

# THE VITAL PRETENSE

## *McDougall's Execution*

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**B**EFORE PUBLISHING the novel *Execution*, Colin McDougall allowed himself fourteen years to ponder his experience of World War II. During that time he was able to consider the aftermath of the war, and to develop a sense of perspective and interpretation which has made his novel something more than simply another story of military adventure. The adventure and the drama, of course, are there. But also there, one can find a significant insight into what is perhaps the fundamental psychological problem of the Twentieth Century — the problem of accepting life itself as meaningful when the age-old props of expected success, religious conviction, and the challenge of tomorrow have been knocked away.

The novel got off to a spectacular enough start with the Governor General's Award for Fiction, but in the seven years since its publication it has been virtually ignored by the critics. It would seem, nonetheless, that a good deal remains to be said about Colin McDougall's *Execution*. Whether or not to a degree intended by the author, the more extraordinary thematic aspects of the novel are camouflaged by a surface of deceptive simplicity. Concentrated to the point of almost hypnotic effect, charged with dramatic irony, the book makes unusual demands upon the reader's critical attention.

The plot of *Execution* hangs upon the ancient literary device of a journey, but

it is so stripped of inessentials as to resemble a stream of consciousness. The separate, yet closely integrated and often skilfully counterpointed episodes blend into a series which progresses rapidly, perhaps too rapidly for anyone to assimilate the full texture of meaning in the course of a single reading. In the first episode, Krasnick, a stolid farm boy from Manitoba, is refusing to shoot his Bren gun at a group of Italians performing a cavalry charge. Once assured that he need not shoot the horses, but only the men off the horses, Krasnick steadies his gun, and with quick bursts of fire he slaughters the moustached giant in the lead and brings the charge to an end as efficiently and finally as modern warfare terminated the chivalric notions of days gone by. Thus, from the very outset, McDougall makes clear that he is not concerned with heroics — there will be no storming and holding of the British square. But like any other modern military novelist, he is concerned with the great levelling power of a bullet; and the episode of the horses, recalled a second time at the end of the novel, serves neatly to underline the devaluation of human life brought about by war. More precisely, *Execution* is in large part a study of the effects of killing, with or without benefit of law court, upon those who perform and witness it.

The first effect, ironically enough, is one of exhilaration, when Pachino is totally destroyed "by express command to provide a beacon for ships and aircraft" and Castello Donato is captured. John Adam discovers a "mad grandeur in the concept that cities should be made funeral pyres," and even the gentle Padre Doorn finds it impossible to summon up pity and regret. But McDougall cuts the exhilaration short; when the two harmless Italians whom the Canadians have befriended, Little Joe and Big Jim, are crudely executed by Brigade command in the barnyard serving as Battalion headquarters, the effect is crushing disillusionment. McDougall handles the scene with sharp, fitting detail: the prisoners, six revolver bullets pumped into their bodies, are writhing in a manure pile, and Adam must rush in to finish them off with bursts from his tommy-gun — an act grotesquely parallel to Krasnick's merciful killing of the wounded horses at Castello Donato. The whole, sordid barnyard execution, in fact, is vividly contrasted to the first engagement, in which Adam gallantly refused to accept the sabre the defeated Italian officer no less gallantly offered him, in which the Canadians toasted their triumph from vats of *vino rosso*, and in which Adam actually contemplated riding on one of the captured white chargers to make his tour of inspection.

The barnyard execution is the first major pivot upon which the novel revolves. Presented with such realism that it is entirely believable, it is nevertheless a

shrewdly calculated device: here is the ultimate brutality, the very antithesis of goodness, mercy, nobility, and even of efficiency. It cannot be rationalized as "part of the game", as were the disagreeable aspects of Pachino and Castello Donato. Moreover, it is not a routine brutality of the dehumanized Hun; it is commanded, perpetrated and sanctioned by Canadian vested authority. One wonders what the verdict of a tribunal would be in respect to the responsibility of Mitchell, who disobeyed an order in not shooting the two Italians on sight, of Brigadier Kildare, who issued the order, and of Colonel Dodds, who decided that he had no choice but to see that the order was carried out. McDougall, of course, had witnessed enough of the military to know that in every army there is always a sadistic Sergeant Krebs available.

