

The Search for F. P. Greve/Grove: From First Doubts to a Greve Biography*

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Frederick Philip Grove (1879-1948) was one of the most important Canadian authors in the first half of this century. With novels such as *Settlers of the Marsh* (1925), *Our Daily Bread* (1928) and *Fruits of the Earth* (1933) he laid the foundations for a tradition of representing life on the Western Canadian prairie as characterized by alienation.¹ More than that, Grove managed to promote himself and his writing so well that in 1945 he was called "by far the greatest philosophical literary artist to emerge as yet in Canada,"² he became one of the first authors from the Canadian West who was canonized³ and has become an indispensable figure in every history of Canadian writing.

Critical interest in Grove waned in the late 1960s when a new generation of Canadian authors began to publish texts that were artistically more interesting than Grove's works which were largely written in the realistic mode developed in the late nineteenth century. The "Canadian Dreiser"⁴ seemed definitely an author about whom relatively little was left to be said.

Since the early 1970s, however, the name Frederick Philip Grove can once again frequently be found in the annals of Canadian literary criticism. But now interest has shifted. Doubts had been raised about the author's identity, and in 1972 Douglas O. Spettigue opened a new phase of Grove criticism when he declared: "Frederick Philip Grove's novels, poems and criticism are the continuation of the novels, poems and critiques of Felix Paul Greve in Europe."⁵ Spettigue had followed his doubts concerning

*Reference: Klaus Martens, *Felix Paul Greves Karriere: Frederick Philipp Grove in Deutschland* (St. Ingbert: Röhrig Universitätsverlag, 1997).

the autobiographical *In Search of Myself* (1947) for several years and in fact began the first book-length study on the subject with a whole chapter describing how he had been looking for traces of Grove in Europe.⁶

Spettigue's discovery of Frederick Philip Grove's true identity meant that much traditional criticism had to be revised. Grove frequently insisted that much of his writing was autobiographical. In addition to *In Search of Myself*, the novel *A Search for America* had been read as only thinly veiled autobiography. Grove himself played a large role in provoking and shaping this critical response. In 1945, he lent the as yet unpublished manuscript of *In Search of Myself* to the scholar Desmond Pacey who used it as the basis for what was the only book-length study for 20 years.⁷ Grove's claims that he had grown up in Europe, traveled around the world, stranded in North America, spent 20 years as a migratory farm worker in the United States and began writing his fiction completely cut off from the rest of the literary world was generally used as the basis for evaluating his writings.

The material about Felix Paul Greve that Spettigue managed to gather and published in 1973⁸ suggested a very different background than the one *In Search of Myself* had painted. Greve turned out to have been a very busy translator of modern British and French literature in the first decade of this century who had also published two books of poetry, two novels and several essays on modern writing. In 1909, Felix Paul Greve disappeared from Germany without a trace. According to a letter by his wife, he had committed suicide. Three years later, in December, 1912, a man calling himself Frederick Philip Grove appeared in Winnipeg.

Spettigue's discovery meant that Grove criticism had to be revised in a large measure. Critics had become used to reading Grove's novels in the light of what they knew about his life, following his own statement that "no true artist of the first order will ever emphasize his own individuality: it will pervade his work in spite of himself."⁹ The discovery came at a critical moment. Several studies were about to be published when suddenly much of the supposed basis of those studies broke away. Critics reacted in different ways. Desmond Pacey, who himself had been looking for traces of Grove in Europe, showed reluctance to accept Spettigue's discovery. In his edition of Grove's letters he conceded simply that

Spettigue's research "seems now to have established beyond a reasonable point" that Grove had been Greve.¹⁰ Margaret Stobie, writing at the same time a portrait of Grove for the Twayne World Authors Series,¹¹ acknowledged Spettigue's discovery but focused only on the Canadian writing.

Only very gradually did Grove criticism come to terms with the altered context in which the author was to be put. The 1973 "Grove Symposium" accepted the newly-found background quite naturally and even included an essay on "The German Novels of Frederick Philip Grove."¹² At this early stage, however, a significant critical debate of *Fanny Essler* and *Maurermeister Ihles Haus* was practically impossible since the novels had been out of print for almost 70 years and could be found only in collections of rare books.

