HUGH MACLENNAN

Interviewed by
Ronald Sutherland

R.S. How long have you been here in Quebec, Hugh?
H.M. I came to Quebec the fall of 1935 to teach for Lower Canada College and live in at $25.00 a week. I came late in the term, because they simply had to get somebody else, I suppose. And I've been permanently based in Montreal ever since then.
R.S. Did you come directly from the Maritimes?
H.M. Directly from Halifax. I did not have a job. I got my Doctor's degree at Princeton during the depths of the depression, and it was difficult to get any kind of job at that time. I was in Roman History and a Rhodes Scholar. Terry McDermott, who ended up as Ambassador and Commissioner at various places, was the secretary of the committee that gave me a Rhodes' Scholarship, because I was defeated in Nova Scotia. But there was a special one loose at the time, and I was actually a Rhodes Scholar for Canada at large.
R.S. Where were you going to university? Dalhousie?
H.M. I went to Dalhousie. I did Honours Classics there.
R.S. When did you leave Dalhousie?
H.M. I graduated in 1928 and went to Oxford the next fall, then Princeton. I would sooner have gotten a job then, but there just weren't any jobs in 1932. Only about five per cent of Rhodes Scholars got any jobs at all.
R.S. Did you want to go back to the Maritimes, or did the economic conditions force you to leave?
H.M. I very much wanted to go back, but I couldn't get a job there, and that was the thing, I think, which was very damaging in the Maritimes then. Less so now. The casualties in the first world war had been abnormally heavy, and once the war was over there was a depression all over the Maritimes. They never had a 1920's boom down there. The old establishment didn't particularly encourage people who really weren't members of it to remain, but at any rate I couldn't get a job. Indeed, a post was vacant in my field at Dalhousie, and the chairman was a Yale man. A very small department, of course — they all were then. He simply told me that an Englishman was applying, and that was it, although he didn't like the English. The same thing happened with a vacancy in Saskatchewan. The

Chairman called me and said, "I am afraid you haven't got a chance because an Englishman is applying." The Englishman hadn't any higher qualifications than I had and was only coming here in order to get into the States, which was where he eventually went.

R.S. Do you still consider yourself a Maritimer?

H.M. I never did. I'm a Nova Scotian.

R.S. A Nova Scotian?

H.M. Anybody who says he comes from the Maritimes, ninety-nine times out of a hundred he is from New Brunswick. They never call themselves New Brunswickans. Perhaps they don't like the word. Otherwise, you are a Nova Scotian, or from the Island, or Newfoundlander, or from the Atlantic Provinces, in my case Cape Breton.

R.S. Do you think there is a particular mystique shared by people from Nova Scotia or any part of the Maritimes?

H.M. I do. I think it's because there is a sense of community. It's very beautiful country where people know each other. I'm not saying that in the old colonial days of Newfoundland the government was honest, because it wasn't, but I would say the governments in the Island, Nova Scotia and New Brunswick, have been universally pretty honest for the reason that politicians know they couldn't get away with anything else. People know too much about each other down there. They are democratic countries. Montreal, the rest of Canada, Toronto — they aren't democratic, they're simply controlled by corporations.

R.S. Are the Maritimes still democratic?

H.M. They're democratic in the sense that they do manage a good many of their local affairs. For example, the developers began to do damage in Halifax, but they've been, to some extent, stopped. An attempt was made to develop Point Pleasant Park. They got nowhere. No, the people down there are much more straightforward and outspoken than they are here.

R.S. Can you see your upbringing in the Maritimes having an influence on your writing? You've not written a great deal about the Maritimes comparatively speaking.

H.M. I was influenced by Nova Scotia, and also by the kind of education I had. Years ago I came to the conclusion that urban-dwellers — people like Norman Mailer, Mordecai Richler or John Dos Passos, who grew up in cities — don't see details. But they have a wonderful sense of surge of movement. Now when Hemingway was growing up he spent a great deal of time in the country, and Hemingway will describe a situation or landscape by the minutest intuitive selection of detail, and he will use the *mot juste* again and again and again. That's why he is such a vivid kind of writer. City living is having its effect on me. My next book will be in a far more surging kind of prose than I have ever written before — there's a slight element of this in some of the writing in certain sections of *Rivers*

of Canada. The kind of writing or style that I used before is more reflective than what I feel now, living in Montreal.

