

FATHERS AND SONS

Marilyn J. Davis

A RECENT ARTICLE by Ronald Sutherland, "The Calvinist-Jansenist Pantomime,"¹ compares English- and French-Canadian literatures as reflectors of Puritanical repression in Canadian society. Sutherland argues that Canada remained

more faithful to the Puritan ethos than has the United States of America. And what is even more significant, Canadian Puritanism has evolved much the same form of expression in Protestant English Canada as in Roman Catholic Quebec.

English-Canadian Calvinism shares a common denominator with the Jansenism of French-Canadian Catholicism. The root of both is Augustinian theology as interpreted by Calvin, and by Jansen after him. "In its doctrine of hereditary corruption, universal deprivation, and complete loss of spiritual freedom on the part of man," says one authoritative source, "Calvin takes over almost unchanged the doctrine of Augustine."² Similarly, says another, "Jansen adopted in their entirety the most rigid of St. Augustine's formulas, and adhered especially . . . to the most rigid [gratuitous predestination]. . . ." In treating of the Fall of man Jansen assumed "a very pessimistic standpoint in which he presented as absolute the power of concupiscence over free will, thenceforth inclined to sin."³

The doctrine of predestination affirmed by Calvin and Jansen raised thorny problems of divine grace for orthodox theologians. Given the total depravity of man since the Fall — not only in his spiritual nature but also in his human powers of intellection and will — then "all man's works are contaminated by sin" (*NCE*, II, 1092), and human activity is impotent to establish a proper relationship with god. It is an image of man corrupted into a "horrible deformity,"⁴ as Calvin put it. Salvation then, is *absolutely* in the divine will and *not at all* in man's merits and good works, for predestination either to election or reprobation is presented as independent of God's foreknowledge of individual merit.

Those foreordained to eternal damnation are justly treated since *all* men are wholly perverted. Those foreordained to eternal life acquire it only because "God's grace is irresistible. Just as sinful man *necessarily* wills evil, so the elected or justified man *necessarily* conforms to God's decree" (*NCE*, II, 1092). Spiritually speaking, man is abased to *nothing*.

The invincible logic of Calvin's doctrine may be partly attributed to his rigorous training in logic and law, and to a tendency to see God "in terms of his supreme power that is absolute law . . ." (*NCE*, II, 1090). Thus, "justice, in some sense, may be vindicated on the lines of Augustine and Calvin, but not *love*; for if God could save, why did he not?" (*ERE*, III, 152). Jansen's work was "immediately accused of renewing the errors of . . . Calvin" (*NCE*, VII, 820), and condemned. In 1730, following political persecutions, the anti-Jansenism bull *Unigenitus* (1713) was proclaimed law in France. Subsequently, Jansenism moved underground and became "entrenched in the mentality of a minority clan, narrow, surly, and irritable . . ." (*NCE*, VII, 824). Signs of a "martyr mentality" emerged, frequently accompanied by an "eschatological mentality" which conceived the end of the world near at hand (*NCE*, VII, 824). Calvinist theology triumphed mainly in Scotland, Jansenism in France, the two cultures which most significantly contributed to the early growth of Canada.

HUGH MACLENNAN indicates, in his essays, his awareness of the peculiar influence of religion on the Canadian psyche:

In addition to the repressions enforced by nature, there are few nations in which established religion has had a greater success in curbing exuberance. The authority of the Quebec priest over his parish is famous. In the English-speaking provinces Calvinism has been endemic from the beginning.⁵

And although MacLennan has not to my knowledge specifically pointed out the Augustinian root to both Jansenism and Calvinism, he is certainly aware of its dual heritage in Christian life:

From St. Augustine we accepted the vision of the City of God, and mankind has been better as a result. Also from St. Augustine the Christian religion accepted for centuries the view that man, though God's creature, is utterly vile, and failed to realize that this opinion was the purely personal result of St. Augustine's disgust with his own former life of debauchery and sensuality.⁶

To examine doctrinal similarities is inadequate, however, since both systems assumed different shapes in different countries, under new conditions, without abandoning their fundamental principles. When the Scottish Church adopted the Westminster Confession (1646), for example, it passed from Genevan-Calvinism to the Puritan pattern.⁷ In fact, Puritan Covenant theology modified Calvinism since Puritans made "God's absolutism tractable to man's ability to conform," so that now:

man's duty was to fulfill his contract with God. Since God had made the contract in the image of legal and trade agreements of the time, His demands were reasonable and humanly possible of fulfillment. Thus, Calvin's God of predestination and irresistible condemnation became a Puritan God who could be served by righteous living and who would thereby consider those so living among the elect. (NCE, II, 1093-94.)

