

# HOME TRUTHS

Fraser Sutherland

IS ONE'S BIRTHPLACE CANAAN, or the land that God gave Cain? Every writer born in the Maritimes must answer that question; how he answers it will determine whether he remains home to work, or goes away.

We have a variety of solutions. Poets like Charles Bruce and Kenneth Leslie spent most of their lives outside Nova Scotia and produced poetry that was a sort of superior nostalgia. One returns to their poems as one might to a place. Indeed, if there is one quality which unites Maritimes writers, at home or away, it is the ability to render the mood, the personality of a place. This evocation of place, especially when produced by a Scot, can easily become sentimental. (Scots' sentimentality is the worst in the world, an ugly, joyless, maudlin thing, almost obscene: whisky tears.) Bruce and Leslie are limited poets but it's to their credit that in this respect they did not succumb. A somewhat similar strategy has been adopted by the novelist Thomas Raddall, even if he did choose, unlike his contemporaries, to stay home. Raddall's nostalgia takes the form of an immersion in the distant past, from which he contrives his historical romances.

The best poet the Maritimes has produced, Alden Nowlan, has also chosen to remain there and so has Ernest Buckler, an excellent writer if a very unprolific one. The sense of place that informs the short stories and early poems of Nowlan as well as Buckler's lovely memoir *Ox Bells and Fireflies* (not to mention *The Mountain and the Valley*) is neither sentimental nor does it imply long excursions into a romantic past.

There are other strategies. Prince Edward Island's Milton Acorn has left the Maritimes to become "The Peoples' Poet".<sup>1</sup> Sadly there is a sag in performance between the charged lyricism of *I've Tasted My Blood* ("Charlottetown Harbour", "Rooming House") and the later *More Poems for People* — Acorn has settled for the rhetoric, as opposed to the poetry, of socialism, and in the process has relinquished some of his local strengths. A different route has been taken by Ray Smith, originally of Mabou, Cape Breton, but now of Montreal, who apparently couldn't care less about ideology, nor for that matter about the particularities of place. Despite the locally allusive titles of *Cape Breton is the Thought Control Centre of Canada* and *The Lord Nelson Tavern*, locales in Smith's stories are only departure points for his elegantly grotesque characters. Perhaps the middle ground is covered by another short story writer, Ray Fraser, who after living some years in Montreal is presently back home in New Brunswick. Fraser shares an interest in grotesques but roots them in a very specific setting.

There are other gifted Maritimes writers but these are the ones who come to mind as must, inevitably, Hugh MacLennan. MacLennan's Nova Scotian roots go deep, as he reminds us in his essays; he has set his novel *Each Man's Son* in Cape Breton, and *Barometer Rising* in Halifax, and has drawn on Maritimes experience for portions of *The Watch That Ends the Night* and *Two Solitudes*. Yet one does not think of him as a "regional" writer. After schooling at Oxford and Princeton, he came to feel that Canada

was *home*, and to be deeply involved in its divisions and destiny. Just as a reluctant Nova Scotia joined the national cause at Confederation, so a perhaps-reluctant MacLennan became a convinced federalist. In doing so he did not cut his Maritimes connections, but incorporated them into a larger whole: place became an agent in the construction of a political and historical unity that was also a novelistic one.

When Nova Scotia entered Confederation, it dedicated its best brains to Canadian commerce, religion and law. Having made *its* decision, that province has been impatient at Quebec discontent. An unsuccessful Nova Scotian was busy with his own sense of injustice; a successful one was inclined to say something like, "Look, Quebec, *we* do our bit for Canada. Why don't you stop grousing and get on with learning English and making money?" MacLennan cannot be accused of so crass an attitude, but to some extent a more liberal and sophisticated form of it colours his view of Quebec. One sometimes gets the impression, reading *Two Solitudes*, that he believes the Canadian wound would be healed if only our Athanase Tallard married our Kathleen Connors, and their son Paul protect, touch and greet Heather Methuen in a perfect commingling of English, Irish, Scotch and French. (This probably explains MacLennan's loyalty to the French-Scotch Pierre Elliot Trudeau which judging from his *Maclean's* articles, verges on the idolatrous: it is the clansman's fealty to his chieftain or, even more likely, an author's admiration for one of his own characters.) That matters are not as simple as this MacLennan himself demonstrates in his last novel, *Return of the Sphinx*. Landscape has always been the strongest character in a MacLennan novel — no disparagement intended — but in this book the land becomes the *only* abiding reality, literally above and beyond

human / national feuds and reconciliations.

