

# MEMOIRS OF A ROMANTIC IRONIST

*Elizabeth Brewster*

WHEN R. G. BALDWIN published an article about Edward McCourt a dozen years ago in *Queen's Quarterly*,<sup>1</sup> he commented on how little critical notice had been taken of McCourt's work. In 1976 Baldwin's complaint still remains substantially true. For an author who published during his lifetime six novels, a biography, three travel books, a work of criticism, two books for children, and numerous short stories and articles, McCourt has created singularly little stir, even in a period when people who have done much less quantitatively and whose work does not appear remarkably superior qualitatively have been praised and discussed at length. To my knowledge, no substantial articles, other than book reviews, have been published since Baldwin's. McCourt is not mentioned in such notable thematic studies as Jones's *Butterfly on Rock* or Atwood's *Survival*, nor is his work represented in such recent anthologies as the new edition of Klinck and Watters' *Canadian Anthology*, Brita Mickleburgh's *Canadian Literature: Two Centuries in Prose*, or Mary Jane Edwards' *The Evolution of Canadian Literature in English*.

Perhaps a part of this neglect is caused as much by McCourt's somewhat retiring personality as by the unassuming nature of his work. He once wrote to me jokingly, at a time when I was having difficulties in getting a book of poems published (December 18, 1967), "The trouble is, I'm sure, that you don't project the right image. And you must remember that the right image is much more important than the quality of your poetry. Can't you head up a militant campaign of some sort? Get yourself arrested?" McCourt himself was certainly not one to head campaigns, get himself arrested, or otherwise provoke comment on himself as a human being. Yet to his family, friends, colleagues, and students, his personality was an attractive one, not without its mysteries. Both as a human being and a writer, he aroused more interest on the second look than on the first.

More attention, I am sure, will eventually be paid to McCourt's writing. *Music at the Close* and *The Wooden Sword* are now available in the New

Canadian Library. A book on McCourt is being written by Winnifred Bogaards, and this will provide much information on the man and his work. It is also to be hoped that sooner or later some of his unpublished work will be published.

This unpublished work, now in the Special Collections of the Library of the University of Saskatchewan, Saskatoon, includes three novels, *Ragged Regiment*, *The Coyote Hunt*, and *No Snow on the Mountain*, a collection of short stories, and an autobiographical work, *The Long Years*. It might even be suggested that his most important work has not yet been published.

All three of the novels are interesting, although somewhat untypical of McCourt's published work. *Ragged Regiment*, which was written directly after his last published novel *Fasting Friar*, is an academic novel set in a fictional Atlantic university with distant resemblances to the University of New Brunswick. It perhaps owes more to an odd combination of Kingsley Amis and Angela Thirkell than to actual observation of the Maritime scene. Yet it has some effective comic passages, especially those involving Lewis Otterburn, a movie mogul who is given an honorary degree in the hope of benefactions to come, and whose resemblance to Lord Beaverbrook seems more than coincidental.

*The Coyote Hunt* is a much grimmer work. It is set in an ugly little prairie community named Sunlight, a later version of Sinclair Ross's *Horizon*. Bypassed by the "new super-highway", Sunlight is a ghost town inhabited by the living dead, full of boredom and hate. The coyote hunt of the title, a desperate effort of the community to amuse itself, turns into something more sinister as the novel progresses, a "hunt" of the outsiders in town, the local school teacher, the minister, and the community hermit. McCourt has preceded Heather Robertson in his picture of the decaying prairie community. Indeed, he was already doing so as early as *Home is the Stranger*, although in that novel the modified hopefulness of the ending tended to distract the reader from the picture of community breakdown.

Of the three novels, *The Coyote Hunt* is perhaps the most currently interesting, in spite of some unevenness, though some readers might prefer *No Snow on the Mountain*.