R.S. Are you saying that the Maritimes have an essentially rural effect?

H.M. Don't forget the sea. Five thousand miles of coastline in Nova Scotia. When I was reading Homer as a kid, particularly *The Odyssey*, he was describing what I had all around me. Many of the poems in the Greek Anthology could have been written of Nova Scotia, and when I went to Greece the first time and again even more the second time, because the second time I was able to get out to sea a bit, it was very like the coast of Nova Scotia. If you stand out on Cape Sounian, remove the Temple of Neptune, and look inland, it's just like looking in beyond Peggy's Cove up St. Margaret's Bay. The ground cover is slightly different, but the same granite outcropping, the same formations. Now my neighbour, Tasso Sikiris, who is a Greek, went down with his wife to Nova Scotia last year, just about this time in September — they went around the Cabot Trail in Cape Breton, went through the valley and around the North Shore. Tasso called me up and said, "My God, you're absolutely right!" Once I saw a picture that my old friend, Ewing Irwin, had in his house here in North Hatley, and I said, "Ewing, that's somewhere up in Cape Breton isn't it?" "God, no," he replied, "That's Delphi."

R.S. So there's no accident about the affinity you've had with Greek legend?

H.M. No, not at all.

R.S. Do you think that growing up in Nova Scotia has influenced the themes of your books?

H.M. Actually, classical education, particularly Roman History, is the most perfect preparation for living today, especially the later Roman Empire in the period of disintegration. I wasn't studying that at Halifax, I was reading the elementary basic classics of the Golden Ages, but my research at Princeton involved that period. Boiled down in the long run, it was the decline and fall of the Roman Empire through the wrong end of the telescope. The Roman tax system was about the same as ours, and therefore doomed. The bureaucracy was doomed. We're going much faster than they were. We're much more efficient at ruining ourselves, but ultimately money, you see, became worthless. It took a long time, but once it passed a certain point — we're just on the verge of passing it now — it just went off to practically nothing — which meant agrarian feudalism. In our age it would mean, of course, some sort of urban feudalism, which would be far more explosive.

R.S. Far more explosive?

H.M. Oh, yes, it will probably destroy us.

R.S. Feudalism in what way?

H.M. Well, I mean, the working man today may be making a lot of money, but the government's taking half of it. There's no government, just bureaucracy. It doesn't seem to me to matter who's Prime Minister any more.

R.S. And this you regard as a new kind of feudalism? Man becomes a serf again?

H.M. He's becoming just that. He always tended to be. But a dictatorship of the Proletariat means a dictatorship of the leaders of the Proletariat. They drive around in Cadillacs and everything else, with hoods to keep the boys in order.
R.S. Of course, some of the labour leaders have a tendency to disappear these days, like James Hoffa.
H.M. That happens. It all reminds me of the Roman barrack room Emperors, the gangster Emperors. If you ever go to Florence, don't miss looking through the Portrait Gallery of the Roman Emperors. It tells you more than you get in books.
R.S. Let me ask you another question. You are considered one of the foremost interpreters of Quebec and the solitudes of Quebec. Do you think that your Maritime background has had some influence or has helped you to interpret Quebec?
H.M. I think so because I had absolutely no trouble at all, not even being able to speak French at the time and knowing very few French Canadians, interpreting how French Canadians felt. They regard everybody who is non-French as *Anglais*. But, of course, that's not so. The Scotch, as you know, had in many ways a worse history than the French Canadians ever had. The chiefs sold them and transported them some way or other with them as soldiers for the English and so forth. Leo Rowse, the great historian of All Souls, was a Cornishman. He read one of my essays in *Scotchman's Return* and said only a Celt could have written it. He was saying that a Celt has a dog-whistle sound that an Anglo-Saxon simply doesn't get and which an Anglo-Saxon finds very irritating. Of course, the Anglo-Saxons on the whole are much abler administrators and much more reliable people. At any rate, I knew what it was like to be in a minority, because the Celts were.
R.S. How were they in a minority in Cape Breton?
H.M. They were a minority in Nova Scotia, and while they were proud people and never felt a sense of inferiority, there was something underneath. The Annapolis Valley was pro-Loyalist Yankee. A lot of them came from Massachusetts. The Loyalists, of course, were not the way the Americans said — all coming from the upper classes. If you look at the shipping lists of boats that went into Saint John, you will find that every trade right down to tinkers, all classes of people were there. Some of them were upper class. For instance, the Bishop of New York, the Anglican Bishop became the Archbishop of Nova Scotia as a Loyalist. Many of them came from West Chester Country, some from Connecticut and some of them even came from North Carolina. As Loyalists they were more British than the King in some ways, as they tended to be in Ontario. But there was another thing about Nova Scotia in the 19th century. It was a tremendous sea power — the little town of Yarmouth with a population of about six thousand people built, sailed and manned one sixty-fourth of the entire shipping of the world from about 1850 to the end of the century. In sailing ships of wood, which they built themselves, Nova Scotian or Maritime ships — mostly Nova Scotian but there were some from New Brunswick — were about the fourth largest fleet