What interests me more, for present purposes, is the role that French Canada has played in the progress of MacLennan's novelistic vocation. Undoubtedly living in Montreal has been immensely valuable to him, not simply because the subject at hand suited his evolving style but because alienation, in the right amounts, is better for a writer than confraternity. He was in Quebec, but not of it, and I would hazard the idea that he would not be nearly so good a novelist, nor probably even a novelist at all, if he had lived in English Canada or, worse yet, in England or the United States. He might have become a lucid historian like Donald Creighton or A. R. M. Lower but the human tensions so evident in Quebec demanded artistic, not scholarly form. Animated by the dynamic present but detached enough that he could cope with it, he was able to encompass his ancestral and provincial pasts. He is inordinately proud that he is three-quarters Highlands Scots (since my own ancestry is entirely Highlands I regard MacLennan as something of a half-breed, but such are the ways of genetic vanity), and of his Nova Scotian heritage. Yet in Nova Scotia he would have been a Dalhousie professor. In Quebec he is a writer.

It is perhaps time to look at the culture that sent a young Dalhousie student named Hugh MacLennan off to Oxford on a Rhodes Scholarship. A century before, colonial Nova Scotia was the centre of learned and artistic culture in British North America. In Thomas Chandler Haliburton it had a writer who was to be vital in the development of North American prose. If, as Hemingway said, all modern American literature begins with a book by Mark Twain called *Huckleberry Finn*, so all the style of *Huckleberry Finn* is implied in a book by T. C. Haliburton called *The Clockmaker; or, The*

*Sayings and Doings of Sam Slick of Slickville* (1836). It is amazing in an age of specialists to look back on men like him or Dr. Thomas McCulloch (a Presbyterian da Vinci) of Pictou, who, if they did not quite accumulate and digest all knowledge, certainly made a sporting attempt to do so.

Whatever the economic benefits of Confederation to the three Maritimes colonies, generally judged to be few, it was a cultural disaster, only temporarily abated by the rise of poets — Bliss Carman, Charles G. D. Roberts — associated with the University of New Brunswick. Yet it was as if these men were only agents in the inexorable western swing of culture. The Maritimes would henceforth act only as a nursery for talent that was quick to catch a train for Boston or Ontario.

In speaking of culture, though, one must examine — to employ a phrase Robert Frost used in another connection — “the whole damn machinery,” the bedrock/seedbed below universities and literary magazines and poetry readings. I think MacLennan would agree that a large part of the Maritimes cultural matrix is made up of rural Scots Presbyterianism.

Much nonsense has been written about the baleful effects of the Calvinistic creed. Our preachers are believed to be obsessed with Original Sin, and insatiable prophets of sulphurous damnation, warping everyone in their charge with the sour winds of an inflexible Puritanism and moulderous gloom. But the ministers I remember from boyhood were singularly gentle souls who scrupulously avoided hellfire in the pulpit. Our Sunday School Superintendent, known to inveigh against wickedness, was plainly a crank whom no one, least of all his pupils, took seriously. The best teacher of English I ever had, Viola Fraser, was a minister’s wife. Then, too, for what is supposed to be a dour-faced,

life-denying creed there is something wonderfully ambiguous about the first question-and-answer of the *Primary Catechism*:

Q: What is the chief end of man?

A: Man’s chief end is to glorify God and enjoy Him forever.

(my emphasis)

At other times I wonder whether the injunction doesn’t suggest that we should emulate the practice of Tantric Yoga and conduct sex as a holy ritual!

When these reservations are made, however, it must be allowed that hardships faced by the early Presbyterian settlers profoundly affected them. The Enclosures had driven them off their holdings in Scotland, conveyed them in rotting tubs across the Atlantic, and set them down roughly in a country of only rudimentary promise. The iron-shod elements of the old faith were reinforced by physical obstacles — the Rock of Ages might be something you had to clear off your back field. Gradually a pattern of ethics, a system of values, emerge and these any Maritimer — be he Presbyterian, Baptist, Roman Catholic or Anglican — is bound to carry as psychic baggage wherever he goes.

In delineating this Scots-dominated character I cannot improve on MacLennan’s essays or on J. K. Galbraith’s charming memoir *The Scotch*, though the latter is of course set in a different locality. Both authors are right to stress the hospitable, humorous and fanciful elements in the Scotch character but there are, naturally, other aspects. A phrase that occurs in George Woodcock’s study of MacLennan perhaps offers a valuable hint: “the diffused malevolence of the universe.”<sup>22</sup> After a century of wrestling with intractable land and treacherous sea the Maritimer, especially if he is Scotch, not only doesn’t expect anything good but is unhappy when it appears. This is not childish ingratitude but only the expectation

that the good is the harbinger of the outrightly catastrophic. This sounds funny, but it does rather put a pall on one's life. The lull after ecstasy is not so much post-coitus *tristesse* as it is a grave watch, and no matter how hard you try, no matter how far you climb the success-ladder, you can never please your father. To put it coarsely, one's duty in life is to keep one's head down and one's ass close to the ground. The religion of work, the cult of success, the fear of retribution.

