

# History and Place

## An Interview with Daphne Marlatt

**B**orn in Melbourne, Australia, where her British father was stationed during World War II, Daphne Marlatt is a Vancouver poet and writer whose two novels, *Ana Historic* (1988) and *Taken* (1996), weave present and past narratives to explore the lives of contemporary and historical Canadian women. In *Ana Historic*, the narrator, Annie, re-imagines and reconstructs the late-nineteenth-century life of a schoolteacher she is researching, while simultaneously exploring her own past and that of her mother, Ina. All three women struggle to maintain their selfhood in a land that is new to them. In *Taken*, the narrative moves among Sydney's Blue Mountains, Malaysia, and Vancouver, from contemporary Canadian politics with its entanglement in the Gulf War to the Second World War and Japanese internment camps, evoking displacement and loss, both political and personal.

Daphne Marlatt was kind enough to invite me to her Vancouver home when I visited Canada from Australia for the first time. We shared experiences of colonial childhoods, hers in Penang, Malaysia, and mine in Zambia. I was particularly interested in discussing her own particular sense of place, locality and self, and the ways in which she rewrites what she has called "the great diorama of history."

SK I've just read *Taken* for the first time and have re-read *Ana Historic*. What do you see as the relationship between these two texts?

DM There is a conscious connection between them because when I finished writing *Ana Historic* I realized that I wanted to go back and talk about the

mother figure. I felt that she was too much a victim figure in *Ana Historic* and that there wasn't enough of her past to explain why she was like that. So I thought I needed to write a book about *her* young adulthood and the war. I was very interested in talking about how war impacts on civilian women and it just so happened that the Gulf War started at the same time so, of course, it got written in.

SK That idea that you talk about in *Taken* about complicity, both political and personal, is something I'm fascinated with. I'm looking at that uneasy relationship the "white woman" has with indigenous people and with place. Did you mean it in a similar way in *Taken*?

DM Oh, yes. What was a real challenge in the writing was to try and give Esme enough of a consciousness to display resistance so that there could be a critique of the colonial system that she was very much a part of, and yet not have her resistance sound unrealistic, because she *was* a part of it and she was therefore complicit. It was very class-oriented—she definitely benefited from the privilege associated with her class.

SK And, in a way, she was complicit with patriarchy because she propagated those notions about womanhood that she'd been taught.

DM Yes, she did. She didn't have a way of critiquing them and she had a very patriarchal father, so even though she tried to resist him, as in that scene where he's reading the paper and she says she'd like to help the war effort by "manning" one of those "stirrup pumps," she can't. She wants to be a hero, she wants to be brave, but then she's also caught in her own doubts about being "just" a woman, and pregnant at that.

SK Talking about heroes, I wanted to ask you about the italicized voices from the Japanese prisoner-of-war camps in Sumatra. Are we meant to be able to identify them as particular individuals?

DM I thought of them as something like a Greek chorus of women's voices. There's a child and there are women of different ages. I wanted them to be anonymous because that's actually how many of them died—some of them didn't even have markers on their graves. It's something that still isn't really well known, that these women, many of whom came from a very privileged class, were prisoners of war and were treated almost as badly as the Jewish prisoners in Germany. I mean, they weren't annihilated in gas chambers but they starved to death and many of them died from the kinds of diseases you get from living in crowded unsanitary conditions in a tropical climate.

SK Could you comment on the link between the nation and history and personal history in your work?

DM This link fascinates me and it's why I did oral history for a while. I think it's partly to do with coming into a different culture and then wanting to find out a lot about it. When you come in [to a new culture] from outside, you sometimes see things more clearly than you do when you grow up inside it. You see certain kinds of attitudes or mindsets and where they come from and what they lead to. Coastal British Columbia is really the western fringe of Canada, and we feel on the fringe, we have a very disjointed sense of being Canadian. Southern British Columbians feel closer to the States than to the rest of Canada, because it's just across the border, and there's always this sense that Ottawa doesn't really understand BC. So it's an interesting conundrum: what does it mean to be Canadian? Back East we're seen as lotus-eaters, a bit like California with its political extremes and slower pace, with a lot more sensuality in our culture just because this climate is so much more temperate than the rest of the country. Coming from the East with its leafless trees in winter, people are astonished at how everything is green here—this *is* the rainforest, after all.

SK That vivid sense of place that you write about seems to be important wherever you are: not just in Canada but also Malaysia and the Blue Mountains in Sydney in *Taken*. Are you conscious of this in your work?