The continued emphasis on original sin and human depravity made mortification of flesh in the Old Adam one of the central duties of Christian life, and lent to Puritan devotion a sombre and gloomy character.

"Often I have said to myself that my grandfathers three times removed lived in a culture as primitive as Homer's," said MacLennan. And indeed the environmental harshness of the Scottish Highlands was peculiarly suited to the growth of Calvinism. When they emigrated to the Canadian Maritimes "with them they brought — no doubt of this — that nameless haunting guilt they never understood. . . ."⁸ It was reinforced in an austere land with a harshness of its own,

a part of Canada where nobody is able to change the landscape. Along the Atlantic coast of Nova Scotia you grow up with the conviction that everything in nature here is as it is forever, and that man, living with the shifting immutability of the ocean and the unshifting immutability of granite rocks, can never dominate his own fate. . . .⁹

In *Each Man's Son*, Dr. Ainslie well knows "there was a rock in them all, buried deep in the past of his own race."

IT IS THE PURITANICAL EFFECTS of both Calvinism and Jansenism that MacLennan presents as significantly determining the relation between fathers and sons in two novels which are filially connected: *Each Man's Son* (1951) and *The Return of the Sphinx* (1967). In *Each Man's Son*, MacLennan focuses on a father/son situation to present his theme of Calvinist guilt

which haunts an entire Scottish, Cape Breton community like a doom. In his "Author's Note" to the first edition MacLennan refers to the "ancient curse, intensified by John Calvin and branded upon their souls by John Knox and his successors — the belief that man has inherited from Adam a nature so sinful that there is no hope for him and that, furthermore, he lives and dies under the wrath of an arbitrary God who will forgive only a handful of his elect on the Day of Judgment."¹⁰ George Woodcock describes this "sickness" which MacLennan sees, "as the principal internal enemy of our western civilization."¹¹ The result is a society too sub-consciously guilt-ridden to live fully or love well.

The theme arises early in the novel when Dougald MacKenzie, wise man and father-figure to Dr. Daniel Ainslie, bluntly asserts: "You haven't forgotten a single word you've ever heard from your own Presbyterian father. You may think you've rejected religion with your mind, but your personality has no more rejected it than dyed cloth rejects its original colour." MacKenzie continues quietly in an ironic parody of Calvin's pessimistic sense of sin, then he again addresses Dr. Ainslie. "I'm a Christian, Dan, but Calvin wasn't one and neither was your father. It may sound ridiculous to say, in cold words, that you feel guilty merely because you're alive, but that's what you were taught to believe until you grew up."

MacKenzie's words set Ainslie brooding about this "burden of guilt" passed from father to son, in the following way:

But why must he, Daniel Ainslie, forever feel guilty before he could reason away any cause for guilt? . . . MacKenzie had told him that although he might be an intellectual agnostic, he was an emotional child in thrall to his barbarous Presbyterian past. As he thought this, he felt guilty again. But why? Was there no end to the circle of Original Sin? Could a man never grow up and be free? It was deeper than theory and more personal. There was Margaret — he felt guilty before her, guilty in his soul. Why again? Merely because, when he had married her, he had been so swayed by sexual desire? As he thought this he saw her anew, as he had seen her for the first time, that wonderful, white firm body so eager for pleasure with him, himself desperate for the joy in her, yet at the same time half afraid and half ashamed. Why again? What was wrong with desire, except that within himself it was overpowering and he feared it? Why did he fear it, since she had always been able to satisfy it? Because he had been taught to fear it. Because it led hellward. But he was a physician, a learned man of forty-two years, and he no longer believed in hell and damnation. No, but he did believe, and believed because it was true, that he had permitted the fables of childhood to destroy much of Margaret's happiness. So the circle was complete again. Any way he regarded himself, he was guilty, and there was no way out.