The lack of concrete biographical information and of access to the German writings hampered the assessment of Grove's achievement in the light of Greve's literary production quite badly.¹³ Most critical work on Grove focused on his Canadian writing, pieces treating both phases of the author's career were extremely rare.¹⁴

Gradually, the exploration of the German element became the dominant interest in Grove studies. Nobody seriously doubted any more that Frederick Philip Grove was in fact Felix Paul Greve but the different cultures in which he wrote and particularly the different languages of his career seem to be the cause that for a long time no study appeared that treated the works of Greve and Grove as a continuing *oeuvre*. The first comprehensive study appeared in 1990,¹⁵ followed by a study that compares the author to Theodore Dreiser and discusses books such as *Fanny Essler* and *A Search for America* without ever questioning that they were produced by the same author.¹⁶

The last years have seen a remarkable shift in the focus of Grove studies. Ever since Spettigue's discovery, the biographical interest in Felix Paul Greve has been overriding the critical interest in the writings. Grove studies have thus gone against the trend of modern criticism. Reviewing the critical production of the last years one arrives at the conclusion that at least to his critics the author clearly appears more interesting than his work.

The biographical impulse shown by several researchers has been supported by several discoveries in the recent past of texts that add a significant amount of information on the life of Felix Paul Greve. The identification of the New York Dada poet Else von Freytag-Loringhoven as the Else to whom Greve was possibly married until he disappeared from Germany¹⁷ allowed the filling of several gaps in the still sketchy picture we have of his life. In addition, his role in the composition of his texts has been scrutinized in the light of Else's biography—which seems to have been the basis for the plots of Greve's novels—as well as of her own artistic ambitions.¹⁸

The approach to studying the *oeuvre* of Frederick Philip Grove via the biography of Felix Paul Greve has now been given a new impetus through a publication that comes close to being a biography of Felix Paul Greve. Klaus Martens has discovered much of the correspondence between Greve and the publishing firm J. C. C. Bruns where Greve published numerous translations. This correspondence, which lasted from 1902 to 1909, as well as other biographical material such as the annals of the fraternity he had joined as a student in Bonn allows Martens to attempt a continuous narrative centering on the life of Felix Paul Greve between 1897 and 1909.

Martens manages to organize the material, some of which had been published before in various places, to present a coherent narrative of a life undergoing dramatic changes. The intention of the book is "to give new and clearer contours to the still unknown private person as well as to the literary figure Felix Paul Greve in the context of his age and of the literary milieu to which he belonged."¹⁹ Therefore Martens presents not just biographical material but includes passages on the George circle, André Gide, the translation business at the beginning of this century as well as biographical information on some of the characters who played significant roles in Greve's life.

Martens presents him as the figure of a potential self-made man who fails because of his own character weaknesses and because of the highly stratified organization of the society in which this man from a working-class background attempted to become famous, wealthy and hence socially acceptable. Martens manages to present an enormous amount of evidence

about Greve's personality. Beginning with his final year in a high school in Hamburg, Greve is shown in *Felix Paul Greves Karriere* as a figure caught between ambition and ability, between flights of dreamy arrogance and the reality of struggling for bare economic survival. Much of what had been known becomes more comprehensible, significant new facets are being added. The numerous photos Martens presents also make the largely unknown figure of Felix Paul Greve more real.

Felix Paul Greves Karriere is, however, at the same time a rather problematic text. The biographer quite naturally strives for a picture of his object of study that is as complete as possible. Such completeness is, however, still impossible for Felix Paul Greve. Although Martens can present a substantial amount of information, there are still large gaps in the picture. Especially his last years in Germany are still badly documented. The documents about the years after 1906 are particularly few in number and so Martens cannot present an explanation for Greve's decision to emigrate to North America.

