

WINTER AND THE NIGHT-PEOPLE

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THE FIRST SIXTY PAGES of *Return of the Sphinx* are among the worst that Hugh MacLennan has written. A blunt statement: but a book like this one, which contends even in fiction with the thorniest political problem in Canada today, is bound to arouse blunt statements. It is not paradoxical, I hope, to add that this is in many ways MacLennan's most important novel too, which makes the faults in it seem larger than under other circumstances they would. The novel emerges not only out of his earlier works and relates to them by both theme and imagery; it also demonstrates a distinct advancement. What before had been nebulous and sometimes even noncommittal in the resolution to his works has here been extended into a tragic vision — for Canada, for the characters, and for the world.

Ambitious? Yes. Worthwhile? Indeed, yes. But successful only on occasion. Briefly, the novel concerns the conflict that assails Alan Ainslie, federal Minister of Culture in a cabinet that seems to have both Diefenbaker and Pearson figures in it (a situation ripe with fictional promise in its own right, but by the way). His French-Canadian wife has been killed by a truck overturning in a freak accident; his daughter, Chantal, is in love with his best friend, an emigrant Frenchman near his own age named Gabriel Fleury; and his son, Daniel, tortured by a Jansenist schooling and by awakening sexual urges, torn between respect for his gentle father and antagonism towards all things and all people not French Canadian and of another generation, is becoming more and more involved in the Separatist cause. For Alan the problem is only partly a political one; much more so is it emotional — at a national level, where his commitment to the cause of Confederation is both deep and honest, and at a personal level, where his memory of past happiness with his wife is so strong that he has really lost contact with the world that is growing up, here and now, around him. The two are obviously

symbolically related. Alan's tragedy is that he does not recognize what is happening until it is too late, until events have taken place that divide him irrevocably from his position in government and effectively from his children. His world, at the end of the novel, is different from the one he has seen at the beginning, although in the background there still broods a hint of the ideal world which Alan has been conscious of and which MacLennan himself has been concerned with throughout all of his fiction.

We have met these characters before in MacLennan's work. Chantal, idealistic, young and therefore confident, at once sophisticated and naïve, intelligent, capable, and determined, has under different guise appeared as Penny Wain in *Barometer Rising* and Sally Martell in *The Watch that Ends the Night*. She performs much the same function here — the representative of the realization of young love — but she is less of a stick figure than the other two and so more satisfactory as a character. Daniel has developed out of Marius Tallard, the young rebel and Oedipally-motivated father-hater in *Two Solitudes*, but again he is more rounded and more credible. Whereas Marius had been shallowly drawn, a shadow figure defeated as much by his own character as by the System he was reacting against, Daniel is by contrast brimful with talent and possibilities. Tragic again is his commitment to an increasingly narrowing cause, for the mistakes he makes in judgment cease to be the excusable sins of youth when they affect the life of the nation itself.

Alan Ainslie is, of course, quite literally the boy Alan (MacNeil) Ainslie from *Each Man's Son*, now grown up — trying, as so many MacLennan characters do, to forget his origins (wandering father, murdered mother), and attempting by this means to attach himself and his family to a kind of order it has never really been his to know. We have seen this in Neil Macrae in *Barometer Rising*, in Jerome Martell, and even to some extent in Paul Tallard. In all the earlier books MacLennan has implied that the order is achievable, that the characters have conquered the major obstacles in the way of their happiness. But in fact there is always another note present as well, which, in imagery involving winter and darkness, hints of isolation and of further conflict yet to come. Neil and Penny, for example, are reunited by the end of *Barometer Rising*, and the Canadian nation they represent has severed itself successfully from the nineteenth-century control of Great Britain. But the language is not altogether joyful: "They paused on the narrow, snow-banked platform and watched the lights of the coaches disappear around the next curve and heard the dying echoes of the whistle reverberating through the forest." Similarly, *Two Solitudes* ends with Paul Tallard and