*Execution* is haunted by the idea that, immersed in the barbarism of war, a sensitive, thinking person is in danger of becoming dehumanized. Through the episode of the barnyard killing, this process of dehumanization is speeded up in the cases of Adam and the Padre. The average, generally unthinking soldier is not in quite the same danger, he accommodates without losing his sense of human identity. When the old farmer whose son has been destroyed by a shell burst begins to pound his head on the ground and scream "*Mio bambino! Morte! Morte!*" he is stopped, it is true, by a hard slap on the face. But when Ewart, as the platoon is about to move off, callously asks, "Hey . . . What about those chickens?" the reaction of the others indicates that they have simply conditioned their feelings, not relinquished them.

John Adam and the Padre, on the other hand, do go through a period when the sense of human identity is lost. After the barnyard execution, Adam feels violated: "as he walked he wanted to cry out for his lost innocence. It was like the time, he remembered, that first time when he was seventeen and he walked away one rainy night from visiting a brothel." To carry on, he must develop a protective shell of efficiency: "Perhaps, he thought, the only end in life is to be functional: to do one's job is as much as a man can ever do." Yet by the time of the death of Rifleman Jones, both Adam and the Padre have regained a sense of human identity.

THE SHOOTING of Jones by a Canadian firing squad is, of course, the climax of the novel. Jones is unquestionably blameless, yet McDougall

makes the strange circumstances leading up to his trial and conviction seem as real and believable as those surrounding the barnyard execution. Jones has no idea of what is happening when Frazer takes him to the hideout of a gangster ring composed of Americans, Canadians, Italians, and even Germans. But he and an American thug are the only two captured when the U.S. military police move in. The activities of the gang, the raid, and the consequent death of one of the American policemen, receive wide publicity in the newspapers. The people at home in North America, understandably, are outraged; strong political pressures are brought to bear for swift retribution. The Americans convict and shoot "their boy" with no delay, and the Canadian Army is expected to do likewise with Jones. For the Canadians, however, there is an embarrassing delay, owing to the technicality that Jones is entirely innocent.

This execution, and Jones himself, are meaningful in a variety of ways. Jones is a symbol of purity and innocence, which are destroyed by the war. At his trial it is argued that he should never have been placed in a combat unit, to kill and perhaps be killed; but then what man ought to be so placed? In the Jamesian sense, he is the naïve goodness of the New World being confronted by the scheming evil of the Old. He is the thoughtless boy who becomes a man overnight, in the last few hours actually strengthening Adam and Padre Doorn, who, ironically, have come to protect him. There are parallels between the death of Jonesy and the crucifixion of Jesus: both are put to death because of political and social pressures; each forgives his executioners. But these echoes should not be forced to the point of considering the episode allegorical. General Kildare, for example, does not wash his hands of the affair; his commutation of the sentence is simply not accepted by the higher authorities. Adam and the Padre walk with Jones to the stake, but they are not executed, as were the thieves with Jesus.

In essence, Rifleman Jones represents the two Italian boys slaughtered in the Sicilian barnyard and every other blameless person subjected to the anti-order, victimized by the madness that is war. "The truth was that Jonesy had done nothing wrong at all, unless perhaps it was to be born what he was, to *be* what he was."

The two bitter men who are with Jones when he dies have done everything in their power to prevent the injustice; but after the execution is performed, both men feel "in a sense, perhaps, restored to whatever they had been before Sicily." It is not, however, the execution itself which has this regenerative effect, it is Jones's attitude. The man Adam and Doorn had thought to be simple-minded, to require sheltering from the realities of life, demonstrates that it is possible to

face knowingly the ultimate brutality of life without being reduced to the brute. But he is able to do it because he does not attempt to understand life; nor does he descend into the hell of being unable to love. His final words are spoken out of concern for the safety of Adam.