Given the lack of coherence in the biographical material about Greve that is known at this point, Martens had to resort to a trick. Hjartarson suggested that *In Search of Myself* should not be regarded as completely fictitious: "Grove [did not] simply bur[y] his past, but . . . he slowly reshaped it in terms of his changing understanding of himself . . . In his autobiography he sets his vision of himself before his readers. *In Search of Myself* will remain a central document in the study of Frederick Philip Grove because in it the novelist sets forth the vision that shaped both his life and his vision."²⁰

Martens picks up and broadens Hjartarson's suggestion when he states that "Greve remains the secretary of his experiences who has his books dictated to him by 'life'—or at least by living persons."²¹ Consequently, he argues that "the literary persona FPG can be compared in his autobiographical writings to a palimpsest under which Greve's life rests as a hidden text."²² From this, he takes the liberty of using *In Search of Myself* and *A Search for America* as evidence to support his own speculations about Greve's career. Sometimes, however, Martens's desire to fill the gaps in the biography leads him dangerously far into speculation even when he

cannot attempt to back it up with a passage from one of Grove's books. From a reference in a letter, for example, Martens concludes that Greve may have owned his debts to gambling: "He could have seen in [gambling] a chance to rid himself of his burdening financial situation He might have taken his publisher as example."²³ The vagueness of the language indicates how insubstantial Martens's claim is. This claim, just like many others, cannot be proven, but Martens repeatedly argues as if his speculations were as good as factual evidence. Equally far-fetched are speculations about Greve's contributions to meetings of the German Archaeological Society in Rome in 1900 and, most notably, about the possibility that Greve met Thomas Mann in 1902 which culminates in the question, "Had Felix Greve's physique become an object of Mann's admiration?"²⁴

These speculations undermine the credibility of *Felix Paul Greves Karriere* to a significant extent. This is unfortunate since they are quite unnecessary and distract from the accomplishment of the book. It is, in spite of its shortcomings, a significant contribution to Grove studies. It comes as close as seems possible from the perspective of 1997 toward establishing the biography of Felix Paul Greve and thus of the formative years of Frederick Philip Grove.

Felix Paul Greves Karriere may not be the great literary biography which allows the reader to comprehend the biographical circumstances of individual literary production. But Martens deserves credit for bringing together the existing material on Felix Paul Greve and arranging them into a largely coherent whole. As a consequence of this book, the figure of Greve has become a lot more three-dimensional.

At the same time, the publication of *Felix Paul Greves Karriere* calls for debate of several issues. Language is the most important one of these. As the subtitle, *Frederick Philip Grove in Germany*, indicates, the object of study is the time a Canadian author spent in Germany. Given this premise in addition to the fact that Greve is at best a marginal figure in German literary history it is clear that the logical audience of this book is Canadian. For that audience, however, *Felix Paul Greves Karriere* is as difficult to access

as Greve's own writing had been. Grove scholars worldwide would have profited had the book been written in English.

Also, the question needs to be asked which service the Greve biography can fulfill in the context of Grove studies. The book quite certainly broadens our knowledge of Felix Paul Greve but it seems to add little that can be of use to the interpretation of Frederick Philip Grove's writings. The literary influences Martens discusses—Wilde, George, Gide—had been known before and the book does not add anything that changes the Canadian texts which make up that part of Grove's *oeuvre* on which his reputation rests. Interesting as the facets of his personality are that emerge from *Felix Paul Greves Karriere*, they bear as yet extremely little direct connection to the author of *Over Prairie Trails* and later works. For this reason, and because the years 1909 to 1912 are still undocumented, *Felix Paul Greves Karriere* cannot be the final word on Grove's life and career before he appeared in Winnipeg in December 1912. It remains to be seen which impulses *Felix Paul Greves Karriere* will give to international Grove studies.

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NOTES

¹Dick Harrison, *Unnamed Country: The Struggle for a Canadian Prairie Fiction* (Edmonton: U of Alberta P, 1977) 114-42.

²B. K. Sandwell, "Frederick Philip Grove and the Culture of Canada," *Saturday Night* 61 (24. November 1945): 18.

³Grove's *Over Prairie Trails* (1922) was the first text selected by McClelland & Stewart for its New Canadian Library series which served a pivotal role in establishing and making accessible in paperback a canonized body of Canadian writing.

