

[Print PDF Version](#)

CULTURAL COMMENTARY

BOOK REVIEW

By [Brenda Reed](#), ©1999

Lunn, Janet. *The Hollow Tree*. Toronto: Alfred A. Knopf, c1997. 208pp. ISBN 0-394-28074-1, \$19.95hc. ISBN 0-676-97143-1, \$6.99 pb.

Janet Lunn, as one of the co-authors of *The Story of Canada* (1992), is most aware of the many stories of hardship and heroism that are a part of Canada's past. Over the past three decades, Lunn has turned her imaginative energy to the creation of several works of historical fiction that evoke a past that is often difficult to imagine. *The Hollow Tree* tells the story of fifteen-year-old Phoebe Olcott, a New Hampshire girl who undertakes a mission for her beloved soldier cousin during the American Revolutionary War, and who ends up as one of the United Empire Loyalists living in what is now southeastern Ontario. From the 1770s on many people from the American colonies who had remained loyal to the British King during the Revolutionary War moved northward into safe British territory. Lunn's rendering of the trek of one group of refugees through the wilderness of northwestern Vermont into Lower Canada portrays both the ordinary struggles and the tremendous emotional pain that these people must have endured. Lunn's fiction offers many perspectives of the American Revolution and the United Empire Loyalists.

As *The Hollow Tree* opens, Phoebe is living with her father in Hanover, New Hampshire, the site of present-day Dartmouth College. In 1775, the college is "still only a collection of rough buildings surrounding the stump-filled clearing called The Green" (1), but readers who have been to the idyllic Hanover of the late-20th-century will recognize today's Green and realize that it has been walked across by students for over 200 years. Here, and elsewhere in this story, Lunn offers readers the chance to pause to consider connections between past and present. Phoebe cooks and cares for her rather absent-minded professor father, and spends her free time with her two cousins, Anne and Gideon Robinson, who live across the Connecticut River in Orland Village, Vermont. The eruption of the Revolutionary War splits Phoebe's family life, as her father leaves to fight for the Patriots, and Gideon leaves to fight for the Loyalists. Phoebe's fear that "[t]he two people she loved most in the world would go to war and fight on opposite sides" (10) is thus realized, and the rest of the plot reverberates with the tensions caused by the divided loyalties of families, neighbours, and friends. The tragedies that result from the tearing apart of families and small towns emphasize the very personal impact of a large-scale war, and the powerful emotions that can be sparked by a sense of loyalty.

Both Phoebe's father and Gideon die due to their individual loyalties. Paranoia escalates among the Orland Village townspeople as accusations spin out of control and families are banished without their belongings. Lunn's writing is at her best when she transforms this seemingly pleasant community into a village that has moved beyond peaceable relations to an environment characterized by fear and violence. Gideon's violent death is entirely plausible in this dangerous setting even though it is just his longing to see Polly Grantham that puts him at risk. His hanging is a pivotal moment since this tragedy bequeaths to Phoebe both the worst moments of her life and a direction for her future.

The "hollow tree" is a hiding place for messages that Phoebe and her cousins shared in pre-War times. When Phoebe discovers that Gideon has left two messages, she realizes that he was a spy for the British and that he had been on his way to deliver the messages to the General at Fort Ticonderoga on the New York side of Lake Champlain. Phoebe takes it upon herself to deliver these messages for Gideon, and the rest of

the story follows Phoebe's treacherous journey over the mountains to Lake Champlain. Phoebe is given guidance on how to cross the mountains by a Mohawk friend (and former student of her father's) who appears as her concerned protector at several points. The involvement of the Mohawk people in the war, and their loyalty to Britain, is another thread that Lunn skillfully weaves into Phoebe's story. The epilogue notes that "large tracts in Canada" were provided for "the King's Mohawk allies" (202).

The central plot, however, stays with Phoebe as she encounters Jem Morrisay at Lake Champlain and discovers that it will be pointless to deliver her message to Fort Ticonderoga since it has been abandoned. Instead, Phoebe joins Jem and a group of twenty-three refugees heading north to the safety of Lower Canada. The plot complications increase as Phoebe learns that one of the families in the bedraggled and desperate group is the very family that she left behind – Gideon's mother, father, sister, and brothers. Phoebe's emotional turmoil is augmented by an increasingly complicated relationship with Jem and growing tensions between various members of the group. The journey northward proves to be even more dangerous and tragic than Phoebe's solo journey across the mountains. In the end Phoebe flees from her fellow travellers, continues alone, and is rescued at her point of exhaustion by residents of Fort St. John's on the Richelieu. The pieces of the story are carefully woven, however, and the epilogue provides us with the satisfying knowledge that Phoebe and Jem marry and settle at Hawthorn Bay.

For readers familiar with Lunn's *The Root Cellar* (1981) and *Shadow at Hawthorn Bay* (1986), however, the story will not end here, as there are satisfying links to be worked out among these three novels. The families who travel northward through Vermont in *The Hollow Tree* are the United Empire Loyalist ancestors of the families that Mary Urquhart (from *Shadow at Hawthorn Bay*) meets upon her arrival at Hawthorn Bay in 1815. When Rose Larkin from *The Root Cellar* travels back in time to the end of the American Civil War, she encounters Will Morrisay -- surely a descendant of Phoebe and Jem -- and Susan Anderson, a possible descendant of Mary Urquhart and Luke Anderson. Therefore, although each novel can be read independently, readers of Lunn's earlier books will gain additional pleasure from a reading of *The Hollow Tree*, as Lunn fills in the past -- or really the beginnings -- of her Hawthorn Bay families.

The *Hollow Tree* won the 1998 Governor General's Award for Children's Literature -- Text. But readers of Lunn's other Hawthorn Bay novels may find that Phoebe's tale is the least compelling of the three Hawthorn Bay stories. Phoebe's actions are often daring, but her stalwart independence keeps her emotionally distant from the reader. The mission that Phoebe extracts from the hollow tree is just not, in the end, as powerful a plot as the larger story of the exodus of the Loyalists from Vermont. The success of *The Hollow Tree* is Janet Lunn's exceptional ability to tell the story of history. Readers of *The Hollow Tree* will remember the cruelty and divisiveness of the American Revolutionary War and the tragic plight of its refugees rather than the delivery of Phoebe's message to General Powell.

Brenda Reed