The execution of Jones has tremendous dramatic effect. It occupies a climactic, dominant position in the book, and the reader is almost forced to search for a master key to the novel's meaning in the incident itself. It may well be that this is a flaw in McDougall's work. Since it diverts attention from the deeper issues of *Execution*, the issues which take the novel beyond the range of the usual military story. It is important to recognize that Jones' death is neither mystical nor crucial in the thematic sense, but merely a foil for McDougall's major theme. Jones does not attempt to understand life; for those who do try — Padre Doorn, Bazin and John Adam — there *is* a descent into hell, a journey to the "heart of darkness." Bazin does not survive the war, but the Padre and Adam are both able eventually to readjust to reality; the death of Jones simply marks the culmination of that readjustment. The quality which elevates *Execution* above the ordinary is not McDougall's analysis, however impressive it is, of the process of dehumanization; nor is it his study of accommodation to the state of war, the type of study which characterizes every military novel. The true elevating quality is McDougall's analysis of the intricate process of regeneration. In presenting, through the characterization of Adam, a painfully acquired attitude which permits that character to live with twentieth-century reality, McDougall achieves a positive note generally absent from the modern novel. This positive note, moreover, has bearing upon the whole age. The wartime setting of *Execution* operates as a magnifying glass.

Probably the most complete and succinct statement of current psychological problems is that of Viktor E. Frankl, discoverer of the psychiatric technique of logotherapy. According to Frankl, the dominant neurosis of the World War II and post-war periods can be traced not to the Freudian frustration in sexual life, but to "the failure of the sufferer to find meaning and a sense of responsibility in his existence."<sup>1</sup> Frankl, who spent the war in a concentration camp, points out that a preconceived set of attitudes toward the world can be shaken by "the mental agony caused by the injustice, the unreasonableness of it all." He observes that "it is a peculiarity of man that he can only live by looking to the future — *sub specie aeternitatis*." Setting aside the Freudian principle of "will-to-pleasure" and the Adlerian "will-to-power," Frankl introduces the "will-to-meaning," and asserts that "what threatens contemporary man is that which I call 'the existential

vacuum' within him." Logotherapy is essentially the process of conquering the neurotic effects of boredom and disillusionment by providing a "will-to-meaning." In *Execution*, McDougall also tackles the problem of the "existential vacuum" and comes up with his own solution.

Christianity, of course, is in the western hemisphere the major pattern of set, basic attitudes toward the world. In *Execution*, McDougall seems to suggest that this pattern can prove inadequate. Padre Doorn is a sincere and intelligent Christian at the beginning of the book, "a man at peace with himself and his God." One imagines that had Doorn lived in more tranquil times, he would have become a gentle, inspirational pastor. At first he is able to fit the war into his pattern of basic attitudes; the Canadian soldiers are crusaders going about God's work. Then comes the shock of the Sicilian barnyard. Like Adam, his initial reaction is to fill the vacuum with functional activity; he becomes a graveyard ghoul — "happy only when he had a burial to conduct." He finds himself leaning toward the Roman Catholic rites and sacraments because in them "everything was provided for." But the emptiness within the Padre is so great that he becomes demented. Using a smoke bomb for cover, he steals an alleged piece of the True Cross from the Chapel of the Sacrament of the Church of Sant' Agata. He reasons that with this relic he will be able to focus God's attention on the insane slaughter that is taking place, and that a God of Pity and Love cannot permit such wanton destruction of the innocent to continue. Along with what is left of the Padre's set pattern of attitudes, the piece of the True Cross is "ground into dust on the Hitler Line." Philip Doorn must now develop a new "will-to-meaning."

In contrast to the Padre, there is little Frazer, who regards the world as a crude, godless, loveless rat-race. Faced with the revelation of the war, his pattern of attitudes proves much more adequate than the Padre's. Completely self-reliant, fearless, he is one of the few soldiers to survive the insane attack at Monte Cassino. Frazer, however, is fit only for the battlefield. When not in action, he is continually in detention. Naturally, he is the one to join the gangster ring.