⁴Northrop Frye, "Canadian Dreiser" (obituary), *Canadian Forum* (September 1948): 121-22.

⁵Douglas O. Spettigue, "The Grove Enigma Solved," *Queen's Quarterly* 79 (1972): 2.

⁶Douglas O. Spettigue, *Frederick Philip Grove* (Toronto: Copp Clark, 1969) 1-33.

⁷Desmond Pacey, *Frederick Philip Grove* (Toronto: Ryerson, 1945).

⁸Douglas O. Spettigue, *FPG: The European Years* (Ottawa: Oberon, 1973).

⁹Frederick Philip Grove, "A Writer's Classification of Writers and Their Work," *University of Toronto Quarterly* 1.2 (1932): 243.

¹⁰Desmond Pacey and J. C. Mahanti, (eds.), *The Letters of Frederick Philip Grove* (Toronto: U of Toronto P, 1976) ix.

¹¹Margaret Stobie, *Frederick Philip Grove* (New York: Twayne, 1973).

¹²Anthony W. Riley, "The German Novels of Frederick Philip Grove," *Inscape* 9.1 (1974): 55-66.

¹³Greve's first novel *Fanny Essler* (1905) was published in English translation in 1984 (Ottawa: Oberon), his second novel, *Maurermeister Ihles Haus*, appeared under the title *The Master Mason's House* in 1976. The English translation of Greve's essay *Oscar Wilde* (1903) appeared in a small edition in 1984 (Vancouver: William Hoffer). Greve's poetry collections *Wanderungen* and *Helena und Damon* (both 1902) are still untranslated.

¹⁴A remarkable exception is E. D. Blodgett's essay "Alias Grove: Variations in Disguise" in his *Configuration. Essays in the Canadian Literatures* (Downsview: ECW, 1982) 112-53.

¹⁵Axel Knönagel, *Nietzschean Philosophy in the Works of Frederick Philip Grove* (Frankfurt: Peter Lang, 1990).

¹⁶Irene Gammel, *Sexualizing Power in Naturalism: Theodore Dreiser and Frederick Philip Grove* (Calgary: U of Calgary P, 1994).

¹⁷Lynn De Vore, "The Backgrounds of *Nightwood*: Robin, Felix, and Nora," *Journal of Modern Literature* 10.1 (1983): 71-90. Freytag-Loringhoven's autobiography has been edited by Paul I. Hjartarson and D. O. Spettigue as *Baroness Elsa* (Ottawa: Oberon, 1992).

¹⁸See Gaby Divay, "Fanny Essler's Poems: Felix Paul Greve's or Else von Freytag-Loringhoven's?," *Arachne* 1.2 (1994): 165-97.

¹⁹Martens (see reference note) 28. My translation.

²⁰Paul Hjartarson, "Design and Truth in Grove's 'In Search of Myself,'" *Canadian Literature* 90 (1981): 73-90, here 78.

²¹Martens 276. My translation.

²²Martens 18. My translation. The attempt to use Grove's writings as sources for hidden references to his former life is not new. K. P. Stich, for example, used this method to questionable results in his "Narcissism and the Uncanny in Grove's 'Over Prairie Trails,'" *Mosaic* 19.2 (1986): 31-41.

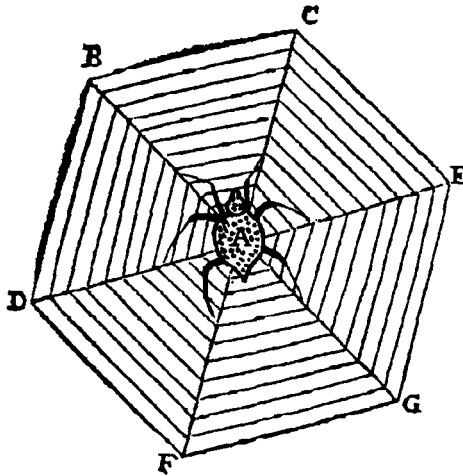
²³Martens 192, 193. My translations.

²⁴Martens 282. My translation. The speculation about the German Archaeological Society can be found in Martens 114-15.

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