in the world. The British were first, I suppose the Americans might have been second, who was third I don't know, but they were fourth. Anyway, fourth or fifth. The Cunard Line was founded in Halifax and the White Star Line was founded in St. John. Those provinces in the 19th century were not provincial. Quebec and Ontario were much more provincial. A man who became the Admiral of the Fleet, Provost Wallace, was born and went to school in Halifax county.

R.S. You think then, that the fact that the people of Scottish descent were a minority in Nova Scotia has given you a lever to interpret Quebec?

H.M. I think it probably has, although I never thought of it at the time. Yes, I think it probably did, because I always felt in a minority. My family left Cape Breton when I was seven, coming to Halifax. I thought Haligonians were different people. I liked them very much. I loved Halifax, but people had names like Smith and Brown and Robinson and so forth. Halifax seemed to me a terribly exciting place. It still does.

R.S. Have you found any other sort of spiritual affinity with Quebec that helped you to develop your novels and your writing about Quebec?

H.M. Well, I think it's true that the Scotch and the French people have had an intuitive understanding of each other. God knows where the Highlanders would have been if their Chiefs hadn't made an alliance with France. I spent a winter in Grenoble about ten years ago. I remember I was very amused by this old retired French colonel who said to me, "*Monsieur, est-il possible de visiter l'Ecosse sans visiter l'Angleterre*?" I found out that he hated the English, but being *Ecossais* made a difference, being *Ecossais* and *un écrivain*. Everybody knows that the French seldom invite foreigners into their homes, but somehow or other people began inviting us out and we were in about fourteen different homes in Grenoble, which is very unusual.

R.S. Of course, in Quebec there are a lot of Scotch.

H.M. I'll bet that one third of them have Scottish blood. The Fraser Highlanders were disbanded here. If Rocket Richard doesn't have Highland blood in him, I'd be very surprised.

R.S. It would be interesting to find out. But when you came up to Montreal, did you like the place?

H.M. Immediately. I loved it. I don't like it now. It was the finest city in America seven years ago. Look at it now. It's a concrete jungle.

R.S. In your writing have you never had the desire to write more about the Maritimes? How do you pick your themes?

H.M. They pick me. The first book I wrote was unsuccessful. It was mixed up with Nova Scotia. I had some bootleggers in it, and it was set more or less in the States — people, the sea and so forth. The next one I tried to set in Europe with some Americans in it, but I wasn't close enough to it. Then *Barometer Rising*

occured to me. I have to write about what I absolutely know, and I had almost to make a map to write about Canada then. I had to because early perceptions are the things that count, and this all came about when my second novel had been reviewed by the twenty-first New York publisher, and the agent had simply put my name on it and sent it in. The review said, "We don't know who your writer is. He doesn't write like an American and he doesn't write like an Englishman. Who is he? There's something missing." So, I thought O.K., I can't get away from it. Then I thought of Aristotle's idea of recognitions — nobody could recognise within a social novel where the conflict would lie if they didn't know anything about the country. Even Canadians knew nothing about the country. So I made the city the hero of *Barometer Rising* and thought it might last for nine months, and I'm amazed that it's still published.