So, "the curse of his ancestors" has been passed from father to son, and made Ainslie — against his will — a prisoner of his father's past, chained to his father's image of god-the-father seen as a harsh, Old Testament Jehovah, rather than as a New Testament god of love and mercy.

"Submission to God's will expressed itself in self-control" for "man's depravity necessitated a stern and repressive moral discipline" where unchastity, for example, was sin, not venial weakness. Also, where even children are "cursed creatures" because of original sin, distrust of child nature led to distrust of "natural feeling". Thus it is that Ainslie orients himself almost exclusively towards his brain in order to keep "emotional distance" from his wife, Margaret. Pleasure, for Ainslie, is medical work which relaxes "the tense muscles of his back". Yet his medical potentialities as a neurosurgeon are not realized, since to seek "success" is to the Calvinist mentality simultaneously a command and a sin. "The face of [Ainslie's] father flashed before his eyes. How could he ever hope to win the kind of struggle such a father bred into his son? The old Calvinist had preached that life was a constant struggle against evil, and his son had believed him. At the same time he had preached that failure was a sin. Now the man [Ainslie] who had been the boy must ask, How could a successful man be sinless, or a sinless man successful?"

Any dissipation of wealth and energy was "sternly denounced and repressed" in Puritanical Calvinism, "time and talents were not to be wasted. . . . Idleness was a sure sign that one's standing in grace was doubtful. No one should be unemployed." Ergo, Ainslie's few spare moments are filled with his translation of Homer's *Odyssey* without his awareness that he is on a strange pilgrimage himself. The study of Greek also keeps him apart from Margaret. Dougald MacKenzie diagnoses Ainslie's increasing irritability as the "hypertension" of a man who "courts unnecessary work" and who "flogs" himself into reading Homer. Pointedly MacKenzie adds, "no man can deliberately exclude his wife from the centre of his life and hope to escape the hounds." Then, more bluntly: "as long as you've been married to Margaret you've resented her because she hasn't been able to wash away your sense of sin."

Like MacKenzie, Margaret is sensitive to her husband's belief that to work as he did was senseless. "No wonder, she thought now, growing up with those wild, solemn, Bible-reading Highlanders all around him, looking out at the glory of an innocent world, Daniel had been unable to prevent a need growing in him, until now that need was higher than a mountain." Ainslie's need is for a son to "give purpose to the universe" and to be "the boy he might have been, the

future he can no longer attain." Having in the past performed a hysterectomy on his wife (which now compounds his guilt), Ainslie must look elsewhere for a "son," and arbitrarily decides young Alan MacNeil will fill the role. He arrogantly tramples over the loving kindness of Alan's mother, Mollie MacNeil, as he does over her absent husband Archie, who is a coarse man of brawn, not brain. Alan is a son "conceived" in Ainslie's intellect, destined to become a man of brain unlike his real father, and freed from "everything in his background that would try to hold him down." This is arbitrary social justice devoid of love. Significantly Ainslie's awareness of the "sonship" of Alan occurs when after a successful brain operation he took young Alan on an educational trip to Louisburg. With a sense of Calvinist predestination Ainslie feels that this "had not been an accident."

The wise-man, Dougald MacKenzie, is again the bearer of truth to Ainslie when he speaks of the primary importance of a loving person above all else in the world. MacKenzie knocks the bottom out of Ainslie's illusion that his mother was to be condemned as a weakling and his father revered as an archetypal, strong-willed Presbyterian. Ainslie describes the hardship of his boyhood and proudly says: "all of us [are] well-educated, thanks to my father. Mother thought it was more important for us to eat than to learn. She had none of his will power." In Ainslie's Calvinist eyes she wrongly placed the carnal above the intellectual. MacKenzie sets Ainslie straight in no uncertain terms. It was only his "father's driving ambition," he says, which "forced his whole family to go hungry." All this time, adds MacKenzie, Ainslie's mother unobtrusively gave her portion of food to her children to keep them healthy. She died from malnutrition, after Ainslie's father curtly dismissed MacKenzie as her doctor after the latter blamed Ainslie's father for her condition. "I wouldn't talk about her lack of will power if I were you. . . . You would do well to honour your father less and your mother more. She was a very loving woman."