*No Snow on the Mountain* is a strange romantic and symbolic work which would probably have more appeal now than it might have had at an earlier date. It is in part a retelling of the Hippolytus-Phaedra story set in the Canadian West. Perhaps Jones and Atwood would have been interested in this novel if it had been available to them. It includes a true Canadian Venus, in the form of a girl named Rachel Lowe, rising from the waters of the river after a picnic. And it ends with the death of Roy Bothwell, the modern Hippolytus, part way up a mountain which he thought would make him divine if he reached the top. As a capsule summary, this may sound fairly comic, but actually the novel has considerable power. The classical plot gives the book a sense of inevitability, and the

voice of the first-person narrator, Roy's friend Rick Warner, has an authentic ring. It is the only one of McCourt's novels to be written in the first person — unless one considers the autobiographical *The Long Years* to be a species of fiction. McCourt might not have gone along with the term "non-fiction novel." He was too well aware of the long tradition of biography and autobiography as an art form. But the line between a novel and an autobiography as aesthetically conceived as *The Long Years* is certainly thin.

*The Long Years* seems to me (although I may be wrong) to be the best of McCourt's works, better than anything published during his lifetime. The typescript (267 pages double spaced) is a fair copy which appears, except for a few typing errors, to be ready for publication. The typescript is not dated. Some chapters clearly belong to the last year or so of McCourt's life, touching as they do on the old age and death of his father, whom he mentions as being alive in 1970. (Mccourt himself died in January 1972.) "Our Hired Man" appeared as a short story in the Spring 1971 issue of *Queen's Quarterly*, and must date from 1970. (He mentioned, in a letter written to me December 9, 1970 that he had been doing "a good deal of writing" including "a short story for Q.Q. — and various odds and ends." This must be the story he means, and I would guess that some of the "odds and ends" later became chapters in the book.) However, some chapters are definitely of earlier date. These include "A Man for the Drink" and "The Maltese Piano," both published in the *Montrealer* in the early sixties, and both also included in his unpublished collection of short stories, *Cranes Fly South*, which he submitted unsuccessfully to a publisher in 1968. One or two others may possibly also date from the sixties.<sup>2</sup> I would conjecture that he wrote the larger part of *The Long Years* in 1970-71 but incorporated a few more highly fictionalized chapters which he had written earlier. Mrs. McCourt also believes the date to be approximately 1970-71, and considers it his final work aside from unfinished work in progress, a novel and a biography of Sir William Gregory of Coole which were never completed.<sup>3</sup>

*The Long Years* is not a complete autobiography. I would conjecture that the work is the first volume of what would have been a longer work if he had lived; but it is self-sufficient in itself. It tells the story of McCourt's life from his earliest memories until the time when he wrote the Provincial examinations which opened the way to his attendance at the University of Alberta. The concentration is on the first ten years of his life, the period, before and during the first Great War, when he was growing up on an isolated prairie homestead near Kitscoty, Alberta. The setting is one which, in spite of its later time, seems as harsh and primitive as that of Mrs. Moodie's *Roughing it in the Bush*, and one remembers that McCourt's sympathy with Mrs. Moodie (as expressed in his article on her reprinted in A. J. M. Smith's *Masks of Fiction*) is greater than that offered to her by younger readers such as Atwood.

I READ *The Long Years* last summer with interest and recognition and some surprise. I was a student of Edward McCourt's for two years at the University of New Brunswick in the 1940's. The background I came from was, in spite of the difference in regions, amazingly similar in some respects. Perhaps because of that similarity, he had treated my own early attempts to write poems and short stories and one abortive undergraduate novel with a great deal of sympathy. He had impressed on me the importance for the writer of being faithful to his local background, of looking at the people and places he knew best. And he made it clear that a writer ought to be honest with himself, face his own personal demons, not soften or sentimentalize or smoothe over the harshness and absurdity and clumsiness and dullness of life. His novels, it seemed to me, had worked in the direction of these ideals, but they had not always come up to them as completely as had the autobiography. Many novelists begin with autobiographical fiction and proceed to do something more objective and external. McCourt seemed to reverse the procedure and work up to the personal and subjective. But, by the time he had completed *The Long Years*, he had a lifetime's practice in writing fiction behind him. He had also written a highly competent biography, *Remember Butler*. What he produced was not the amateur narrative which a beginning writer might have provided, but an aesthetically satisfying whole.