To understand this Maritimes mood one cannot do better than read those early clenched poems of Alden Nowlan's like "Summer" and "Warren Pryor" — the rage at having the feminine *Eros*, the dark fluid dream that feeds creation, pent up hopelessly in a society both patriarchal and philistine. Patriarchal (the many father-figures in MacLennan's novels!), because the manly virtues of the kind mentioned above are emphasized; common sense is the god. Philistine, because like provincial society everywhere, it prizes its own dormancy, both grumbles about and is complacent with its own poverty. For many years the spirit of the Maritimes was not to be found in its middle class, or the few intellectuals at the universities, but was centred in the rural poor, a culture of patched highways, reliable bootleggers, and bad dental care. It was migrant trips to Toronto's Cabbagetown or the tobacco fields of Tilsonburg or the nickel mines of Thompson, Man.; it was coming home for Christmas and getting boozed up — a world accurately described by Ray Fraser's stories in *The Black Horse Tavern* and elsewhere; it was the time when Nova Scotia led the country in the rates of alcoholism and illegitimate births. It was ignorance and fear.

The philistine above all fears to be mocked, and the artist is always the mockingbird. How can such a rare species as the artist survive in the Maritimes, save

by becoming a hermit or, at the other extreme, pretending to be one of the boys in such traditional pursuits as collecting unemployment insurance and swilling Moosehead ale in the corner tavern?

Some of the homebound writers already mentioned are taking one or the other of these routes, but I cannot. Yet truly the question of going back for good has been settled by conditions outside the Maritimes. Any bucolic dreams I may have harboured about living there have been shattered by the fact that the whole world, and the Maritimes with it, is rapidly turning into a facsimile of Newark, New Jersey. I have a vision of the modern writer soon being driven by the force of technology, the loss of his own and exterior nature, into one of a billion illuminated cubes — a Hilton Hotel anywhere — and there trying frantically to write in honour of the past, since there is no engageable present and he falls back on racial and private memory for the seedbed of his work, knowing there can be no future except the Apocalypse and no past but that which lies buried beneath a Petrifond Foundation.

I would hope, in such a situation, to draw on a few good memories of my father though I know that he has never understood, nor can he ever understand, why or even how I am a writer.

My father with his team of horses, in his slow shambling was personifying what Hemingway called grace under pressure, sheer intelligent strength, a small man controlling two very large horses. Or, the victim of a practical joke, he pursues, pitchfork in hand, the impish youth from Pictou he'd hired to help with the haying. Or I see him in the corner chair, rumbly in the deepest of basses a hymn — "The Old Rugged Cross"? — this man who considered ministers some lower form of insect and devoutly avoided, except for the rare funeral, attending church. Or in that same chair, Sir Walter Raleigh

smouldering in his pipe, he stares out into the diffused malevolence of the night, the very picture of the Great Stone Face. Although he is very much alive I imagine him as somehow historical, embodying the verities of a rockbound province, the home truths.

But I know, or I think I know, that the home truths are only accessible to those with the power to understand them, and that the practice of art is not solely the attempt to make money or to create a masterpiece (will I ever?) but is for me a liberating way of life. In *The Mountain and the Valley* David Canaan walks up the mountain: "And some unquenchable

leaven in the mind's thirst kept sending it back for the taste of complete realization it just missed."<sup>3</sup> I would not want to be David Canaan as moments later he lies on the ground, his thirst unquenched, snowflakes melting on his face, as only a partridge rises to make it over the mountain.

## NOTES

<sup>1</sup> Milton Acorn, *More Poems for People*, (Toronto, 1972), jacket cover.

<sup>2</sup> George Woodcock, *Hugh MacLennan*, (Toronto, 1969), p. 7.

<sup>3</sup> Ernest Buckler, *The Mountain and the Valley*, (New York, 1952), p. 360.

## WHOLLY DRUNK OR WHOLLY SOBER?

*Marilyn Baxter*

IN ALDEN NOWLAN's early poetry (before 1969) the self is essentially a single, homogeneous entity. Although it is never "wholly removed from [its own] echo and reflection",<sup>1</sup> there is no hint of any actual dichotomy; and when the self inadvertently comes upon its own reflection in a pool, it does not think of that reflection as a separate being (as for instance Eve does in Jay Macpherson's "Eve in Reflection"), but is only concerned with avoiding any further encounters:

Christ, but I wish  
I knew the direction  
a man had to take  
to keep from meeting  
himself.<sup>2</sup>

With the publication of *The Mysterious Naked Man* in 1969, however, it became obvious that Nowlan's apprehension of the self had undergone a number of changes. Although there is only one poem

in the collection that explicitly mentions the "mysterious naked man", the title is appropriate because the whole volume can be seen as an exploration of the human soul stripped bare. And the human soul Nowlan is most interested in is, of course, his own. Intensely aware of "how mysterious it is / that I am looking out through the eyes / of a certain body and this body is alive / here and now",<sup>3</sup> the poet is also beginning to see that this mystery is heightened by the fact that the "I" or self is no longer single but multiple:

You keep peeling off hollow dolls  
and finding another  
inside: I divide into men,  
fat and thin, half a dozen  
boys, children and babies  
of various sizes.

I could have said it  
a year ago in a Russian boutique  
but it didn't happen  
until tonight.

(*MNM*, 41)