DM Well, it's both conscious and unconscious. The unconscious part has, again, I think, to do with being an immigrant child and coming from a dangerous place. By the time we left Penang, it was getting quite dangerous because of the Communist guerilla activities there, so we were kept under fairly close surveillance. We lived up Penang Hill and our house was surrounded by jungle so there was obviously a sense of what was lurking in the jungle—not just the snakes or ants but human activity, because there was an attempt to set the hill railway on fire and cut off everybody living up there. When we came here [to Vancouver], the second house we lived in had forest outside the back door (it's now all built up but that part of Grouse Mountain was still heavily wooded then) and we could just go out the back garden gate and play in the woods for hours. It was that tremendous sense of freedom and that sense of just falling in love with the trees, especially the cedars. We had an old stump that we used to love to play in—yes, *in*—it was large enough to hold all three of us. There was a sense of laying claim to the place, of saying, "I want this place to be mine, this is a place where I think I can belong." Because children, even though they don't have any larger political consciousness, are very aware of power relations and the immediate impact of politics. As a child, you can sense conflict, you can see how your parents

feel, even if they don't talk about it when you're present. I don't know what would have happened if we'd gone on living in Penang. I think it would have been interesting to know what sense of belonging or non-belonging I might have had if I had reached adulthood there. Given the times, of course, and Malaysia's nationalization, I think it would have been very difficult to have any sense of belonging. Even as a child, although you feel at the centre of a certain colonial privilege or entitlement, you still sense what you're outside of. We were sad to leave Penang and especially our amah; there was a lot of nostalgia for years. But at the same time there was a tremendous feeling of freedom here: you could go out and leave the adults behind and nobody had to keep an eye on you. You could just run free in the woods and I wanted to get that experience across in the beginning of *Ana Historic*.

The conscious part of it has to do with the time at which I came into writing in the early 1960s, and the group that I was associated with, the TISH group. There wasn't much that had been written about Vancouver then—Earle Birney, Ethel Wilson—these were probably the two best-known writers of the generation that preceded ours. We shared a sense that Vancouver wasn't really on the literary map. So that was the conscious part: I didn't want to be writing about some place where I wasn't actually living and this aspect of the TISH poetic fused with my desire to find out more about this city that I was just beginning to explore as a young adult. In those years when people asked where I came from, I'd say, Oh North Van, which of course was only half true, and it still pleases me when readers who've grown up in North Vancouver say, "It's great to see North Van in your novel."

- SK One of the things that struck me about *Ana Historic* in particular is that, despite this sense of being at home that you've talked about, there's still that sense of being an intruder on someone else's land.
- DM That's much stronger in *Taken*, I think, than it is in *Ana Historic*. But even in *Ana Historic*, there are two things happening there. There is that sense of being an intruder in a non-human environment where all the relationships that count are vegetal or animal. And overlaid on that, there is the fear passed on from Ina about men, men in the woods, partly because of some sensational killings around the time I was growing up.
- SK That reminds me of the "lost child" syndrome that has been so prevalent in many Australian cultural texts, where there is a sense that the landscape can swallow children up because they don't really have a spiritual map of the place that actually belongs to someone else.
- DM Yes, and that's the second thing. If the land belongs to anyone—First Nations

people understand that it doesn't—really it's the first inhabitants who have the deepest sense of the land and we should recognize that. I always thought it was very peculiar that people grew up without much knowledge of indigenous cultures here and that they would name things with imported names when there were perfectly good Salish or Kwakiutl names. I was particularly interested in Kwakiutl [Kwakwaka'wakw] culture on Vancouver Island a little bit north of here. That was partly because I met a woman at UBC, Susan Reid, who was doing a dissertation on the Hamatsa ritual of the Kwakiutl.<sup>1</sup> I had already come into contact with Franz Boas's translation of Hamatsa songs but then I ran up against First Nation property rights, as the songs, even though they were taken by Boas who then translated them, are really the property of the people who inherit these songs, so I didn't go any further with that. But Susan's dissertation talked about the spiritual cosmology of the Kwakiutl and the sense of everything being alive, even the rock you're standing on, and, of course, that resonates for me with what it felt like when I was out in the woods as a child with those giant trees and the wonderful smells of the rainforest and everything being so animate. Their culture [First Nations culture] hasn't lost touch with the understanding that place is actually our mother, place is what nourishes us, that without this sense of place we're dead and, of course, the whole capitalist culture, the global culture, that we're experiencing now works to erase that recognition.

SK That sounds very similar to the Australian Aboriginal sense of place and its immersion in spirituality.

DM Yes, that wonderful sense of the Dreamtime as a vital constant, that the sung story dreams what is past into the now of place, and also in a sense births the singer in that place at the same time. In *Double Negative*, the collaboration Betsy Warland and I wrote together, we touch on this notion, just touch on it, because we were writing the first section as we were crossing the Nullarbor on the train from Sydney to Perth, and we were thinking a lot about the desert.

SK You talk in one of your essays, "Subverting the Heroic in Feminist Writing of the West Coast," about the anti-intellectual, macho culture of pioneer British Columbia with the women characters constantly needing to fight what you call the "great diorama of history." How does your work resist that heroic notion of history?