Autobiographical material is, of course, present in his published novels. Neil Fraser's schooldays, in *Music at the Close*, for instance, bear a strong resemblance to McCourt's own schooldays as described in *The Long Years*. No doubt the account of Neil's university days owes something to the young McCourt's own experience on the University of Alberta campus. Charlie Steele, the remittance man of *Music at the Close*, whom the young Neil idolizes, is clearly based on the young Englishman, Charlie Hayward, of *The Long Years*. But there are great and significant differences. Neil enters the novel, perhaps conveniently, as an orphan, so that the crucial relationship of father to son need not be analyzed. Charlie Steele is presented as a more romantic figure (although of course some of the romance is in Neil's imagination) than Charlie Hayward. And Neil is a weaker figure than his author. Neil as a central character is in some ways an interesting failure. One suspects a certain ambiguity in McCourt's intentions. No doubt he partly wished to present, as Baldwin suggests, a character led astray by "escapist" romantic dreams. But then McCourt is not unsympathetic to these romantic dreams. There is a great deal of Edward McCourt in Neil Fraser. If Neil Fraser is not always presented with approval, one may suppose that McCourt did not always approve of himself.

*Home is the Stranger*, my own favourite of the published novels, is not in any

obvious way autobiographical; but the sensitivity, the romanticism of Norah, the protagonist, is present in all his principal characters. She is a prairie Madame Bovary, observed less coolly than Flaubert observed Madame Bovary. It is a pity that McCourt softened the ending. Some of his sympathy with Norah's homesickness for Ireland may come from his memories of his own mother's struggles in adjusting to life on the prairie, though certainly her character as it is revealed in *The Long Years* seems to have been very different from that of Norah.

*The Wooden Sword* also makes use of autobiographical background only in a general way. Steven Venner, the protagonist, has a childhood far different from that of Edward McCourt. Yet, like the young McCourt, he was a bookish boy who loved the poetry of Lord Byron and wanted to be heroic like St. Paul and Robin Hood and King Arthur. And much of the novel is concerned with Steven's sense of worthlessness as a teacher, symbolized by his impotence as a husband and lover. Behind the occasionally melodramatic plot is a serious discussion of the role of the university teacher, of what is involved in a sense of vocation. Steven Venner's doubts of the value of his teaching must be doubts that every teacher, including McCourt, has shared.

Michael Troy, the youthful protagonist of *Walk Through the Valley*, is probably closest of these fictional characters to the young McCourt of *The Long Years*. As a matter of fact, McCourt wrote to me about the book (in a letter dated October 18, 1971), "I think I liked the book very much indeed when I was writing it — perhaps because the youngster and I seemed to be the same person." It is the personalities of the two boys that are alike, their boyhood dreams and youthful romanticism. But there is a great difference in the father-son relationships in the novel and the autobiography. McCourt's own father, although like Dermot Troy he was an Irish immigrant, was otherwise almost Dermot's complete opposite. It is as though McCourt found it necessary to create for his fictional counterpart a father who had the charm and romanticism and gaiety which his own father lacked, but who also had weaknesses not present in his own father.

These four novels have, as Baldwin points out, main characters who live to a certain extent in the world of romantic illusion. Michael Troy is the only one of these protagonists whom Baldwin sees as being genuinely "triumphant" because, after an initial disillusionment, "he has . . . found an invulnerable romance in the heroism of life itself."<sup>4</sup> Is the McCourt of *The Long Years* also "triumphant"? Perhaps. But then there are two McCourts present — the ironic, somewhat detached observer who is the adult narrator and the romantic child and youth whom the narrator remembers.

Much of *The Long Years* is less about the young McCourt himself than about the community, the neighbours, and his parents. Immigrants from Northern Ireland who had come to Canada when Edward McCourt, the youngest of the three children, was only two years old, the elder McCourts found the pioneering

experience difficult. Even though he himself could not remember the move, the immigrant experience bulks large in the McCourt novels, including the unpublished *No Snow on the Mountain*. William McCourt was a stern, undemonstrative Calvinist whose nature was made harsher by failure. McCourt writes, "I have rarely observed a companionable relationship to exist between a fundamentalist father and his offspring. Our family was no exception. My father lived in fear of God, his children lived in fear of him."<sup>5</sup> Yet he is not simply a stereotype of the rigid father, for McCourt notes his good qualities — his love of the countryside, his "intellectual curiosity" — and is aware of the harsh and narrow upbringing which, together with his later hardships, prevented a flowering of his personality.<sup>6</sup> A complex personality is suggested, and the personality is revealed not only in McCourt's direct comments but in the father's relation to the foils provided for him, the hard-drinking Charlie Hayward or the gentle hired man, Sandy.

