serialized in *Le Temps*, a Parisian daily, in 1914. Two years later the first book edition was published in Montreal, with drawings by Marc Aurèle de Foy Suzor-Coté.

Since then, the novel has caught the imagination of many artists, especially from Quebec, as well as that of commercial illustrators. Some of the books on display are *éditions de luxe*; others are popular mass-market paperbacks on yellowing paper. They were published in Canada, the United States, France, Belgium, and Switzerland.

Hémon's novel has attracted criticism as well as praise, yet most illustrators enter into the author's preference for countryside over city, and warm to the novel's ending. Artists from Quebec, more specifically, celebrate the landscape and traditional life of rural Quebec. Clarence Gagnon even manages to make a scene of pig-slaughtering look like a loving family ritual. Others, often aiming for a mass market, focus on incident, which is not always easy, given the static nature of the plot. Characters may be represented by stereotypes, though these, in time, acquire the period charm frequently found in even hack illustrations of another era.

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