

Skevington's Daughter. JOHN MILLS. Ottawa: Oberon, © 1978. 195 p. ISBN 0 88750 253 9 bd. \$15.00; ISBN 0 88750 254 7 pa. \$6.95.

Probably all archivists have heard stories about university professors controlling tantalizing collections of papers they will not let anyone else see or use. John Mills' satirical novel *Skevington's Daughter* is about such a situation. Simon Motley, an English professor at a mythical Ontario university, has acquired letters written in 1840 by Stella Skevington, the daughter of a British explorer, while accompanying her father, Francis, on a journey in Mexico. These letters are coveted by a colleague of Motley, Harry Peasemarsch, because Francis Skevington has become an important figure for the Tidewater Poets, a group of modernistic American writers—they shun vowels—that Peasemarsch is cultivating. The novel follows Peasemarsch through a series of more or less comic misadventures ranging from attempted seduction and unsuccessful blackmail to a disastrous break and entry, in his quest for the letters. But Mills is commenting on much more than access and freedom of information. *Skevington's Daughter* also tries to satirize among other things: academic infighting, radicals, literary scholarship, mounties, homosexuals, the young, the old, feminists, and the author, John Mills, himself.

The framework of the novel is an attempt by Mills to convince an American publisher that Stella's letters, revealed in a study he has submitted called *Skevington's Daughter* (there is much cleverness of this sort in the book), suggest a full-scale biography would make big money for all concerned. The novel is presented mainly in epistolary form and Mills is a skilful forger of letters. Should he ever present his own papers for sale, it is obviously buyer beware. He perfectly captures the nineteenth-century style as Stella explicitly describes herself doing naughty things with her father among other people, that Victorian young ladies would never have put in writing, even in letters to an intimate friend. Had Mills concentrated on the potential in Stella's letters, the novel would certainly have been more successful than it is. But instead, Stella is sacrificed for a string of heavy-handed and muddled pot shots in the name of satire.

From the author's interjection at the end of the book it is clear that he takes satire very seriously indeed. And he is quite correct in doing so. With the possible exception of a good limerick, nothing is more difficult to write. Too often, however, what passes for satire in Mills' novel is only superficial cleverness and pointless malice. The book drops literary names, pseudo-scholarly references and poetic forms left and right. But the suspicion remains that there may be less erudition here than first meets the eye. One example: a character is described as having been invited to visit D.H. Lawrence "in the thirties." Technically possible, but just so, since Lawrence died in March 1930. In any case, a book that begins and ends with quotations from Kierkegaard, whatever its satirical intention, is immediately suspect. The novel is finally rarely very funny, unless the reader can manage a chuckle over such things as a mountie named Eddy Nelson, a homosexual, Adam Brede, or a professor plagued by his foul-mouthed children.

When an author extends his satire to himself, he has an out in the face of criticism: the bad can always be intentional. Perhaps Mills' novel is really a satire of the satirical form. But somehow that seems too genuinely clever to be likely. Good satire is ultimately didactic, and there is very little to learn from *Skevington's Daughter*.

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