DM Well, for one thing, women's daily experiences of history have hardly been taken note of, perhaps because there's still an identification of women with the sphere of personal life, domestic life. Much of women's work, a lot of it

caretaking, never enters the records, is a-historic as such. So I've wanted to look at historical events through the filter of women's daily lives, foregrounding the textures of those lives. Women's experiences of war—rape, famine, destruction of their families and homes—are often callously viewed as just “collateral damage” in the grand heroic narrative of war. I think a lot of women don't subscribe to the grand narrative, perhaps because women are the ones who most experience the losses that go along with it. In a wonderful film we saw last night, Jean Renoir's 1937 film, *La Grande Illusion*, about POWs in World War I, there's a German woman with whom one of the escaped French prisoners falls in love and whom she rescues. He doesn't trust her, but she brings these two famished escapees into the farmhouse and feeds them. Later, she points to a photograph of her husband and brothers and names the battle that each died in and turns to them saying, “These were all German victories” and you can hear the quotation marks around the word “victories.” This woman, who could have slid into bitter victimization and fear of “the enemy,” instead had this generosity and could relate to these men as human beings. A quiet kind of heroism of an entirely different order.

SK I'm interested in the underlying sense of violence beneath the domesticated exterior of order. Can you say anything about that notion in your work?

DM There are different kinds of violence, of course, but I think it's endemic wherever you have a colonial situation because you have extreme displacement of the original people. Even though here they were pushed onto reserves and supposedly kept out of sight, they're never really out of mind because the psychological violence of forced deculturation, the problems that stem from that violence, become everyone's problems. I myself had the experience in the 50s of going to a new high school in North Vancouver with two opposed populations, students from a new upper middle-class white suburb and a very few students from the Indian reserve. They came from opposite ends of North Vancouver but were somehow in the same catchment area for the school. At that point in the late 50s, there weren't many Native kids who made it into high school and the ones who did really had a hard time. The art room was my home room and I noticed these kids were good at art. They didn't want to show that they were good at things but you could see they were. Often in the morning the white guys would be hanging around talking about how they'd beaten up a bunch of Indians the night before, and the contrast was violent. There was always this sense of incipient violence or memorialized violence, and I think that was just a metaphor for our whole society.

SK There's also the more subtle kind of violence, like that which keeps women "in their place."

DM Yes, there's that classic division that Simone de Beauvoir in *The Second Sex* pointed out, that women are be-ers and men are do-ers, especially in the culture she was writing about, middle-class urban culture, where women were supposed to "be" first of all feminine, bodies, alluring, accepting, compliant even. In a frontier society, even though the women were doing a lot of hard work, it wasn't acknowledged because it was "just" supportive work for the "real" work the men were doing.

SK Another compelling aspect of your work is the powerful influence of the past on the present and of memory. Can you comment on your use of history?

DM Well, perhaps what triggered it was the very first book I was given when I came to Canada as a child. It was a suede-bound copy of Pauline Johnson's retelling of legends that she had collected from Chief Joe Capilano of the Squamish people. It was called *Legends of Vancouver* and when my great-uncle gave it to me, he said, "Now that you're here, you should find out something about this place." That was a springboard for me. Without it I would never have known a terrain, *this* terrain, animated by the kind of history these stories carry. Of course, it wasn't what is recognized as official history. In fact, it wasn't even good oral history because it was all told in that romanticized, rather Victorian voice of Pauline Johnson's. But it was perfect for a nine-year-old. Official history, written history, interests me because it passes itself off as objective, documentary, as "the facts," when it usually represents the view of an elite or of one privileged historian. Even items in the so-called popular press represent particular journalists' take on what is going on. The question of what gets reported and what doesn't is a huge issue. I'm always interested in what gets left out of any official history. This is what oral history focuses on: the telling details, the daily experience of people who lived through events that later become "author-ized" as historic events—authorized in both senses of the word.

And then there's memory, which is famously unreliable because it tends to carry a fictional component. I like rubbing the edges of document and memory/fiction against one another. I like the friction that is produced between the stark reporting of document, the pseudo-factual language of journalism, and the more emotional, even poetic, language of memory. That's why I used such a hodgepodge of sources in *Ana Historic*: a little nineteenth-century and very local journalism that sounds like a gossip column, a 1906 school textbook, various historical accounts, some contemporary feminist

theory, and a school teacher's diary from 1873 that was completely fictitious. By the time I got to *Taken*, I was interested in another language texture, the colonial British dialect my parents spoke and wrote, with its sprinkling of Malay and Anglo-Indian words. This language carried the textures of their daily experience in contrast to the dramatic black and white language of news reports during the war. I'm still fascinated by the differences in language texture between personal, interior, domestic language and the public, declarative language of the press, which over time reflects larger changes in social consciousness. I'm looking at these textures during the 50s in North Vancouver in the work I'm doing now.

Recorded Monday, 15 July 2002 in Vancouver.

NOTE

- 1 A Kwakwaka'wakw (Kwakiutl) dance ceremony dramatizing myths and personifying mythic creatures. The most important dancer is the Hamatsa or Cannibal Dancer.