Heather Methuen together, with autumn golden, and yet things are not really stable: "Only in the far north on the tundra was the usual process of life abruptly fractured"; the nation is going into war, "knowing against her will that she was not unique but like all the others, alone with history, with science, with the future". *Each Man's Son*, moreover, ends with Ainslie adopting Alan MacNeil — which closes a novel largely about ignorance and single-mindedness, but also intimates the beginning of another phase of human conflict: Ainslie "had no sense of the distance he had walked or what time of night it was. He stood in the darkness outside his own house for a long while, hearing the sound of the broken water in the brook." And *The Watch that Ends the Night*, which closes at the end of a summer with George Stewart discovering a kind of metaphysical peace, ends also with his knowing the world about him as a shadow, knowing politics as an unreal thing in that world, and knowing light only insofar as his life is now illuminated from within himself. *Return of the Sphinx* picks up these darker threads of MacLennan's thought, in a study of the breakup of the order of a single man's family and a parallel disruption of society at large. No answers exist — only the sphinx — and this novel, too, closes with "the long snows" approaching.

THE EXTENSION OF CHARACTER into political affairs, by a kind of modified allegory, is also a feature of all of MacLennan's books — most demonstrably forced in *Two Solitudes* and *The Precipice*, where the one-to-one correspondence between character and political entity is so defined as to make any proffered solutions seem facile. The allegory is most competently handled where it seems effortless, where the technique becomes an integral part of the message. *Barometer Rising*, for example, is brilliantly structured, yet the reader is conscious less of the form than of the reality of the novel's focal situation; and *The Watch that Ends the Night* succeeds because the political allegory is implicit in the imagery rather than explicitly enunciated by the central characters. *Return of the Sphinx* wavers a little between these two groups, but ultimately, because of its overt commitment, it most closely approximates *The Precipice*, except that large parts of it are better written.

MacLennan uses here some of the same image patterns he has used before, and handles them well. Night, winter, flowers are all important strands in exploring the conflict. The story takes place in Eastern Canada as a hot, humid summer is settling down on Montreal. It is the ripe time for riots in North America. The oppressive climate and oppressive situations (real or imagined) seem to come

together then, and if causes exist in the mind of a people, they can manifest themselves in forceful, concerted, mass, and therefore often dangerous and violent ways. Some emotionally sensitive individuals, like Daniel Ainslie, will be used by the power structure that orders any political demonstration, and if this turns to riot, they are consumed. Others, like Alan, will be so committed to another ideal that they may be overwhelmed by the moment. Still others, like Gabriel Fleury, are taken out of their personal isolation during a time like this; if they discover the real meaning of love, they survive. This last situation is figured early in the novel when we are told that Gabriel “was not a good golfer — he preferred winter to summer on account of the skiing, at which he was very good — but it was the only summer game he knew and physical exercise was the one permanent security in his life.” The problem is the same one presented to George Stewart in *The Watch that Ends the Night*. He has to discover that the winter snows — symbolic of an innocence that this country perhaps once knew — are no longer the only identity to be met with. He has to learn the games of summer, in effect, so that in any season he can survive, but in doing so he will learn the facts of heat and discord as well. So with Alan, whose happiness (Constance, the children, a lake and a cottage and a summer when “the daisies were like snow in the high Gaspesian meadows”) lies in the past; and so with Daniel as well (whose blinding focus on the present is jolted when he discovers not only the identity of his Cape Breton grandfather — the Nova Scotia/French combination in the place name a probably unintentional added irony here — but also how alike they are).

This tension between past and present is given further development in the overtly political passages in the book, but first we must see that Gabriel’s character is extended by the imagery of night and flowers. His name, for one thing, and his recurrent association with nicotianas (“they’re night flowers and I’m only here at night”) are a constant reminder of the possibility of flourishing and of being at peace with one’s environment. His union with the younger generation, in his love for Chantal Ainslie, is a happy one for them both, and the last time we see them, though the summer is ending and the country’s innocence is gone, the flowers “of late summer were in bud”. For Daniel and Alan the contact between generations is more difficult, and when the book ends with winter coming on and with Alan outside the city contemplating the landscape, thinking “The vast land. Too vast even for fools to ruin all of it”, we can see that symbolically the ideals of Confederation, co-operation, and stability are still held as possibilities within man’s reach. But for Alan it seems more like an insistent belief in the mask than an acceptance of the night and the heat that influence the human landscape.