The pattern of attitudes which Bunny Bazin brings to the testing ground of World War II is somewhere in between the Padre's and Frazer's. He has faith in the goodness of individuals, but he thinks of life as a hopeless paradox: when Adam visits him at a sniper post, he is shooting his rifle at the enemy while conjugating the Latin verb *amare*. In conversation with Adam, he reveals his thoughts:

...if you dare look at the thing — instead of building up and hiding behind a

shield of competence . . . What it's about, of course, is execution. It started in that Sicilian barn-yard, with your two Italians — big Jim and little Joe, did you call them? — when you stood by and acquiesced in their execution — . . . and remember — execution is the ultimate injustice, the ultimate degradation of man. Look what it's done to the Padre, that poor bastard Philip Doorn. . . .

. . . Don't ask me what the answer is . . . Perhaps it is man's plight to acquiesce. On the other hand, even recognizing execution as the evil may be victory of sorts; struggling against it may be the closest man ever comes to victory.

Bazin understands what is troubling Adam, and his words provide the latter with elements for a readjustment to life; but he is convinced that his own fate is to be killed. Unable to formulate a "will-to-meaning," in his subconscious, perhaps even in his conscious mind, he wants to die, just as a person who drives at ridiculous speeds on a dangerous highway is probably flirting with a subconscious death-wish. When Adam learns that Bazin has been killed by a sniper's bullet, he speculates on what a "beautifully conceived stroke of fate" it would be if perhaps, as he squeezed the trigger, the German soldier had been conjugating the Latin verb *to love*.

W HATEVER THE PATTERN of attitudes John Adam brings to the war, after the Sicilian barnyard, as we have noted, he offsets the vacuum within him by complete devotion to duty. What Frankl calls the "Sunday neurosis" — an awareness of the lack of content in life when the rush of the busy week is over — hits Adam when he goes on leave to Bari. There he meets Elena, a young prostitute to whom he feels immediately attracted. Elena, whose name means "light" or "torch," is much like Dostoevsky's Sonia. She is obviously different from the two hardened "pros" who are with her. Eventually she takes Adam to her home:

That first time, as they sat together on her bed, his hands feeling the texture of her flesh, Adam wondered for a fantastic instant if the parents in the rooms outside, waited for the creak and groan of bedsprings, and how they planned to spend the 1,000-lire note. There had even been a formal offer of wine; and that — for a blazing moment — sent Adam blindly, furiously mad with anger. The daughter of the house represented the family's capital: they sent her out to earn the food they must eat . . . But Adam's anger cooled. What the hell, he thought: much

worse things than this happen in wartime . . . He declined the offer of wine and followed Elena into her room.

Once they are in bed together, Elena pleads with Adam to say the words "*Ti amo*" before taking her. But Adam has visited Dostoevsky's hell; he has been moving toward the state of "being unable to love" by willing that he never again become emotionally involved. His response to the girl lying naked in front of him is "Go to hell." Then suddenly, because his withdrawal is not yet complete, he understands why Elena is making such a strange request: the young girl is suffering what for her is the ultimate brutality, and she is attempting to offset the existential vacuum within her by pretending that she is with her lover. "*Io ti amo*," he repeats. "It was pretense, but he had given her something; and, oddly, he felt better at once, as though he had also given something to himself."

Adam's initial reaction to Elena's request is perfectly understandable. He resents the idea that she is refusing to face all the facts and is trying to make her life slightly more than functional. He resents it because, as Bazin correctly observes, he has made no such attempt himself. Withdrawal is clearly the easiest, perhaps the normal recourse when one's sense of human identity has been violated. His experience with Elena causes him to realize for the first time that no matter what the circumstances, an individual may still retain a measure of control over the spiritual depths to which he can be reduced. He also realizes the essential nature of a certain kind of pretense in creating a tenable "will-to-meaning." It is not the pretense of falsification or self-glorification, but simply the process of making one's condition sufferable, perhaps even meaningful, by stressing the *be* in *what could be*. In other words, if one is to develop an adequate working relationship with accepted reality, then sooner or later one must go beyond what can be objectively demonstrated as scientific fact; one must create for oneself a set of life-justifying premises, a glass through which the world appears tolerable and reasonably comprehensible; in short, a vital pretense.