Although McCourt's father did not model for any main characters in McCourt's novels, his mother as presented in *The Long Years* is not unlike the mother of *Walk Through the Valley*, whose first name, Elizabeth, she shares. She too had a strong religious faith, but she held it less grimly than her husband held his. A woman who yearned for more beauty and more demonstration of affection in her life, she obviously won her son's pity as well as his love. The account of her early homesick days in the new country is especially effective and is similar to the account of Norah Armstrong's yearning for Ireland in *Home is the Stranger*.

The dreamy, introspective, romantic personality that appears in some form or other in most of the published novels (and also in Colin Jarvis of *Ragged Regiment* and Roy Bothwell of *No Snow on the Mountain*) makes perhaps his most convincing appearance in *The Long Years*. Here is the small boy growing up in a setting where his imagination could wander as he willed it to. A slough "two hundred yards long and three feet deep" becomes for him all the Seven Seas. One day the Creek

might be the Amazon or Congo, I an explorer battling my way through the dense menacing jungle that lined its banks; the next the Rubicon, with Julius Caesar, wooden sword in hand, waving his legions across; the next the Rio Grande, the cattle grazing on the hills beyond the far bank a rustled herd I had trailed all the way from Canada to Mexico and was now set to recover at gun-point.

In "the poplar bluff on the ridge above the east pasture" he played Robin Hood with a bow and arrow.

Much of his imaginative life was nurtured by books. One chapter (Chapter 12) is entitled "Books of my Boyhood." The book heroes of his boyhood are similar to those he gives to Steven Venner and Michael Troy — that is, Robin

Hood, D'Artagnan and the Three Musketeers, Wild Bill Hickok, Girt John Ridd, Buck Duane. All heroes appeal to a romantic imagination. Like every book lover brought up on a small supply of books, he read whatever he could get his hands on, from the poetry of Byron to Creasey's *Fifteen Decisive Battles of the World* and Horatio Alger's *Only an Irish Boy*. And he placed the characters from old-world books in his own prairie surroundings:

Girt John Ridd stands forever on the manure pile down at the edge of the slough and from that lofty eminence hurls Carver Doone into the murky slime below; Pugh the blind man comes tapping along the trail winding past our shack door; Ivanhoe and the Knight Templar face each other from opposite ends of the cow pasture (when Wellington and Napoleon aren't using it); and in the dark hours the Hound of the Baskervilles still bays from the hills on the far side of the Creek.

As a romantic adolescent, although he did not have the sexual adventures of which a later generation would inevitably have written, he cherished a schoolboy crush on the thirteen-year-old niece of Colonel Buckland, the aristocrat of the neighbourhood — the teasing Peggy McKinnon, on whom Janet Maitland of *Walk through the Valley* seems to be based. But it is the comedy of the romantic attachment, and the boyish ineptitude of his youthful self, that the adult narrator emphasizes, along with his disillusionment at Peggy's hands.

Our last glimpse of the young McCourt occurs when he travels to Vermilion, Alberta ("a town so big you might as well call it a city") to write his university entrance examinations. Obligated to leave his first boarding place because of the sudden heart attack of his disagreeable landlady, he delightedly jogs off to the local hotel. Here he thinks of himself as leading the life of an independent sophisticate for a week, in whatever time he has free from writing exams. He spends the early part of his evenings alone, walking the two intersecting main streets of Vermilion, "a gawky farm lad projecting a lot of wrist and ankle from a mail order suit several sizes too small for him." Later in the evening he attends the movies (going twice in succession to the same movie) or listens to the town band when it takes over the movie house for an evening:

Viewed in the hard clear light of common day I spent my evening in a shabby little movie house listening to a small-town band play tired old numbers in and out of tune, and to two semi-professional artists who would never make it to anywhere within a mile of the top. But the truth for me was something far different. The pianist symbolized the union, on the highest level, of art and romance, and I fell deeply in love with her. And the trumpets and trombones of the town band, played mostly by paunchy middle-aged business men who tended to run out of wind in sustained passages, were the authentic horns of elfland . . .