The father image which had formed the cornerstone of Ainslie's life briefly merges with his memory of "the expression in Mollie's eyes as she comforted Alan. Then . . . Mollie's eyes . . . were the eyes of his own mother." As MacLennan puts it, "the little boy he once had been still longed to be loved by some human being as Alan was loved by her." At this point, MacKenzie states a deeper truth, the significance of which, Ainslie is not yet able to grasp: "You aren't looking for a son, Dan. You're looking for a God." As Peter Buitenhuis puts it:

Dr. Dougald's story suggests that Ainslie has suppressed the normal love for his mother and fixated his affections on his father instead. This appears to be why he has such a strong urge to be a father himself. He has pushed Mollie and her maternal rights into the background as a form of revenge for his mother's supposed betrayal. He has also been unable to relate emotionally to his own wife, Margaret, because of his crippling emotional negation. In the gap left by his loss of religious belief, he had placed the ideal of fatherhood.¹²

But Ainslie's stubborn mind fiercely rejects the wisdom of the old man's truth. Mollie he sees as merely "a good woman . . . and Alan deserves far better than that. . . nothing is going to stop me. Nothing." Ainslie's choice ultimately precipitates the catastrophe that emerges from a tangle of guilty relationships. "If God looked down on them that summer," says MacLennan, "the kind of God their ministers had told them about, He must have been well pleased, for by summer's end all of them except Alan were conscious of their sins," and the Calvinistic sense of doom hangs over what George Woodcock describes as this "little society [which is] bound together by a common faith in its own damnation."¹³

The brutal catastrophe, however, does not occur until Ainslie releases his grip on Alan with a sense of gratuitous love, and frees himself from the burden of his father's harsh Old Testament God whom he now sees as "nothing but the invention of mad theologians" and a "fear" that had

hobbled his spirit. The fear of [this] curse had led directly to a fear of love itself. They were criminals, the men who invented [this] curse and inflicted it upon him, but they were all dead. There was no one to strike down for generations of cramped and ruined lives. The criminals slept well, and their names were sanctified.

Now Ainslie experiences the loss of Alan as the loss of God, since both are a loss of something larger than his own life. Ainslie's despair is a form of spiritual death manifested as total negation. Ainslie sees only "a world without purpose, without meaning, without intelligence; dependent upon nothing, out of nothing, within nothing; moving into an eternity which itself was nothing." In this condition of "total emptiness" in which Ainslie "had reached his core" and "stopped" he acquires "the freedom of not caring," and "in that moment he made the discovery that he was ready to go on with life," and that "now he could once more think about the people around him."

Freed now from Puritanical fear, Ainslie looks upon Alan snuggled protectively in Margaret's arms. "It was then that Ainslie began to cry. . . . It was the

first time Margaret had ever known him to be unashamed of showing emotion.” Release from the shackles of Puritanism is like a classical purgation. The novel ends with Ainslie talking to MacKenzie in the realization that he has acted “through arrogance. . . . Through total incapacity to understand that in comparison with a loving human being, everything else is worthless.”

THE RETURN OF THE SPHINX evokes the father/son relationship between the middle-aged Alan Ainslie (Alan MacNeil of *Each Man's Son*) and his twenty year old son Daniel, named after Alan's adoptive father. In the 1960's in Montreal, open hostility develops between the English-speaking federalist father, and his French-speaking separatist son. The land is again accursed, as the title indicates. Of it, MacLennan said this:

I understand the inner sense of the sphinx to be the breakdown into destruction of the Father-Son relationship within the Oedipus Complex. To overthrow the tyranny of the father in order to live is the duty of any son, but this must be recovered, and in the last Oedipus play, of course, the father asserts his right against rapacious revolution. Polyneices [Oedipus' son], comes back, as it were, with the sphinx operating in him, as he operates in today's universities and all over the world.¹⁴

The father/son riddle of the 60's has no easy solution. The “son-hungry man” of *Each Man's Son*, Dr. Daniel Ainslie, “did not live long enough to know whether the educational experiment he had performed on the adopted orphan had succeeded or failed.” This novel invites the reader to judge.