Sinclair Ross, in his novel *As For Me and My House*, presents some interesting reflections upon the same principle:

Religion and art . . . are almost the same thing anyway. Just different ways of taking a man out of himself, bringing him to the emotional pitch that we call ecstasy or rapture. They're both a rejection of the material, common-sense world for one that's illusory, yet somehow more important. Now it's always when a man turns away from this common-sense world around him that he begins to create, when he looks into a void, and has to give it life and form.<sup>2</sup>



Before the Twentieth Century and its emphasis upon scientific truth and the material fact, the majority of people, it seems, unwittingly and automatically acquired the vital pretense. The mind of a child instinctively embraces it. Christianity furnished it ready-made, called it "faith," and insisted upon it; the most twentieth-century-minded of the disciples of Jesus was forever branded with the pejorative title of Doubting Thomas. The problem of our age, clearly, is that a significant number of thinking people, especially young people, cannot get beyond Adam's initial reaction to Elena. Like Salinger's Holden Caulfield, basically honest with themselves and seeking the objective truth, they perceive only the "phoniness," the pretense. Like McDougall's Padre Doorn, they discover that the Christian-Judaic pattern of beliefs is convenient and functional up to a point, but that it no longer can explain and justify observable phenomena in an acceptable manner. In an age of increasingly efficient mass murder, the doctrinal flaw which Voltaire put his finger on — "Thou shalt not kill, except with the sound of trumpets and in large numbers" — glares like an open wound. What is manifestly wrong can no longer be explained away by such stratagems as predestination, the unknowable will of God, or the divine plan that is beyond human understanding, with their resultant policy of *laissez-faire*. The Christian Church, ironically, is being forced to de-emphasize those aspects of its teaching which for centuries supplied, albeit unintentionally, the vital pretense to millions of believers; leaders of the Church appear to have sensed that the kind of faith with which she is traditionally associated is no longer viable — it is 2,000 years too late to provide evidence for the Doubting Thomases, and mountains today are moved by bulldozers. Like John Adam, indeed like the legendary Adam, many people in the post-war world are being left to their own philosophical resources, while life around them, projected right into their living rooms by the television networks, is a context of disorder, slaughter of the innocent and large-scale human depravity. McDougall's *Execution*, far from "ending in a philosophical and ethical fog," not only dramatizes the emerging major problem of the Twentieth Century, but points to one kind of solution based upon simple experience of life.

The lesson Adam learns from Elena, then, is that unreality can sometimes be used to make reality endurable, and without presenting too great demands on the critical faculty. He has experienced the emotional sterility of withdrawal from life, but after his meeting with the girl, he is inspired to grope for a personal "will-to-meaning." He accepts Bazin's observation that man cannot eliminate injustice, and that the world is bound to remain an arena of crudities. In this respect, there is no self-deception; the world and life are accepted for what they are. But he

learns to curtail his demands — there are no such things as absolute justice, permanent happiness, or realizable peace on earth. But one can struggle for justice, as Adam does in the Jones affair, and the struggle itself is a victory. For the individual, moreover, there can be long moments of complete happiness, provided he preserves his capacity to love, and is willing to suspend his disbelief and allow himself to be transported by the illusion of permanence. The emotion of love, however short-lived and likely to be unsustainable, is none the less legitimate and humanizing. This attitude blossoms for Adam in the joy of his sojourn with Toni. Earlier in the book, another instance of the same attitude is provided, when Sergeant DiCicco dismisses the war during a leave by stacking a few tins of bully beef on a kitchen table and living for five days as the son-in-law of an Italian family.

The new Adam is a less efficient fighting machine, but he is a human being again, and the experiences he has undergone have the inevitable effect of heightening his sympathy for other human beings. He develops a sense of the shared challenge of life. Tortured by the screams of a woman whose husband, child and home have just been destroyed by Canadian artillery, he desperately wants to register his compassion. Looking into the woman's eyes, the only words he can muster are "*Ti amo — Io ti amo,*" but something of the significance of these words for Adam is communicated to the woman and she becomes relatively calm. At the end of the book, when Adam is thinking about the soldiers who have served under him, he says: "Each one of them, in his fashion, was a good man. The trouble was that they *were* men, and being such, they were caught up in the strangling nets which man's plight cast over them: they could not always act the way their goodness wanted them to."

