W.O. Mitchell *The Black Bonspiel of Willie MacCrimmon* (Toronto: McClelland and Stewart, 1993) \$19.95.

here is a strange cult that flourishes nigh in every village, town, and city across this land—the legacy of Ailsa Craig and our brethren in the old country. A million souls are sliding into a ritualistic obsession.

From all walks of life, curlers are lured by the rhythm of pulsing brooms, tempted by the colliding fate of stone on stone, addicted to the counting of 'shot rock' (or more accurately the consumption of a beer after the match). W.O. Mitchell knows the hearts of curlers well.

In his novella, *The Black Bonspiel of Willie MacCrimmon*, based on the short story and radio play of the same name, Mitchell returns to familiar themes satirizing the politics and religion of small-town prairie life. His tale revolves around the pursuit of one curler's dream—the winning of Canada's curling championship, the Brier. To ensure victory, Willie MacCrimmon, the Sheby, Alberta cobbler, enters into a Faustian bargain with the devil.

Satan or "Old Cloutie" as he is referred to in this story, is a fanatic curler himself. Satan has a vested interest in securing the services of Willie as 'Third' for his own rink in Hell. Old Cloutie has a championship of his own in mind, a victory in the annual Celestial Brier Play-offs. Satan's existing vice-skip Macbeth has a strong tendency to fall apart under pressure. The bargain is struck with Willie wagering his soul for Brier victory. His own foursome must defeat the Devil's rink in an all or nothing match to be played in Sheby.

W.O. Mitchell's strength as a novelist has always been his ability to find humor by exaggerating the many foibles of human nature. He creates characters that have a universal appeal. Human attitudes and interactions provide the backdrop for Mitchell's good natured pokes at religion and politics.

In conversation with the new minister, Reverend Pringle, Willie laments the changes within the town's temporal community—the union of the Methodist and Presbyterian churches. The Reverend refers to "The birth of the United Church." Willie responds "Aye—birth often follows rape. ...I long ago decided

to remain what I am...continuing Presbyterian with the creed of my fathers and their fathers. I cannot go along with the modern." Ever the conservative Scot, Willie refuses to acknowledge the existence of the new church referring to it instead as Methodist—the church of “wishy-washy symbolical hells and symbolical Devils.”

The devil too, voices his share of complaints regarding the changing world. He berates, “You see, you people with your wasteful ways are going to run out of oil and gas and you’re going to have to look elsewhere for your fuel and heat. Deep thermal energy. Mine. ... Hell, including all its thermal energy and mineral rights, it is my province! I will grant no leases or release no territorial rights or powers of decision over my single non-renewable resource. Because when the brimstone runs out—I do not see how in Hell we can salvage our economy.” In this tirade Mitchell takes a thinly veiled jab at the Canadian political landscape. It could easily substitute as a speech by any premier, jealously protecting his province’s jurisdiction over natural resources from the greedy federalists in Ottawa.

What ultimately contributes to the success of W.O. Mitchell’s curling novella is his unique writing style. His choice of simple wording and repetition of language effortlessly conjures up vivid images of the past. In the course of Willie’s comedic exchanges with the Devil, you are left with an impression of the sights, sounds and smells of a working cobbler’s shop. As with his most successful novels, Mitchell imparts an essence of everyday life. He instills or leaves the reader with something distinctly Canadian.

Perhaps for this reason alone W.O. Mitchell could have done no better than to weave a tale around the sport of curling. He expounds, “...curling is the great Canadian game. Forget lacrosse (most people have). Take away hockey, which is only for those who are young and healthy, with a good dental plan. Don’t even mention Americanized pastimes like baseball or Dr. Naismith’s peach basket invention for stilt people. No, pound for pound, curling is the great participatory sport in Canada.” W.O. Mitchell has found a perfect match for his dual passions of curling and history. They blend together in a ‘smooth delivery’ of pure Canadiana.

From a curler's perspective I suspect in reading this book that Mitchell is a purist. He is likely every bit as conservative about his curling as Willie MacCrimmon is of his choice of church. He would probably choose the thunder of the straw broom and the crack of the take-out game over the more recent innovations of the push broom and the draw game.

It is no matter. Mitchell has 'hit the broom' with this excellent book. This year, avoid tuning in hours of Brier tedium, curl up with a more attractive alternative. Whether you are a curler or simply a fan of W.O. Mitchell you will find this book to your liking. You will discover what those of us who have curled already know. Curling is a religion unto itself; it has the soul to prove it.

...I wonder if Russ (Howard) has had any sharp-featured distinguished gentlemen visiting his shop looking to have a golf club repaired. No...I rather doubt that 'Old Cloutie' would be caught dead in polyester pants—a kilt maybe...

TIM TULLY