Dr. Daniel Ainslie raised Alan without superstitious religion, but also taught that “his life ought to be some kind of Pilgrim's Progress to some kind of City of God.” As Dr. Daniel required a substitute for lost ancestral religion, Alan now seeks fulfilment in political ideals. Working in External Affairs had been “almost like a religion to him,” and currently, federal union is Alan's spiritual omega from “the sense of infinity that lies in the hush over the deltas of huge northern rivers. . . .” Even young Daniel describes Alan as “a saintly kind of man. He's willing to put up with anything they do to him so long as he thinks it's for the sake of the country. . . .” Alan, like Dr. Daniel, needs children, and “seemed to love this huge, mostly unknown country as some people love the idea of growth in a child. . . .” Herein lies the root of family tragedy since Alan places the “sonship” of his country above immediate concern for Daniel, his bloodson. A

Calvinistic sense of duty keeps Alan almost exclusively in Ottawa, too distant from Montreal and young Daniel who feels himself "orphaned" from his father and, as a French-Canadian, culturally "orphaned" in the New World. "The pride of the unappreciated . . . [is] the strongest and most self-destructive emotion anyone can nourish," says one of two wise voices in this novel. The statement exactly describes Daniel whose hostility is intensified by the lingering influence of a puritanical priest.

The austere piety of Jansenism prevented filial closeness to God. Christ was "a severe and inscrutable redeemer" for a God whose commandments were impossible even for the just who wished and endeavoured to obey them (*NCE*, VII, 825). Young Daniel, like his grandfather Dr. Daniel Ainslie, has rejected religion intellectually, but is emotionally crippled by the remains of puritanical Jansenism, and bears essentially the same burden of guilt. The "sphinx" has returned. The resultant unhealthy incapacity to love not only mars Daniel; it explains, for Alan Ainslie, the Quebec Revolution:

. . . no people in history has ever tried to break with a strict Catholicism without turning to nationalism or some other kind of ism as a surrogate religion. As I see it, that is the essence of the situation in Quebec today. The problem there isn't economic, it's psychological. . . . What's happening in Quebec . . . is something deeper than we've ever seen before in Canada. It's a genuine revolution in a way of life, and I don't have to remind you that all revolutions have neurotic roots.

This general theory is applied specifically to the "neurotic and self-willed" Daniel by a wise, European voice in the novel. Marielle warns Daniel that there is

nothing so terrifying as self-willed ignorance. I wish you would stop being romantic about Europe and the Old World [wars and revolutions]. People there understand things it will take you North Americans another century to learn. You are all puritans over here and don't even guess what it does to you. . . . Young men like you never plunge into movements like this without some kind of personal reason. Usually they don't understand what it is until it's too late and sometimes they never understand it.

Later, Marielle asks Daniel why he is "so afraid of being a man," and suggests "if a man fears [to love], then it is very natural for him to talk and dream about bombs and war." The "revolutionary" effects of severe sexual repression are described by MacLennan in a very curious passage.

After participating in a separatist-oriented television broadcast, Daniel is simultaneously "intoxicated with a feeling of power" and morbidly hypersensitive

to women on the street as “raw sex on display.” Mouthing sayings of his separatist father-figure, the ironically-named Latendresse, Daniel interprets “the sexual explosion” as a prelude to the collapse of an era: “a Mardi Gras before another of history’s lenten seasons ushers in the day of retribution and atonement.” Daniel’s destructively apocalyptic mood shares in the eschatological temperament of repressed Jansenism already discussed. His lust and hate focus on the buttocks of two girls, a “plump one wobbling and a lean one popping up and down”. Leanness merges with the thin outline of a Montreal skyscraper, symbol of English domination, and it is difficult to tell whether Daniel, referring to the “thin one”, means the building or the girl or, subconsciously, both:

Yes, he thought, yes! If you chose that thin one you could do it. . . . If you placed the explosives at exactly the proper balance points you could bring that thin one down. You could bring it down screaming and grinding and trembling . . .

Rape of human being and rape of the physical environment fuse in a sick mind which cannot see repressive sexuality fostering angry, frustrated, and destructive impulses. It is “love-hunger growing imperceptibly into hunger for power.” Daniel’s sister Chantal evokes the inner ugliness by describing “a puritan when the bottom falls out of his character and all those polypy things that are inside of puritans come crawling out for a Mardi Gras.”

Alan Ainslie sees the violent side of the Quebec Revolution as part of a “universal disease” which “came when humanity lost its faith in man’s ability to improve his nature.”