Daniel, like Chantal, also has the opportunity to respond to both the city and the land, and as his first sexual encounter is with a woman from the older generation, the parallel with his sister is strengthened. Chantal is learning from Gabriel as well as giving to him, however. Daniel is affected rather less by Marielle's wisdom than she is carried away by his impulsive desire for satisfaction and revenge. The "revenge" is against many things — his Jesuit schooling, his conscience, his father, his mother's death, *les anglais*, the American influence in his society and among young people, and so on. MacLennan's extension of the image patterns into the political sphere becomes obvious in Daniel's reaction to his city:

It's fantastic, the truth you can see in this city at night. You can go for miles without seeing a single *Anglais*. They know no more about this city than the English knew about India. When I learn more about television techniques I want a program about this city after dark. About *la nation* after dark. The camera spying. The camera working as if it had a mind of its own. The camera just telling me what to do with it. The people speaking in broken sentences. That's where the truth is, in broken sentences. Their expressions when you catch them with the truth on their faces. The people are smoldering. There's not enough room for them any more. They live in the city like a huge African kraal with the forests all around them. The lights on the snow in the streets, the dirty snow in the streets. . . .

In the city, in Montreal, the mask of innocence that the land has held before itself no longer exists, but it is not a world of sophistication which by and large has replaced it. Gabriel Fleury is sophisticated, is part of the night, and he survives, but in the world Daniel recognizes only negation exists: surrender to material pleasure, decadence, bombing (ironically for the sake of a culture), and rioting simply for the sake of being divisive. Even this is a way of living to which he wants to attach himself, but he cannot. For all his activities, he remains the spectator-television interviewer, trying to escape himself and discovering only another kind of incarceration.

The political problem of *canadien* separatism is of course a particularly grave one in Canada at this time. MacLennan is right to feel that this can be the focus of a work of fiction, but when he writes a work of this kind he is creating something that seems less readily apprehensible by the Canadian imagination than by the American or English one. All those works in Canadian literature that apparently emphasize sociological phenomena, for example — *The Loved and the Lost*, *The Master of the Mill*, *Scratch One Dreamer*, *The Man from Glengarry* — are all much more obviously studies in the psychology of an individual conscience. Such a categorization is less obvious, I think, in works by C. P. Snow or

Robert Penn Warren, and the disposition of American writers towards political criticism is what perhaps lies behind Edmund Wilson's approval of both MacLennan's *The Precipice* and the novels of Morley Callaghan. In these works something of man-the-Canadian-political-animal comes closest to the surface. But *Return of the Sphinx*, political as it is, captures only some of the character of either the country or the separatist question.

CANADIANS SEEM, in other words, to be much more addicted to the onlooker-interviewer role than most are willing to admit. Daniel and Alan Ainslie are our men, that is, just as George Stewart was in *The Watch that Ends the Night* — no matter how stuffy, thwarted, or unaware any of them might appear. MacLennan is right to set up this kind of character, right to interpret much about the nation this way, and curiously wrong when for some reason he locates a different kind of character in the West. He suggests that Westerners are delighted with Quebec's threatened withdrawal from the nation, for that event would give them a wealthy independence themselves, and he is wrong. Westerners, plain and simply, are the onlookers again, goaded in this decade into calling a plague on both houses, which they locate specifically in Toronto and Montreal, whose perennial opposition is now more than just high school rivalry. It is a continuation of an historic clash of cultures, which MacLennan himself implies in his book, but never makes clear, and it is this local antagonism, misunderstood by both locales, who both erroneously consider themselves representative of half the nation, that has been grotesquely magnified into an almost insoluble problem.

Like Daniel and Alan Ainslie, each side is magnificently sure of the other side's position. In this lies inevitable tragedy, for it demonstrates a previous foreclosure on both imagination and understanding. When Daniel thinks: "Endlessly the French Canadians talked of their deprived past and what did that do except weaken their purpose to make the future theirs?", both he and MacLennan have seized on a major truth underlying the whole situation. The parallel United Empire Loyalist-Upper Canada syndrome that afflicts some English Canadians, valuing some invalid sense of historic superiority, also prevents some people from preparing adequately for the future. Together these underline the fact that not only is the conflict in the present emerging out of the past, it is also very much of the past, still based on attitudes that most of the nation's people — from whatever cultural source (many young Westerners, for example, do not regard themselves as being *English* Canadian particularly) — do not here and now share.