R.S. Have you consciously tried to map the country in that way?

H.M. It's hard to say that specifically. After *Barometer Rising* came out, an old friend of mine, an Englishman, was killed in an accident in the war. He had been in the publishing business, had been with Constable in New York, but he had lost his job in the depression as did everybody else. When he read *Barometer* he sent me a letter saying, "This is not Canadian literature, it's Nova Scotian." He asked me why I didn't consider setting a novel in Quebec. It's the centre of Canada, if anything is. Well, I'd already started it, because *Two Solitudes* came out of a dream in which I saw some tall blond man, a total stranger, and a short stocky dark man shouting at each other at the tops of their voices, both of them quite likeable people who just simply couldn't understand each other at all, and some boy said, "Don't you see they're both deaf." How the book was structured as it was, don't ask me. I have no idea how it formed itself. I felt the material was so rich I could have gone on forever.

R.S. Where did you get the material? How did you find out about the attitudes?

H.M. I got absorbed in them, and in Quebec. I should say this because it's very definitely true, and I want to acknowledge it though I didn't realize it at the time. I had a French-Canadian colleague who was a Protestant, Monsieur Peron, a man of enormous integrity and intelligence, a delightful personality and tough as all hell. The French-Canadian Protestants were sort of an underground in those days. He could call an election within a decimal point. He was very strong as a French Canadian. He disliked the Catholic Church intensely, blamed it for practically everything that was wrong here. When I finally finished *Two Solitudes*, I still had the job at Lower Canada. Mr. Peron was a very tough critic of things, and the highest praise that book ever got was when I gave him a copy on a Friday afternoon and he read it over the weekend. He came back and said there was nothing the matter with it.

R.S. Did you use him as a model for Tallard?

H.M. Absolutely. But unconsciously. Monsieur Peron was a very poor man. He

had two sons and a daughter. How in the name of God he educated the whole lot of them, I do not know. He never got more than $2,400 a year, and he had his own house, at least part of it, and he rented the other part of it. Both of his sons have succeeded tremendously. Fernand, the younger son, is now Professor of, I think Bio-Chemistry, down in M.I.T., and René, the elder, has been very successful in business.

R.S. You mentioned before that *Barometer Rising* was a Nova Scotian novel and not a Canadian novel. Is it possible for this contradiction to exist? Can you see any pan-Canadian attitudes or are the writers here strictly regional and must they be regional?

H.M. Well, I think that in so far as the novel has got to have a physical basis, all novels are regional in some way. *War and Peace* isn't, because it's the whole world. *Two Solitudes* isn't truly regional. *The Watch That Ends The Night* isn't regional. The reception *Barometer* got in Canada was so remarkable that it must have stirred up echoes from one end of the country to the other. I got letters from all over the place. It seemed to echo so many of our attitudes. It was a book with something of a contrived plot, though the plot turned out to be almost dead accurate as I found out later. But I didn't know that when I wrote it.

R.S. In what way?

H.M. Larry MacKenzie, who had been overseas with the 85th Nova Scotians, asked me if I got into any trouble about the book. I said no. A lot of people in Halifax said it was obscene and that sort of thing. Actually there was a case, and strangely enough I knew the people involved or at least some of them, of a man from an old Halifax family who had been with the 25th Regiment, which was decimated on, I think, the 19th of July, 1916, in the Somme battles. The colonel was a very ruthless man who was actually an Englishman, a ranker, who accused one of the soldiers of cowardice. The man might possibly have been shot, I don't know.

R.S. You didn't know this story before?

H.M. I didn't know it then, but how can I be sure? You get things through the pores.

R.S. Do you find then that it's quite possible to be completely regional and at the same time to embrace a kind of pan-Canadian attitude?