This glimpse, however second-rate it might be, of the larger world beyond the homestead and the small town, was the beginning of the change from boy to

adult. "I had begun moving inland away from the immortal sea into a world far different though not less splendid than that in which I had spent the long years of childhood and early youth." There speaks the eternal romantic in McCourt, triumphing for the moment over McCourt the ironist.

The young McCourt of *The Long Years* may thus be viewed (if he is historically true) as the original of McCourt's romantic protagonists; but he may equally well be viewed as their cumulation, for as a literary creation he comes later than Neil Fraser and Steven Venner and Michael Troy. If he is more appealing than Neil and Steven and Michael, it is perhaps because McCourt the narrator sees his younger self with saving irony and unsentimentality, and yet with sympathy. The book is full of droll touches of comedy and also of a kind of stubborn refusal on the part of the narrator to sentimentalize or soften what his younger self might have sentimentalized. "Splendid" though he might think the world of childhood, for instance, he will not sentimentalize his schooldays. The school was uncomfortable. He learned little, he said, from his teachers. "I disliked my schoolmates and they me. About all I remember of my schooldays with pleasure is being left alone to read in peace." Perhaps the only way he could bear to view some of the unpleasant incidents of childhood was to view them in the light of comedy.

The double personality which emerges from *The Long Years* is complex, sometimes contradictory. It seems doubtful if McCourt ever completely reconciled his romantic, idealistic, hopeful self with his cool, ironic, stoic self. But the tension between these contradictions is what, for one reader at least, makes *The Long Years* more compelling than his published novels. The authenticity of the first-person voice and the easy polish of the style no doubt also help.

McCourt did his most ambitious writing in his novels, his most immediately popular writing in his travel books; but, if one work of his more than any other is likely to last, I would predict it to be *The Long Years*. Provided, of course, it is published.

## NOTES

<sup>1</sup> 68 (Winter 1962), 574-587.

<sup>2</sup> "A Man for the Drink," *Montrealer* 35 (December 1961), 36-42; "The Maltese Piano," *Montrealer*, 37 (June 1963), 29-31.

<sup>3</sup> This conjecture is supported by other evidence, such as the inclusion of a note on *The Long Years* in a notebook devoted to material for the unfinished biography of Sir William Gregory, on which McCourt was working in 1971. A partial handwritten first draft with the title "Remembrance, Bk. 2, Draft 1," exists in an unpaginated scribbler. This includes the original of several chapters of *The Long Years*, including "The Hired Man." There is a not too legible note after one chapter which looks like "Work in stories I have." Also a typescript in the possession of Mrs. McCourt, an intermediate version, includes a handwritten note: "*The Long*



*Years*. First draft of autobiography. Very rough in spots. Into it should be integrated two stories — *A Man For the Drink & The Maltese Piano* — both in short story collection.”

<sup>4</sup> Baldwin, p. 587.

<sup>5</sup> *The Long Years*, p. 9. This and all subsequent references are to the typescript in the Special Collections of the University of Saskatchewan, Saskatoon. Permission to quote from unpublished material has been obtained from Mrs. McCourt.

<sup>6</sup> In a few pages of loose ms tucked into the draft *Remembrance*, McCourt writes about his impressions of the Ulster relatives, and says of his father, “Measured in terms of emancipation, he moved a long way. The blight of a narrow, hate-filled evangelism he never escaped from.”

## STEPPING OUT OF WATER

*Peter Stevens*

The sensation is acid.

In it, the feet  
feel ice;

then out,  
flesh seared away.

Bones in bright air  
burn white coiled clear:

filaments  
in a bell jar.

The sun shines  
outside

not warming.

Feet will hiss  
into steam  
if you step into  
that enticing  
glitter  
again.