Daniel's immaturity is shown in that he does not trust his perception of truth; instead, he goes along with the riots and the bombs, which solve nothing. Alan's generation is by and large no better, for its members, violent in their own way, talk and talk, and again solve nothing.

It is interesting, at this point, to place the political argument of this book beside that in Peter Weiss's absurdist and terrifying play *Marat/Sade*. Part of the dialogue is apropos:

SADE: Nature herself would watch unmoved / if we destroyed the entire human race / I hate Nature / this passionless spectator this unbreakable ice-berg-face / that can bear everything / this goads us to greater and greater acts / Haven't we always beaten down those weaker than ourselves / . . . /

MARAT: what you call the indifference of Nature / is your own lack of compassion / . . . /

SADE: no small emotions please / Your feelings were never petty / For you just as for me / only the most extreme actions matter /

MARAT: If I am extreme I am not extreme in the same way as you / Against Nature's silence I use action / In the vast indifference I invent a meaning / I don't watch unmoved I intervene / and say that this and this are wrong / and I work to alter them and improve them / The important thing / is to pull yourself up by your own hair / to turn yourself inside out / and see the whole world with fresh eyes

(I, 12)

One of the many fascinating things about this play is that its technique of depicting plays within plays forces us all into roles both as spectators and actors: all implicated in whatever guilts, animal motives, insanities and oppressions may be represented. Towards the end, Roux, the fettered radical, is still shouting out "When will you learn to see / When will you learn to take sides" as pandemonium engulfs him. What we do see above all else is the extent to which both Marat and Sade intellectualize humanity, and therefore, though opposites, how much they are alike. The other opposites — freedom / confinement; sanity / madness — also come in a sense to be indistinguishable, for one cannot identify which is which. But we are actors as well as spectators in such a play, and so if we respond at all these are truths for own own lives as well.

MacLennan's novel bears, it seems to me, enough likeness to Weiss's theme to make this digression reasonable. In Alan and Daniel, and in the views of Canada which they represent, we have just such intellectualization coming into conflict. In the demonstrations Daniel plans, and the resultant riots which destroy Alan as a political figure, are just such unidentifiable motives as those of the re-

volution and the madmen of Charenton. Liberty? But the Québécois have liberties under federal law now that would be lost to them if they seceded. Equality? Fraternity? Yet as both Hugh MacLennan and Peter Weiss show, these desires are not necessarily distinguishable from the desire to exercise power.

The difference between the two writers is partly in technique, partly in the fact that Weiss does not draw a moral; his effect lies in his presentation and in the extent to which that alone can cause us to pull ourselves up by our own hair and see the world with fresh eyes. MacLennan, on the other hand, guides the reader to a point of view rather more deliberately, and the sadness of this is that the novel would have been more powerful had the characters and the images been capable of doing it on their own. For all the novel's political importance and for all the clarity with which the author views some political situations, no novel can absolutely succeed unless the characters come to life. With *Return of the Sphinx* we are up against a problem that has plagued MacLennan throughout his work: much of the dialogue is stilted, therefore lifeless, and the characters, who in other situations can be perfectly credible, will occasionally die. Regrettably, at those times, the novel dies with them. MacLennan can write magnificent monologues; of this there is no question, but so much of the dialogue is simply punctuated monologue that it becomes incredible. Where it is good, the formal language is inherently part of the situation being presented. Some of the arguments between Alan and Daniel, for example, and the passages of House of Commons debate are handled well. But where the conversations should be informal, even if they are not exactly relaxed, the language remains repetitive and starched:

'He's wasting his life.'

'Can you be so sure he is?'

'Oh yes, I can be sure.'

This sort of thing is so constructed as to be artificial, too formalized to seem natural, and it occurs so often that one's attention shifts from the heart of the book to its method. It is a frustrating novel, because it promises so much and wavers so much too. For MacLennan scholars it will be a key work, one which shows not only his descriptive abilities but also his consciousness of the tragic possibilities in modern life. For many more readers its topic will make it an interesting enough narrative to warrant reading. But for very few, unfortunately, in spite of its potential, will it be the impetus for seeing the world with eyes that have been made fresh.