H.M. I think so. I have always seen Canada as a part of the history of the world and there has never been any universal literature that started on a local basis, except maybe the Greek, and even it probably didn't. But that was the original Western civilization. The Romans had to learn from Greek models, how to adapt them to Latin, and in the final Ode of the third book of Horace — I have built a monument more enduring than bronze and higher than the royal seat of the Pyramids and so on — he ends up by saying, I was the first man to tune the Roman lyre to Grecian measures. Take the Renaissance. It was first of all Italian.

Just think back to the time that Queen Elizabeth came to the throne. The only thing scholars could read really was Latin. Then Greek was coming in. They were learning some Greek, because Erasmus had come there to teach Greek. What was there of the European? Rabelais, Montaigne had just published around 1580. There was Chaucer and Malory and that was about it, before the great flowering came.

R.S. Are you saying there's no question of isolation of a culture?

H.M. Yes. It just means tuning the lyre to Grecian measures you may say, but I have no use for regionalism in itself although some of it can be charming. I always used to be irritated at being called a Canadian writer — I was a writer who was a Canadian.

R.S. Let me ask you another thing, what do you consider to be the major influence on your writing career?

H.M. This may sound stuffy, but in a practical way one sentence of Aristotle that the drama depends on the ability of an audience to recognize what the drama is about. I had to build a stage for the earlier books. Nearly all the academics at the time were criticizing me for doing this. Back in the 1950's, people who later became violent literary nationalists — who shall now be nameless — were bawling me out for not joining the English angry young men and so forth. I'd been to Cambridge for a year. That, and I suppose living in North Hatley, made an enormous difference to my understanding of how people live. I knew practically everybody in this village and I used to work in the garden with some French Canadians. I recall the lovely story of what would happen if the Germans won the war. My French-Canadian friend said that he would still be on one end of the saw, but the man on the other end would be an Englishman.

R.S. All of these influences together then have resulted in your writing the way you do?

H.M. I suppose so, but truly it's not profitable for a writer to analyse how he does things while he's still working, except in a technical way. The thing that must have had an enormous influence on how I looked at things was that I was something of an athlete when I was young, and I would sooner have been a Wimbledon champion than to be well known as a writer. When I was in my early twenties, I'd never thought of being a novelist; it just happened.

R.S. You say that when you wrote *Barometer Rising* you had to consciously set the stage for your writing. Has that stage now been set, do you think?

H.M. It's been set. By the time I finished *The Precipice* I decided that I didn't have to do that any more. With *Each Man's Son*, when I sent it to Boston, I just opened right up, didn't tell them anything about the situation. And I was told that I would have to write some kind of a preface, because nobody in America, not even in Boston, could believe in a kind of Calvinism as rigid as I had described. But I don't think such prefaces are necessary any longer.

R.S. Young writers today no longer have the same task. Good.
H.M. I think it might be relevant to say too that Gabrielle Roy had to do the same thing. Her book came out, *Bonheur d'occasion*, six weeks after *Two Solitudes* did. Neither of us knew of each other's existence. Roger Lemelin had to do it to some extent too. But Lemelin's work was of much more popular nature. *La Famille Plouffe* practically put the rural, small-town film business out of commission, because that long series of "La Famille Plouffe" not only trained a lot of French-Canadian actors and showed how to move people around the stage in television, but it brought up all manner of contemporary problems in French-Canadian life. Its influence was prodigious.
R.S. Do you often go back to The Maritimes?
H.M. I do like to get back to The Maritimes, to Nova Scotia, any part of it, but especially Cape Breton.

CARP

Peter Stevens

Flotilla of fat fish swims
with the hectic dash and swerve
of birds erratic sleekness
in the clear shallows. Sensing
canoe slant in heavy black
slide over the rocks they veer
sharply together then smooth
through the darkened stretch these thick
shadows in sunned water to keep
a meticulous distance
in their fleet from the canoe:

darts over the rocks under
the keel's black to swing across
and back they are keeping near
these carp together to weave
fishy awareness slippery
round the long fat underside
of the canoe.

Waves rolling
our shadow flowing over
rocks is a carp though swiftly
they streak towards other rocks.