As we have seen, the execution of Jonesy marks the culmination of Adam's readjustment. He is now conditioned to resign himself to the inescapable depravities and injustices of life without resigning from life itself. At the same time, however, he can avoid the abyss of stark cynicism and the spiritual sterility of *laissez-faire*; he can struggle against injustice. By accepting the vital pretense, he can recharge himself emotionally and sustain a personal *raison d'être*. He does not have, it is true, a defined code of ethics; for McDougall suggests that fundamental moral issues can not be resolved by a code of ethics. The new John Adam has something far more simple and effective, far less professional and susceptible to the deteriorating influences of the nuclear age — he has acquired a genuine compassion for his fellowmen. In his characterization of John Adam, McDougall thus takes what is in fact an ancient philosophy of life, strips it of the accumu-

lated paraphernalia of centuries, and shapes it to fit the major demand of our times.

THE ARTISTIC QUALITIES of *Execution* are concordant with the significance of its theme. The style is laconic, touched with poetry on occasion, and ideally suited to the dramatic quality of the material. When dialogue is used, it rings true. Perhaps the most notable aspect of McDougall's style is a device which creates a verbal echo of the impact of war upon the participants; he presents a passage of flowing, descriptive prose, then shatters the effect of order and calm with a single shell-burst phrase.

Brigadier Kildare, he told the Padre, exalted the Scottish Borderers as a subtle means of humbling the regular officers under him and infuriating those above. Then Major Bazin smiled gently at the Padre's puzzlement and told him not to worry if it didn't make sense; so many things did not after all. One thing, at least, which the Padre understood was the crushing burden of responsibility that this man bore. As they stood at the rail together, in this moment of crisis, the Padre could imagine the stern look on the face beside him, those blue eyes clouded in sombre reflection of the next terrible decision to be made.

The Brigadier tapped his cigar ash on the rail. "Got 'em by the balls, Padre?" he inquired courteously.

McDougall has a particularly keen eye for scenic and ironic detail. His description of the attack at Caielli, for instance, is a tour de force. A panoramic view of the action is punctuated by glimpses of the thoughts of the various soldiers, then there is the strange tranquility which grips everyone during a lull in the German offensive: "There was a gentleness about every soldier in Caielli. Each was considerate toward his fellows. Faults and meannesses which at other times would have drawn quick anger were overlooked." When Adam is consulting with a British tank Major about siting guns before the battle begins, he casually notes that "his plump jowls were exquisitely shaven; his face had a pinkish tinge, as though he had come fresh from his tub and toilet lotions." But even this minor detail is tinged with irony; after the attack, Adam finds the tank commander dead: "It must have been an A.P. shell because the Major had no head: there was only the red, meaty stump of his neck."

The way in which each small detail contributes to the organic unity of the novel is indicative of great care and artistic skill. The seemingly unimportant character traits of Ewart and Krasnick, for instance, take on fascinating significance when the latter hears about D.D.T. There are the incidents of the crimson wine spilling on Adam, the secret of Fergus-Cohen and Kildare, the church which serves as a latrine, the effect of the ordered stand of pines, the big sergeant weeping after he had given the command to the firing squad, the pitiful old soldier Perkins, whose life has no meaning outside of the military context, and numerous others. The combined effect of all these details is a total and powerful impression of war — its thrills, its horrors, its glory, its boredom, its madness, and ironically, its momentary periods of profound peace.

<sup>1</sup> Gordon W. Allport, in Preface to Frankl, *From Death-camp to Existentialism*, trans. Ilse Lasch (Boston: Beacon Press, 1959), p. x. Other references are to text of book.

<sup>2</sup> New Canadian Library N4 (Toronto, 1957), p. 112.