When people can no longer believe in personal immortality, when society at large has abandoned philosophy, many men grow desperate without knowing why. . . . Some of them will do anything — no matter how hopeless, criminal or idiotic — merely to have people mention their names and recognize that they exist. . . . A senseless crime can be one way of passing into the only kind of immortality this sick epoch understands . . .

Chantal illuminates the central dilemma in both novels: “to love a person and be unable to help him — that’s the most terrible thing in the world.” Meanwhile Alan has learned the humanist truth that both the individual and the nation must “school” themselves toward civilization. “One more step would have freed us all, but the sphinx returned,” and the land feels anew the curse of ancestral guilt.

Perhaps there is no immediate answer to the Canadian riddle of the sixties, or as yet, to the universal violence of which violence in Canada is one small part.

Therefore, to conclude that "the sphinx has returned to the world before" and the world survived, is at best a brooding optimism, yet it is all one can draw out of MacLennan's historical perspective. Still, to be able to *pose* the riddle in its localized form, is a small step forward for man, and one for Canadian literature in so far as MacLennan believes that "the substance of any living literature must come out of the society to which the writer belongs."¹⁵

In an essay written during the 1940's, MacLennan stated that "the psychological mould which was set in Canada in the early days" lay in its *three* founding peoples: French-Canadian colonists, United Empire Loyalists from the American colonies, and Highland Scots. Each had its peculiar puritan background, and each was a dispossessed people. Thus, while the French-Canadian must come to grips with the British conquest, the Highland Scot had endured a more devastating humiliation after the Battle of Culloden when the clan system was ruthlessly and systematically destroyed. Perhaps the three central founding cultures of early Canada share a greater similarity of experience than their differences permitted their members to see. Could her people examine clear-eyed their historical roots, they would discover that the essential Canadian problem exists inside, not outside her borders. One pathway toward national self-knowledge lies in the mutual exploration of the growth of both French- and English-Canadian culture as expressed, for example, in Canadian literature.

History reveals, says MacLennan, a dominant impulse in Canada "to retain in her own eyes the kind of personality she *feels* she has, even though she has never been able to define it in words." In this, both "French and English have an overriding common aim upon which the Canadian national character, whatever its individual manifestations may be, firmly rests."¹⁶ It is in no way derogatory of Hugh MacLennan to say that much of his value as a novelist is precisely this: that he seeks to define the elusive Canadian truth in words.

NOTES

¹ *Journal of Canadian Studies*, V (May 1970), 10-21.

² *Encyclopaedia of Religion and Ethics* (Edinburgh 1918) III, 150. Cited *ERE* in text.

³ *The New Catholic Encyclopedia* (New York 1967) VII, 820. Cited *NCE* in text.

⁴ John Calvin, *Institutes of the Christian Religion*, 1.15.4.

⁵ "The Canadian Character" in *Cross-Country* (Toronto 1949), p. 8.

⁶ "A Would-Be Saint" in *Thirty and Three* (Toronto 1954), pp. 216-217.

- ⁷ *Encyclopaedia Britannica* (London 1967), XVIII, 462.
- ⁸ "Scotsman's Return" in *Scotsman's Return and Other Essays* (Toronto 1961), pp. 10, 8.
- ⁹ "Confessions of a Wood-Chopping Man" in *Scotsman's Return and Other Essays*, p. 89.
- ¹⁰ Quoted in George Woodcock's *Hugh MacLennan* (Toronto 1969), p. 91.
- ¹¹ *Ibid.*
- ¹² Peter Buitenhuis, *Hugh MacLennan* (Toronto 1969), p. 51.
- ¹³ Woodcock, p. 99.
- ¹⁴ In Buitenhuis, p. 66.
- ¹⁵ "Literature in a New Country" in *Scotsman's Return*, p. 135.
- ¹⁶ "The Canadian Character" in *Cross-Country*, pp. 10-17.

SEVEN PERSONS REPOSITORY

A New Creative Writing Magazine
from Western Canada

POETRY FICTION ESSAYS

Published Quarterly \$2.00 Per Year

Box 52, Seven Persons, Alta.

JOHN HARRIS & BOB ATKINSON
EDITORS, PUBLISHERS AND PRINTERS